

POLITICS

Ontario budget 2018: Full speech transcript

For the record, the budget speech Ontario Finance Minister delivered at Queen's Park

by Maclean's Mar 28, 2018



On Wednesday, March 28 Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa delivered his final budget before voters in the province go to the polls in his speech to the Ontario Legislature:

Mr. Speaker. I rise to present the 2018 Ontario Budget.

A Budget that builds upon our past successes.

A Budget that charts a path to shared opportunity...for all Ontarians.

A Budget that makes strategic investments.

Helping attract jobs and economic growth.

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Helping shoulder the burden for those struggling to make ends meet.

Helping families to care for their children and their parents.

All to ensure that everyone in the province can reach their full potential.

First, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to remind the House that, thanks to the talent and resilience of our people...

And thanks to the hard-working women and men who keep the engine of Ontario running...

Our economy has been growing.

Better than Canada...

Better than all G7 nations.

Our unemployment rate is the lowest it's been in almost two decades.

The majority of the 800,000 jobs created since the recession are full-time, in the private sector and pay above-average wages.

Last year alone, 500 net new jobs were created every single day in Ontario.

And our debt-to-GDP has fallen steadily, lowering the burden that would otherwise be passed onto future generations.

In the year 2000, we were paying about 15 and a half cents of every dollar of revenue to service our debt.

This year, we will pay eight cents.

That's the lowest it has been in 25 years.

And thanks to this improved economic growth...

Combined with our government's strong fiscal management...

We have eliminated the provincial deficit steadily, exceeding our fiscal targets each and every year since 2009.

I announced last year that we would eliminate the deficit this year entirely.

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And I am pleased to report...

That...we have a balanced budget in 2017-18.

In fact...we are now projecting a surplus of over \$600 million in this fiscal year.

Mr. Speaker, let me remind everyone how we did it.

We did it by maintaining and improving services that families rely on like health care and education...

Boosting investments in health care at near record levels.

In the last Budget, we made an additional investment of \$7 billion in health care to reduce wait times, improve access and enhance the experience.

We also created OHIP+, making prescription drugs absolutely free for every person under the age of 25.

Because no parent should have to choose between buying the medicine their child needs...

And putting food on the table.

Already, more than one million young people in Ontario have had almost three million medical prescriptions filled...

At no cost.

We created a plan for 100,000 more children to access licensed child care.

With subsidies available for about 60 per cent of those spaces.

We're helping more parents find quality and affordable child care.

Because getting the best start in life is key to future success.

It's also helping more parents return to work earlier.

We made changes to OSAP, Mr. Speaker, to help our young people who seek a postsecondary degree or diploma...

This year, more than 225,000 students are going to universities and colleges in Ontario with free tuition.

With an additional 175,000 students receiving generous grants and loans to cover expenses.

Demand far exceeded our initial projections...and that is a good thing.

We stayed faithful to Ontario workers, Mr. Speaker.

We stood by Stelco employees and retirees during the company's restructuring.

We made sure they had benefits like prescriptions and dental care, so their families would not go without.

And we played a leadership role in bringing the parties together for the sale of the company...

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Preserving the 2,200 well-paying jobs at Stelco.

And protecting almost 12,000 retirees.

And we made significant infrastructure investments.

We committed to a historic investment in new hospitals, new schools, and new roads and transit.

This investment has grown to \$230 billion over 14 years.

From the Hurontario Light Rail Transit (LRT) in Mississauga and Brampton...

To repairing and refurbishing railway tracks for the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission.

From the Ottawa LRT...

To widening Highway 11/17 between Thunder Bay and Nipigon.

We are building tomorrow's infrastructure today.

We also made the choice to help 1.1 million men and women by raising the minimum wage.

Increasing it to \$15 an hour will give a full-time worker about \$5,000 more in take-home pay every year.

Helping more people get ahead.

And we've done all of this...while also ensuring that Ontario's businesses can compete...and win.

We have maintained a competitive tax rate for businesses — the lowest in Canada and competitive with neighbouring U.S. states.

We cut the small business tax rate by 22 per cent.

We also joined the Western Climate Initiative with Quebec and California in cap and trade.

It's a market approach that has already raised billions of dollars to reinvest in green infrastructure and diversify our economy.

And we provided supports to help small businesses grow, scale up and access export opportunities.

We invested in key priorities. And we were disciplined.

We eliminated waste and programs that no longer offered an adequate return.

This year again, Ontario will spend less per capita on programs than any other province, while preserving the policies that touch the lives of the people of Ontario.

We have to invest to create growth.

Our strengthened position today is due to a more diverse economy.

Yes, Mr. Speaker, we slayed the deficit, balanced the books and are projecting a \$600 million surplus...

While diversifying our economy by supporting technologies and industries of the future,

like artificial intelligence, quantum research, regenerative medicine, advanced manufacturing and FinTech.

But make no mistake, Mr. Speaker...

Balancing the budget is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end.

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And the end...is a stronger Ontario.

A stronger Ontario that provides more opportunities for everyone.

A stronger Ontario that allows us to provide more care for those who need it. Mr. Speaker, the province has faced great challenges as well as opportunities from the largest global recession since the Great Depression.

We have overcome them... and together we have achieved great things.

Today, however, we face new challenges.

While it is true that Ontario's economy is growing...

And doing better than most...

And, even though we are forecasting around two per cent growth next year and thereafter.

That's not good enough.

We have an aging population and more and more people moving out of work and into retirement.

There's the prospect of rising interest rates and increasing household debt.

There's current international trade uncertainty.

There are "Buy America" campaigns and calls for protectionism.

These new significant risks to our economic outlook have caused us to be more cautious in our revenue expectations.

Two per cent economic growth is OK...

But it's not good enough.

Another challenge we face today, Mr. Speaker...

Is that while this province has experienced economic growth...

The benefits of this prosperity have not been shared by all.

We must work to ensure that opportunity reaches everyone.

Women. Students. Seniors.

And those who are in precarious work — toiling away in the gig economy.

The benefits of a growing economy must be shared by them, too. So, Mr. Speaker, our answer is clear.

In the 2018 Ontario Budget...

We are doing more.

We are facing these new challenges...head on.

Former U.S. vice-president Joe Biden said, "Don't tell me what you value, show me your budget, and I'll tell you what you value."

The 2018 Budget reflects the values we share as Ontarians.

Those of fairness, caring and opportunity.

So we are taking bold steps, guided by a commitment to care.

This is our responsibility.

We will act on behalf of the people...and in defence of our economy.

We will continue to put Ontario on a path to higher economic growth — increasing GDP and job opportunities.

We will continue to ensure that the benefits and opportunities of growth are widely shared across the province.

And we will continue to ensure Ontario remains competitive and attractive as a destination for business.

Mr. Speaker, good public and social policy must also be sound economic policy...and that is what makes it sustainