

Third Session – Forty-Second Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
DEBATES
and
PROCEEDINGS
Official Report
(Hansard)

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The Honourable Myrna Driedger
Speaker*

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MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Forty-Second Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
ADAMS, Danielle	Thompson	NDP
ALTOMARE, Nello	Transcona	NDP
ASAGWARA, Uzoma	Union Station	NDP
BRAR, Diljeet	Burrows	NDP
BUSHIE, Ian	Keewatinook	NDP
CLARKE, Eileen, Hon.	Agassiz	PC
COX, Cathy, Hon.	Kildonan-River East	PC
CULLEN, Cliff, Hon.	Spruce Woods	PC
DRIEDGER, Myrna, Hon.	Roblin	PC
EICHLER, Ralph, Hon.	Lakeside	PC
EWASKO, Wayne	Lac du Bonnet	PC
FIELDING, Scott, Hon.	Kirkfield Park	PC
FONTAINE, Nahanni	St. Johns	NDP
FRIESEN, Cameron, Hon.	Morden-Winkler	PC
GERRARD, Jon, Hon.	River Heights	Lib.
GOERTZEN, Kelvin, Hon.	Steinbach	PC
GORDON, Audrey	Southdale	PC
GUENTER, Josh	Borderland	PC
GUILLEMARD, Sarah, Hon.	Fort Richmond	PC
HELWER, Reg, Hon.	Brandon West	PC
ISLEIFSON, Len	Brandon East	PC
JOHNSON, Derek	Interlake-Gimli	PC
JOHNSTON, Scott	Assiniboia	PC
KINEW, Wab	Fort Rouge	NDP
LAGASSÉ, Bob	Dawson Trail	PC
LAGIMODIERE, Alan	Selkirk	PC
LAMONT, Dougald	St. Boniface	Lib.
LAMOUREUX, Cindy	Tyndall Park	Lib.
LATHLIN, Amanda	The Pas-Kameesak	NDP
LINDSEY, Tom	Flin Flon	NDP
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	NDP
MARCELINO, Malaya	Notre Dame	NDP
MARTIN, Shannon	McPhillips	PC
MOSES, Jamie	St. Vital	NDP
MICHALESKI, Brad	Dauphin	PC
MICKLEFIELD, Andrew	Rossmere	PC
MORLEY-LECOMTE, Janice	Seine River	PC
NAYLOR, Lisa	Woleseley	NDP
NESBITT, Greg	Riding Mountain	PC
PALLISTER, Brian, Hon.	Fort Whyte	PC
PEDERSEN, Blaine, Hon.	Midland	PC
PIWNIUK, Doyle	Turtle Mountain	PC
REYES, Jon	Waverley	PC
SALA, Adrien	St. James	NDP
SANDHU, Mintu	The Maples	NDP
SCHULER, Ron, Hon.	Springfield-Ritchot	PC
SMITH, Andrew	Lagimodière	PC
SMITH, Bernadette	Point Douglas	NDP
SMOOK, Dennis	La Vérendrye	PC
SQUIRES, Rochelle, Hon.	Riel	PC
STEFANSON, Heather, Hon.	Tuxedo	PC
TEITSMA, James	Radisson	PC
WASYLIW, Mark	Fort Garry	NDP
WHARTON, Jeff, Hon.	Red River North	PC
WIEBE, Matt	Concordia	NDP
WISHART, Ian	Portage la Prairie	PC
WOWCHUK, Rick	Swan River	PC

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Monday, November 2, 2020

The House met at 1:30 p.m.

Madam Speaker: O Eternal and Almighty God, from Whom all power and wisdom come, we are assembled here before Thee to frame such laws as may tend to the welfare and prosperity of our province. Grant, O merciful God, we pray Thee, that we may desire only that which is in accordance with Thy will, that we may seek it with wisdom and know it with certainty and accomplish it perfectly for the glory and honour of Thy name and for the welfare of all our people. Amen.

Please be seated.

Speaker's Statement

Madam Speaker: I have a statement for the House.

In light of the move to the code red level for the city of Winnipeg, I would like to advise the House and all members—or, pardon me, and all Manitobans, of the steps taken by the Legislative Assembly to provide additional measures for health and safety during sittings of the Legislature.

By agreement of the government and opposition House leaders and the member for River Heights (Mr. Gerrard), the seating capacity and number of MLAs permitted to be present in the Chamber for legislative sittings is now reduced to 25 per cent. This equates to the Speaker, 10 government MLAs, five official opposition MLAs and one Liberal MLA, with no switching of seats by the Liberal members allowed.

All other MLAs will be participating in the legislative sittings by virtual means. The seating plan continues to apply on a week-to-week basis so that caucuses can alternate the MLAs who are physically present in the Chamber.

In addition, the virtual component has been added to all three sections for the Committee of Supply for those MLAs who do not wish to be physically present to participate, and the previously agreed upon restriction of no more than six MLAs at a time in any one section continues to apply.

This has been facilitated in a timely manner, thanks to the excellent work of the virtual planning team and the head of Hansard recording and staff from media services.

The restriction of six in each section includes the Chair, the minister, one government member, two

official opposition members and one independent Liberal, with the official opposition limited to one staff member in each of the three sections and the Liberals limited to one staffperson per caucus in the committee rooms.

To clarify, the ministers and critics do not have to be physically present in the sections of the Committee of Supply. They have the choice to be physically present or to participate virtually. The Supply chairpersons will be present in each section.

We are living in unprecedented times and the Legislative Assembly will continue to be responsive and provide options to ensure the health and safety of MLAs and Assembly political and non-political staff working in the Legislative Assembly.

And I would just like to thank all of those who have worked very diligently over the past few days and particularly also on the weekend to reach these decisions which have been put in place for the protection of health for all.

Thank you.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill 48—The Fiscal Responsibility and Taxpayer Protection Amendment Act

Hon. Scott Fielding (Minister of Finance): I move, second by the Minister of Education (Mr. Goertzen), that Bill 48, The Fiscal Responsibility and Taxpayer Protection Amendment Act, be read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Fielding: I'm pleased to bill—to move Bill 48, The Fiscal Responsibility and Taxpayer Protection Amendment Act.

Based on the language about our intent to—intent outlined in our recent Throne Speech, the bill will modify Manitoba's balanced budget plan to reflect the unprecedented fiscal challenges currently facing Manitobans as a result of the pandemic.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? *Agreed? [Agreed]*

Bill 49—The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Amendment Act

Hon. Scott Fielding (Minister of Finance): I move, second by the Minister of Health, that Bill 49, The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Amendment Act, now be read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Fielding: I'm pleased to move Bill 49, The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Amendment Act.

The—this legislation will modify or modernize the—Manitoba's freedom of information and protection of privacy regimen. As members will know, there's a requirement for a periodic review of the act and public consultations 'identified' several recommendations to amend provisions of FIPPA.

Amendments will be more reflective of modern-day information processes and mediums, and improve effectiveness of the administration of the act.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Bill 54—The Personal Health Information Amendment Act

Hon. Cameron Friesen (Minister of Health, Seniors and Active Living): I move, seconded by the Minister of Justice (Mr. Cullen), that Bill 54, The Personal Health Information Amendment Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Friesen: Madam Speaker, Bill 54 will amend The Personal Health Information Amendment Act.

These amendments follow the five-year mandated review of The Personal Health Information Act, or PHIA, which ensures that PHIA continues to meet the needs of Manitobans and the trustees for personal health information under PHIA.

The proposed amendments are intended to achieve this goal. They are based on the feedback received in the review as well as on the review of privacy legislation in other provinces.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Bill 56—The Smoking and Vapour Products Control Amendment Act

Hon. Cameron Friesen (Minister of Health, Seniors and Active Living): Madam Speaker, I rise—sorry, I move, seconded by the Minister of Crown Services (Mr. Wharton), that Bill 56, The Smoking and Vapour Products Control Amendment Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Friesen: Madam Speaker, Bill 56 will amend The Smoking and Vapour Products Control Act, which is a law of general application designed to address health issues and applies everywhere in the province.

The amendments will seek to ensure that rules intended to protect Manitobans from second-hand smoke will apply uniformly throughout the province while, at the same time, of course, maintaining protections for the traditional or ceremonial use of tobacco.

Madam Speaker: The honourable—oh. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Bill 47—The Early Learning and Child Care Act

Hon. Heather Stefanson (Minister of Families): Madam Speaker, I move, seconded by the Minister of Education (Mr. Goertzen), that Bill 47, The Early Learning and Child Care Act; Loi sur l'apprentissage et la garde des jeunes enfants, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

* (13:40)

Mrs. Stefanson: Madam Speaker, I'm pleased to rise in the House today for first reading of Bill 47, The Early Learning and Child Care Act.

COVID-19 has shown the need for greater support and improvements to Manitoba's child-care sector, particularly to benefit front-line workers and parents working non-standard hours. This bill will include provisions that reflect our government's Throne Speech commitment to create a modern child-care system and funding model that will enable the child-care sector to grow in line with demand from Manitoba families.

Madam Speaker, our government has stood up for parents since the beginning of this unprecedented public health emergency, and I'm proud to say that Bill 47 will allow our child-care system to better meet

the needs of parents and children throughout our province.

Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Bill 40—The Manitoba Liquor and Lotteries Corporation Amendment and Liquor, Gaming and Cannabis Control Amendment Act

Hon. Jeff Wharton (Minister of Crown Services): Madam Speaker, I move, seconded by the Minister of Finance (Mr. Fielding), that Bill 40, The Manitoba Liquor and Lotteries Corporation Amendment and Liquor, Gaming and Cannabis Control Amendment Act, be now read for a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Wharton: Madam Speaker, Bill 40 will meet a commitment by allowing a wider range of businesses to retail liquor, saving Manitoban's money and assisting us in growing our economy.

Currently, section 34, liquor retail agreements, are limited to businesses in rural areas, Madam Speaker. This amendment will provide the opportunity for private businesses anywhere in the province to expand their retailing options to satisfy customer demands and will help modernize our liquor retailing system.

Madam Speaker, this initiative is one step towards our government's priority to reducing red tape for businesses and to provide more choice and convenience for customers.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Bill 45—The Public Schools Amendment and Manitoba Teachers' Society Amendment Act

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Minister of Education): I move, seconded by the Minister of Health, that Bill 45, The Public Schools Amendment and Manitoba Teachers' Society Amendment Act, be now read for a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Goertzen: I am pleased to do first reading of Bill 45, The Public Schools Amendment and Manitoba Teachers' Society Amendment Act.

Manitoba is the only province in Canada where public teacher bargaining is done exclusively at the

local level. There are presently 38 separate collective agreements bargained directly between school boards and their teachers' associations.

This bill will modernize Manitoba's approach to public teacher bargaining by introducing a single-tier centralized teacher bargaining model. The bill maintains a local bargaining for the division scolaire franco-Manitoba in respect of their unique management role in minority language school divisions, and the bill will not impact any collective agreements in place. When the bill comes into force and existing—as existing collective agreements expire, school divisions and school associations will become party to the provincial agreement.

The bill will modernize how teacher collective bargaining is conducted in Manitoba by streamlining the process and reducing duplication.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Bill 64—The Education Modernization Act

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Minister of Education): I move, seconded by the Minister of Families (Mrs. Stefanson), that Bill 64, The Education Modernization Act, be now read for a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Goertzen: I am pleased to do first reading of Bill 64, The Education Modernization Act.

The bill will make changes to various acts to modernize our education system in Manitoba and ensure the education system is focused on providing the best possible outcome for students in Manitoba.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Bill 62—The Animal Diseases Amendment Act

Hon. Blaine Pedersen (Minister of Agriculture and Resource Development): I move, seconded by the Minister of Municipal Relations (Ms. Squires), that Bill 62, The Animal Diseases Amendment Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Pedersen: This bill will allow our farms and food processors to continue to produce world-class, safe and healthy foods in a humane way.

The bill will amend The Animal Diseases Act to protect farmers from persons who interfere with food production facilities that could result in harm to people, animals or the food supply, and to ensure that biosecurity is protected on the farm and through transportation and processing.

Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Bill 37—The Planning Amendment and City of Winnipeg Charter Amendment Act

Hon. Rochelle Squires (Minister of Municipal Relations): I move, seconded by the Minister of Families (Mrs. Stefanson), that Bill 37, The Planning Amendment and City of Winnipeg Charter Amendment Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Ms. Squires: I am pleased to introduce Bill 37 to amend The Planning Act, the City of Winnipeg charter, and repeal The Capital Region Partnership Act to implement key recommendations in the planning, zoning and permitting in Manitoba report.

The bill will modernize planning processes, support a capital region economic growth plan, and ensure municipal governments make timely and transparent decisions on multiple private sector capital investment opportunities in their communities.

This bill will help reduce duplication and unnecessary delays in planning to ensure Manitoba remains competitive and open for business and job growth.

I am pleased to present this bill to the House for consideration.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Bill 53—The Municipal Statutes Amendment Act (2)

Hon. Rochelle Squires (Minister of Municipal Relations): I move, seconded by the Minister of Agriculture and Resource Development (Mr. Pedersen), that Bill 53, The Municipal Statutes Amendment Act (2), be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Ms. Squires: I am pleased to speak to Bill 53, the municipal statutes amendment act.

This bill will modernize provisions in relation to public hearings and notices under The Municipal Act, the City of Winnipeg charter, The Municipal Board Act and The Planning Act.

The bill will also enable small councils to effectively address violations of municipal codes of conduct through a majority vote.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Bill 55—The Reducing Red Tape and Improving Services Act, 2021

Hon. Rochelle Squires (Minister of Municipal Relations): I move, seconded by the Minister of Finance (Mr. Fielding), that Bill 55, the reducing red tape and improving services act, be now read a first time.

Madam Speaker: It has been moved by the honourable Minister of Municipal Relations, seconded by the honourable Minister of Finance, that Bill 55, The Reducing Red Tape and Improving Services Act, 2021, be now read a first time.

Ms. Squires: This bill amends a number of statutes to remove unnecessary regulatory requirements and streamline provincial services that support Manitoba residents and organizations.

The bill is part of our commitment to reduce the administrative burden on Manitobans and continue to grow our economy.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Bill 41—The Fair Registration Practices in Regulated Professions Amendment Act

Hon. Ralph Eichler (Minister of Economic Development and Training): I move, seconded by the Minister of Finance, that The Fair Registration Practices in Regulated Professions Amendment Act now be read for a first time.

Madam Speaker: It has been moved by the honourable Minister of Economic Development and Training, seconded by the honourable Minister of Finance, that Bill 41, The Fair Registration Practices

in Regulated Professions Amendment Act, be now read a first time.

* (13:50)

Mr. Eichler: This bill will update Manitoba's fairness legislation to reduce barriers for qualified international educated applicants to the 30 self-regulated professions. This will enable their credentials to be recognized faster, allowing them to start working on their professions, fill skill gaps in the labour market and fully contribute to our economy.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? *[Agreed]*

Bill 61—The Apprenticeship and Certification Amendment Act

Hon. Ralph Eichler (Minister of Economic Development and Training): I move, seconded by the Minister of Finance (Mr. Fielding), that Bill 61, The Apprenticeship and Certification Amendment Act, be now read for a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Eichler: This bill will amend the apprentice and certification act to support a more flexible and responsive apprentice and certification program. The changes respond to the 2018 Apprenticeship and Certification System Governance Review, which identified several transformation required to meet the current needs of industry.

These modernizations support a more flexible, responsive and—apprenticeship and certification system, an important part of our efforts to sustain and grow Manitoba's economy through this pandemic era.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? *[Agreed]*

Bill 42—The Remote Witnessing and Commissioning Act (Various Acts Amended)

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I move, seconded by the Minister of Health, that Bill 42, The Remote Witnessing and Commissioning Act (Various Acts Amended), be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Cullen: This bill amends a number of statutes that provide for the witnessing or commissioning of certain legal documents under provincial statutes.

We recognize that the ability of Manitobans to use videoconferencing or similar technology in the future will be beneficial, for example, in creating a will or buying a home. This bill is certainly a step in the right direction, and I am pleased to present it to the House for consideration.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? *[Agreed]*

Bill 46—The Court Practice and Administration Act (Various Acts Amended)

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I move, seconded by the Minister of Agriculture, that Bill 46, The Court Practice and Administration Act (Various Acts Amended), be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Cullen: This bill will respond to requests from the judiciary to improve a number of administrative and procedural processes within Manitoba's three courts. Modernizing and improving the justice system in Manitoba continues to be a priority of our government, and this bill is another step in that direction.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? *[Agreed]*

Bill 50—The Legal Aid Manitoba Amendment Act

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I move, seconded by the Minister of Education (Mr. Goertzen), that Bill 50, The Legal Aid Manitoba Amendment Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Cullen: This bill updates provisions related to the tariff of fees paid to the private bar who administer services on behalf of Legal Aid Manitoba.

The bill will provide Legal Aid Management Council the authority over the tariff, including the setting of fees. The amendments contained in this bill will allow Legal Aid Manitoba to be nimble in responding to access to justice issues and will provide them with an important tool to manage operations.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? *[Agreed]*

Bill 51—The Limitations Act

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I move, seconded by the Minister for Economic Development and Training, that Bill 51, The Limitations Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Cullen: Madam Speaker, limitations acts are important aspects of the civil justice system. They ensure parties do not delay unnecessarily in bringing lawsuits. This avoids problems with memories fading and key documents being lost. A new Limitations Act will give better certainty to parties, lawyers and courts. Most other provinces have already modernized their corresponding acts, and Manitoba is now doing the same.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? *[Agreed]*

Bill 52—The Minor Amendments and Corrections Act, 2021

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I move, seconded by the Minister of Finance (Mr. Fielding), that Bill 52, the minor amendments and corrections act, be now read a first time.

Madam Speaker: It has been moved by the honourable Minister of Justice, seconded by the honourable Minister of Finance, that Bill 52, The Minor Amendments and Corrections Act, 2021, be now read a first time.

Mr. Cullen: Madam Speaker, this bill is a long-standing tradition in the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. The minor amendments and corrections act shows our respect for the rule of law by correcting various typographical, numbering and minor drafting and translation errors identified by Legislative Counsel.

This bill also contains minor amendments that are brought forward to a variety of acts.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? *[Agreed]*

Bill 57—The Protection of Critical Infrastructure Act

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I move, seconded by the Minister of Finance, that Bill 57, The Protection of Critical Infrastructure Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Cullen: The main purpose of this bill is to protect critical infrastructure if and when a protest harms or threatens to harm the public interest of Manitobans. Legislation would create a provincial offence for

undue obstruction of critical infrastructure such as railways and highways. The legislation provides consequences that would prevent a resumption or reoccurrence of the obstructive behaviour.

The Manitoba government recognizes the rights of citizens to express views on issues and engage in peaceful protest. Those rights must be balanced with the rights of Manitobans to enjoy their property and preserve their livelihoods and access necessary services. This bill will take firm action to prevent blockades from creating risks to public safety or harming the economy.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? *[Agreed]*

Bill 58—The Criminal Property Forfeiture Amendment Act

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I move, seconded by the Minister of Education (Mr. Goertzen), that Bill 58, The Criminal Property Forfeiture Amendment Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Cullen: Madam Speaker, this bill amends The Criminal Property Forfeiture Act to significantly improve operational efficiency of the Criminal Property Forfeiture Branch. The amendments will also provide the Criminal Property Forfeiture Branch, in the fight against organized crime and money laundering, with the critical legal tools and authority to identify and secure unlawful money before it can become untraceable in the day and age of smartphone banking.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? *[Agreed]*

* (14:00)

Bill 59—The Police Services Amendment Act

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I move, seconded by the Minister of Families (Mrs. Stefanson), that Bill 59, The Police Services Amendment Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Cullen: The Police Services Amendment Act will amend The Police Services Act to enhance transparency, oversight and accountability in policing. The bill will provide clarity to police, address gaps in the current legislation and strengthen the Independent Investigation Unit.

This bill will ensure that Manitoba has the most effective independent police oversight agency in Canada. The bill is another example of our commitment to implementing meaningful reforms that will guide the future of policing and police oversight and governance here in Manitoba.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Bill 60—The Liquor, Gaming and Cannabis Control Amendment Act (2)

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I move, seconded by the Minister of Crown Services (Mr. Wharton), that Bill 60, the liquor, gaming and cannabis control amendment act, be now read a first time.

Madam Speaker: It has been moved by the honourable Minister of Justice, seconded by the honourable Minister for Crown Services, that Bill 60, The Liquor, Gaming and Cannabis Control Amendment Act (2), be now read a first time.

Mr. Cullen: This bill will amend The Liquor, Gaming and Cannabis Control Act to establish a new licence category that would allow third-party companies to deliver liquor and cannabis on behalf of existing liquor retailers, service licensees and retail cannabis stores.

This bill also includes provisions that would strengthen the LGCA's enforcement capabilities, establishing authority to employ minors and young persons who would attempt to purchase regulated products in order to allow the LGCA to monitor a licensee's compliance with prohibition's under-age sales.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Bill 63—The Petty Trespasses Amendment and Occupiers' Liability Amendment Act

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I move, seconded by the Minister of Agriculture, that Bill 63, The Petty Trespasses Amendment and Occupiers' Liability Amendment Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Cullen: Madam Speaker, the main purpose of this bill is to better protect rural Manitoba residents from crime by improving Manitoba's trespass and occupiers' liability laws. The legislation will include amendments to the petty 'trespassers' act to ensure the

law is easier to enforce and to prevent confrontations between landowners and trespassers.

Amendments to The Occupiers' Liability Act ensure a landowner's legal responsibility for injury is fair and reasonable when someone is on their property without permission.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [*Agreed*]

Committee reports? Tabling of reports? Ministerial statements?

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

Léo and Adèle Dubois

Mr. Bob Lagassé (Dawson Trail): Madam Speaker, I'm honoured today to introduce a special couple and to—

Madam Speaker: We could ask the member—the honourable member for Dawson Trail—we can't hear him. I wonder if he has his headset there. [*interjection*] Okay, we'll come back.

Housing Affordability

Mr. Adrien Sala (St. James): Today I'd like to draw attention of the House to a silent driver of our growing affordability crisis—housing affordability crisis in Manitoba.

During my first year as an MLA, our office learned of many apartment buildings in St. James that were impacted by above-guideline rent increases approved through the residential tenancies board.

Madam Speaker, all of these rent increases were 15 per cent or higher. People on fixed incomes, many of them seniors, were being driven out of their buildings because they couldn't afford these types of rent increases without sacrificing other essentials like food and medicine.

To learn more about the scope of the problem, we submitted a FIPPA which found that, in 2019, 310 applications for above-guideline increases were put forward and every single application was approved. In 2019 alone, 20,400 units in Manitoba had been affected, and of those units approximately 2,700 had seen rent increases of 20 per cent or more.

It's quite clear that our system of rent controls is broken and that it's failing to balance the interests of everyday Manitobans and those of property owners. While we need to ensure there are investment incentives for the rental housing sector, our primary responsibility here should be to protect the overall

affordability of life in our province, and at this, Madam Speaker, our government is currently failing.

In light of the growing housing affordability crisis in Manitoba, and given the incredible economic challenges being faced by Manitobans, it's my belief that the government should immediately place a halt on approving above-guideline rent increases. The government should revisit the residential tenancies board legislation to slow the pace of rent increases that will ensure rental housing remains affordable for seniors and people on fixed incomes in Manitoba.

Madam Speaker: I would now like to go back to Dawson Trail.

Léo and Adèle Dubois

Mr. Bob Lagassé (Dawson Trail): Madam Speaker, I'm honoured today to introduce a special couple and two Dawson Trail heroes. Léo and Adèle Dubois were long-standing residents of Lorette, Manitoba. Adèle was active in the church, while Léo was a town councillor, school trustee, grand knight with the Knights of Columbus, as well as a hockey and baseball coach.

Léo worked as a grader operator in the town and would wave to everyone. Their family describes Léo and Adèle as being good Samaritans. They saw the good in others and always had a place at their table. I'm told no one ever left their house without something to eat or drink.

Adèle passed in 2017, and her dying wish was that Léo would not get too lonely. The family honoured her wish and made sure Léo was never lonely right up until he passed on Christmas morning in 2019.

The grandchildren of Léo and Adèle came up with an idea to honour their legacy by paying for a commemorative bench. On September 8th of this year, the commemorative bench was placed in front of la parish of Notre Dame in Lorette to honour the lives of these 61-year residents.

Please join me in honouring the memory of two wonderful Dawson Trail heroes, Léo and Adèle Dubois.

Ste. Rose du Lac

Mr. Brad Michaleski (Dauphin): While Manitobans are dealing with a global pandemic, there are still many good news stories happening across our great province. Last week, this strong Parkland community celebrated the unveiling of a new Zamboni, and I know this investment will serve the community and the surrounding region very well.

Madam Speaker, I have a great privilege of representing the community of Ste. Rose du Lac in the Manitoba Legislature. Ste. Rose du Lac is an essential region of Dauphin constituent and of Manitoba. I know this community holds great ideas and experience that can help the province to recover and develop positively from the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Ste. Rose du Lac is Manitoba's cattle capital, and I know the cattle producers in this region form a significant part of Manitoba's good news livestock story. Every year, Manitoba's cattle producers yield beef of the highest quality. They steward their livestock and the land with care.

I want to thank the community, Mayor Robert Brunel and council and, most importantly, the livestock producers for their leadership. Their knowledge related to the beef industry is an invaluable resource.

I also thank the producers who came to Ste. Rose this past summer to meet, discuss and share ideas with Manitoba's Minister of Agriculture and Resource Development (Mr. Pedersen). I would also like to thank my colleague, the minister, for making Ste. Rose a stop on his summer farm tour.

I thank the Pallister government and the—Manitoba's health leaders for their strong leadership during this pandemic, and for the PC government's unprecedented offer to listen and help the entire Dauphin region with regional economic development planning.

Madam Speaker, Ste. Rose has a lot to offer, and it's really, really great to hear they got a new Zamboni.

Homelessness in Wolseley

Ms. Lisa Naylor (Wolseley): Homelessness in Wolseley is a challenging issue that has only been exasperated by the pandemic. People are camping on the properties of many businesses in the Wolseley constituency. Stores and restaurants are used as warming shelters, and washrooms are used for bathing and drug use.

Small businesses incur the costs associated with cleaning up their property once folks move on. The folks camping behind businesses, on the riverbank and in the parks of my constituency are human beings who deserve dignity but are forced to use public spaces as toilets.

There have been several recent fires in the constituency as a result of people trying to get warm,

and last month, a community member died alone in a park where he was sheltering. His name was Tom.

* (14:10)

Recently, members of the West Broadway business association wrote to their representatives at levels of government to discuss the burdens they are shouldering with respect to marginalized members of our community. The COVID-19 pandemic has escalated chronic issues. The added costs in order to operate safely mean that their thin margins are being stretched, yet they are left to cover the costs of homelessness as well.

Businesses already struggling to survive are using all available resources to help their unhoused neighbours while keeping their staff and property safe, but these efforts don't provide long-term solutions.

Seventy-five per cent of respondents to a Wolseley community survey indicated that public bathrooms are desperately needed in our constituency. Community-serving agencies continue to call for adequate, secure, affordable housing, 24-7 safe spaces and 24-7 mobile mental health crisis response teams, and now the business association joins that call.

West Broadway business owners want to be part of the solution, but they can't do this alone. The provincial government must do its part with meaningful policy and action to mitigate poverty, homelessness and addictions.

Thank you.

Dr. Vince Crichton

Mr. Alan Lagimodiere (Selkirk): Madam Speaker, I stand before the House today to recognize a very special individual known throughout the province and around the world as Doc Moose.

Dr. Vince Crichton is best described as passionate, dedicated and committed to moose and moose management in Manitoba and around the world. The son of a conservation officer, Vince pursued university degrees in both Ontario and Manitoba, obtaining a bachelor of science, a masters of science and a Ph.D. With these impressive academic credentials and extensive knowledge of wildlife, Vince Crichton began a career in wildlife management with the Province of Manitoba in 1972.

Regional wildlife biologist, provincial moose manager, habitat manager, section manager were just some of the many hats Vince wore in a 40-year career with the Province of Manitoba.

Vince had an intense passion for moose and spent the majority of his career focusing on studying and understanding moose biology, physiology and habits. He became a world authority, the go-to man.

Doc Moose led and participated in moose management research, conferences and symposiums across Canada and internationally.

Dr. Vince Crichton's achievements have been many. He was among the first wildlife managers in Manitoba to advocate for the co-management of moose between First Nations and the provincial government. Doc Moose has made many appearances on both the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet. He has been the recipient of numerous awards, including Distinguished Moose Biologist Award, the 2014 Conservation Award from the Manitoba Chapter of the Wildlife Society. Vince was the first ever recipient of the honorary moose hunting licence from the Manitoba Department of Agriculture and Resource Development.

Madam Speaker, it is indeed a pleasure to honour Doc Moose, Dr. Vince Crichton, in our hallowed Chamber today.

Thank you.

ORAL QUESTIONS

Pandemic Management Government Response

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Madam Speaker, Manitobans have lost confidence in this Premier's ability to manage this pandemic. They've lost confidence in this Cabinet and this government's ability to manage the pandemic.

Over the weekend, we saw a remarkable scene, more than 1,100 new COVID cases in our province. We saw 15 Manitobans lose their lives.

And where was the government in all of this? Where was the Premier? Where was the Minister of Health? Nowhere to be found.

As small-business owners were standing up and demanding assistance so that they could make it through the month, where was the Premier? Nowhere to be found. It was a complete absence of leadership.

Where was he, Madam Speaker? What was so important to the Premier this weekend that he didn't have time to talk about saving lives and saving livelihoods?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): On the job, Madam Speaker. I and my ministers have been focused on COVID.

The member's seeking partisan advantage at the expense of the focus we need in this province to work together, to work in good faith with one another, to respect our health-care leaders and to give encouragement to Manitobans at a time they need it.

Madam Speaker, this is a difficult time for all Manitobans. The member shouldn't try to achieve a try to achieve some partisan political advantage at the expense of the unity that we need right now to fight COVID.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Kinew: Unity was there amongst everyone who showed up: Dr. Roussin, Lanette Siragusa, myself and others. We all showed up on Friday and over the weekend to issue a strong message to Manitobans to come together at this time.

But where was Premier? Where was he? What was he doing this weekend that was so important that he couldn't reassure Manitobans, that he couldn't bring forward a plan to save small businesses, even as new restrictions were being implemented with a laudable goal but that we know will have an impact on their viability?

Madam Speaker, 180 physicians signed a joint letter saying that this government's penny-pinching ways are going to cost us more in the long run. We need to see a real response. We need to see real investment in health care. We need to see real investments in order to preserve small businesses.

When will we see a Premier in action?

Mr. Pallister: The member opposite stands on a weak platform. He can't even show up for court dates.

So the fact of the matter is, we are, as a government, working diligently every day to address the issues of COVID. The issues raised by the physicians, for example, five of them, all five are being addressed as we speak and have been being addressed for some time.

We have a plan that was developed over months of work by health-care leaders in respect of the issues that they raised as far as ICU space, which is there, which is available. And all the member can come up with is alarmist behaviour and phony fear mongering and calling in the National Guard.

Press releases, press conferences—that's fine, Madam Speaker. The member may be good at those things, but we're better at addressing the issues Manitobans want addressed, and they want a government that will address COVID. And they deserve an opposition that will too.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a final supplementary.

Mr. Kinew: What Manitobans want is leaders who will show up. And history will record that in our darkest day of the pandemic, the Premier failed to show up.

Again, there are seven points in the letter that the 180 physicians co-signed. Five of them the government is failing on miserably, and the two additional ones they haven't even proffered any sort of response.

Another top-of-mind consideration for Manitobans is, of course, the safety of our schools. It's remarkable that it—this point in the school year, during the rest of the city of Winnipeg moving to the red condition, that this government is still sitting on \$85 million in federal funds.

Do they have a plan? No. Do they have teachers, additional classroom spaces? No. All they have are dodges and phony lines.

What is the harm in hiring more teachers?

Madam Speaker: The member's time has expired.

Mr. Pallister: The NDP threw their previous leader under the bus; they'll probably throw this one under the bus too, because he has a tendency to throw everybody under the bus, so I don't take this personally.

The member talks about inaction. The actions we've taken are: additional large sites over just the last two and half weeks that have increased our testing capacity by 40 per cent—done; additional evening testing sites: over 650 patients at the Dakota health centre already receiving testing as a consequence of that action; 10,000 Manitobans with an appointment booking system with the average wait being less than one minute.

Those are the actions we've taken. While the member is trying to score partisan points, we're focused on COVID. He should do the same.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a new question.

COVID-19 and Health Care PPE for Front-Line Workers

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): No, Madam Speaker, no. No, no, no, no. If this government had been focused on COVID, those measures would have been implemented in the summertime. If this government had been focused on COVID, a safer back-to-school plan would have announced prior to September 8th. If this government were focused on COVID, nurses wouldn't still be fighting for masks—masks, Madam Speaker. Eight months into the pandemic, our front-line heroes are still begging a penny-pinching government for masks.

No, scratch that. We're still begging this government to show up during Manitobans' time of need.

* (14:20)

How is it that this government could have exhausted eight months without bringing forward a real plan to guarantee protective equipment for those front-line heroes who need it, and what does he say to those who have contracted COVID in our hospitals as a result of their failure?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): While the member was vacationing all summer and cobwebs were forming on the door of his office, the Health Minister and I made over 100 appearances to the media to be accessible and transparent to the people of Manitoba. On every occasion, with every announcement, good or bad, the health leaders of our province led the way. After consultation with Manitobans we introduced the idea.

Madam Speaker, we're continuing, not only to be available, to get action, to achieve results for Manitobans. The member talks about why we didn't have additional testing sites in July. We had no COVID cases. That would've been idiocy. We're setting up additional testing sites and making them available to Manitobans as is needed now because this is when the demand is occurring, not just in Manitoba, everywhere around the world.

And around the world, Madam Speaker, people are avoiding trying to be selfish and achieve partisan advantage at the expense of the unity that needs to occur in their jurisdictions. I encourage the member to do that now.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a supplementary question.

Pandemic Response Summer Ad Campaign

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Well, I think maybe we've come a little bit closer to diagnosing the problem with the Premier. Apparently, he views preparing for the second wave of the pandemic as idiocy when, in fact, every expert around the world was saying that we ought to use the summer to increase testing capacity, to increase contact-tracing capacity and to increase ICU bed capacity to prepare for the inevitable resurgence of this silent enemy.

And yet what was the Premier doing at that time? Well, he was hanging a mission accomplished banner from billboards across the province: ready, set, grow. Doesn't sound too good to Manitoba businesses teetering on the edge, to those parents worried about students in class or to our health-care workers sitting on the edge.

Will the Premier now admit that his summer ad campaign was a complete, utter mistake?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Well, the idiocy would be a member opposite who does so little research he can't even get the slogan right: Ready. Safe. Grow. And immediately promoting safety in workplaces, promoting safe habits, promoting people practising physical distancing. All summer, Madam Speaker, while the case numbers were low, we were advocating for health measures that would protect Manitobans if they followed them, and they were.

But, Madam Speaker, some of them aren't now. And so deterrents need to be brought into place, and this is what Dr. Tam has said federally; this is what Dr. Roussin is saying here. We're acting on that advice, not the advice of Dr.—I'm sorry, not Dr. Wab; he's not a doctor; I don't mean to say that—but not the advice of someone who pretends to be a health expert and is not. That's the danger when the member stands up, makes things up, gets things wrong and tries to scare people.

What we're focused on doing is addressing COVID, Madam Speaker. That's what Manitobans want. That's what they get with this government.

Madam Speaker: Order, please.

I would just encourage the member that inferring about idiocy across the way would probably not be something that is viewed to be very kind or parliamentary. So I would just urge all members in the use of those words to be very careful in what they are saying.

The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a final supplementary.

COVID-19 Financial Assistance Support for Small Business

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Madam Speaker, 180 physicians and Ph.D.s signed a letter condemning this government's approach, saying the fact that they're not willing to invest in public health, that they're not willing to invest in front-line health care, is the reason that the coronavirus pandemic is spiralling out of control. And they say, again, that the government's No. 1 stated rationale, that the penny-pinching ways will cause us more pain in the long run.

But what has been completely absent and remarkably notably absent from a government that claims to be the friend of small business is any help whatsoever to help those small businesses impacted by this round of restrictions. We are calling on this government to bring forward \$100 million in special, direct financial assistance for business this month.

Will the Premier stand in his place today and commit to bringing forward \$100 million in direct grants for small businesses impacted by the restrictions for this coming month?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): We've already done that, plus, Madam Speaker. Over \$160 million already and the largest and most supportive programs for small business, bar none in Canada, are here in Manitoba.

Madam Speaker, the member speaks about penny-pinching. The fact of the matter is he was ready to spend money the—from the rainy day fund last Friday. He was—had all kinds of ideas on how to spend money from a rainy day fund. The NDP raided it in good times: no money at all there. If the NDP had been in power, wouldn't have had any money to invest.

Instead, we've invested it: \$648 million more this year in health care than the NDP ever invented. Don't sound like penny-pinching to a common sense person in Manitoba.

So the fact of the matter is, we are investing more and we're continuing to invest more in focused ways to address the issues that Manitobans want addressed, and they want us to focus on COVID, not partisan gain.

Revera Personal-Care Homes Government Oversight of Facilities

MLA Uzoma Asagwara (Union Station): Madam Speaker, there were 15 deaths over the past four days and, as of today, six of those deaths were at Maples personal-care home. That's after 23 deaths so far at Parkview Place. We've been asking for the government to step in and take over care of Parkview Place for nearly a month, but the minister refused and, instead, he called those deaths unavoidable.

We know that we need to stop the outbreaks in our PCHs. We need to make sure that every private, for-profit home is taken over by this government.

Will the minister make sure he does not fail any more seniors? Will he take over control of all Revera personal-care homes?

Hon. Cameron Friesen (Minister of Health, Seniors and Active Living): The member would do wise to stop continuously misquoting me and using words out of context. It does nothing to bolster their credibility, which is suffering right now.

Madam Speaker, I'm happy to provide this—*[interjection]*—oh, unless the member for St. Johns (Ms. Fontaine) would like to provide the answer? Okay.

I would like to provide this update. I can indicate to everyone there's been no more cases in a 24-hour period, that 28 workers have been hired at Parkview Place. There are now virtual visits happening daily. There are physicians on-site or virtual 24 hours of the day. There was a town hall meeting for all the families of individuals and residents there, and all of the cohorted people who have been cohorted are done so in private rooms.

These are some of the updates that show the degree to which this is a focus: to keep health and safety at Parkview Place.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Union Station, on a supplementary question.

Call for In-Person Inspections

MLA Asagwara: Madam Speaker, we know that families are desperate to know how their loved ones are doing in personal-care homes. They're worried sick about their mothers and fathers and elders in Parkview, Maples and other PCHs across the province. They need to know that those in personal-care homes are being cared for and also that there are in-person inspections being done by health experts, and they need to know that today.

The only way that we can know what's really going on in PCHs and—is for the government, rather, to step in and inspect each and every one.

Will the minister take that action? Will he tell the House that every single Revera personal-care home in the province will have personal—in-person inspections, rather, today?

Mr. Friesen: Madam Speaker, let the member be very clear what they are asking for. If they are asking for in-person people to show up with clipboards in hand, even at the express direction of public health that that should not happen, let them say so.

Manitoba—Manitobans know that we are standing up for them and keeping their focus on safety. Madam Speaker, I can tell all Manitobans that there will be more inspections undertaken, even during this COVID pandemic, than even before, more than last year. And I can also inform all members that there was an unannounced follow-up visit even at Parkview Place that took place just four days ago.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Union Station, on a final supplementary.

Deaths in Personal-Care Homes Call for Emergency Response

MLA Uzoma Asagwara (Union Station): The Premier (Mr. Pallister) has said that he is comfortable with the actions taken at Parkview Place.

Madam Speaker, 23 residents have died, over 100 residents and staff infected. That is an absolute failure.

* (14:30)

We need immediate, decisive and emergency action to save lives. That's why we've been calling for the takeover of Parkview, Maples, and other personal-care homes, because the Premier's actions have failed. The Premier needs to stop being comfortable and take action to save lives of Manitobans.

Will the Premier get on Team Manitoba and treat this situation for the emergency that it is?

Hon. Cameron Friesen (Minister of Health, Seniors and Active Living): For the record, the member just also twisted again the words of the Premier on the record.

Everyone is tremendously devastated at the loss of life that has taken place in Manitoba long-term care homes. That's why we are acting. That's why so much is being done to keep those residents safe.

I would say to all members of this Legislature, when it comes to the Maples situation all—we know that in that facility all the rooms are private. We know that everyone has been in their rooms, monitored, kept safe as a result of the precautions that have been taken and the precautions that will continue to take place in all of our long-term-care homes because we care and because we put the first emphasis on the safety of all Manitobans.

COVID-19 and Education System Spending of Federal Funds

Mr. Matt Wiebe (Concordia): Madam Speaker, this is a stressful time for families and for our teachers who are supporting our children.

Teachers have begun to speak out, saying they're exhausted and saying that they are, quote, at the end of their rope.

There's simply no relief from this government. The Premier confirmed today that none of the \$85.4 million in federal funding has made its way to school divisions. And over the weekend, MTS confirmed that federal money hasn't flowed, funds are collecting dust. In other provinces the money has started to flow, but not here.

I ask the minister: When will the federal funds actually begin to flow and when will schools begin to get the resources they need?

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Minister of Education): I have no doubt that this is a challenging time for teachers, for EAs, for bus drivers, for janitorial staff, for everybody who is working within the school system. It is a challenging time generally for society and many different people who are taking on different roles that they never would have expected a year ago.

But I say to all of those who are working in the education system, and it was echoed by Dr. Roussin last week, that the reason why schools are seeing relatively minimal transmission of the virus is because those individuals are doing an extraordinary job in an extraordinarily difficult time.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Concordia, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Wiebe: Unfortunately, Madam Speaker, it's clear that this minister's priority continues to be only their bottom line and not our schools.

This spring, for instance, he forced the layoff of nearly 8,000 people in our schools, and now he's forcing out remote learning staff who work in the Department of Education.

As we've said for months now, the Province needs a resource plan. Instead, what families are facing from the Pallister government is their true priority: first and foremost—[*interjection*]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Wiebe: —above all else, to try to limit how much they spend.

Why is the minister forcing out staff in the Department of Education—[*interjection*]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Wiebe: —and when will federal funding actually flow to our schools?

Mr. Goertzen: Unfortunately, the member opposite—while I recognize that he's trying to make a point about the great work that is being done in our schools by the school staff, and that is certainly true—is conflating that with misinformation when it comes to funding.

We did say prior to the year—beginning of school that there would be \$100 million available. I got the most recent report from September: 15-and-a-half-million dollars of that \$100 million was spent by schools—\$5.7 million on enhanced cleaning supplies, \$1.4 million on transportation, \$3.5 million on technology and another \$3.5 million on staff.

Of course, there'll be another report in October and I expect similar numbers during that month.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Concordia, on a final supplementary.

Wait Time for Test Results

Mr. Wiebe: And yet this minister continues to force out staff in his own department and hold back from schools when they need it most.

Teachers and education staff aren't getting what they need to be safe. One teacher told the media a similar story that we have heard continuing on in other places. Once a positive test happens, a school has to wait for the positive test to be communicated to the school by public health. But they are waiting days, Madam Speaker, sometimes many days, for those results to come in. This undermines the contact tracing as well as the confidence that parents would have to be quickly informed. Parents have begun sharing their own information because of this minister's step back.

Why is it taking so long to communicate those test results to the parents and the schools that need it most?

Mr. Goertzen: Madam Speaker, while I know the member opposite is critical of public health officials

all the time, as are all the members on the other side, as indicated in the first answer there've been 15-and-a-half-million dollars in September alone of the money that was allocated spent within schools. I know that October will be similar numbers, and I'll be happy to share those numbers with the House when I receive them.

The federal government has indicated that, of the money that they have committed to, half will not arrive in Manitoba until at least next year, Madam Speaker, at some point during next year. For that money that they will flow this year, we absolutely will be spending that on similar items that I've already described and others, including staff.

Correctional Facilities COVID-19 Spread Prevention

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): Manitobans either living or working in correctional facilities are in the midst of a COVID-19 outbreak. Housed in Headingley, one Manitoban describes it as, and I quote, a complete outbreak where an entire unit has tested positive, Madam Speaker. This same citizen also states, and I quote, people who are sick aren't coming forward because they are afraid of being put in segregation.

That is what the Minister of Justice is offering Manitobans: segregation when they are sick and most at risk and need.

I ask the minister: What is he doing to address this crisis at Headingley and other correctional facilities across Manitoba?

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I do appreciate the opportunity to respond to this, because we have been working with our public health folks since day one of the pandemic here in Manitoba.

We have very strict protocols and policies in place to deal with the outbreaks that we've encountered over the last month, so a lot of safety equipment is being utilized. We've upgraded the PPE to medical status—medical-grade equipment. We continue with the cleaning. In fact, Manitoba leads the country in terms of the capacity to clean these facilities.

So there's been a lot of work. We will continue to work with our staff and the inmates at our various facilities to make sure that public safety is paramount.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for St. Johns, on a supplementary question.

Ms. Fontaine: And despite what the minister has just erroneously put on the record, there are outbreaks at Agassiz, the Manitoba Youth Centre, women's correctional facility, Brandon, Milner Ridge and the Winnipeg Remand, Madam Speaker.

One resident says that people who are sicked aren't coming forward for fear of segregation, Madam Speaker. This is going to make it nearly impossible to contain the virus if the chain of transmission is not broken.

The residents, and many people, are proposing that all residents and staff be tested at all of our correctional facilities.

Will the minister do this and ensure that everyone at correctional facilities get tested today?

Mr. Cullen: Obviously, we're working closely with our public health officials, Dr. Atwal and his team working in corrections. We're following their advice.

I will say, for the member's knowledge, we have done over 850 tests at our facilities. Obviously, those that are symptomatic will be offered a test, and hopefully they will take us up on that test.

I will say, obviously, we've enhanced the personal protection products there. We've enhanced our cleaning. And any individuals that do come down with a positive are isolated. Those cohorts are isolated. So it doesn't necessarily mean segregation, but certainly those that test positive are isolated from those non-positive.

* (14:40)

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for St. Johns, on a final supplementary.

Ms. Fontaine: Last week, the minister said that there were about 1,900 Manitobans currently being housed in our correctional facilities. The minister just said that only 815 of those have been tested. Madam Speaker, I remind everybody these are contained, isolated, overcrowded, above-capacity facilities that are ripe for the transmission of COVID-19. There simply isn't enough space in many facilities to isolate sick residents without double-bunking in other parts of facilities or putting them in segregation. This is a recipe for disaster.

And I remind the minister that everybody deserves to be safe, regardless of where they are currently housed.

I ask the minister: What is he going to do today to mitigate the transmission of COVID in all of our correctional facilities?

Miigwech.

Mr. Cullen: Since day one, we've worked very closely with our public health officials, Dr. Atwal and his team. We've developed policies, procedures for situations exactly as we find ourselves in. We're taking their advice; we're acting on their advice. Obviously, individuals, if they are symptomatic are offered tests, and as I say, we've done over 850 tests to date, and certainly we will continue to make sure that safety is first and foremost when it comes to both our staff and the inmates as well.

Keeyask Generating Station Code Red Designation Request

Mr. Adrien Sala (St. James): We continue to hear of climbing case numbers at the Keeyask site. The government has the opportunity right now to get on top of this outbreak fast to try and control it to make sure we do everything possible to keep employees and neighbouring communities safe. Unfortunately, the Premier (Mr. Pallister) has made it pretty clear to Manitobans this morning that no new actions or initiatives will be taken to help people get through this difficult time financially.

Given this, will the minister and his government at the very least take aggressive action to contain and control the outbreak? Will they increase the Keeyask site to code red immediately?

Hon. Jeff Wharton (Minister of Crown Services): Again, protecting the safety and well-being of our staff and the communities surrounding the Keeyask site, Madam Speaker, is priority one for this government, and I might add, Manitoba Hydro, as well, and their executive team working hard with stakeholders to ensure that proper protocols are in place to protect Manitobans in the North.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for St. James, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Sala: If people in neighbouring First Nations get sick, those individuals will have to come to Winnipeg, where we're already reaching capacity because of this government's cuts to health care. Fox Lake Cree Nation, Tataskweyak Cree Nation, War Lake and York Factory First Nations are all demanding the government step up and do their part and protect northern Manitobans.

We can't afford another outbreak that will further strain our system.

Will the minister move the Keeyask site to red today?

Mr. Wharton: Manitoba Hydro has been working closely, again, with senior health officials, Madam Speaker—because we'll take lessons from health officials and not the members opposite—who are providing direction and guidance on measures undertaken at Keeyask and, again, working in partnership with KCN and other first nations around Keeyask and employees that live and work in that area.

Our government is working hard with Manitoba Hydro and all stakeholders to ensure safety is No. 1.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for St. James, on a final supplementary.

Manitoba Hydro Rates Request to Cancel Increase

Mr. Adrien Sala (St. James): You know, Madam Speaker, in his comments to media today, the Premier recognized that all Manitobans are taking a financial hit. So I find it quite fascinating that his special way of lightening the load for Manitobans is to give them a 2.9 per cent rate hike just in time for the holidays.

Not only does this rate hike mean higher bills for individuals but it also means higher hydro bills for businesses when the Premier just affirmed this morning that they wouldn't be receiving any new supports either. That's not leadership. That's providing greater hardship for Manitoban families and businesses that have already received no help from this government.

Will the minister do the right thing and amend BITSA and strike the rate increase to help Manitobans and small businesses during this difficult time?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Madam Speaker, the NDP created Hydro havoc for ratepayers with \$10 billion of wasted investment. They own any rate increases that occur in this province for decades to come.

As far as our investments in small business, they lead the country, Madam Speaker. We have 10,000—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Pallister: —10,000 small businesses in this province that have received gap funding, which is—exceeds every other province's supports. We have 10,000 businesses that have used our wage subsidy

program: tens of millions of dollars going out every week now, Madam Speaker, to Manitoba small businesses.

The member says we're not supporting small business, Madam Speaker. He puts false information on the record because he simply doesn't understand the reality of the situation. We're supporting Manitoba small businesses better than any other provincial government in Canada.

Victoria General Hospital PPE for Nursing Staff

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): I table an open letter by a nurse who's been working at the Victoria hospital.

No one told the Vic that a patient who was coming from St. Boniface from a suspected COVID ward. The patient wandered the halls, and when people put on masks, they were mocked. Nurses there don't have adequate PPE.

Now, the government knew about problems at the Vic because I wrote a letter to the minister, which I also table, about the father of Dr. Jen Gunter. Mr. Gunter died there after developing sores, not being fed. No one returned Jen Gunter's calls for help and the Vic admitted there were mistakes in his care, then cancelled the meeting with the family.

So before the pandemic, we already had catastrophic failures in basic care and basic communication for a patient. In July, the minister knew about it.

Why is the Premier blaming Manitobans when he can't even make sure that nurses in hospitals get PPE in a code red?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): The NDP and—the NDP opposition, Madam Speaker, was intelligent enough and thoughtful enough on this rare occasion to stand with the government last week and support a call for the federal government to resume its rightful responsibilities in funding health care in this country.

Every premier of every political stripe agrees, and virtually every opposition party across the country from coast to coast to coast, except the Liberals in this province, who sat quietly on their hands and represented Ottawa to Manitobans yet again. And they continue to do it and they do it again today, while we stand up for Manitobans and for Manitoba health care. The member should do the same.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for St. Boniface, on a supplementary question.

COVID-19 and Education System Spending of Federal Funds

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): Clear that the Premier didn't hear my remarks. I'd be more than happy to share with him my opinion on that resolution last week.

Earlier this month, in the middle of a code orange, I got a fundraising letter from my son's school, which I table—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Lamont: —asking me and other parents to sell chocolate bars in order to raise money for distance learning equipment, a handwashing 'stadon'—station and 40 face masks.

Now, apparently this was a miscommunication. We shouldn't be surprised about the confusion, because the Premier and his ministers have never explained how \$85.4 million in federal money to make safe schools will be sent. Many other provinces break it down in detail.

My question: Would the Premier (Mr. Pallister) like to buy some chocolate bars, or will he actually spend some of the \$85.4 million he got from the federal government to make my child and the schools across Manitoba safe?

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Minister of Education): Madam Speaker, first of all, I notice that the member opposite was tweeting erroneous information and scaring individuals within a certain school on the weekend. And I think that's unfortunate that this member, of course, puts politics ahead of both the safety but also, I think, the overall mental health of those who are dealing in a very difficult time.

More specifically, when it comes to Ottawa, Madam Speaker, he will know that less than 3 per cent of the funding that we ever receive, when it comes to education, would come from the federal government. This is a government that has stepped up with \$100 million of funding. We continue to provide support to the schools as they need them. *[interjection]*

He can yell from his chair all that he wants, Madam Speaker, but it doesn't change the fact that we're here to represent Manitoba. He represents Ottawa to Manitoba.

Child Care Availability During Pandemic Constituent Case Concern

Ms. Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): I have a constituent who is a single mother of three. She has a strong work ethic and wants to continue working. However, because of the shortage in child-care spots due to the pandemic, she is forced to choose between cutting back on her work hours, which would make her ineligible for child-care subsidies, or having to cut her hours completely so she can stay at home with her children, where she would then be ineligible to pay for—or to apply for COVID relief programs.

* (14:50)

How would the minister recommend she move forward, and what is this government doing to address this for all other Manitobans facing the same situation?

Hon. Heather Stefanson (Minister of Families): I want to thank the member for that very important question, and I think it's important that what we did is we took it very seriously in terms of matching people who needed child-care services with those facilities.

There is an online matching system right now, so I would suggest that that individual, you either contact our office; we'd be happy to set her up with the appropriate mechanism to do so.

We do know that there's about 6,000 vacant positions right now in the province of Manitoba for child care, so we should be able to accommodate those—that individual.

Code of Conduct for Municipal Councils Harassment and Bullying Prevention

Mr. Brad Michaleski (Dauphin): Safe and respectful workplaces are important for all Manitobans, and this government has taken many steps to ensure that all employees are protected from all forms of bullying and harassment.

The most recent step to ensure that all Manitobans are protected was the passing of The Municipal Amendment Act and the council members code of conduct regulation.

Can the Minister of Municipal Relations provide the House an update on the codes of conduct for municipal government?

Hon. Rochelle Squires (Minister of Municipal Relations): I'd like to thank my colleague for that great question.

We all deserve to work in a workplace that is free of sexual harassment and where individuality and diversity is respected, and municipal councils are no different. The council members code of conduct regulation, which officially came into force yesterday, is yet another tool to ensure that this does occur in municipalities. The framework will help council members understand both the expectations of them and situations or behaviour that can be considered inappropriate or unacceptable.

Together The Municipal Amendment Act and this regulation reflect Manitoba's continued commitment to preventing and addressing issues of sexual harassment and ensuring that we all have safe workplaces in Manitoba.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Fort Garry. The honourable member for Fort Garry? I would ask the member to unmute his mic.

The honourable member for Fort Garry. We cannot hear the member.

Mr. Mark Wasyliw (Fort Garry): All right. Can you hear me now?

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Financial Assistance During Pandemic Support for Small Business

Mr. Mark Wasyliw (Fort Garry): From the start of the pandemic many businesses have led the way in measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19, from shutting down before they were mandated to reducing their occupancy in their stores.

Sadly, we haven't seen the same leadership from the Pallister government to help make sure businesses survive through COVID-19, and many won't make it through the second round of shutdowns.

With new restrictions should come targeted, corresponding financial relief for small businesses.

Will the minister show leadership during this second wave and provide businesses with the financial relief they need immediately?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): After years, Madam Speaker, of NDP looting small businesses, raising their taxes, increasing their fees and charges and blaming them, basically, for being in operation, this government came in and took immediate steps to assist small business, and we continue to do that during this COVID pandemic.

We have over \$91 million right now out in supports to Manitoba small businesses with our wage subsidy program, Madam Speaker, for example. That's assisted people in getting jobs back, helped small businesses with the cash flow crunch during this difficult time. And those applications continue to flow in—1,696 new jobs created in just the last 30 days.

On the gap program, we alone in Manitoba have a \$6,000 support program, 95 per cent approval, money out in 48 hours or less, and Manitoba small businesses appreciate that very much. I can tell you, Madam Speaker, just in the last seven days, another 100 Manitoba small businesses benefitted from that.

Madam Speaker, \$160 million out to Manitoba small businesses—best record in the country. We continue to support our small businesses.

Madam Speaker: The time for oral questions has expired

Speaker's Ruling

Madam Speaker: I have a ruling for the House.

On March 11, 2020, the honourable member for Fort Garry rose in the House alleging a matter of privilege on the grounds that cuts to the public service made by the provincial government led to the removal of public accountability and those actions have impeded the member's ability to hold this government to account and interfered with his parliamentary duties. The member concluded his comments by moving, and I quote, that this matter be moved to an all-party committee for consideration. End quote. The honourable member for River Heights (Mr. Gerrard) also offered advice to the Chair. I then took the matter under advisement in order to consult the procedural authorities.

I thank all honourable members for their contributions to the matter of privilege.

In raising privilege, members must satisfy two conditions in order for the matter to be ruled in order as a prima facie case. It needs to be demonstrated that the issue was raised at the earliest opportunity, and that sufficient evidence has been provided to demonstrate that the privileges of the House have been breached, in order for the matter to be put to the House.

The honourable member for Fort Garry suggested that the criteria for determining the earliest opportunity should be interpreted in a, and I quote, holistic or contextual matter, and, I quote, cannot

simply mean the next moment in time in which a member has ability to speak.

The procedural authorities disagree with the member's contention. Bosc and Gagnon advise on page 145 of the third edition of the House of Commons Procedure and Practice that, and I quote, "the matter of privilege to be raised in the House must have recently occurred and must call for the immediate action of the House."

Therefore, the member must satisfy the Speaker that the matter is being brought to the House as soon as practicable after becoming aware of the situation. I ask members to keep this in mind when assessing the aspect of timeliness in the future as I am not satisfied the condition was met in this case.

Regarding the second issue of whether a prima facie case was demonstrated, the member essentially alleged that administrative or policy decisions made by the provincial government in regards to the funding of the public service were grounds for a matter of privilege. I would note for the House that Joseph Maingot advises on page 224 of the second edition of Parliamentary Privilege in Canada that allegations of misjudgment or mismanagement or maladministration on the part of a minister in the performance of their ministerial duties does not come within the purview of parliamentary privilege. This finding is supported by one ruling from Speaker Rocan in 1994, three rulings from Speaker Dacquay in 1996 and one by Speaker Hickes in 2006.

The principle is also confirmed by a decision of Speaker Lucien Lamoureux regarding a matter of privilege raised in the Canadian House of Commons on March 9th, 1972. The matter alleged inadequate funding by the government of the office of the federal Auditor General. The allegation stated the lack of funding had an impact on staff and resources for that office, created delays in submitting a report which, in turn, affected the privileges of members by impeding them in the discharge of their duties.

Speaker Lamoureux ruled that there was no prima facie case of privilege, as the complaint about the facilities of the Auditor General's office did not relate to privilege but rather to a matter of administration. Speaker Lamoureux stated in the ruling, and I quote: I remind honourable members that this is not a decision on the substance of the matter but one only on procedure, which is the limit of Speakers' responsibility in such matters. End quote. He also indicated that the matter could be raised under different circumstances on another occasion.

The member for Fort Garry (Mr. Wasyliw) alleged that the cuts to public service impeded his ability to hold the government to account. However, given that members have been able to ask questions during oral questions, make members' statements and participate in debate and in committee meetings, it is difficult to argue with the suggestion that the member was impeded from—pardon me—it is difficult to agree with the suggestion that the member was impeded from performing his parliamentary duty.

* (15:00)

In regards to the member's comments that he could not fulfill his role as critic to hold the government to account, Maingot further advises on page 224 of the same edition that, and I quote, parliamentary privilege is concerned with the special rights of members, not in their capacity as ministers or as party leaders, whips or parliamentary secretaries, but strictly in their capacity as members in their parliamentary work. End quote.

Therefore, the honourable member from Fort Garry cannot claim the protection of parliamentary privilege for the performance of his duties as a critic, but only as an MLA.

All of the above references from Joseph Maingot are supported by rulings from myself as well as from Speakers Rocan, Dacquay and Hickes.

The member has not demonstrated any obstruction or impediment regarding the function of the House nor the discharge of his duty. I must therefore rule, with the greatest of respect, that the matter raised does not fulfill the criteria of a prima facie case of privilege. This does, however—pardon me, I'll start again. This, however, does not prevent the member from raising the issue in other areas such as questions in the House or during discussions held by the Public Accounts Committee for other such decision-making bodies for the Legislative Assembly.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Official Opposition House Leader?

MATTER OF PRIVILEGE

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): On a matter of privilege.

Madam Speaker: On a matter of privilege.

Ms. Fontaine: I rise at the earliest opportunity as I have used the time to consult authorities and it is not permitted to raise matters of privilege during question period, according to our rules, Madam Speaker.

We know that it is the job of MLAs to be able to comment on legislation before this House. This legislation must be made available to members so that they can do their job, Madam Speaker. The fundamental privilege of a member is speech in this Chamber and if the information necessary to provide the basis of this speech is deliberately withheld from members of this Chamber, this fundamentally undermines the ability of MLAs to do their job.

In plain English, Madam Speaker, this is a cheap and worrisome move that undermines the fundamental democratic rights of members of this Chamber.

Beginning at 1:30 p.m., Madam Speaker, the government introduced 23 bills, and as of 30 seconds ago we have only received four of those bills. This removes the ability of members to hold the government to account and to do our job, and it is an insult to the people of Manitoba by a government that is withholding vital information about schools, about justice, about child care and about other matters from the people.

As a result, Madam Speaker, I move, seconded by the member from Concordia, that this matter be immediately referred to a committee for consideration.

Madam Speaker: Before recognizing any other members to speak, I would remind the House that remarks at this time by honourable members are limited to strictly relevant comments about whether the alleged matter of privilege has been raised at the earliest opportunity and whether a prima facie case has been established.

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Government House Leader): I won't delve into the argument about whether or not this was raised at the earliest possibility. I'll let you do your deliberations on whether or not that would be the case, Madam Speaker.

On the issue, though, about whether or not this in some way impedes the member's ability to do her job, usually the ministers gave a description regarding the bill. I think that she would know that the rules of her House require that bill distribution happens before second reading, Madam Speaker. I've been in this Chamber for a brief amount of time since being elected in 2003 and there has been other instances, of course, where similar things have happened.

I would remember when Gary Doer—I believe former Premier Gary Doer brought forward legislation on fixed election dates, Madam Speaker. Contained within that bill was, of course, a number of other things, not just set election dates. I believe also the vote tax and other things were contained within the bill, and he delayed distribution of that bill.

In fact, I think I remember now—Member of Parliament Lamoureux, a former MLA in this Chamber, running into the hallway and claiming victory on that legislation simply because the bill was entitled the fixed election day bill, and only later on when the bill was distributed that he see there was a bunch of other things contained within the bill.

In fact, there may have been matters of privileges or points of order raised on that very issue by the former Speakers that were then ruled upon. But the real crux—the genesis of this problem, Madam Speaker—is—and my friend, the Opposition House Leader, will know—is that the opposition has used the relatively new rules that have been crafted in this House to block bills from being introduced before the specified bill deadline day.

Madam Speaker, you will know and you will remember that, when the relatively new rules were crafted in this House, it was always intended to be a balance and to provide a balance for government to bring in legislation because they have the mandate to govern, but also to allow opposition to do their job and to be able to hold bills over until generally the fall of a particular session so that they could make whatever case they wanted to make to the public that those were not bills that were worthy of support, Madam Speaker.

However, this opposition—led by this Opposition House Leader—has, I would say, used those rules in a way that was never intended by those who crafted them, including former members of the NDP, Steve Ashton, Dave Chomiak, including the member for River Heights (Mr. Gerrard)—current member for River Heights, who was involved with those rules. And, in fact, they have demonstrated both this spring during a pandemic and in previous springs the desire and the willingness to filibuster the ability for bills to be introduced for days before that specified date.

So what we have done as a government is, rather than waiting until spring to provide our intention of the bills that are here now to be introduced, we're doing it months ahead of time, Madam Speaker. So, far from the member's ability to be impeded, to be able to see legislation or to learn about legislation she's learned about it from members' statements, the—or,

sorry, ministers today who've made comments about it, in fact, months earlier than would have been the case previously. And that is a direct result of how they have managed or decided to at least abuse the intention and the spirit of the rules as they were crafted by parties prior to the 2016 election.

However, I would offer this in conclusion to my friend, the member for St. Johns (Ms. Fontaine), Madam Speaker: If she is looking to have the rules changed in such a way that it could restore the original intention of those rules so that government can bring forward legislation in a timely way because they have the mandate to govern and opposition has the ability to withhold, or to hold pieces of legislation for longer periods of time because they have also been elected to an important role in democracy, and that is to oppose things that they don't think are in the best interests of the public generally, I have already extended the invitation to the member. I'm more than willing to have a discussion about changing those rules so that it means both the government's and the opposition's mandates—because we both have important mandates.

But on the substance of her matter of privilege, Madam Speaker, this is well within the rules that currently exist in the Manitoba Legislature.

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): Briefly, Madam Speaker, on this matter of privilege.

It clearly has been raised at the earliest possible time and it is a significant issue because we need the bills, which have been announced and tabled for first reading, to actually be there. The government has had months to prepare these bills and get them ready for distribution, so it's just not acceptable.

The House leader for the government suggests that, because the honourable Gary Doer did this, you know, bad approach in the past, that he should be allowed to do this bad approach now. That's not a good reason.

And further, in the comments of the House leader for the government, he seems to be suggesting that he may not bring these other bills forward for months. You know, this is not normal democracy. This is not the kind of approach that we should have.

The government should be ashamed of itself.

Madam Speaker: A matter of privilege is a serious concern. I'm going to take this matter under advisement to consult the authorities, and will return to the House with a ruling.

PETITIONS

Dauphin Correctional Centre

Mr. Jim Maloway (Elmwood): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly.

The background to this petition is as follows:

(1) The provincial government plans to close the Dauphin Correctional Centre, D-C-C-C, in May 2020.

(2) The D-C-C-C is one of the largest employers in Dauphin, providing the community with good, family-supporting jobs.

(3) Approximately 80 families will be directly affected by the closure, which will also impact the local economy.

* (15:10)

(4) As of January 27th, 2020, Manitoba's justice system was already more than 250 inmates over capacity.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge the Minister of Justice to immediately reverse the decision to close the D-C-C-C and proceed with the previous plan to build a new correctional and healing centre with an expanded courthouse in Dauphin.

And this has been signed by many, many Manitobans.

Madam Speaker: In accordance with our rule 133(6), when petitions are read they are deemed to be received by the House.

Are there any further petitions?

There being no further petitions: grievances?

ORDERS OF THE DAY

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Government House Leader): Could you please resolve into Committee of Supply?

Madam Speaker: The House will now resolve into Committee of Supply to consider Estimates from the following departments: Health, Seniors and Active Living in the Chamber, Crown Services in room 255 and Executive Council in room 254.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY
(Concurrent Sections)
EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

* (15:30)

Mr. Chairperson (Greg Nesbitt): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of the Committee of Supply will now consider the Estimates of Executive Council.

Does the honourable First Minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Yes, Mr. Chair.

And first of all, I thank members of the committee and you, Mr. Chair, for allowing us to meet in this format. I know the House leaders worked hard to devise a manner in which we could meet effectively to protect the safety and well-being of all members. I know it's an innovative approach by the nature of the challenges we're facing together, and so I just want to say thanks to all the members for being—accommodating that.

I also wanted to preface my introductory comments by saying that I will, as I have in the past, undertake, if I don't have the information members are asking, that I will undertake to get it to them, and I hope they'd agree that in every past year that has been my undertaking and I have provided in every respect any information members have asked of me, of my government, and I'll continue to do so.

I am pleased, on behalf of Executive Council, Mr. Chair, to present the financial Estimates for the 2020-21 fiscal year, and in doing so I am committing to Manitobans that through our budget we'll continue to deliver on our promises as we have.

Of course, this is, to put it very mildly, an unprecedented year in Manitoba history. We will continue to battle COVID-19 and I will certainly be pleased to answer any questions members may have in respect of the measures that we are taking in response to the pandemic and will continue to take.

Protecting the health and safety of Manitobans remains our top priority and we are focused squarely on our response to COVID, and it bears repeating that Manitobans are also still being strongly encouraged—and I thank members of the opposition for repeating these—including the Leader of the Opposition, for repeating these messages about good hygiene, social distancing, cleaning your hands regularly.

And you know that sometimes, as we've said these things so many times, dozens and dozens of times through the—more than—with my Health Minister and myself, more than 110 times I am told, we've gone out to the public, I believe. Frankly, at each of those opportunities we've repeated these messages. I know that other members have done the same, but it bears repeating that we are still very, very much in a battle with COVID. It's a sneaky, nefarious thing and the way that we can beat it is through good personal hygiene, social distancing, cleaning hands, the issues around staying home, away from others, especially if you're sick, maintaining that distance, that two-metre distance from others when in public—and these are important messages for us all to remember and to repeat, and we are doing—all of us are doing our best to do that.

We spent more than half a year now living with this pandemic. I think in many respects it seems much longer to probably all Manitobans, but it is an ongoing challenge, and so I know with these messages and others are common messages, but they bear repeating.

This virus is unrelenting and our response is unrelenting as well. To date, we've allocated more than \$1.2 billion specifically to COVID-related spending and I'll—given the opportunity, Mr. Chair, I will go through those COVID highlights, but I—if the members are interested in more data on—and detail on these issues, I'm happy to share it.

But I will—I just will say, to keep my comments, I hope, charitably brief, I look forward to any questions members may have. I look forward to answering them directly if I can, or I can't, as I've said, I will undertake to get the information they're asking for as we move forward together, and I would encourage, in the spirit of teamwork, members to take that approach.

As we are dealing with an unprecedented situation, we are reminded, however, that there are precedents in respect of other challenging situations that our province and country have faced before, and when those situations have arisen, very, very often it has been a willingness on the part of all political representatives to pull together in a common direction that has assisted us in making better results happen.

I would give, as an example of that, the opposition's support—official opposition's support, I should be specific here—in respect of the resolution on health care that was presented. And not to read it into the record, Mr. Chair, but suffice to say we join together to call on the federal government to resume its rightful

responsibilities in sharing the funding obligations on health care, and that is important as those obligations haven't been met in recent years in particular.

The need for health-care services continues to grow and was growing significantly because of many factors. Largely, the baby boom, of course, has contributed to this. As our population ages, demand has risen, and this all before COVID. So, right now, Mr. Chair, we have the highest growth rate in demand for health care ever in Canada's history, and the lowest percentage of federal government support for health care in the history of Canada since the Canada Health Act was passed.

It is disappointing, of course, that we couldn't have had unanimous participatory support from three legislators but, that being said, those who voted did vote unanimously, and I will share with opposition members and my colleagues that other provincial governments are planning to proceed with such a resolution in their jurisdictions as well so that we can add their voices to Manitoba's voice.

And Manitoba has been leading this challenge; a challenge that needs to be met. There are great needs in our province—never more than now—for health-care services to be available. Funding cannot, in perpetuity, be borrowed by provincial governments for this purpose. It is not sustainable.

Every single expert agrees with this, and so to have our opposition—New Democratic Party members join with us in support of that resolution, I just wanted to say thank you to them for that. It is a very important message, and it's one that other—I'm speaking again to Premier Horgan later this week, but it's one he has also been taking forward as a New Democratic Premier in British Columbia, and others of other parties, Liberal premiers as well.

In the Yukon, Sandy Silver, who was active with Premier Horgan and I in promoting and advancing the idea of a paid sick leave very early on, we were able, effectively—three different parties but the same priorities—able to achieve some actual outcomes as a consequence of that from the federal government, and we thank them for that too.

So there's much more for us to fight for. I'm sure there'll always be reasons for us to find things to fight about, but I would urge members to continue in that spirit of solidarity and co-operation that was so evident last week. And I'll leave my intro comments at that, Mr. Chair, and thank you for the opportunity.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the honourable First Minister for those comments.

Does the Leader of the Official Opposition have an opening comment?

* (15:40)

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Well, thank you very kindly, Mr. Chair, and also I want to thank the First Minister in advance for his participation in the committee and, of course, to all the staff, both from the Legislative Assembly and our respective political operations who are making this possible.

I just want to begin by acknowledging what's happening in the room here, for those who are attending virtually or just viewing this online, because this is a committee hearing like no other, and it is, I think, a testament to how different 2020 is from any other year. You know, I'm sitting here in the committee room and I'm joined by the Chair and some Legislative Assembly staff, but I can tell you that all the staff in the room are wearing masks, and so I will endeavor to keep my mask on while we're all in this space here together, just out of respect for their well-being and just to do my part to hopefully, you know, help everyone's health.

At the same time, of course, the fact that the Premier (Mr. Pallister) is logging in virtually is also another point, I think, that just shows us how different this year is and many of our colleagues are joining virtually as well. For the first time in our 150-year history, we're having a committee structured in this way. And while, maybe, there's an argument to be made about, you know, getting with the times and allowing for technology to be used in our parliamentary work this way, I don't think any of us wanted it to happen like this, with such a social and health cost going on outside the Legislature.

So, yes, this is truly a committee unlike any that we've seen before in Manitoba but I expect that the principles of democracy and accountability and working for the benefit of Manitobans will continue.

When it comes to the budget that we're considering here in the Estimates process, you know, this is an important opportunity for us to ask questions of the government, to hold the government accountable and to be able to get more information that can help Manitobans understand what is happening in our province today. And so we take that, as the opposition, very seriously and we look forward to being able to dive into as much Estimates as this week will allow,

though we don't have a ton of time because there is a deadline looming.

I do think it's important to point out, however, that the budget that we are being asked to consider by this government is one that was prepared before the pandemic arrived in Manitoba and so it does not really adequately contemplate the true impacts of COVID-19 and the recession that it caused on our province. We see that both in terms of the projections for revenue, but also in the program of spending.

And I'd say that the most obvious example of that, the most glaring example, is the fact that this budget cuts public health spending, which currently, like, we can all see that that was a mistake and hopefully has been rectified since the documents were prepared. But just as one example of how, you know, the government could've taken the eight months that they've had and gone back to prepare a new budget and to bring forward new documents that would give us a more accurate snapshot of what's happening with the Province's finances, but also with the program of spending.

And, certainly, there is a lot of policy questions that we want to seek some answers to. You know, I have been talking over the past number of days about some calls that we've been making throughout the pandemic but have really, really become all the more urgent with the dramatic increase of case counts over the past number of hours. And that is specifically that we need to increase intensive-care-unit-bed capacity, system-wide, and see more investments in health care at the bedside, and also that the small businesses in Manitoba do need more supports, there need to be new interventions to help these businesses keep their doors open. And we know that the current programs on offer, whether it's from the Province or from the federal government, are not up to the task.

I was speaking with one business owner yesterday who made the point, and he's repeated this publicly, that I thought was quite effectively, he says: A wage subsidy doesn't help me if I have to close my doors and my employees aren't there. His point of course being that he still faces fixed costs as a business owner and none of the programs announced to date really will help him deal with the scale of the fixed costs that he faces month in and month out.

So, that's just a little bit of, I guess, a look ahead at some of the lines of inquiry that we want to explore here in the Estimates process.

I want to acknowledge that the Premier (Mr. Pallister) did bring forward that resolution on the health-care transfer last week and we were pleased to support that. Of course, who wouldn't want more funding for health care in Manitoba, especially during a pandemic. I know that my colleague who is chairing this meeting, for instance, is—in his own backyard they've seen staffing shortages and issues with diagnostic services in Shoal Lake, and I'm sure each of us in our respective constituencies could catalogue where we would like to see more health-care investments made, and so, of course, who wouldn't want to see that health-care spending happen?

However, I would point out that the Premier and his party voted against our amendment that would've actually guaranteed that every single dollar in federal health spending would actually make it to the bedside. And so we are very concerned that perhaps this is just a PR campaign designed to get more money sent to Manitoba but that it won't actually be used for the express purpose for which it was demanded.

And that is a big concern because we know that health care was already behind the eight ball before the pandemic started, and if we look at all the public letters and advocacy that physicians and nurses and health-care folks have made over the past number of days, I think we can all conclude that there is still an even greater urgency behind the need for us to adequately fund health care in Manitoba.

Now, this is a crisis and this is an important time for Manitobans. You know, I'm joining you here today from a room in which there's oil paintings of leaders of the province past, and, certainly, I would be surprised if any of them had to contend with a crisis greater than the one that we're currently confronting. Perhaps they had to confront crises which were the equal of this COVID-19 pandemic, but I don't think that they had to contend with something that is as far reaching or more far reaching and more impactful than the current one.

So I do want to acknowledge that we carry out our work here in as much as there will be, you know, challenging lines of inquiries and, you know, exchanges back and forth, that we do carry out this work against the backdrop in which Manitobans so desperately need our government to be able to function and to be able to function at its top capacity. And so, you know, we're here as the loyal opposition to do our part and to ensure that accountability, information sharing and people's understanding of

government does get increased and is not, in fact, locked down due to COVID-19.

So with those few comments I'll turn things back over to you, Mr. Chair, and thank you in the process.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the Leader of the Official Opposition for those remarks.

Under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is traditionally the last item considered for a department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall defer consideration of line item 2.1(a) and proceed with consideration of the remaining items referenced in resolution 2.1. Given that the Estimates of Executive Council consist of only one resolution, the discussion will proceed in a global manner.

I would ask the honourable First Minister to please raise his hand when he would like to speak so I have the ability, then, to recognize him and know he's ready to speak.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Kinew: I wanted to pick up on some of the discussion that the First Minister and I were having during question period and, in particular, one question—or one comment that the Premier made, I would like him to clarify on. So I asked about increasing testing capacity and contact tracing capacity in the summertime, and the Premier made the comment that having—that would we have invested in contact tracing capacity and testing capacity in the summertime that that would've been idiocy, and the word idiocy is a direct quote from the First Minister.

So I wanted the Premier to expand on that and to explain. Is it actually the case that he believes that preparing in advance for a second wave, that we all knew was coming, was idiocy, that investing in contact tracing and testing capacity in the summertime while we had some breathing room to be able to do so was idiocy, or was this simply him misspeaking and perhaps he would like to correct himself.

* (15:50)

Mr. Pallister: No, what the member advocated today and earlier against the recommendations of the public health officials was for asymptomatic testing. He came out on record contradicting directly the health experts of our province. He has done this on other occasions as well, and this is what I referred to as idiocy. Frankly, these people are trained professionals who lead our health-care battle. As far as the member is concerned, based on his advice to Manitobans, they should have, earlier in the year, and they should now,

if they have no symptoms, go and get tested. This is what I refer to as idiocy, Mr. Chair, not the issue of preparing; most certainly our health officials have been preparing in earnest for some time.

The plans that they're enacting now are as a result, direct result of that preparatory work that they've done. Just to illustrate, we now have 30 sites in total across the province of Manitoba that have or will be opened in the next while. The capacity to do daily tests has gone up by well more than 1,000 per day, average weekly test results, as a consequence of the incredible, intense efforts of our senior health officials.

When the member contradicts the advice of our senior health experts for whatever reason he may choose to do so, he calls their advice into question, or attempts to. He is not a medical expert, nor am I. And I think that that is the idiocy, Mr. Chair, that we have to always be careful of here, as our senior health officials are qualified people we are trusting to make recommendations that we are following. And their planning and their intense efforts to plan are what are resulting in the opportunities to meet the demand that we now have.

Our wait times have reduced. For Manitobans, that's a wonderful thing. No one wants to wait for an exceptionally long period for anything, of course, but we did lead the country, under the NDP, in wait times, and we are the only province that's made some headway on reducing those in our emergency rooms.

So, now, with respect to COVID testing, we're able to say we're making progress in reducing those waits. That's important. We're also shortening the time periods, thanks to the work of our senior medical people, that are used up between the time that the test comes in and the time the results go out.

I'll be talking to the Prime Minister, if not later this afternoon then tomorrow, on a number of fronts, but the federal government is also offering to assist us with additional supports in a few categories, and we appreciate that. And we appreciate the partnership that they have offered to make with us on some areas of importance, such as data entry and additional measures in respect of the tracking issues that StatsCan personnel can be made available to assist us with.

I would just say to the member, his reference to reductions in funding is wrong—it's false—and simply say that we have over \$600 million in this year's budget, before COVID, additional committed to health-care investments than the NDP ever made.

In terms of other departments, similar increases: in education, over half a billion additional was the budgeted amount and now we're—we've already added to that for safe schools well over \$100 million in addition; and on Families, \$200 million in addition more than the NDP ever invested.

So, continued reference to false data doesn't give it an element of truth. Continued repeats of false information don't make them correct.

The fact of the matter is additional investments have been made, are being made, that—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: —far exceed any previous government. That's understandable—thank you, Mr. Chair—and that's very understandable, given the realities of COVID. And so we'll continue to focus on additional investments and most certainly expanded capacity, drive-through sites, testing, tracking, all these areas are critically important. And we will continue to focus on making sure we're doing everything we can to assist to make this horrible time, this stressful time for all Manitobans a little less stressful as we stay focused on the real battle at hand, which is with COVID.

Mr. Kinew: You know, I'll let the Premier (Mr. Pallister) continue to repeat our message about the cuts to health care that he's made.

But I do just want to return to the question at hand, which was for him to clarify his comments about what exactly, in terms of expanding testing capacity and contact tracing capacity during the summertime, would have qualified, in his words, as idiocy.

Again, I would note that he ran away from his statement there in the—his answer. He didn't actually address the substantive issue there. And, in fact, in a round about way, his answer actually kind of served to underline one of the failures in his thought process. Specifically, the fact that only now, at this point after COVID new case counts are through the roof each and every day, is he announcing increases to testing capacity. And I would point out for the member—for the members of the committee, as well as you, the Chair—Mr. Chair, that the contact tracing piece has never been adequately explained by this government. They've never actually put a number on how many contact tracers there are working in the province today.

So, again, expanding contact tracing capacity and testing capacity in November, in late October, that

really squandered the advantage that was created by Manitobans making a sacrifice earlier in the year.

I think everyone in Manitoba remembers staying indoors for close to two months. The reason why everybody did that was to buy this government time, and so I just want to point out for the committee that the Premier (Mr. Pallister) actually just said that using that window of opportunity to make the investments in the summertime before the second wave arrived, that he characterized that as idiocy during question period and now given the opportunity in the Estimates committee, has run away from that topic and has chosen not to actually say that he misspoke or to clarify his comments in any substantive way.

So, again, I would just ask the First Minister, given that he has stated on the record today that he thought that investing in contact tracing capacity and expanding testing capacity this summer was idiocy, can he now just admit that that was a mistake? Can he just say that that was the wrong thing to say and, in fact, he acknowledges that expanding contact tracing capacity and expanding testing capacity during the summer when there was a low case count was actually the right thing to do—would have been, actually, the right thing to do?

Mr. Pallister: Well, the member can try polishing his own comments and changing mine all he wants, but his question referred to expanding testing at a time when we had no COVID cases for three weeks. And that's what I'm referring to as idiocy and referring to my comments erroneously and deliberately here weakens his arguments and he does that on a regular basis.

He referred to expanding testing at a time we didn't need the testing. We instead invested in expanding testing capacity, which he now refers to as something he said, which he did not.

Mr. Chair, quite frankly, the member is wrong in his assertions and he was wrong when he contravened and contradicted the advice of a leading health-care authorities and told people they should rush out and get tested in the summer, even if they were asymptomatic. This simply would have created longer lines for people who should have got tested, who needed to be tested, who satisfied the criteria that our public health officials said they should before they went for testing. Creating longer lines for testing might be something the member wants to achieve as a political goal, but it's not a goal that any Manitoban would support.

What we want to be able to do is make sure that there is testing available and there is for those who have symptoms. So, October 1st, a new mobile site at 1181 Portage Ave. was opened; October 10th, expanded capacity at 2735 Pembina Hwy.; October 13th, a new drive-through site at 1066 Nairn Ave.; October 17th, a new site at the Brandon Keystone Centre; October 31st, a new site at 125 King Edward Ave. in Winnipeg and also additional upcoming test sites will be opened as well.

Thank you to the work of our health-care leaders for the planning and preparatory work they've done to make sure that such sites can now be opened: November 6th at Portage, November 6th also at the University of Manitoba, November 6th as well in Winkler, November 13th at Assiniboia Downs, November 27th in Arborg.

So as of today, as we escalate our pandemic response system level to critical level red, at the same time we know that we have expanded massively the number of available testing sites to reduce the waits for people—which the member would have created longer waits for had he been successful—urging all asymptomatic Manitobans to go and get tested earlier in the year. That would have done nothing. Those same people who would have followed the member's advice, not health expert advice but his advice, would actually have had to go and get retested as soon as symptoms appeared, and it would have been a fruitless waste of time. That's the bizarre suggestion the member made then, and that's what he's repeating into the record today.

* (16:00)

He was talking about why we didn't expand testing in the summer. The reason is our testing expansion, our capacity, was our focus, and the expansion of capacity is what we did invest in and what we are now seeing bear fruit for the people of Manitoba.

Again, the member's not a health expert. He continues to try to position himself as one, but we'll continue to follow the advice of our leading health experts like Lanette Siragusa and Dr. Brent Roussin and many, many others who work in our WRHAs around the province and elsewhere in our Health Department and so on, because it is those people that have assisted us in being able to do things like expand our appointment booking systems. We introduced those to several sites in rural and northern Manitoba.

Since October 20th alone, we've had almost 3,000 appointments made by phone; we've had 1,350 made online in Winnipeg, and most Manitobans were able to get same-day or next-day appointments in less than a minute of calling.

These are the kinds of things that are happening, not because of luck, but because of planning—planning by our health experts that's now seeing real results and better services at a time when we need them.

Mr. Kinew: I just want to thank the First Minister for his candor and for confirming at this committee that he does believe, in a very mistaken way, I would add, he does believe that expanding testing capacity this past summer would have been idiocy.

So I'll just leave it to him to continue to try and explain to people how that makes sense, you know, to use the sacrifice that all Manitobans made earlier in the pandemic as an opportunity to prepare for the second wave, and not just to shirk the obligation to act, but, in fact, to characterize one of the laudable goals that public health officials the world over were recommending that people do, jurisdictions should do, which is to expand testing capacity, but he thinks that that was idiocy.

I just want to state for the record to you, Mr. Chair, and to everybody else watching, that I think that that is actually wrong, and that I believe that government should have moved aggressively to expand testing capacity this summer and, of course, that they should have hired contact tracers so that we could have had latent capacity in the system, and that we could have been better prepared for when the second wave did arrive here in Manitoba this fall.

Again, one of the concerns that we have with the contact tracing piece is that, at this point it seems largely to be an academic exercise. What I mean by that is that contact tracers are not reaching the close contacts of people confirmed to have COVID-19 quickly enough to prevent them from exposing other people in Manitoba.

So while it might help us to understand what happened 10 days ago, 14 days ago, the contact tracing capacity is not actually serving one of its important goals right now, which is to suppress future outbreaks.

Unfortunately, we've not just seen that generally, but we've seen that specifically with respect to schools, when we've seen letters arrive home to parents warning of cases that happened, you know, 10 days in the past and, of course, potentially there

were exposures happening in the interim. And so that is a very, very serious concern.

Now, we have been successful, through our research, in being able to pin down some of the numbers of people working in contact tracing in the various health regions outside of Winnipeg. I believe Prairie Mountain was the first to respond and then Interlake, Eastman, Interlake-Eastern responded basically at the same time. Subsequently we received some research from southern health and from the North, but we've never actually heard from the Winnipeg health region about how many people they have working for them on contact tracing capacity.

I want to be fair. I also want to note that the government has made an announcement about Red Cross assisting in this respect, but I would like the Premier (Mr. Pallister) to tell us how many people are working as contact tracers in Winnipeg, including in the Winnipeg region and including any folks who may be working there by way of the Red Cross.

Mr. Pallister: Yes. Just again the member keeps digging the hole deeper for himself. He urged everyone who was asymptomatic during the outbreak in Westman to go and get tested. He put that on the record. That's what he's running away from right now, and that was horrible advice and it would have had the effect of making the wait times for those who had symptoms incredibly long if people had followed it. Thank goodness the vast, vast majority of people did not follow it. It would've been totally useless.

That's what I'm referring to when I say, when the member calls for more testing in the summer and misses the point that we were expanding testing capacity in the summer and that we're now reaping the rewards of it, the member was totally misrepresenting my comments and trying to cover up his own. He positioned himself in the summer, and later, as a health expert, which he is not, deliberately contradicted the advice of Dr. Roussin and others who were encouraging people who were—only those who were symptomatic to pursue testing. He deliberately contradicted that advice, and that is what I call idiocy.

I will go on to elaborate for the committee on the new appointment booking process which I mentioned earlier, because I think that is important to understand that people can now go online to line up their appointments rather than waiting is a very useful additional service, and we're getting a lot of good comments from Manitobans on that. And, in particular, it's not just the lineups that they were enduring. As the number of symptomatic people

began to grow, it was also the time waiting on a call of various kinds. We now have call waits that are less than a minute for people that are scheduling their appointments, and that's good to know. Thousands of people now using that service, that's also good.

But I think the other key benefit now is the new micro-credential course that's being offered at Red River—and I thank our former clerk, Fred, for helping us in respect of this, and the folks at Red River—to train health-care providers on how to safely perform a nasal swab on adults and children. I think that that's very, very useful. I think also, in terms of the first graduates, they are already qualified and out there, and I understand there's a full enrolment in additional course training at Red River College, so additional providers can be offered training opportunities. This is going to assist, whether it's in Winnipeg or in other health regions, to take what has been a load, for sure, for our front-line service providers in terms of the testing work that they've had to do and make sure that we have folks that are available to do that testing.

And I should also mention that officials have, had been and are continuing to work with Doctors Manitoba to expand the community-based doctors' offices. This, I understand—and I'm not a technical health expert; I know that the member for Fort Rouge (Mr. Kinew) is not either, though he positions—tries to position himself as one. And I would say from Dr. Roussin's comments that these offices will be very useful for people who have significant other underlying conditions to be able to avail themselves of testing without having to be in a situation that might be more dangerous for them specifically because of those underlying conditions.

Some medical centres have already brought testing online as well, and we're going to see more testing available at additional locations available in coming days. I outlined some of that for committee members earlier.

It's worth looking back on the response to date, not just with a critical eye to what could've been done differently, but with a thankful eye to what has been done. I know this is missing from the perspective, thus far, demonstrated by the opposition leader, but—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: —announcing our participation—national—thank you, Mr. Chair—early on—acting early on to protect our most vulnerable, whether it be in seniors homes, announcing our participation in a national procurement for PPE program in the first

week of March, and then proceeding to also work with Manitoba small businesses to add significant availability through manufacture here in Manitoba of PPE was a very significant early days measure.

And we've done hundreds of millions of other investments through our Manitoba Protection Plan to assist homeowners, businesses, enhance health preparation—health preparedness, so thinking about your actions earlier is something that is very important. We've done that on a number of fronts.

I'll share many other initiatives with you momentarily, Mr. Chair.

* (16:10)

Mr. Kinew: Sometimes it's difficult even for myself, the person asking the question, to remember what the question was when the Premier (Mr. Pallister) runs away from them so quickly and so far. Again, the question was about contact tracing and how many people are working as contact tracers in Manitoba right now.

Ideally, hopefully, we can flatten the curve again and stop the huge number of new case counts that we see. And hopefully, that as Manitobans work together and abide by Dr. Roussin's advice and hopefully are able to flatten the curve in that way, I would hope that at the same time there is a contact tracing capacity for us to be able to once again get a handle on the situation.

The situation is clearly beyond the capacity that we have for contact tracing right now, given that people are waiting for so long: 10 days for schools to hear about potential exposures, in some cases; waits over a week just for the average person out there to hear back, even just a call, from a contact tracer once they've received a positive test.

So, again, I think knowing what the resources are there would help the people of Manitoba to better understand what is going on with contact tracing.

So, again, the question is: Can the Premier (Mr. Pallister) tell us how many people are working as contact tracers, first in the Winnipeg health region, and then province-wide and inclusive of anybody who might be working via Red Cross? How many people are working as contact tracers in Manitoba right now?

Mr. Pallister: Yes. The member is asking how many people do contact tracing. Literally hundreds.

What we've done, what the health experts have done, is they've added to the ranks of those who were

engaged in the low-demand time as the demand has risen. So they've responded as any common-sense person would do, not by beefing up the numbers beyond the need for them to do work, but rather responding as the need to do work rose.

And so, for example, through our RHAs and various other health management agencies, we've redeployed 290 nurses who now are engaged in assisting in the contact tracing exercise to beef up tremendously the ranks of those who are doing that important work.

We've hired an additional 40 nurses to do that work while redeploying others. That's on top of the 290, so we're talking 330. We've also engaged Red Cross in adding staff, which I understand, 60 staff initially will be added to assist in contact tracing. They'll be engaging in that assist this week as needed.

This is a surge capacity opportunity. If—as we all, I think hope, that we can bend the curve by getting Manitobans on board with additional adoption of the fundamentals. So, if we can do that, then perhaps we don't need the backups of Red Cross. That would be the hope. What the Red Cross initially offered, and we are going to be paying for 60 additional staff there. Also, StatsCan has made available, already, 10 staff. I would like to see us have more in abeyance in case the curve continues to worsen.

We need to prepare for worse scenarios and we'll need additional surge capacity. That's one of the topics on my agenda for discussion with the Prime Minister, and has been, I understand, discussed by health officials, with federal officials already, but I want to re-message, you know, the Prime Minister on the importance of having additional federal staff available where they may be needed. Certainly, it's not solely in contact tracing, though that is an issue of great importance, but it's also in areas like the data entry part that is necessary, obviously, as we do more testing. And our testing capacity, as I mentioned before, Mr. Chair, has accelerated as—really significantly accelerated—as the need has grown, the capacity has grown right along with it.

This is evidence of our health leadership doing preparatory work. The member has stated they didn't do enough, he's been critical of our health leadership and contradicted them on several occasions in recent weeks and months. That's disappointing, of course, but that's his choice.

But the fact remains that our health officials need our support now most of all. I would say to the

member that, you know, when we had low case numbers, he was quiet. He didn't offer suggestions of any significant quality, except that asymptomatic people should go and get tested, which is, you know, bizarre.

And the fact of the matter is, he was quiet. He wasn't attacking our health officials then, so I'd encourage him now, when case numbers are rising here, as they are throughout the Western world, almost without exception, throughout Asia, without exception, in South America, without exception, as those case numbers rise, don't look to blame public health officials—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: That's not fair, it's not right.

And so thank you, Mr. Chair, and just to say to the member, you know, what a fair-weather friend he's turning out to be. It's like the way he treated Greg Selinger after he went to bat for him and got him to be a candidate, he's now throwing—threw Greg under the bus, now he's throwing our public health officials under the bus, too.

They worked their tail off all summer to get ready, to develop—I'll share with him the detailed plan, if he would like, in terms of the intensive-care beds. It's fascinating how much work they've put into getting ready so that we'd be able to have that capacity on the intensive-care side, that work is impressive and I think that those folks, like Dr. Roussin, we deserve—they deserve us having their back; they don't deserve us putting a knife in it.

Mr. Kinew: Yes, you know, when Dr. Roussin went out there and put up the red light on Friday, and there was a need for leadership to come out and help share the message with Manitobans, I was there. The Premier was not.

And so, we have been vocal throughout the summer about the need for increasing contact tracing and testing capacity, as well as many, many other preparations for the second wave, such as a safe return-to-school plan, you know, the need to hire more teachers and to rent more classroom space so that kids could actually have a two-metre space between them while they try to learn.

It would appear that the Premier's (Mr. Pallister) approach to back-to-school was, instead of making any investments to help keep children safe, it would be to lean on public health officials to just water down the two-metre requirement to one metre.

And, again, today. You know, it seemed like the Premier had not spoken to Dr. Roussin anytime recently. You know, Premier's out here talking about, like, measures that should have been implemented weeks ago. He's talking about, you know, maybe if twentysomethings would stop partying, that that would help us flatten the curve.

Of course, now is not the time for partying. But if you were to listen to Dr. Roussin today, he was putting out a warning about transmission within households. So it seems like once again, when it comes to listening to the public health experts, that the Premier's late for showing up to the game and still focusing on the wrong message.

Similarly, again, Dr. Roussin is talking about outbreaks within hospitals, personal-care homes. These are areas where a provincial government acting quickly earlier on during the pandemic, securing more protective equipment, more masks, would have made a difference.

Over the weekend, including Friday of last week, even earlier than that, we've heard from many, many health professionals, people who work on the front lines: intensive-care-unit doctors, nurses who work in hospital wards, health-care aides who works with seniors in personal-care homes, those people that we value so dearly. And they've been raising concerns about capacity. But also, even things that we thought had been addressed earlier on during the pandemic. I think we all remember that there was a shortage of the N95 masks taking place in March. We had expected, you know, we—but though we certainly can't take credit for it, because everyone was calling for—you know, an increased procurement, an increased access to supplies of masks, and other protective equipment.

But you fast-forward several months later, and here we are, nurses who are working with people who are found to have COVID still don't have access to the necessary masks and the necessary protective equipment.

* (16:20)

So what was actually happening, what was the government doing with all that lead time that they had to secure protective equipment? We haven't seen the protective equipment make its way to the front-line workers who need it. So what happened? Where along the way did this government fail in its efforts to try and secure masks and other protective gear to help nurses and what specifically would the Premier say to

those people who are dealing with outbreaks on the job, as to why he has failed to provide them with a simple mask?

Mr. Pallister: Well, there's so much silly stuff in the preamble, it's hard to confine it to my five-minute limit, Mr. Chair, but I'll try to address one silly thing at a time.

The member talks about him showing up for a presser to showboat on Friday. Congratulations. Big deal. That's not what Manitobans want. That's not what they expect. We have Dr. Roussin out there, announcing potential measures, that's how we've done it since March. Then, the day the measures come in, I, and usually the Health Minister go out and we answer questions about those measures. This is the standard approach we have taken from the get-go.

The member references, harshly, comments designed to hurt. This is his nature. It's his tendency to want to harass and to bully but the reality is that I and the Health Minister have been out, over 110 times in the last five months, to the media, answering their questions directly and honestly. And we continue to do that in the interest of getting the information out there just as I did today, Mr. Chair.

The member ridicules my comments about under-40 public gatherings. I would remind him that Dr. Teresa Tam has said that it is one of the greatest dangers for Canadians to gather excessively, in large numbers, and in particular, in her own comments, has referenced the under-40 group. This is a reality and it's a reality we are doing our best to address through messaging, through advertising—some advertising which will be in addition to the current advertising budget. It's pretty extensively invested in preventative, focused advertising to get the message out on things like we talked about: physical distancing, washing hands, wearing masks and so on.

But also, because those messages have been out there and most Manitobans have listened to those messages, we know that we have to target additional messages, in particular, to some of our younger folks because they are, like all of us, certainly social animals and they want to be with friends and they want to be out there enjoying their lives and that is totally understandable. But what isn't acceptable is meeting in larger groups without the benefit of protections and masks. And doing that jeopardizes not only the young person themselves, but, as we all understand, and I hope the member will understand, these are significant problems in terms of the danger of transmission.

And so today, we added on to the advice previously given by health experts like Dr. Teresa Tam, like Dr. Brent Roussin, and emphasized the message that many of the new cases—many, not all, but many—are linked to people ignoring public health's advice and attending larger gatherings, leaving their homes even though they have symptoms. Dr. Roussin shared some of those examples last week. Some cases have been linked to Thanksgiving, other gatherings where people are often sharing items, he talked about, even in some groups, sharing vape pens, for heaven's sakes. We've got to know better than that; I'm sure the member knows better than that. In one example, seven cases were linked to the same Thanksgiving dinner.

Other cases have been linked to people travelling, so our emphasis now is to ask Manitobans to reduce their contacts for this month of November. I would hope the member would echo those messages. If we can reduce our contacts, that will help. And, you know, again, the member can criticize my messaging or capability, he can't criticize accurately the frequency of my attempts to get these messages out there.

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: The reality is—here's a quote from somebody that we should—thanks, Mr. Chair. Here's a quote from somebody I think that we should trust and respect, that says: And so we can see how our close contacts can quickly become cases and more contacts. That's Dr. Roussin, and he has said that many, many times, as recently as in my last discussion with him this morning.

The member is—has been critical, unjustifiably, of Dr. Roussin. He has recommended advice that contradicts Dr. Roussin. This is not helpful and I—again, I encourage the member to understand these health experts are experts and they deserve to have our support, especially now in challenging times. Stay with Team Manitoba, is what I would encourage him to do. Get with Dr. Roussin, Lanette Siragusa, and our health-care leaders and offer them your support and encouragement, not your criticisms.

Mr. Kinew: I shared a very strong message in support of Dr. Roussin's public health orders, as well as his advice. If the Premier (Mr. Pallister) had shown up on Friday, if he'd been at work on Friday instead of taking a long weekend during Manitoba's darkest hour, he would know that.

I suspect he actually does know that and that's why he sent his staff out over the weekend to count up all the media appearances that he did instead of, of course, doing something that would have helped fight the pandemic, but such is the nature of the damage control that you have to do when things get away from you.

In this instance, the question was about masks. We know that there are people who could be delivering life-saving medical treatment who are not able to serve at the bedside right now as hospitals reach capacity—in fact, over capacity if you factor in the slack that's necessary to deal with events like car accidents.

We know that there's a lot of people who could be delivering life-saving care who are not able to, either because they've acquired COVID-19 in the workplace—a hospital like Victoria General, hospital like St. Boniface, other sites, personal-care homes—and there are still others who are unable to work because they were potentially exposed and they have to self-isolate and monitor for symptoms, et cetera.

It seems like some of the very fundamental things that were ignored by the government in this instance that contributed to a large number of these health-care heroes being unable to work is the fact that they didn't have access to simple things like a mask.

Earlier on during the pandemic, everyone said we needed to secure more masks. Everyone said we needed to secure more protective equipment. And so, of course, we were part of that chorus, but we were no different or not special in any way because every single public voice was saying that we should secure more masks and protective equipment.

But what I'm curious, again, is what happened between then and now. What happened between a unanimous consensus amongst everybody, including in our province, that the top priority—one of the top priorities for the health-care system should be to secure enough protective equipment to protect our front-line workers so that they're not taken out of the workforce due to exposure or acquisition of COVID-19—what happened between that and the current situation, where nurses, health-care aides, other health-care professionals tell us that they have inadequate access to masks and to protective equipment still?

We have letters that are signed by physicians. We have statements that are made by nurses. And we know that that is just the tip of the iceberg because

there's many other people who fear, you know, for their health but maybe, for whatever reason they don't necessarily want to speak out publicly about it.

So I just want to know why is it that a nurse still can't access an N95 as needed in Manitoba? Why are they still facing shortages of protective gear? What happened to the procurement process that there still is this, you know, question hanging over the delivery of health care as we deal with a surge in new COVID cases?

Again, this is something that the earlier sacrifice earlier this year made by Manitobans, that sacrifice should have bought this government time to procure masks, gowns, gloves.

Again, we were one voice among many, but the question remains: what happened? Why is there still a shortage for the nurses working at the bedside, for the health-care aide working out there, and what happened—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Kinew: —what happened with this government's procurement process that we're still dealing with this rationing of N95 masks as the hospitals are hitting capacity?

* (16:30)

Mr. Pallister: Well, I'll tell the member who is, you know, I think put himself in the position of being vulnerable, the charge that he is trying to showboat, I'll tell him that he needs to understand that the work that's been put in by this government and our senior health officials is demonstrable in the face of an unprecedented pandemic and not worthy of his disdain. I would also say to him that what he is doing now is needlessly fear mongering when that is not justifiable or fair. I can tell him that the actions of our government in terms of COVID response for personal protective equipment have been singularly effective in getting the enhanced sourcing that we needed for PPE for Manitobans, including medical masks, gloves, gowns, face shields, critical equipment, testing kits, ventilators and other supplies necessary to make sure that we were protecting not only our front-line personnel, but that these materials were available for others who might wish to have them in their workplaces as well.

I can tell the member that we set aside \$400 million, of which more than three quarters has already been allocated to date for PPE. I can also tell him that close to half those orders were satisfied by

vendors in Manitoba, including many Manitoba companies that answered the call when we officiously asked Manitoba small businesses if they would participate in supplying us with materials that were not to the degree that we would like made available from Ottawa, who assured us early they'd handle all of this and did not, quite frankly, do what we needed them to do in terms of making this available.

Our public—our purchasers have engaged in massive procurement operations, purchasing tens of millions of dollars of PPE and other necessary products and services. Whereas other jurisdictions—I won't get into all the horror stories—but other jurisdictions across the Canada, around the world, experienced genuine shortages of PPE such has not been the case in Manitoba. The member should be congratulating the people who worked so hard both in the private sector and in the public sector to address this issue early.

We have a live-activity tracker on COVID alternative supplies, equipment and services status that was set up to keep track of the dynamic procurement activities, and I can tell the member what he is putting on the record today about shortages is simply false. The services on that tracker include issues like home nutrition and learning, web-based crisis line, air services. I can get into the mental health programs, the seniors programs and the programs for the disabled that we have pioneered here in Manitoba that no other province was using, but we've taken initiative and we've moved it into the COVID response.

Where the member is critical, he is using fear mongering as a technique which is not justifiable or supported by the facts. PPE, including gloves, face shields, eye protection, gowns, disposable isolation gowns, disposable surgical gowns, reusable gowns, scrubs, masks, body shields, powered air purifier respirators as well as the manufacturing and the sterilization of these products, also important, has all been managed by our government departments in partnership, as I said, with suppliers in the private sector. And I'll share for the member because I think it's important for all members of the committee to know the degree to which Manitoba's small businesses, Manitoba vendors have stepped up and assisted us in—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: —making PPE available. This partnership has—thanks Mr. Chair.

This partnership is one that we deserve, all of us deserve, to be very, very proud of, and, you know, I can tell you that literally tens of millions of dollars of contracts to Manitoba companies have been assigned to assist us whether it's Barrick Medical, Blue Oasis Canada gold—Canadian Gold Beverages—I better get that right—central demo solutions, Cerebra medical limited. And I'll keep reading the list for the member because when he criticizes our program, he's criticizing the businesses that have partnered with the government to make PPE available, and I don't think that's justifiable.

Mr. Kinew: The First Minister said there were horror stories in other jurisdictions in his previous answer, but I just want to read the headline above the fold from today's Winnipeg Free Press. This is Monday, November 2nd, 2020. Horror story after horror story. Nurses detail lapses at Victoria hospital.

And just for the purposes of clarity for the committee, horror story after horror story is not the characterization of the editorial staff at the Free Press. That is a direct quote taken from the article.

And so again, the businesses that supply the protective equipment; good job. Where I think the failure occurred was within the government. Somehow the government has spent \$300 million—or I should clarify—the government has allocated \$300 million for protective equipment, according to the Premier's (Mr. Pallister) previous answer, and yet, even though they have allocated so much money, we are still hearing about nurses who don't get a mask when they ask for one. We're hearing about other nurses who get one N95 mask a day and a brown paper bag to store it in while they eat their lunches.

This is a rich country that we live in. This is an advanced economy. A nurse should be able to access the protective equipment that they need any time they need it, to care for somebody at the bedside. If a nurse is being provided with one mask per day and they have to store it in a brown paper bag while they eat lunch, it suggests that the public health guidance that they should discard protective equipment, like a mask, when it gets soiled, is not being observed right now.

So I have the utmost respect for the manufacturers who create the protective equipment. I have the utmost respect for the health-care heroes, who wear the protective equipment in order to save lives, in order to make lives better. But it seems to me that between those two ends of the procurement process, there must be some problem within government.

I suspect that the problem is that the \$300 million has been allocated but not spent by this current government. The Premier is free to confirm that in his answer, if he likes. But whether or not he confirms the fact that his underspending habit is continuing with respect to protective equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic, I would like him to grapple with the question and to provide an answer for the committee as to what happened along the way so that the protective equipment that the government has announced and issued press releases over, has not actually made it to the bedside where it's needed by nurses and other people who work in health care. Is it that the protective equipment was never purchased? Is it that the protective equipment doesn't actually exist? It only exists in the form of announcements and press releases? Is it there's some stockpile sitting somewhere under lock and key that nurses and other people in the health-care profession don't have access to?

These are the questions that Manitobans are left asking today. So what is it? How does the First Minister explain that it's not withstanding any of the announcements he's made around procurement, that nurses are still forced to reuse, are still forced to go without and are still forced to contend with shortages when it comes to masks?

Mr. Pallister: Well, now I understand why the member was nowhere to be seen for the first six months of COVID, when we were doing well. He was letting the Free Press do his research for him evidently, Mr. Chair. If he's going to cite issues, I'd encourage him to cite facts that support the position, not just rumour, and I'd encourage him to do the necessary work to prepare his arguments a little better than just simply reading something from a report in a newspaper that may or may not have been well-researched.

* (16:40)

It's unsurprising that the member would choose to resort to this level of disconcerting neglect in respect of the people who've worked so hard to make PPE available in our province for so long, but it comes as no surprise to me. I've coached a lot; I've worked with a lot of teams over the years and I've seen people be very quiet and supportive of the coaches and managers of teams when they were winning and suddenly become, you know, rebellious, like the former NDP caucus was of Greg Selinger: rebellious when times get more stressful.

I see this member demonstrating that tendency today in his comments, that attitude of disdain for people who he should be showing respect for, in particular, at a time of great stress for Manitobans and for the people who are giving us the advice and working so hard; for example, those people in our civil service who work so hard to get the PPE. They—think about them for a second while you're making these disparaging comments. Think about the people who work in our private sector companies, like—some of whom changed the operations of their businesses to accommodate our needs for PPE.

Cerebra medical, I think I might have mentioned, Deasil Custom Sewing, Eli Promotions, EQ3, Executive Sports Apparel, Farmery Estate Brewing Company, Freed & Freed International, Grand Medicine Health Services, Icon Technologies Ltd., Interpoc Inc.

What I'm listing right here now are Manitoba companies with Manitoba employees that have invested in Manitoba and have focused themselves on getting PPE and relevant protective equipment in various categories to be available to Manitobans at a time when, you know, we got some of our support from the federal government late, but there were many, many early days when these Manitoba companies were the ones who stood up our supply, and I've shared with the member, and he, I guess, didn't remember this or just didn't retain it, but over \$150 million, okay, almost half of our purchase orders have gone to vendors in Manitoba, and I say to them, thank you. Thank you to you; thank you to your staff; thank you to your teams for the great work you've done for Manitobans—Mammoth Equipment, Medigas, Meditech, MEP Brothers, Minhas Creek brewing company, Mondetta, MWG Apparel Corp., North Country Outdoor Furnace, Northern Diagnostics, Oil Mart, Orientworks, Pacific Development Manitoba Ltd., Peerless Garments—more than a million-dollar contract there; Pine Falls Clothing—great production there; Polymershapes distribution, Portage Medical, Precision ADM, Protective Textiles International, and there's many, many more, Madam Speaker—or Mr. Chair—I'm sorry.

And, you know, I know the member may not want to hear this, but we are very, very thankful of the work these companies have done. We're tremendously appreciative of the work that government employees did in organizing the procurement and co-ordinating the procurement of these made-in-Manitoba products, and we believe very, very frankly that what the

member is doing right now is belittling that contribution, and that is not justifiable.

We have more than a year's supply of PPE available right now and we have two and a half million—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister:—N95 masks coming to Manitoba in the next little while—thanks, Mr. Chair—and that—that's going to give us an opportunity, because we have a demand that's clearly got to be met, of about \$100,000—a hundred thousand masks—I'm sorry—per week, so that clearly gives us that opportunity to know that for at least half a year we've got the N95 issue dealt with.

The member may recall that early on in the pandemic this was a big fear for a lot of people that there wouldn't be N95 masks, and the fact of the matter is now we know we've got a half a year just on that category alone. Most of our other PPE, we've got stockpiles now accumulated, thanks to the work of mostly Manitoba companies that are going to be able to give people protections.

He's fomenting fear. This is not right. This is not a thing to do right now or ever, frankly, but it is, especially when based on false information, but it's certainly not, in the middle of a pandemic, a wise move to start going after the fear factor—

Mr. Chairperson: The member's time has expired.

Mr. Kinew: I appreciate your interjection, there.

I think one of the things that Manitobans have been talking about for months now is just the off-key approach of the Premier's (Mr. Pallister) billboard campaign during the summer.

I think the reason that it's attracted so much attention—negative attention, to be specific—is that it seemed to be putting up that mission accomplished banner, just like George W. Bush did before the war in Iraq was over. You know, the Premier (Mr. Pallister) seemed to be saying that, you know, things were great and that the pandemic was over and now it was #Restart time, when, in fact, that attitude seems to have been indicative of an attitude of complacency within the Premier's office.

Now that we are in the midst of this string of high case counts, and physicians are warning that hospitals are over capacity and that even with surge capacity measures that there will be strain for the weeks to come, does the Premier now admit that his summer

advertising campaign and his Ready. Safe. Grow. billboards were a mistake?

Mr. Pallister: Premier John Horgan of British Columbia is not a noted Progressive Conservative, but he has repeatedly communicated the vital symbiotic relationship between progress and rebuilding our economy and the successful battling against COVID. These two things are not separate. This is the fundamental confusion the member seems to have. He seems to think that if everybody's unemployed and we have no COVID that the country's going to be a stronger country; Manitoba's going to be a better place. He's wrong. There's no data to support this thesis. None.

The fact of the matter is Ready. Safe. Grow. has focused over 60 per cent of its time and effort directly on health-care messaging to make sure that people get the message that we have to be safe in order to grow, fundamental to the message ready, safe, then grow.

This has been a three-pillar focused messaging campaign from the get-go. From within a few days of the launch, we were focusing with Dr. Roussin on messaging to people about washing their hands. These are the kinds of messages we were delivering to the people of Manitoba when we had no cases. We were focused. We were focused on getting the message out and repeating it, that the fundamentals are what's going to keep you safe, that we can't grow without safety. That's implicit in the message.

The member has repeated criticisms that have no bearing on the reality of the situation, you know. Frankly, we have led the country in getting people back to work, and that is good because Manitobans want to work. But if the member is suggesting that we shouldn't be promoting work and programs to help small businesses on one hand and on the other hand saying we haven't done enough for small businesses, he's caught in a little bit of a contradiction there.

The fact of the matter is we have some of the most generous programs to support small businesses in the country of Canada. And we promoted availability of those programs to help people get their lives back and get their jobs back. And good for us for doing it, and thank you to the small businesses that took advantage of those programs.

We're talking about 10,000 small businesses in this province that have already received the gap program funding. That's 95 per cent approval within two days. Whereas other provinces haven't done anything like that, we have that program, and some

people ridicule and say it's small. Well, a lot of our businesses are small too.

And I come from a background unlike the member, where we had spoons, but they weren't silver. And I can tell the member that the fact of the matter is, when you had \$6,000 available to you in a difficult time, that was a really, really good thing.

And I'm going to get some comments from hundreds of Manitoba businesses and I'm going to read them to the member. Then he can understand that his little diatribe is falling on deaf ears out there. When he talks about us not doing anything, there's 10,000 Manitoba businesses out there right now that are very thankful that we have a program that supported them.

And there are also over 20,000 Manitobans that have been able to get back to work because of our job subsidy programs that are partnering with small businesses, partnering with non-profits, partnering with charitable organizations, partnering with our business community—something the NDP was never very good at.

They saw our small-business community as a cow to be milked, and the reality is they did that. They raised the tax rates for small business. They jacked up the fees and charges.

What have we done? We've lowered the fees. We've lowered the charges. We've reduced the costs for small businesses. For example, for things like the Workers Compensation premium; for things like the insuring for the PST on your insurance on properties; we've taken that off. These are tens of millions of dollars, and I could go on. I mean, we have many other programs like the MPI rebates that have allowed hundreds of millions of dollars to be available to Manitoba small businesses that wouldn't have been available without our actions. So I get a little adamant on this one—

* (16:50)

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: Mr. Chair, because the member is so out of touch with the reality of Ready. Safe. Grow.

Ready. Safe. Grow. The member's suggesting we shouldn't have advertised programs that helped over 20,000 people get their jobs back? That's just wrong. The member's suggesting that, somehow, we couldn't have at the same time advertised for safety and safe practices? We did. We advertised for both because, as Premier Horgan has said—a noted NDP leader in our

country, the only NDP premier—the symbiotic relationship between a stronger economy and stronger health care is indisputable.

And I agree with Premier Horgan. I would ask the member to maybe consider giving Premier Horgan a call, getting a briefing. Don't just read the Free Press for research. Talk to real people in positions of real leadership and you may find that you'll learn something.

Mr. Kinew: I just want to remind the Premier (Mr. Pallister) that I'm on the other side of the Legislative Building watching him by video so it's not necessary to yell at his computer screen. I can hear him just fine.

This whole ready, set, go campaign that he's got going on, you know, I think it does typify the mistakes that he's been making with respect to managing the pandemic. And when it comes to speaking to real people, I can tell him that I've spoken to a number of real business owners, specifically the owners of some of the 15 small businesses that were closed at the Premier's orders for the past two weeks.

Now, I don't think many of us were surprised that closing the King's Head and closing Club 200 and closing The Pyramid Cabaret didn't actually flatten the curve. But what it has actually produced is a tip of the spear, a warning of what is to come for other small businesses if the Premier continues down this path of mismanaging the pandemic.

These businesses are warning us that they are teetering on the edge. You know, I like to think positive so I don't want to say what the edge is there, but I think we understand how serious it is for many of these small businesses.

They also understand the importance of managing the public health measures in the pandemic. But I think what would make it easier for these business owners to be able to abide by the restrictions, or the closures, or the capacity limits that they may face, is expanded financial assistance, direct financial assistance. We have seen that there were loan programs, we have seen that there were deferrals but the deferrals are now coming due. The invoices from suppliers are past due. The businesses can't take on additional debt. There is a need for quick and easy access to cash.

When we bring these ideas forward, we're not bringing them strictly because it's something that we believe in, we're bringing it because we want to amplify the voices of the people of Manitoba. What

the people of Manitoba are saying loud and clear is that small businesses, local businesses, are going to need help from this government, new help to survive this new code red period.

When it comes to the Premier's ready, set, go campaign, while he was at the starting line saying we should be first to reopen, he took off sprinting and the destination that he ended up running to was a situation where Manitoba is instead No. 1 in the country for new COVID cases, where instead, Manitoba is No. 1 in the country—perhaps even No. 1 in North America—for test positivity rates, depending on the day.

And so it seems that the Premier's rush to reopen actually had a very damaging effect on many businesses. And, you know, I'd suggest to him that an approach that would've focused more on public health, that would've focused more on the need for continued vigilance against COVID-19, rather than putting up billboards that would have to be taken down within a few days of their launch in the summertime, that that would've been the better approach.

And while I don't want to suggest that we could've avoided the second wave, perhaps we could've managed things a little bit differently. Perhaps a tone that didn't start with ready, set, go—which suggests everybody rush to the beach—would've been better served here in Manitoba had it been replaced with a campaign that says, yes, we're going to reopen, but this thing is going to be with us for a long time and so we all need to take seriously, and not let our guard down, that while we have some fun this summer and get to return to a little bit of normal, that this thing is going to be waiting for us in the fall. It's going to be waiting for us in the winter—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Kinew: —and we're going to have to get back to the basics when that happens.

So after having laid that out, I just wonder, will the Premier (Mr. Pallister) now admit that that ready, set, go campaign was a mistake?

Mr. Pallister: What I'll admit is that what the member's just put on display here is his own inexperience. He can't even get three words right: Ready. Safe. Grow. Where 60 per cent of our emphasis was on the safety of our businesses and our workers, and we also promoted the readiness of our programs to support the small businesses he claims now he wants to support.

What he also put on display with his comments, Mr. Chair, was that he doesn't want to respect Dr. Roussin. Dr. Roussin is the one who put the rules in place for the King's Head Pub whether the member likes it or not. Those are Dr. Roussin's decisions and we support him in that.

The member contradicts himself. He suggests we rushed to open up businesses. We promoted partnerships with small businesses who themselves wanted to employ people and help them do that with our wage-subsidy programs. The only province in the country that has such programs.

The member is contradicting himself. He says that we rushed to open up businesses, and now he wants to contradict Dr. Roussin and open up some pubs and bars. We'd like to see every pub and bar open too if it was safe, but safe is the middle word, not set. And the member needs to know that. And he needs to take a look at the advertising we did, the promotional work we invested in, and realize that it was balanced to achieve the goals of people like Premier John Horgan, the NDP Premier in British Columbia, to support our small businesses, to help them get people their lives back.

I know the member doesn't come from a small-business background. He may not understand this, but I most certainly do, and many of the members of my caucus do. Our small-business people needed supports, and they continue to need supports, and that's why we've designed our programs to give them supports. The supports they need, when they need them.

We've expanded our wage-subsidy program now not once, but twice, and we may well expand it again. And what it is doing is helping people to get their lives back. It's helping small businesses to address the cash flow demands they have by paying 50 per cent of the salaries of employees, up to 20 employees, up to \$100,000 available to small businesses. And the qualifications are not hard to satisfy; the approval rating happens quickly.

The feedback that we're getting from small businesses is incredibly supportive. The member needs to understand that and perhaps broaden his comments, search out a little more beyond the Free Press and the King's Head Pub.

Here's one comment: it was too good to be true. Simple to sign up, a big help, \$6,000 for our business helped to cover a lot of our missed business that we

had over the first few months, and it saved us from having to consider selling our business.

It's a company called Aim for Life Incorporated. Thank you for your positive comments. They're nice to hear. There are frankly dozens of other positive comments here, Mr. Chair. I won't read them all on the record.

I just want the member to know that when 10,000 businesses have achieved a support program, they like that. And we like it too because we understand that small business is important and vital to our economy. And we understand enough about that to take the time to actually promote the programs that have helped all these people get their lives back.

Now, I've over 22,000 Manitobans working because we partnered with small businesses to assist them with these programs with a 50 per cent wage subsidy, up to \$5,000 per person, with a \$6,000 gap program, and by working, working with our other levels of government and our provincial partners, to make sure that we didn't duplicate or create more red tape. Businesses don't like that. That we made sure our programs were designed to complement the federal programs.

We fought for and achieved—Premier Horgan and myself—something I know the NDP leader supports, which is paid sick leave for workers. But advocating it from his side of the House occasionally over the summer when he's on vacation and are cobwebs on his office door didn't really get it done. What got it done—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister:—was the unanimity of premiers fought for, negotiated—thank you, Mr. Chair—negotiated, pursued diligently, by myself and Premier Horgan. Now, we have paid sick leave for our people all across the country, run by the federal government. Thank them for that. The Liberal leader says we want credit for it—no. We're happy, happy to give the federal government the credit for doing this. We're also happy to—

Mr. Chairperson: Order.

The hour being 5 o'clock, committee rise.

CROWN SERVICES

* (15:20)

Mr. Chairperson (Andrew Micklefield): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of the Committee of Supply will now consider the Estimates of the Department of Crown Services.

Does the honourable Minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Jeff Wharton (Minister of Crown Services): I do, Mr. Chair, and thank you everyone.

This is definitely unprecedented times and certainly we're very pleased, though, that we're able to continue the—in our democratic roles and our elected roles to ensure that Manitobans continue to have government and opposition and whoever else that wants to bid—be a part of this great process, along with our staff being involved in this very important area of government and Estimates, so I will open.

I'm pleased, again today, to be here, Mr. Chair, and to present the '20-21 Estimates for the Department of Crown Services.

To start with introductions, in attendance with me today is Mr. Eidan Hassan, our special assistant.

As indicated in this year's fall Throne Speech, this government is committed to protecting Manitoban's agenda. That includes protections for health care and vulnerable Manitobans, jobs and the economy, tax reductions that keep income in Manitoba's hands, education and child care and Manitoba's financial, environmental and energy future.

The Crown corporations will do their part to meet these objectives with a decrease in Manitoba Public Insurance rates, less expensive and more convenient access to retail liquor sales and Manitoba Hydro rates—rate increases below 3 per cent this year.

Our government is committed to accountability and transparency by releasing the soon-to-be-completed report from the economic review. Bipole III and Keeyask projects, will ensure that hydro remains Manitoba's clean energy advantage.

Initiatives taken by Crown corporations are undertaken under the auspices of The Crown Corporations Governance and Accountability Act, Mr. Chair, which provides a clear governance framework to prevent any backroom political interference with the Crowns.

* (15:30)

Our government has reintroduced legislation to streamline the Public Utilities Board and reduce costs to ratepayers. Reducing red tape and the administrative burden on Manitobans is a core policy of our government and a priority for Cabinet members. We continue to work with Manitoba's

Crown corporations to streamline and remove unnecessary regulatory requirements.

Advancing reconciliation with Indigenous Manitobans is a responsibility for all members of Cabinet. We will better align the engagement practices of Manitoba's Crown corporations and work in collaboration with Indigenous and Northern Relations on this important initiative.

As Minister of Crown Services, I will continue to ensure—ensuring that Crown corporations are accountable to the people of Manitoba, and that the high quality of service Manitobans expect is delivered.

Although there is much more work to be done, Mr. Chair, and many more achievements to realize, I'm pleased to present and review the Department of Crown Services' 2021 Estimates of Expenditures.

With this, I wish to conclude my opening statement, Mr. Chair. I look forward to also working through this process—this very important democratic process—and taking questions for Manitoba Crown Services Estimates.

Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the minister for those comments.

Does the critic from the official opposition have an opening statement?

Mr. Adrien Sala (St. James): I'd like to start by thanking all the Leg. staff who helped to make this meeting happen today and also like to thank all the civil servants who are out there supporting the minister today. As someone who worked in government, I recognize how much work goes into this kind of a process, so thanks to everyone for helping us support this meeting happening here today.

So we're here today, as the minister's said—stated, to discuss our Crown corporations, but specifically today we're going to be focused largely on Manitoba Hydro. And it's important to have an opportunity to ask questions of this government and of this minister because we're at an incredibly important moment in the history of this Crown corporation.

We know that Hydro is soon to release a 20-year strategic plan that will paint a picture of the path forward for the organization, but a pattern of interference from this government raises a lot of important questions about their motives and their end goal. And so, from direct interference from Hydro—in Hydro's

subsidiaries to the elimination of the role of the PUB as we know it, we have a lot of questions to ask.

Hydro is incredibly important to our current economy and we need to do everything possible to protect this resource through generations to come, so I hope that the minister is mindful of this as we ask questions and that he does his best to answer our questions in an open and transparent manner in the interests of all Manitobans.

Thank you.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the member.

Under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for a department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 5.1(a) contained in resolution 5.1.

At this time, we ask that the minister introduce their staff in attendance.

An Honourable Member: Certainly, I'll echo my critic's—the member from St. James's comments on, again, thanking—

Mr. Chairperson: Minister, my apologies. Sorry to interrupt. I did not recognize you and for Hansard's sake, I'm obliged to do that. So I now do that.

Honourable minister.

Mr. Wharton: Certainly, again, I would like to thank all civil servants and all staff that have helped put this together in a very, very quick time. It's wonderful work that they've done to prepare us for this virtual meeting of Estimates. First of its time, my understanding.

And at that, I would like to welcome our acting deputy minister of Crown Services as well, Bernadette Preun, and also our executive director, Rob Marrese, and also assistant deputy minister of central finances, Ryan Klos for joining us here today. And again, thank them and their teams for all the work they did to pull this off.

Thank you.

Mr. Chairperson: Does the committee wish to proceed through the Estimates of this department chronologically or have a global discussion?

It is agreed, then, that the questioning for this department will proceed in a global manner, with all resolutions to be passed once the questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Sala: I'd like to start by having the minister explain how profits from Manitoba Hydro are directed to general government revenue.

Mr. Chairperson: Honourable minister.

Minister, if you could unmute your mic, please. We can't hear you.

Mr. Wharton: Yes, so, Mr. Chair, in light of this again being a first time to experience Zoom and not being able to be in person, I'll, if you—if the committee is willing, I'll use a hand signal when I'm ready to answer. Is that something we can do?

Mr. Chairperson: That seems reasonable; we'll proceed that way.

Mr. Wharton: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Chair, just quickly, just to confirm we have the question correct. The member from St. James is looking for what happens with profit from Crown corporations, is that correct?

Mr. Sala: I'm specifically requesting that you clarify how profits from Manitoba Hydro are directed to the general government revenues.

Mr. Wharton: Again, sorry for the delay. We're working virtually and it's—we're all kind of—this is all new, so we're just getting through it.

*(15:40)

So with that being said, the understanding with respect to Manitoba Hydro—our profits are directed through the general rate application so, certainly, the PUB has oversight and it's through the GRA. So I hope that answers the question from the member from St. James.

Mr. Sala: Just want to point out that it took approximately five minutes for the minister responsible for Hydro to tell us how profits are transferred from Manitoba Hydro to government general revenue. It's quite concerning.

Could the minister explain how much money was cut from employees' wages due to involuntary days off with Hydro?

Mr. Wharton: It's not surprising that the member's already going into the sewer with questions, Mr. Chair, and certainly, this process is important, and whether it takes five minutes or five hours, I think getting the facts on the table and on the record are much more important than the fiction that the member

from St. James seems to surround himself in. But, of course, being a senior staffer with the former Selinger government, I can understand why he's gone down that hole.

So, essentially, for the sake of the rest of the committee, certainly, we know that COVID has presented a number of very, very challenging issues, not only across government but in the private sector. We know very much that a number of Manitobans are feeling the effects of COVID. And, certainly, we've worked with Manitobans and in an all-hands-on-deck approach, Mr. Chair, and Manitobans have really picked it up, and they understand that in order to get through this pandemic, we need to ensure that we get through it, and we're stronger when we get through it so we can recover as Manitobans do and have and proven to be able to.

So, with Manitoba Hydro in particular, the unions in collaboration with their employer, Manitoba Hydro, essentially agreed that all hands on deck was the way to go and looked at a three days of unpaid time, Mr. Chair, in order to ensure that we can redirect funding—redirect monies, very important monies, to the front lines of our health care to ensure that proper PPE and protection was provided. Manitobans—in particular, Hydro staff—understood that. They took up the challenge, with the exception of, I believe, the 13 members of Unifor that chose not to. We certainly really thank and appreciate the all-hands-on-deck approach that the other unions did in respect to Manitoba Hydro.

Mr. Sala: So I take it from the minister's response that those monies were collected and that he is in a position to identify the totals of monies that were collected as a result of those forced involuntary days off that were forced upon Hydro workers.

So what I'd like to know next is: How much of those funds that government has saved through putting them on the backs of Manitoba Hydro workers was redirected to help government fight the COVID-19 pandemic?

Mr. Wharton: Certainly, I'm happy to correct the member on actually money being collected. This is money that—and the member knows; he comes from a—well, he 'allegesly'—allegedly comes from a, you know, a small-business background. I know his career at the banking issue would give him the opportunity to know how, you know, how a P & L works, you know, bottom lines of businesses work. And the stressors on—one of the most, you know, most expensive parts of running a business, of course, is

ensuring that our staff are well-paid, well looked after. And, you know, the bottom line is, though, that nothing was collected; these are savings that are redirected.

So if—when the unions at Manitoba Hydro said, yes, it's all hands on deck, we certainly want to take our part and do our part for Manitobans. That money is money that wouldn't have been expensed and hence giving government at large, a whole-of-government approach the ability to ensure that there was no shortfall when it came to reporting things that are important to Manitobans and safety like PPE and other very important front-line areas that need to be covered after we have to in our health care.

Mr. Sala: I thank the minister for the response.

In the minister's first response to my initial question, which is how profits from Hydro are directed to general government revenue, he stated that they're directed through general rate applications. In his second response where he talked about the need for Manitoba Hydro workers to have an all-hands-on-deck approach—and by that I assume that they would be expected to incur losses from their expected revenue for that year—he suggested that those funds were somehow to be redirected to support the fight against COVID-19 in Manitoba.

Can he help to explain the tension between his two answers, which don't in any way align?

Mr. Wharton: Certainly, you know, my job is to ensure that, you know, the member is getting an answer that Manitobans deserve, and that's exactly what Manitobans have asked of this government, and that's what they've asked of myself in particular when they re-elected me for a second time in 2019, and I will continue to do that and I will continue to ensure that Manitobans' best interests are always front and centre.

Profits from Manitoba Hydro, as I alluded to, are not directed to government revenue. Profits are a part of Manitoba Hydro's PUB general rate application, so they're GRA. And, again, that has a direct reflect on what rates will be on a go forward. So if Hydro was profitable, that ensures that Manitobans can enjoy some of the lowest rates, hydro rates, in the country, and we know—we know—that that is going to be a real challenge for our Crown jewel, Manitoba Hydro, on a go forward for generations to come.

In light of the decisions made under the former NDP government, and, of course, we don't have to go far but just go right into Bipole III, Mr. Chair. And,

you know, the member from St. James knows; we've had discussions about alternative energy sources and other things when we had Estimates last year, and certainly we appreciate input from the members opposite to ensure that we can better support Manitobans and their needs. But, you know, I mean, the bottom line is if we can control—if Manitoba Hydro could control their expenses, they can divert that to the bottom line, and that's rates. And rates—so that there's no rate shock.

Well, we know under the NDP there is going to be a challenge over the next seven generations. You know, essentially, there are no profits paid to government, and certainly the member from St. James is looking at that question, and I've got a clear answer for him. There are no profits that are paid to government. Again, this is about ensuring that Manitobans can enjoy some of the most reasonable hydroelectric rates in the country of Canada, Mr. Chair. And that's exactly what Manitoba Hydro will continue to do.

* (15:50)

Mr. Sala: Let's recap the minister's logic that he just put forward there.

Manitoba Hydro employees, according to this minister, need to be—see wage reductions so that Hydro rates can remain low. So, this government forced unpaid days off on thousands of Manitoba Hydro employees, arguably, according to the minister, from what he just presented, to keep rates low.

So, there's a bit of an issue there, given that his government is forcing a 2.9 per cent rate hike on Manitobans at the same time that they are forcing Manitoba Hydro employees to take wage reductions which, according to him, are serving the purpose of keeping our rates low. Which one is it? What are we doing here? What's the goal?

Clearly, the minister is a little confused about how things operate at Hydro, given that he seems to think that we should be both jacking up rates on Manitobans without any accountability to an independent rate review process, and apparently also cutting Hydro worker wages for that—for the purpose of apparently trying to keep rates low. So, there's a confusing logic there which I'm hoping the minister can help to bring clarity to.

So, I ask the minister: How does he resolve those tensions where at one time he's suggesting that we need to have Hydro workers bear the brunt of these wage cuts to keep our rates low but at the same time he's proceeding, along with his government, in forcing

a 2.9 per cent rate hike on Manitobans? How does he explain those two goals together?

Mr. Wharton: Certainly, you know, the member talks about Manitoba Hydro staff taking the brunt of an all-hands-on-deck approach for all Manitobans, and I disagree.

All hands on deck is everybody doing their part of whatever they can do to ensure that we can come out of this stronger than we were going in. And, quite frankly, that's exactly what not only Manitoba Hydro staff and leadership are working towards, they're working towards ensuring that we can come out of this. And we know that rates are going to be at a level where Manitobans don't have to worry about it and don't have to look over their shoulder or their next paycheque to ensure that, you know, they can make that Hydro bill.

And, again, I go back to the 17 years of mismanagement by the former government. I mean, the member will sit here and again try to discredit Manitoba Hydro board, Manitoba Hydro executive, and he has, and he's done it in the House, and continues to do it every day, when their No. 1 priority is to ensure that rates remain low. And that's exactly what they need to do in light of the fact, Mr. Chair, that the NDP government, the former NDP government, reaped billions of dollars of debts on Manitoba Hydro and generations.

So, really, for the member to sit here today and question our ability as a Crown corporation—or, as a Crown corporation to manage their financial—there's the problem. Let me digress a bit, because—I hope I've got enough time Mr. Chair, but you know, the bottom line is their—the political interference over the years under the NDP is a direct result of why we're looking at billions of dollars of debt coming online over the next year with Bipole III and Keeyask.

So, bottom line is this: you know, we are—Manitobans hired us again to ensure that we fix the finances, repair the services and rebuild the economy. We are doing that in collaboration with our Crown corporations and we will continue to, to protect Manitobans.

Mr. Chairperson: Just in response to the reference regarding time, each question and also each answer has five minutes allocated. So, if you're wondering how much time you have, that is the correct amount of time.

Mr. Sala: So it's clear, let's just put on the record the minister was completely incapable of explaining the

relationship between the cuts to Manitoba Hydro employee wages and how they're using those to fight the COVID-19 pandemic in Manitoba. In fact, he completely contradicted himself with his answer, and I think that was clear to anyone out there who's watching.

Hydro profited \$100 million in 2019-20 and they're forecasted to profit \$51 million in 2020-21. And we've just established that the directed, ordered cuts from earlier this year had no relationship of any kind on the government's ability to combat COVID-19. Yet you're still trying to further impact the workforce at Hydro by ordering wage freezes for the next two years during a financially difficult time for Manitobans and when the very bill that attempted to do this was deemed unconstitutional.

Does the minister agree that this is negotiating in bad faith?

* (16:00)

Mr. Chairperson: Hello. Honourable minister, you—we lost you for a second there.

Mr. Wharton: Yes, I see that.

Mr. Chairperson: Your video seems to be back in. There we go.

Honourable minister, you have the floor.

Mr. Wharton: Thank you again, Mr. Chair, and again, ensuring that we have enough resources for our front lines is, has been and always will be, and continues to be through this pandemic, priority one for the safety of all our front-line workers and certainly that is a function that is extremely important and we hear it and I know the member from St. James here hears it every day when he's in his constituency.

And he mentioned about the 2.9 per cent rate increase, you know, I can tell him that, you know, through the PUB review, of course, there will be an opportunity to save Manitobans even more money through this process, and that's important because we know that in comparison to other jurisdictions in Canada, the PUB process is much more streamlined. It certainly gives more opportunity for the public to engage in a more red-tape-reduction way, and certainly that is the goal of that review, to ensure that.

And during that review, because of the shenanigans of the members in the spring, Manitoba Hydro was not in a position to go through a GRA and PUB. And so that, again, with their delays and blockades put up in the House, that caused a real

challenge for Manitoba Hydro. And Manitoba Hydro was looking at potentially a general rate application of three and a half per cent.

Well, we understand during the interim period where the POB will be working through their review and ensuring that Manitobans save money, the rate of 2.9 per cent was put forward for Manitobans to ensure that they're kept low and even though the stress on Manitoba Hydro's bottom line will continue to grow based on decisions made by the former NDP government.

As the member does know, too, as well, the debt-to-equity ratio for Manitoba Hydro, if you were in a private sector scenario—and certainly the member knows how to look at that—through that lens, through Manitoba Hydro and through that private sector lens, he knows that the debt-to-equity in excess of 88 per cent is extremely high. As a matter of fact, I don't think, if it wasn't, you know, for potentially the government being there to support now the decisions that the former government made, that even getting a simple operating line of credit would be impossible for a private sector business in that type of scenario. And that's truly not the way to run a business and it's certainly not a way to run a Crown corporation.

So, again, these changes are getting put into place to help Manitobans save money, to ensure that in the long run Manitobans will have stable, secure, low hydro rates, on a go forward for generations to come. And that is our goal, Mr. Deputy Chair, and I know that that's Manitoba Hydro's goal, as they go through and they continue to go through re-looking at the new business model for Manitoba Hydro. Coming out of COVID, of course, it has really given them an opportunity, along with many other businesses, to really take advantage of some of the online connectivity, opportunities when you're running meetings, people being able to work from home, you know, saving companies and corporations thousands if not millions of dollars in fees and other things.

You know, really, COVID is teaching us a lot, but, again, we need to continue to evolve. And businesses evolve. Businesses have to evolve. Well, they've never had to evolve more than they have during COVID, and, you know, examples of that are the struggles that our businesses are going through, and that's why our Premier (Mr. Pallister) introduced that gap program, one of the most generous programs in Canada, Mr. Chair, and again, that's helping businesses with cash flow and with the needs that they

need to make payroll and to keep the lights on during these very unprecedented and challenging times.

So with that, Mr. Chair, I hope that that gives a little bit of more background and a little bit more insight into the global picture here when it comes to Manitoba Hydro and with respect to rates and protecting Manitobans as we go forward.

Mr. Sala: I appreciate that somewhat freewheeling response from the minister.

You know, just one important point to touch on here. The minister referenced the need for a hydro rate increase in lieu of their inability to advance increases that they clearly had planned, as part of their Bill 44, which we very proudly stopped from being able to be introduced last March, as the minister stated.

One issue with that statement is that, at this point in time, Manitobans will never know whether or not that 2.9 per cent rate increase was required. And the reason for that is because the Public Utilities Board and their independent rate review process didn't have an opportunity to determine whether or not that rate increase was required. So Manitobans will actually never know the answer to that.

The minister is asking us all just to believe him when he states that that increase was required, but we know that in 2017, his government supported a 7.9 per cent rate increase request that came forward. And it was thanks to the Public Utilities Board and their independent rate review process, which this minister and his government apparently are not huge fans of, that we ended up, instead of getting a 7.9 per cent increase, we only received half of that increase. And that was because the independent experts at the Public Utilities Board determined that there was actually no need for a rate increase of 7.9 per cent, that that was far in excess of what was required in order to allow Hydro to service its debts, and so, as a result of that decision, all Manitobans had \$60 million a year put back into our collective pockets, put back onto our collective kitchen tables, in the parlance of this government.

And so we sit here and we're being asked—and we're being expected to believe the minister and his government when they say that we needed a rate increase, but, unfortunately, I just want to be very clear, Manitobans will never know the answer to that because of the actions of this government in jacking it up unilaterally without allowing that to go through an independent rate review process.

Back to the question which we were asking, which the minister dodged entirely. The question again relates to the logic behind making increasing levels of cuts to the wages of Manitoba Hydro employees. We've already established, at the beginning of this Estimates session here, that there is actually no relationship, none at all, to be said between forcing Hydro employees to accept lower revenues this year and allowing the government to fight the pandemic. There's no connection. That's been very clearly established.

So again, the minister's government seems to be engaging in negotiation in bad faith. They're backing out on commitments to Manitoban workers.

So I'll ask the minister again: Could he please explain the rationale for ordering these wage freezes on thousands of working Manitobans?

* (16:10)

Mr. Wharton: The member from St. James talks about Manitobans never knowing the—whether the 2.9 per cent increase was required or not. Well, certainly, what the member does know and will know very soon, along with Manitobans, is the effect of making the decision to run Bipole III down the west side of the province and build Keeyask when we're on the eve of the report on the biggest boondoggle in Manitoba history.

So as we continue to be transparent as a government, I know the member would like to hide from the past, but he needs to ensure that—challenges with that side of the House, Mr. Chair, when it comes to transparency. Well, that's exactly why the review was called, to ensure that Manitobans understand and will never, ever be put in a position that they were put in in the interference of the NDP government when it came to Manitoba Hydro.

Manitoba Hydro, again, the member knows that they're sitting right now at a projected debt of over \$23 billion, Mr. Chair. That's \$23 billion in the last—that's grown and actually doubled, almost tripled in the last seven years—six to seven years under the former NDP government. So, you know, the member has to, first of all, take responsibility for his former government's actions. He was a senior staffer during the Selinger time in government and he certainly was aware of the decisions being made, being a senior staffer, and was directly involved in those discussions. So he's aware of it, so let's make sure that Manitobans listening today are aware of that, to be totally clear and transparent of those facts.

So, you know, again, and it all comes back to ensuring that Manitobans can enjoy some of the lowest hydroelectric rates in the country. And it's Manitoba Hydro who'll be the first to tell you that it's going to be a challenge based on the decisions that were made by his former government. So with that, Mr. Chair, again, we, you know, we need to—he needs to understand—and I think he will after we get through the next hour or so and hopefully we can continue this discussion tomorrow—but he, again, puts false information on the record.

You know, the bottom line is that Manitobans are going to save hundreds and thousands, not if the millions of dollars in fees, collectively, with an annual review, Mr. Chair, an annual review of rates, a GRA that would happen every year where he would spend to the tune of millions of dollars in review where the public didn't have a fair say.

Well, this bill will bring in the ability for the public to have a fair say and it will be the most transparent process ever experienced in Manitoba, to ensure that Manitobans are taking an active role in what they own, Mr. Chair, and that's Manitoba Hydro. And they will continue to own Manitoba Hydro. What they do want to own is a Manitoba Hydro that is really focused on their core delivery, and that's delivering hydroelectricity for the most reasonable rates in Canada and that's exactly what they're focussed on doing.

Mr. Sala: So let's recap here what the minister has shared. We're reducing the work week for Manitoba Hydro workers, which results in significant wage cuts. They're now reducing the wages of thousands of Hydro workers again, after your own government's legislation that attempted to enact that was deemed unconstitutional, and we're being told that all of this is to help respond to COVID-19, yet the minister's own answers throughout the beginning of this Estimates session clarified that none of that is true.

So we appreciate the clarity on that. We appreciate that getting on the record and the minister laying it all out for folks to hear very clearly.

The minister alluded to the incredibly hyperpartisan Hydro review which, according to him, is going to bring Manitobans insight of some kind, but I think that's going to be challenged by the fact that it's being led by not one but two ex-Conservative premiers, which I don't think most people or most Manitobans will receive as being overly useful as a report, knowing that, ultimately, this information is coming from such a hyperpartisan background.

Of course, also concerning is the fact that the current individual who's leading that review is himself a massive champion of coal—from Saskatchewan, of course—and he himself has a long record of huge overexpenditures on a number of major public projects.

So I can confirm for the minister that we, on the other side of the House, are not exactly anticipating much insight from that review, but yet, of course, we are still interested in knowing when it will be released.

So, can the minister share any details on when that Hydro review is expected to be released to the public?

Mr. Wharton: And again, in the attempt to ensure that I'm providing the information to the member from St. James and, of course, most importantly to Manitobans, certainly will provide a little bit more information for Manitobans on exactly what the workforce at Manitoba Hydro and their all-hands-on-deck approach was able to allow the government—all government, to redirect savings of a total workforce—of \$5.7 million back to the front lines of health care, so to ensure that we have that \$5.7 million available to purchase additional and a surplus of PPE and other protective equipment for our front lines.

So certainly, again, we endeavour to ensure that Manitobans have the facts and this is clearly, in fact, that workforce was at the table and we thank them again, as we do always, for their participation in ensuring that Manitobans are protected as we go through this unprecedented pandemic.

In respect to the review and the report coming, certainly we'll advise the member when I'm aware of when it's coming. It is coming; we know it's coming; they know it's coming and that's why they're a little nervous about it. That's why they're throwing, you know, former premiers under the bus because, certainly, that's really the only thing they have in order to try to deflect the harsh realities of decisions that they made that will be uncovered and be public—one hundred per cent public very soon.

So with that, certainly, I'll have—give the opportunity for member from St. James for another question.

Mr. Sala: I appreciate that the minister did provide some clarity there in terms of the total amount of wages that have been taken from Manitoba Hydro employees. According to him, this is going to serve to reduce Hydro rates and this is going to result in somehow helping us to pay for COVID. Meanwhile,

his government is also increasing the Hydro rates by 2.9 per cent.

So again, appreciate the clarity, actually, on the number and a little bit of actual accurate information from the minister. It's greatly appreciated and it's good for Manitoba Hydro employees to know how—to have clarity on how much money was taken from their bank accounts for very questionable reasons.

I'd like to shift the conversation to focus now on the Manitoba Network contract and to ask: the government's known for a while, prior to the pandemic, that the contract was set to expire in 2020.

Hoping the minister can explain what work had been taken to begin a tendering process for a new contract for the Manitoba Network. A timeline would be appreciated, and the dates when RFPs and RFQs had been drafted.

* (16:20)

Mr. Wharton: Well, thank you for that question.

The member from St. James will know, and if he doesn't I will let him know that, again, as we do talk about whole-of-government approach, in particular to his question, that would be a Central Services question, simply because they are directly involved in procurement, they are directly involved in RFP process and the RFQ process.

Manitoba Hydro's involvement is clear. We have underutilized dark fibre. It's been underutilized for several years and has been piecemealed and let to a number of NDP supporters over their time in government. And we, of course, recognize and Manitobans understand that that's not the way to do business. That is why we came out early during COVID to ensure that Manitobans know that we're working with their best interests in mind when it comes to connectivity.

COVID has also shown us that more and better, faster connectivity throughout rural and northern areas, in particular First Nations, is 'paramount' and needs to happen, and it needs to happen at a very, very expedited speed. And I mean that with no pun intended, because the bottom line is folks now are not getting the connectivity they need to not only run their day-to-day lives, but also to run their home business, to work from home, whether they work for the public or private sector. And COVID has really taught us that.

So, this government, along with Manitoba Hydro, have said, you're right, they need to get connectivity. And how we're going to do that is work

with an RFQ and an RFP through Central Services. And they're the lead on that. And, the member from St. James, if you had another question regarding that I would certainly expect you could have the opportunity to speak with that member—that minister as well, and he would endeavour to certainly answer your questions at a different time.

But I can tell you though that I will continue to, and so will Manitoba Hydro, advocate for our folks in rural northern regions, including our First Nations, to ensure that they can have expedited connectivity so they can do the things they need to do to grow their economies, whether it be on a First Nation or surrounding areas in the North, Mr. Chair. And that's exactly what we're going to focus on.

Mr. Sala: It appears that the minister is confused about the question here.

He has alluded to an entirely different RFP-RFQ process relating to our dark fibre, which is certainly an important area that I am looking forward to asking him questions about. But I'm referencing the Manitoba Network contract, which is the data services contract that had been extended in January and that ended up in the hands of Bell MTS, and that extension was worth approximately \$40 million.

So, again, I'll ask the minister if he can explain what work had been taken to begin a tendering process for a new contract for the Manitoba Network.

Mr. Wharton: You know, it's just such an exciting time when it comes to connectivity. Boy, there's so many good things happening.

But I can tell you though, to the member's question, from St. James, that the real challenge was this MC—Manitoba Network contract that was signed back in the 2000s by then-minister Dave Chomiak. And, you know, the member should be aware, but if he isn't aware, I'll certainly give him a little bit of an education on what happened. Mind you, he was the senior representative in the government, so I'm sure he is aware, but maybe he was just—he's maybe forgotten or it slipped his mind. But, you know, this was a 10-year agreement with MTS signed by Mr. Dave Chomiak at the time. It did—it was untendered. It was a sole-source contract by the NDP government. And I have spoke about this before in the House as well, and certainly we'll put it on the record here today for Manitobans.

This untendered contract was up for renewal in this previous—early on this year before COVID hit, and, of course, COVID hit, and again—and we were

set with a situation where everything—essentially everything came to a stop.

So at that point, again, nothing was being let as far as any RFPs or anything. We needed to make sure that the connectivity continued and, of course, that has continued and will continue. This contract will go back out to the market. But for the interim there was a clause in this 10-year contract that was untendered by Mr. Dave Chomiak, allowing for an extension. And I can tell you that that extension was undertaken because of the fact of COVID. Certainly, it would not be wise to be going into the market at that time and certainly to protect Manitobans and the continued connectivity.

And, by the way, for the member, because I know his next question where it's going to go and I'm going to answer it for him right now, this \$40-million extension has been simply—from the outcome of COVID, it's simply the fact that there are so much more connectivity required in this existing contract going forward to ensure that Manitobans were protected going forward in this interim period, pre an RFP coming back out into market, Manitobans connectivity is protected.

So, again, very transparent as I continue to be, it's just unfortunate that we still have a bit of a mess to clean up but with respect to this particular entity and Manitoba Hydro issue. So we are and we're—and certainly we're heading it—we're going head first into this one, Mr. Chair, and we're making sure that Manitobans still can have connectivity during these very difficult times and we're looking forward to getting a tendered contract and an RFP out for Manitobans. And again, we will not make the same mistakes that the NDP did during their tenure.

Mr. Sala: I'll just clarify for the minister, if he looks over at the government website where contracts and RFPs are listed, he'll find that the contract that was put forward by minister Chomiak at the time was in fact stated to have been tendered. So, I'm not sure where he's getting his information.

I'd like to ask the minister—because he keeps referencing that the reason why Manitobans had this contract extension foisted upon them, which was worth 37 and a half million dollars, which went to Bell MTS, the reasoning was COVID, that we are here—that they needed to proceed with that contract extension because they didn't have a choice, we're heading into a period of uncertainty.

So, I'd like to ask the minister if he was aware that direction was sent from central government to Hydro to extend that contract in January, which preceded the arrival of the pandemic in Manitoba by about three months.

* (16:30)

Mr. Wharton: And again, as we want to make sure that we get facts on the record from the government end, and I appreciate the patience of Manitobans that are currently watching live.

Mr. Chair, again, as I mentioned, the contract was paused at COVID in March 2020. Again, I had mentioned that in my preamble before, to the—for the member for St. James (Mr. Sala), for his information and, you know, again, the—clearly, we were not going to go in the market during the middle of a global pandemic, and I'm sure the member can appreciate and agree on that statement.

The extension is for 30 months, of course. It gives some opportunity for some, you know, for us as I mentioned earlier, potentially go back into the market, to ensure that Manitobans' interests are well looked-after, and the last thing we could do is take the chance that the wider sector, the wider public sector, would be without connectivity during an unprecedented pandemic.

And that's exactly why the extension was there, and there was an opportunity to do that within the contract to protect, we thought, to protect Manitobans, in particular, the wider public sector when it comes to connectivity like our schools and our MUSH sector and just the broader public sector, Mr. Chair.

So, certainly, obviously a great opportunity and a great move to ensure that that's what we're protecting Manitobans, where they need communication more than ever, Mr. Chair, during this process.

We don't know when COVID is going to go away. We know that, you know, there's talk of potentially having a vaccine coming in the new year. Well, that's great, but that doesn't help us today and I'm sure the member from St. James will agree on that, as well.

But, you know, look, we need to continue to make sure Manitobans are protected and one of the areas that, you know, that we're talking about here again is ensuring connectivity. And by providing an extension in the existing contract, yes, we absolutely have and continue to go to the market for the best opportunity. We're smart shoppers. Manitobans are the smartest shoppers in the country, and they know that.

So, again we're—this is another example of just simply cleaning up a mess left behind, but also finding a balance to ensure that we keep connectivity within the wider public sector, Mr. Chair. And, again, heck, if schools don't have connectivity, boy, oh boy, think where we'd be today. With a combination of home schooling going on, you know, parents have put on their school hats and they're teaching their kids at home every day now, in some cases, and more and more.

Thankfully though, with the efforts of our front-line teachers and all our educators across the system, we've been—they've been very great at providing a good cohort system that they were—in collaboration with with public health and it's working, you know, Mr. Chair. It's working to the point where kids can still go into school, be within their cohorts, get an education. Teachers are protected, students are protected and I tell you, without that connectivity, where would we be today?

So this really—and I'm really, really pleased that the member did bring this up because it just—it really gives us an opportunity to show Manitobans how important it is to ensure that there is no break in that connectivity as we go forward through this pandemic.

Look, we could be having this discussion in 24 months from now—heaven forbid we are still in the middle of a global pandemic—but the reality is we don't know. Maybe the member knows but we certainly don't know and, you know, we want to make sure that there's pieces of the puzzle in place that can be moved around at a later date, to ensure that the proper oversight is done, it gets into the market and there's a fair and open, transparent process for Manitobans to see and be involved in.

Mr. Sala: The minister is right, I don't have a crystal ball. I don't know what's going to happen, as none of us do with the COVID pandemic.

But what I do know and what's—[interjection]—very clear is that—yes, thank you—what is very clear is that, somehow, the minister continues to reference that they extended this untendered contract due to COVID, and yet we have on record that his government gave direction to Hydro to extend the contract—this \$37.5 million untendered contract—in January, three months before the pandemic hit Manitoba in any substantive manner.

So there's a break here in his logic. He failed to answer the question. It's clear that he's not accounting for that little detail in the response he's offered. And,

you know, he keeps alluding to the fact that his government is a smart shopper. Meanwhile, they're handing out untendered contracts with no apparent reason. And the reason he's offering, which is COVID, isn't valid because we know that they told Hydro to extend that contract long before COVID was ever a factor in Manitoba. So, again, more questions after this minister offers what he is calling an answer here.

Maybe he can explain the rationale for extending that contract without tender for two and a half years. If they're stating that this was necessary, what's the logic behind a two and a half year period?

* (16:40)

Mr. Wharton: Again, you know, it's—we provide answers, we provide clarity, we provide transparency and the member refuses to acknowledge it, so I guess we'll agree to disagree on that point.

But the member's now asking another question, and I referred to this before. This is Crown Services, and this is Manitoba Hydro, Manitoba Public Insurance and Manitoba Liquor & Lotteries. This is not Central Services, and if the member has a question regarding that contract, going further, I think I've provided him ample information from my knowledge, again, as a whole-of-government approach, but I'm certainly not going to be waging into an area that, quite frankly, I have not been involved in on a go-forward.

So I hope the member appreciates that and if he has a question, I certainly would direct him to the member—or, the Minister of Central Services (Mr. Helwer).

Mr. Sala: I appreciate that the minister isn't accountable specifically for this RFP, and it is the Minister of Central Services that is responsible, but I think he can appreciate that Manitobans expect him, as the Minister responsible for Crown Services and ultimately the minister responsible for Hydro, to have some information about what's happening under his watch in that department and—or, specifically in Hydro.

So, you know, maybe we'll go a little further here and, again, just hoping that the minister does have a fairly decent understanding of his file.

Can he offer any explanation for the justification of the increase in monetary value of that contract? Could he provide a copy of the contract to help break down where Manitoban taxpayer dollars are going?

Mr. Wharton: Certainly, you know, we try to do this in a, you know, in a fashion that is respectful, and certainly I endeavour to do that and I would hope the member would also endeavour to do that. And, you know, Manitobans don't need to be subjected to the insults that he throws my way. I think it's, you know, I think it's something that's not right for this venue.

I think if the member has a question in particular and he's not getting the answer that he's looking for, then maybe he should ask a different question but, certainly, I think we've been trying to make sure that this is a very upfront, civil and transparent process, and I will continue to do that.

And to the member's question, again, this is a government-held contract. However, it's managed by Central Services. So, again, the member is maybe trying to put me in the position that I can't answer a question, but I've been clear the last three answers that this is a government-held contract and it's managed by Central Services.

So if the member wants to continue down this road, he's going to get the same answer. Maybe Manitobans would like him to switch gears.

Mr. Sala: Earlier on, the minister alluded to the fact that he was aware that this contract had originally been tendered by Mr. Chomiak, and that he later alluded to the fact that it had a provision for being extended. So, clearly, he has some familiarity with the contract or he's actually seen the contract.

Would the minister be willing to provide us with a copy of that contract for—or the contract extension?

Mr. Wharton: You know, it's interesting. The member, I recall, 20 minutes ago, mentioning that he was on the government website and noticed that he made a comment about Mr. Chomiak's contract being publicly tendered. Well, certainly, we know that discussions about this have been very public, and, certainly, I've provided the information that he's aware of and that I'm aware of, and I've mentioned to him already that it's a government-held contract managed by Central Services.

So, you know, again, the member can keep asking the same question; I'm going to continue to give him the same answer: government-held contract managed by Central Services.

Mr. Sala: So, I think Manitobans want to know how we can possibly enter into a contract here for \$40 million, or almost \$40 million, and we have a minister responsible for that department who doesn't

seem to have any information available or as least is unwilling to provide that information to us. I think that's concerning, Mr. Chair, and I'll ask again.

I understand that the contract extension would've been managed via Central Services, but I ask the minister and I ask him in the interests of ensuring Manitobans can see information that will allow them to understand the decision making behind this government's decision to, again, support a \$40-million contract extension untendered, will he provide any information or will he provide a copy of that contract extension, or is—if there's a term sheet, will he provide us access to that, again, in the interests of ensuring Manitobans can know that their government has done a good job in shopping smart. Is he willing to provide that?

I'm certain he's able to access that, even though it may not be directly under his purview. He's obviously relayed information about that contract extension. He's clearly aware of it. He's, hopefully, seen that contract extension.

Will he simply provide us with a copy of that contract extension so Manitobans can know whether or not, in fact, their government was shopping smart, as he says they were doing?

Mr. Wharton: Well, I don't know if we need to check the audio or maybe I'm not quite getting through to the member from St. James but, as I said to him the last three answers, I'll say it again: this contract—and, again, I've provided some high-level information that even the member was aware of to ensure that, you know, he gets what he's asking for. But I can tell you that government—again, this is not a government—this is a government-held contract, not—has nothing to do with Crown Services.

So, if the member, you know, has concerns with how government departments work, then I suggest maybe he could take it up with another party. Potentially, maybe, you know, one day, heaven forbid, they do form government, maybe he'll have an opportunity to change the way things are done. But in the interim, this is a contract that has nothing to do with Crown Services, and the member should appreciate that.

* (16:50)

And I think, in the benefit of Manitobans listening online and watching online, I would believe that in the time that we have left, the member would like to move on to a question of importance to Manitobans.

Mr. Sala: Yes, I thank the minister for the question, unfortunately, again, just proving that he's not willing to ensure Manitobans have access to the information that they require, which he's clearly in a position to access.

So, I want to go back to the work that had been done in preparation to tender a contract in 2020. Manitoba Hydro Telecom expressed an interest in wanting to participate in that tendering process when it came online, yet we've obtained documents that show Hydro—and, in turn, Manitoba Hydro Telecom—were told that they could not participate.

Can he set the record straight on why Manitoba Hydro Telecom was told they should not participate when an RFP gets posted?

Mr. Wharton: Certainly, we'll talk about, again, this—and I believe I—the member's talking about the opportunity to light up our dark fibre. And if that's not the case, certainly I'm sure the member will take the opportunity to correct me.

But, go back a little bit in time. Again, this falls under—my colleague in Central Services put out an RFQ. RFQ identified a number of proponents that were willing to participate in an RFP. An RFP was let, and that process is currently still unfolding as we speak.

And I hope that that is what the member was looking for. If not, I'm sure he'll correct me on that.

Mr. Sala: Yes, the minister said that the member will confirm, and I will confirm that he is talking about a totally different subject from the one that I was asking him about and that we've been discussing for the last half an hour or so.

I'll reiterate the question for the benefit of the minister here: Manitoba Hydro Telecom expressed an interest in wanting to participate in this tendering process when it came online, and we're talking about the Manitoba Network here, yet we've obtained documents that show Hydro, and in turn Manitoban Hydro Telecom, were told that they could not participate.

Could you set the record straight on why Manitoba Hydro Telecom was told they should not participate when the RFP was posted?

Mr. Wharton: The good thing about having a working pen and a piece of paper is, you know, I wrote down the member's question. And he said Manitoba Hydro Telecom, yet he was clarifying again, was it the

issue of Manitoba Network agreement—which we have discussed at length.

So, the member did say Manitoba Hydro Telecom. These are two different entities. So maybe, can I have him clarify that please.

Mr. Sala: Sure. Again, we're specifically talking about work done in preparation for—to tender a new contract in 2020 relating to the Manitoba Network. Manitoba Hydro Telecom expressed an interest in wanting to participate in that tendering process when it came online. Yet we know that they were told they are not supposed to participate in that RFP.

Can you set the record straight on why Manitoba Hydro Telecom was told they shouldn't participate when that RFP was posted?

Mr. Wharton: And, again, in reviewing the member's question, he's referring to essentially a procurement issue, which has nothing to do with Crown Services. So again, I would be more than willing to direct him to the—my colleague, the Minister of Central Services (Mr. Helwer), to potentially respond to any inquiries that he may have regarding Manitoba Network agreement and Manitoba Hydro Telecom. So—

Mr. Chairperson: The hour being 5 o'clock, committee rise.

HEALTH, SENIORS AND ACTIVE LIVING

* (15:30)

Mr. Chairperson (Doyle Pivniuk): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order.

This section of the Committee of Supply will now consider the Estimates for the Department of Health, Seniors and Active Living.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement? The honourable minister? Can the minister mute—unmute his mic?

Hon. Cameron Friesen (Minister of Health, Seniors and Active Living): Good afternoon.

Mr. Chairperson: We can—we—the honourable minister, for his opening statement.

Mr. Friesen: Good afternoon, everyone.

On behalf of the Department of Health, Seniors and Active Living, I'm very pleased to present the financial Estimates for the 2020-2021 fiscal year. In so doing, I commit to Manitobans that, through this budget, we will continue to deliver high-quality health and wellness services in innovative and sustainable

manners to our patients, to our clients and to our residents. We will continue to deliver safe and accessible services. We will continue to maximize health outcomes for Manitobans at large.

Performance in these domains continues to be pursued through the now-deployed provincial goals with accommodating—accompanying performance indicators for—which health organizations are now expected to adhere to in their operations. The enhancement of accountability and performance as recommended in the Health Sustainability and Innovation Review ensures performance in key areas including patient experience, access, cost and sustainability and patient safety, in no particular order.

Our government has invested over a billion dollars between when we took government to now in operations, programs and services delivered by the department and its other reporting entities, which include the regional health authorities, CancerCare Manitoba, Addictions Foundation of Manitoba, Shared Health, community agencies and personal-care homes. During this same time frame, the Canada Health Transfer increased by \$365 million.

Historically, the federal government has played an important role in helping to support provincial and territorial health services. However, we continue to be concerned about the—a reduction on the CHT's annual growth rate and the impact of that to our health-care system. Starting in 2017-2018, the federal government cut growth in the Canada Health Transfer from a fixed 6 per cent per year to a three-year moving average of nominal GDP growth, with funding guaranteed to increase by a certain percentage. However, aging populations compared with longer life expectancies are expected to result in billions in additional health-care costs, and so in December of 2019, Canada's premiers reiterated their call for a stronger health-care funding partnership with the federal government.

The proposed 2020-2021 Health budget in core represents the largest investment in health care in this province's history—just over \$6.3 billion, as it resides today. This represents a 1.6 per cent increase in core expenditures compared to the previous year. I would note, as well, that this printed budget that—does not include additional investments to be made in the health-care sector related to community and home care, to mental health and addictions, as well as funding being set aside to address and respond to the implications of COVID-19.

On the topic of the global pandemic, I would mention that our government has proactively budgeted for and set aside amounts in respect of the pressures of COVID-19. The onset of this pandemic represents an exceptional challenge to Manitobans, and therefore an exceptional amount of funds have been earmarked for the health care response.

I would note that \$500 million has been set aside for response and does not even rely or reside in the budget of Health, Seniors and Active Living, and instead resides in an internal service adjustment for—which the department can have access.

Nature for—use of this funding has included some of the following: procurement of the PPE to keep health-care workers safe; establishment of those COVID visitation shelters to allow residents and visitors, their family members, their caregivers, to have contact even if the pandemic once again forces a shutdown of regular visitation procedures; relief for the one employer, one personal-care home effective model that we have in place that is designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 throughout our long-term-care sites; establishment of the Manitoba Emergency Response Warehouse; purchase of key equipment, including ventilators and other critical-care equipment for our hospitals; planning for our low-acuity overflow sites; expanded and enhanced in-patient and ICU capacity; access to COVID-19 testing and contact tracing with additional sites in community-based doctors' offices to make sure that Manitobans can get a test when and where they need it; the redeployment of staff to prioritize case investigations, contact tracing, and notification and the daily follow-ups of cases and contacts during self-isolation, as well as the new contract with the Canadian Red Cross to increase capacity to support this work; expanded laboratory testing capacity to meet increased demands.

Budget 2020 includes a number of key investments and enhancements in the delivery of health-care services. I want to take a few moments to describe those.

Consistent with other provinces, in health spending we spend approximately 73 cents of every dollar in hospitals and health facilities on salaries and benefits for the workforce and front-line service providers who deliver quality services to Manitobans every day.

In Budget 2020, there are continued investments in those resources, including almost \$14 million in negotiated wage increases in the health system,

continued in increased investments in global funding in the amount of \$12.6 million to the regional health authorities, Shared Health, CancerCare, and the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba. This will be provided collectively to the organizations simply to maintain the levels of existing services amidst increases in the overall size of population and the changes in the mix of demographics of Manitoba's population.

Global funding increases include additional investments in personal-care homes for wage increases, supplies and drugs. The cost of providing personal-care services is shared with Manitoba Health and by the patients requiring the services.

Also, while on the subject of personal-care homes, I would like to note that our government is currently working with the regional health authorities to address incremental financial pressures resulting from COVID-19 as the virus continues to add pressure to our health-care system. We have essentially told the personal-care homes, keep your receipts and submit them. We want to make sure that they have that confidence as they are continuing to respond to the global pandemic.

*(15:40)

Home Care services' volumes continue to expand. The investments that we are making demonstrate that the system is becoming more efficient as more clients are able to receive care at home with marginal increases. The average number of clients receiving care at home is projected to grow by 2.9 per cent as care is being shifted deliberately and strategically closer to home and away from acute-care facilities. Greater investments in the health-care system to accommodate inflationary increases and other economic increases: that includes \$15.2 million in the current year, or the upcoming year, and spans into a number of key areas, including medical and surgical supplies, lab and diagnostic supplies and other areas.

For the 2020-2021 fiscal year, over \$10.6 million in capital operating funding incrementally is being made available in places like the new Women's Hospital, the acute stroke unit that our government has committed to.

CancerCare Manitoba continues to provide provincial services in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer, with an operational increase of \$1.3 million. Manitoba is also investing additionally in 3.1–\$3.0 million in CAR T-cell therapy to support more patients getting that form of treatment. I would welcome the

opportunity to speak further in these Estimates procedures—proceedings about those investments.

But also, of course, remember our investments in support of 60 primary-care paramedic positions in Manitoba and new ambulance stations in the province and other investments in paramedicine.

There is much more to be said, but for sure, funding to support the increase of activities in STBBIs, sexually transmitted and blood-borne infection response.

A strong mental health and addictions services system is a core component of our system, and we continue to invest; we're making investments in the area of new RAAM clinics to support the findings of the VIRGO report and many other areas.

I don't have much more time allotted to me. We will have discussions during these Estimates, but I do want to thank my department, my deputy minister, my senior staff, the many people at the ADM executive level and also throughout the department, Shared Health and all our other delivery organizations who work so tirelessly and in such a committed way every day on behalf of all Manitobans.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the minister.

So, now we'll go into the next stage here. Under the Manitoba practice—okay, now that the official opposition critic is with—okay, we're going to deal with that later with the opening comments of the official critic—opposition critic, and now we'll go on to this—go through the routine proceeding here.

Under the Manitoba practice, debate of the minister of—salary is the last item considered for the department of the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 21.1(a) contained in resolution 21.1.

At this time we invite the opposition staff to enter the Chamber.

Shall we continue proceeding with the Estimates?

Does the committee wish to proceed through the Estimates of this department chronologically or have a global discussion?

An Honourable Member: Global.

Mr. Chairperson: A global discussion? Would that also be—with the minister?

Mr. Friesen: Mr. Chair, seeking a clarification.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay.

Mr. Friesen: Mr. Chair, we are seeking a clarification as to why the opposition critic is not making an opening statement.

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (Official Opposition House Leader): Just for the purposes of the minister's information and just to clarify, the critic for Health, the member for Union Station, is just presently just doing media and is actually waiting for the Minister of Education (Mr. Goertzen) just to finish up and then they are next and then they will be here. So that's why we're just asking if we can just postpone and come back to their opening comments.

Mr. Chairperson: So now—okay, now that we—

An Honourable Member: Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable minister, again. Sorry, I didn't catch that.

Mr. Friesen: Seeking to respond to that information.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable minister, on the response.

Mr. Friesen: Is there—are you seeking agreement to have us revert at some point in these proceedings to accommodate the critic? Because I assumed that when we were starting, that was because you had both the minister and the opposition critic in their seats, and that's why we were commencing these proceedings.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, we—I just have to remind the minister that we can't make sure that the—like, if a person's not in the Chamber, we can't identify that.

But now we've got the official opposition critic—*[interjection]* okay, we got—we can probably deal with the opening statement of the opposition critic.

The honourable member for Union Station, on the 10-minute opening statement.

MLA Uzoma Asagwara (Union Station): First, I'd like to thank the staff, the clerks, everyone here at the Legislature for their ongoing efforts to keep us safe and to ensure that we can participate, you know, in our democratic duties safely and responsibly. So, big thank you to everyone who continue to make these efforts.

I'd like to start by acknowledging that, you know, COVID-19 is a challenging—is challenging governments absolutely across the globe, and it's laying bare the flaws, the inequities and injustices in our society and in our health-care system. And in the days that we have here in Estimates, these

proceedings—they'll show, you know, and they'll lay out clearly how the cuts made by the Pallister government to our health-care system left us vulnerable, left us weakened in the system and, ultimately, ill-prepared for the COVID-19 crisis.

The rushed consolidation of emergency rooms in Winnipeg cut capacity in our health-care system. Capacity that we need now was undermined, and we're seeing how desperately right now we need that capacity within our health-care system.

And when we look back at this time—when Manitobans look back at this time, they're—they'll ask themselves, you know, did their government do everything that they could to prepare themselves? Did their government do everything that they could to mitigate this disaster, this pandemic, once it arrived here in Manitoba? And they'll ask, did their government show the leadership needed to lead Manitobans through this unprecedented, challenging time?

And in all regards, the answer is no.

Was the Pallister government prepared? Certainly not. We saw right near the beginning that they were forced to beg industry for personal protective equipment. And though the minister has never accounted for this, it is clear, I think, to any rational observer, including the editorial board of the Winnipeg Free Press, that the Pallister government was not prepared with enough PPE for a pandemic.

And, after failing in those preparations, you know, what has the Pallister government done? Have they done everything they can to mitigate this disaster? And again, no. As of last week, there were less intensive-care beds in Winnipeg than there were in 2017, and we are eight months into this pandemic.

Did the Pallister government show adequate leadership? Again, unfortunately, no. The Pallister government's response included spending hundreds of thousands of dollars urging to restart Manitoba when they should have been urging continued preparation and caution. And the minister himself refers to anti-maskers as people who are making good points.

And so I would say that history is going to remember these times. And people will remember how this government failed to prepare, failed to respond and, ultimately, failed to lead.

* (15:50)

Now, unfortunately, I wish I could tell this House that COVID-19 was the only challenge facing our

health system, but it's not the case. There are several other very serious issues that we face.

The Pallister government cut access to CancerCare facilities at Seven Oaks and Concordia hospitals, after promising they would make no cuts to access. When we talk about protecting Manitobans and making accessible what is needed for vulnerable Manitobans, I think that flies in the face of that, just as one example.

By all accounts, home care in this province is falling apart, with declining levels of service and the staff who provide those supports. I know I hear from constituents in Union Station on a regular basis—several times a week—about their challenges receiving adequate care through home care. The abrupt reduction—significant reduction to home care—has so detrimentally impacted so many Manitobans.

I've written multiple letters to the minister on this issue. I know that families of loved ones who receive home care have done the same. I know that folks receiving home care have done the same.

I also think about health care in rural regions and the incredibly significant challenges that they're facing. You know, the minister closed the Roblin emergency room, and places like Dauphin have nurse vacancy rates of over 20 per cent—over 20 per cent—and we have no indication as to how this is going to be addressed.

We have no indication as to a plan to make sure that rural health care is being bolstered, that public health care in rural communities is being supported and bolstered—not just during this pandemic but, certainly, beyond this pandemic, looking forward into what health care, rurally, can look like in Manitoba.

Now, in addition to the questions that I will be asking throughout these proceedings, my colleague for Point Douglas will spend time inquiring of the government regarding the very serious addiction crisis that we face in this province, the very serious crisis of problematic substance use, of unaddressed childhood trauma, of overdoses.

And I commend my colleague for her persistence in asking these questions in QP, for her persistence in asking these questions of the government, amplifying the voices of families and communities that are fighting every single day to make sure that their loved ones who are struggling with problematic substance use and additions have access to the resources they deserve, the health care that they deserve.

And my colleague will also spend time inquiring of this government regarding the news we heard last week of 30 babies being born in Manitoba this year with congenital syphilis. This province—Manitoba—is on track this year to have the same number of cases of congenital syphilis as the entire country did last year.

That is devastating. Something that is entirely preventable, that we should see zero—that number should simply be zero in 2020: 30 cases so far this year. It is an absolute failure on the part of this government that Manitoba could reach record numbers of congenital syphilis that measure what is typically seen across the country.

And so, again, I just want to—I also want to take this opportunity to thank the folks who continue to bring their concerns forward to us as legislators, people who bravely voice their concerns about what's going on in our communities, in our health-care system—nurses, doctors, health-care aides, environmental workers, people with loved ones in long-term care—who let us know, who shine a light on what's going on in our health-care system in a way that, quite frankly, due to this government's lack of transparency, we wouldn't have as clear an idea had it not been or be for the amazing generosity of Manitobans who share with us what's actually going on on the ground in their work environments, in their workplaces, in the spaces that they're navigating in the health-care system.

And I also want to make sure that every opportunity that we have we thank our essential workers and health-care workers for all of their efforts during this pandemic. We are onside, we are fighting for them, and we're asking these questions because it allows for the government, quite frankly, to reflect on their decision-making and make better decisions moving forward that will help our health-care system generate the capacity it needs to get through this pandemic and certainly move us in a direction with a more equitable and better, stronger performing health-care system overall.

And lastly, again, I'll keep doing this because we have to; it's important. I want to thank all the staff, all of the health staff, all the department staff, all the staff who are supporting today's proceedings under what are very challenging, unprecedented times.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the critic of the official opposition for those remarks.

We'll just go back again to: under the Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item

considered for the department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now—for consideration of line item 21.1(a) contained in resolution 21.1.

At this time I invite opposition staff to enter the Chamber if there is any staff attending? No? Okay.

And, does the committee wish to proceed through the Estimates of this department chronologically or have a global discussion?

Some Honourable Members: Global.

Mr. Chairperson: Global? Is that also the case with the minister, too? I don't know if the minister has his mic on mute?

Mr. Friesen: I concur.

Mr. Chairperson: Concur? Okay.

Well, now we'll have the discussion in a global discussion. And I thank—agree to the questioning for the department will be in a global manner, and with all resolutions be passed once the question has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

MLA Asagwara: I'd like to start by asking the minister some questions around our PPE stockpile.

The—or, Manitoba's PPE stockpile in 2009, listed as part of post-H1N1 accountability, stated that there was—oh sorry, rather, over and above normal supplies for PPE. And so, I think about the fact that in 2017, the Province was making a lot of cuts, including what looked like to be a cut to even incontinence products and pads for new mothers, which just seems very cold and callous.

But I'm wondering if the minister could identify, now, how many N95 respirators do you have access to, including those on hand as well as stockpiled?

Mr. Friesen: So, Mr. Chair, I'm seeking some advice here. So, if we were conventionally in the same room, I would now have the opportunity to confer with my officials. So, with your support, I will put my mic in mute to confer with my officials and then signal my readiness to answer when I put my mic back on. Is that sufficient?

* (16:00)

Mr. Chairperson: That will be sufficient, yes.

Okay, thank you.

Mr. Friesen: Mr. Chair, I am happy to talk about PPE and welcome the question by the member in respect

of our province's planning for appropriate PPE to combat COVID-19 in this global pandemic.

I would want to, though, reflect also on the fact that the opposition critic made the comments in the opening statement to somehow suggest that a global collapse of PPE, including N95s—a complete wiping away of conventional supply chains—was somehow foreseeable.

And so, Mr. Chair, I have to remark that I have sat at tables for the last nine months with the federal Minister of Health, Patty Hajdu; I have sat with all of my counterparts in the provinces and territories. We have had countless hours where we, as ministers, provincial, federal and territorial, have combined our efforts. We have thought outside of the box; we have gone to some very exceptional places to import PPE to jurisdiction, as has much of the world.

And I can say for the critic and for all those who are taking in today's proceedings, that we owe an incredible debt of gratitude to the people who have led on this front line—people in Health, people like Jay Singh, people in Central Services, people like Deputy Minister Scott Sinclair and others in his shop, people who saw the incredible challenge of procuring PPE.

As a matter of fact, I heard the federal minister for Foreign Affairs reflect that it had become the Wild West when it came to N95 procurement finding supply chains.

So I would ask the critic to reflect on the fact that the entire world was covering a global shortage in PPE. Nevertheless, we say thank you to not only those who led the charge in Manitoba, not only those who in Manitoba recognized the need for an inventory management tool that would be able to help us assess the need for, find those companies that could provide us with the materials, know how to warehouse it, know how to distribute it, then know how to secure it on-site, and then know how to use the personnel to see—for its appropriate usage and distribution through to the hospital ward level.

And I can tell all Manitobans that that information and that—how it's in place is one of the success stories of this government's response—that we have in place now an inventory demand system that will go on serving Manitobans in perpetuity long after COVID-19.

We came, in some cases, within days of burning through our personal protective equipment in this process. There was, at one time, the development of a doctrine that would see for—universal continuous

personal protective equipment by all users across the full spectrum of the health-care system and then including Justice and including Education and including Child and Family Services and daycares. And we would have exhausted all of our PPE within days had we gone in the direction where the advice had pointed. Instead we redoubled our efforts, we undertook to establish tables for—to understand our projections.

I was pleased to have the support and participation of Shared Health, the Manitoba Nurses Union to continue to give us advice and co-operation when it comes to understanding our needs, and we came to an understanding that we needed to conserve our PPE in order to make it available to where it would be most necessary in the system. And what that did is it allowed us time to—that we bought in order to help us stabilize the inventory.

There are 143 N95 masks now—

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable minister's time is up.

MLA Asagwara: What was stockpiled in the event of a pandemic? So, how many N95 respirators were set aside prior to the pandemic?

* (16:10)

Mr. Friesen: Thank you, I needed the refresher. I'm sorry, I got cut off in the last remark because I remember now that the clock starts at five minutes, so I see it displayed there. I will endeavour to remain within my allotted time.

What I was attempting to say as my time closed out is that we have, currently, 143 days of standard N95 masks. We also have another 54 days of small-format N95 masks in jurisdiction. In addition to that, we have, as reported by Central Services, a large inventory of reusable N95 masks.

As Manitobans will know, we also worked hard in this global pandemic, in the early days, to collect used N95s for reprocessing. As the reprocessing capacity has gotten better and better—and I should indicate to everyone that we have continued to work with our partners and external groups with expertise to understand what our capability is to reuse N95s that can be adequately sterilized and so the work continues there.

I would also tell the critic, in response to the question, that, for example, Manitoba went from being a jurisdiction that was working with

60 conventional suppliers for PPE to, almost overnight, flexing up to work with 600 plus suppliers of PPE. You can only imagine the extraordinary efforts undertaken by those Manitobans leading the charge on this in areas where they had to engage with new suppliers, work from a known supplier to a new one, both domestically and externally, offshore in eastern Asia, in continental Europe, in South America, heroic efforts made to be able to source the materials we needed. Nitrile gloves were in very short supply in the early days of the pandemic, medical gowns, N95 masks, surgical masks, routine—or routine masks. So we had many pieces of equipment that we brought in.

To the member's question, I would say this: what we did not do in Manitoba is expire \$55 million of masks and PPE supplies, as Ontario did. The member and all members will require that after the SARS epidemic—in Ontario—

Mr. Chairperson: Sorry, Minister, you were faded out there for a minute there, so sorry about that.

Mr. Friesen: Thank you.

A former government in Ontario ordered the stockpiling of \$55 million of PPE but failed to produce a plan by which those supplies would actually routinely work through the receipt of inventory and then out to distribution and usage. As a result, \$55 million of supplies were expired.

We similarly found, as an incoming government, that there was no infrastructure in place left by the previous NDP government for such a warehousing for emergency stockpile, and I am pleased to indicate to all members and to all Manitobans that we have essentially constituted that capability that did not hitherto exist. We have, going forward in Manitoba, that ability. We are building an emergency warehouse with redundancy, with multiple locations, million dollars of inventory that will be there, not only to assist us now on COVID-19 but also going forward.

I would remind the member that while they and the members of the opposition were filibustering this House and day after day ringing the bells and refusing to allow the Legislature to go about its business, those were the days when our health system leaders and government members and ministers were working every single day to secure the PPE that we need for this pandemic response.

So I'm pleased to say we are in a much better situation now, not only for COVID-19 but also going forward with the establishment of Manitoba's first

emergency warehouse for stockpiling and inventory management.

MLA Asagwara: Can the minister please provide—he provided the days' worth of N95s in different—three different categories of N95s.

But can the minister please tell us, what does that mean in real numbers? So, how many actual masks do those days translate to, in terms of the 143 that he mentioned, the 54 days and the large storage of reusable N95s? What does that mean in terms of real numbers of actual masks? And how many of each of those N95s are used per day, are gone through per day?

* (16:20)

Mr. Friesen: I would be remiss, as well, if I did not take this opportunity to indicate that enormous response was received in Manitoba by business, by industry, by groups and by private citizens who wanted to help.

We believe that, in many respects, the best of what it means to be a Manitoban came through. When it came to our response on PPE, I was actually just reflecting that I received a briefing on April the 8th—which seems like a lifetime ago now—but, at the time, Shared Health officials were telling me that they had received one more shipment of supplies which would allow us to extend another 4.5 days.

And when you think about, you know, in some cases, when you talk about certain articles of PPE, we now have thousands of days of supply, or hundreds of days of supply at current established burn-rates through appropriate usage through the system, monitored as it is by various groups with their responsibility to do so. But it's amazing to think how at times, extending by four days was a significant achievement. Such was the fragility of supply, not just in Manitoba, but across all Canadian jurisdictions and across much of the world.

But I would be remiss if I did not herald the efforts of those businesses and industries—and I know that if I name some I will be at risk of forgetting others—but I think about the companies and the third-parties, the universities who came onside, provided materials.

We had Hutterite colonies undertaking to sew cloth masks. We had companies like Deasil in the city of Morden, Manitoba, who were undertaking to sew gowns for health-care workers. We had companies like Icon plastics and technologies who were making

the face masks for use in our hospitals. We had other suppliers of those.

We had companies sewing gowns from across the world and right here in our own city, I think about Mondetta manufacturing that used its global supply chains to be able to sew and then import through their distribution backbone the supplies that we would need. And so we say thank you so all of those groups who are part of our made-in-Manitoba solution.

The member is asking a question about how many masks, and that is one question to answer, but the other question to clearly understand is the framework for decision-making when it comes to Manitoba's supply-management and stewardship planning and guidance.

So, when it comes to PPE, we know, now that we've activated this supply management and stewardship framework—and that involves communicating to our health-care workers the appropriate use of PPE, it involves central control of PPE supply because we—it would not be accurate to say that we didn't also face shortages that were a result of people removing supply in an inappropriate way for warehouse.

But also, we spoke about conservation of PPE, and how to not burn through at a rate that would be greater than your peer down the hall. We talked about allocation of PPE to the areas of highest risk and to the workers providing the most critical care services, and also continuous monitoring and auditing of supply and usage.

And so I'm proud to say that all of those protocols are now in place in the province of Manitoba. It continues to be the case that we have undertaken, through infection prevention and control, and occupational and environmental health, and clinical leaders, to establish that guidance that assures that not only are we continuing to bring in the supply we need but that we are also then using it to the maximum efficiency.

I'm just seeing here whether there's an update to be provided in respect of how many units that would meant when it comes to N95s. If not, then we will continue to try to provide that answer as the afternoon proceeds. I would speak about where we have made N95 masks appropriate for aerosol-generating activities, and then try to focus those supplies in those areas, but I'd be happy to speak further about how we're allocating and how we're evaluating usage on an ongoing basis.

MLA Asagwara: Can the minister provide some clarity—I'm going to be asking the minister to provide some clarity, rather, on the access to PPE.

Media has certainly reported that there's a lack of access to personal protective equipment, recently reported that 55 facilities were slapped with grievances over masks, and the Premier (Mr. Pallister) actually said on Wednesday a shortage of PPE in Manitoba is a result, in part, by a failure at the federal government level to provide early support in the province. Those are his words.

So, I'm wondering if the minister can provide some clarity around why health-care workers, including home-care workers—folks who are working with some of the most vulnerable demographics, aged populations, folks with disabilities—why are they not always ensured to have N95 masks when working with someone with COVID-19? And that's been well-reported, like I said, throughout media and certainly from home-care workers directly.

So why aren't health-care workers, including home care, always ensured that they have N95s when working with somebody who has COVID-19?

Mr. Friesen: Before I answer the member's question, I wanted to preface by having members reflect that it was only March the 10th of this year when all the members of the House gave their agreement to a supplementary funding appropriation for the purchase of \$35.2 million, that would allow Manitoba to participate in the federal government's PPE initiative.

* (16:30)

And members will remember that, subsequent to that day, that \$35.2 million of PPE did not arrive in our jurisdiction. We voted the authority, we had the debate that day; all members of the Legislature put their agreement to that funding. It shows the extent to which our government was the head of the pack when it came to leading on the need to take decisive action to get the PPE we need.

Nevertheless, and unfortunately, at that time there was no receipt of that promised PPE. There were decisions that were complex that went into reassigning that supply to other provinces who were at a different place. Manitoba, of course, recognized its need to be a good neighbour. We saw the increase of the spread in eastern Canada. We were taking precautions ourselves. Nevertheless, it shows the degree to which there was volatility on supply that the promised order into our jurisdiction by the federal government never materialized.

To the member's question about who makes the decisions on PPE allocation, I want to make crystal clear it is not the minister in room 302 of the Manitoba Legislature who indicates to health-care workers on the front line where and when those supplies are utilized. Instead, far more effective is the joint PPE committee that we have established. It has membership from clinical leadership across our health-care system, the regional health authorities, CancerCare Manitoba, Shared Health, the Department of Health, but also the Manitoba Nurses Union, and this gives us, with that established membership, the ability to provide guidance in the use of medical masks.

At that table there can be discussion about what is the relative risk of the activity. We talk about the—how to conserve that PPE, including N95s, for the most critical activities within our health-care system. It talks about how to conserve those things and then also where there are anomalies those can be raised by MNU through—from their members so you have that ability to escalate issues of concern around a specific application of PPE to the right table of decision makers.

But also, I would also say to the member in response to the question, that, as I said previously, we have in place now—which was not in place under the NDP—this much more evolved system to be able to conserve PPE supply in a pandemic situation for higher risk settings and services.

So, we know that there is no substitute for meticulous hand hygiene; that should be performed in all cases. We know that that is appropriate in non-COVID patients as well, but we also know that there is a guidance that is given through the system when it comes to staff who are delivering supplies or food or pharmaceuticals, who are not COVID-positive.

We know that the safe and extended use of PPE is articulated and talked about where it's appropriate, as identified in the provincial personal protective equipment requirements. There is a document that helps ensure that critical services are supported during this COVID-19 period when PPE supply is limited.

And let's be clear. I was speaking to the federal Minister of Health yesterday, just yesterday, in a meeting about the need for further receipt of N95 masks in Manitoba. I've indicated to the minister that, on the basis of Manitoba's elevated spread right now of COVID-19, it is important that we have access to the N95 masks, and so the member and all members

will be comforted to know that our advocacy efforts, even to the federal government, continue even at this time to ensure we have the right equipment, including the two million masks that we currently have in supply.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable minister's time is up.

MLA Asagwara: The minister ceded previously that he would undertake to provide the real numbers of the different categories of N95 that are available and as well, the daily burn rate, and so I would ask if the minister could ensure we have those numbers by tomorrow, that undertaking.

And my question, specific question, right now is: When were we days away from running out of N95s? At what point were we just days away from running out of N95 masks?

Mr. Friesen: Yes. So, well, I did provide the number that we currently have on hand of the N95 masks.

The member needs to be more clear as to the question that they are asking. If the member is asking about the burn rate, then it's important to understand that burn rate oscillates. Burn rates oscillate on a wide variety of factors: according to who is in hospital and what that rate of admissions is, but who is also in a hospital in critical care, who's in acute care, to what extent our surgery program is being used, where else in the system activities are taking place.

As the member knows, the health system is a very broad, very complex \$6-billion organization with thousands and thousands of workers, and that calculus, that burn rate, is actually assisted by software that helps us. So, it would really depend. I think we will need the member to clarify what type of scenario they are seeking. But clearly, when it comes to a system as complex as ours, that burn rate changes.

I believe the member misunderstood a previous answer that I gave. I indicated 4.5 as being the number of days in some supply that would have been extended in the month of April due to the receipt of a new shipment. I was using that to illustrate how tenuous the global supply—the global supply of PPE was at that time. I did not indicate that at any point in time we were 4.5 days being out of PPE.

What I would clarify and say is that, of course, the global supply was under great strain. Conventional supply chains were drying up. Governments—all senior governments were going to exceptional

measures to be able to source and receive the supplies they need for their front-line workers. We pulled out the stops because we needed to create safety for all of our health-care workers and the patients and the clients that they serve, and that is why we undertook that activity. So, I welcome this line of questioning because I will endeavour to bring back for these proceedings as well, and be able to quantify for this member.

*(16:40)

The member seems to be in doubt that somehow that the headlines they were reading in April and May were in fact real. And I can assure that member that that was not fake news, that when it comes to all of those headlines—Globe and Mail, National Post, even our Winnipeg Free Press, the Winnipeg Sun, New York Times—all of these stories on the strain that global procurement chains were under was very real, as reported by all of my colleagues, as reported at the deputy ministers' table for health, as reported back by the special advisory committee for COVID-19, by all of the chief provincial public health officers and the territorial officers, and by the federal Chief Public Health Officer, but also as reported as—at the deputy's table for Central Services and Procurement.

Those things were very real, and I would welcome further treatment of that subject at this table. But I would also indicate, just to reflect back at March the 10th, there was that press release that was indicating that we had all signed this—or we had all voted to support this appropriate planning, preparation, mitigation and response to the evolving COVID-19 situation. I was pleased that we had on that day the broad collaboration of all the parties in the Manitoba Legislature, that we were able to do that with unanimity and on that day, all parties, including the NDP, spoke to the global shortages. So, if the member is reflecting today on whether those global shortages were real, they should check back in Hansard and review the statements of their own colleagues before they go much further to understand the degree to which those attestations of the global fragility of the supply chain were made by members on all sides of the House.

I'm quoting from that press release on that day and say: Current inventory of PPE supplies is being closely monitored, and regions and sites have been asked to take steps to ensure supplies of PPE. And then we were saying we were doing that in order to, and I'm quoting again, to help ensure patients, staff and front-line workers have appropriate protective

equipment at a competitive price. And then it goes on to say how we were working in collaboration with the federal government and with federal procurement in order that we're all singing from the same song sheet.

So I wanted to provide that additional detail. It seems like a long time back but as we reflect back, it simply starts to underscore that a lot's been done.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable minister's time is up.

MLA Asagwara: I was very clear that I'm seeking the real numbers of the categories of N95s that the minister outlined, very clear about that. The minister stated that they would endeavour to provide that data, that information, and so I'm simply requesting that the minister provide that information tomorrow if possible.

And again, that's the real numbers in regards to the N95s that the minister stated we had 143 days' worth of, the ones that he said we had 54 days' worth of, and the large storage of reusable N95 masks.

If the minister can provide the real numbers of what exists in those categories currently, if that could be provided tomorrow, that would be wonderful.

And specific to how we're burning through equipment, I was seeking clarification around the statement the minister made today, not long ago. In these proceedings he said that we came within days, this is a quote: We came within days of burning our personal protective equipment.

I'm asking the minister to clarify, please, when that period of time was. When was it? When was it that they came within days of burning our personal protective equipment?

Thank you.

Mr. Friesen: I seem to have lost my video, but I'm going to go on the assumption that I've still got audio and that you can hear me.

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, we can hear you.

Mr. Friesen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Well, first I have to say I'm not certain what the direction of the member's question is, attempting to re-arbitrate a widely accepted view of the world that we had challenges, every senior government in the Western world and most elsewhere, in securing the PPE that we needed to in advance of the pandemic.

I've made it clear to the member that we inherited a system in our five years of government whereby it

became clear that our predecessors, even though they were in power for 17 years, had not undertaken to establish an emergency stockpile. And even if Ontario got it wrong, at least Ontario was trying. And even at that time, after SARS, it is obvious that the NDP did nothing to direct the system to strengthen its reserves in respect of PPE.

So, while I am perplexed that this is the direction that the member wants to pursue in these proceedings, that's fine, we will go there.

The member is asking for a breakdown of the individual itemized N95s. I've already provided the global number of 2 million. I can be more specific and indicate it's 2,047,370 N95 masks. We will endeavour to provide a breakdown of that, and I'll commit to get back to them when we can with the necessary information, inclusive of those reusable N95 masks, inclusive of the discarded single N95 masks that we understand, really, at this point in time, are not re-entering use but are still in storage in—under the understanding that there may still be a leap forward in the ability to sterilize these and use them, should the circumstances require them.

I was reflecting just a moment ago on a statement that was made on April the 7th by one of our senior officers in charge of procurement in Shared Health. And—on April the 7th, this individual had indicated that our inventory manager—management and monitoring is getting better day after day. So it's good to know that, even back then, there was that assessment of our system.

Did it get tenuous at times? Absolutely. It was tenuous at times in Manitoba, in Saskatchewan, in Alberta, in BC. Why? Because I spoke to all of those ministers, in Quebec, in Nova Scotia. Why do we know? Because I spoke to all those ministers.

* (16:50)

But to the member's question: member's asking for a snapshot. When did it get thin when it came to procurement in the province? Well, it's difficult to know what the member's asking for, which day the member's asking for. It's difficult to know how best to answer the question, but let me try.

And I'm sorry, with the video gone I also don't see the time so, Mr. Chair, can you remind me of the time that's elapsed?

Mr. Chairperson: Right now, you have a minute and twenty seconds left.

Mr. Friesen: Very good.

On April—on March the 20th of 2020, the province had on hand 1,158,000 nitrile gloves. We had on hand on the same dates 25,000 face shields. We had on hand 675,000 N95 respirators. We had on hand on that day 33,152,000 surgical masks. We had on hand on that day a—120,000 gowns of various types, 52,000 bottles of hand sanitizer, 31,000 hand sanitizer foam soaps, 103,000 wipes, 15,200 thermometers and 337,000 Ziploc bags.

And I hope that helps to answer the member's question about what inventory we had on hand at any one time. I would tell you, globally, for each of those categories, it's greater now.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

MLA Asagwara: I'm wondering if the minister can provide a little bit of clarity.

The minister's already spoken to the fact that he's in communication with the joint PPE committee. He's identified the persons and the organizations, the entities that are serving on that committee and participating on that committee, which is a good thing.

And in thinking about health-care workers who are in hospital, working on the front lines during this pandemic and, certainly now, as we see health-care workers unfortunately contracting COVID and falling sick, having to isolate—we're hearing from folks working in hospital that do receive N95s, but they're saying that they are being provided only one N95 per day—one N95 mask per day.

And that means that they are, you know, after removing the mask—and, I think, in some folks they're being provided a paper bag to put that mask in—it meant that they at some point are putting that potentially contaminated mask back on after a lunch break or using a restroom.

So, given the fact that the minister—and I know the minister—like, I would imagine, all members of this House—certainly wants our health-care workers to be safe, to be as safe as possible, that as we see COVID outbreaks happening in our hospitals and facilities we want to make sure that people are more protected, not less, that they have access to the PPP—PPE they need in order to keep themselves safe.

So—and given the communication the minister's having with this committee, I'm wondering if he can shed some light on why health-care workers are only being given one N95 mask per day to wear when they're in such high-risk situations.

Mr. Friesen: Mr. Chair, just on logistics.

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, the honourable minister?

Mr. Friesen: Yes, just a logistical question—and I recognize that everyone's working very hard to be able to accommodate this Committee of Supply in a very unusual, you know, fashion. So kudos to everyone who's assisting us in the background to make these proceedings virtual, in order to keep all Manitobans participating safe. Thank you very much.

I have lost my video feed so, with your permission, Mr. Chair, I will remain on audio, but I'm going to stop my video because I don't know if I'm being seen but simply cannot see anyone else including control room speaker and other participants.

Could you give me some guidance on that question, Mr. Chair?

Mr. Chairperson: Minister, we can see you, actually, so if you want to continue, we're seeing you perfectly, just yourself in the room.

Mr. Friesen: Okay, so I'm on video?

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, you're on video.

Mr. Friesen: Okay. I don't have any video feed myself.

Mr. Chairperson: Yes. It's probably—we're seeing here that it's a problem on your end, not on this end. We can see you perfectly, we can hear you.

Mr. Friesen: Okay. Advice for me? Do you want me to continue to keep my video controls on?

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, if you don't mind. We—if you can keep your video—it's working perfectly on this end. One of the staff will go up and assist you after—we're finished with Estimates today. Okay?

Mr. Friesen: Thank you. We had video until recently and then it just escaped us. We'll keep the video on. Give me one moment to confer with my officials and then I'll respond.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, sounds good. Thank you.

Mr. Friesen: Okay, so I would want to make clear to the member that the member is saying we are hearing from people. That's a refrain we often hear from this member: we are hearing from people.

I'm asking for some clarification of that statement. Could the member indicate whether the member is hearing a broad theme from a significant number of health-care workers that, despite efforts to alert their supervisors and to work through to the committee that's responsible for that appropriate use of PPE in our hospitals, that somehow they're not being accommodated; or is this anecdotal?

Could the member provide some details about how many people they have heard from, because I can tell all members that, when it comes to occupational safety and health, infection prevention and control, the regional health authorities, under the leadership of the chief integration lead and the chief nursing officer, this is not a theme that is coming out, that somehow we have broad array of workers who are not able to get the PPE that they need.

We are ensuring that this committee works exactly to do that, to make sure that there is that appropriate conservation and use and the prioritization of the PPE for the activities that are most essential and that need it the most.

So that's exactly the kind of work that is undertaken, not at the minister's office, but instead at the committee level, as I said, where MNU has standing and that ability to also raise issues and concerns. We believe that that profit—process is working, we believe that that process is considerable—

Mr. Chairperson: The hour being 5 p.m., the committee rise.

Call in the Speaker.

IN SESSION

Madam Speaker: The hour being 5 p.m., the House is adjourned and stands adjourned until 10 a.m. tomorrow.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Monday, November 2, 2020

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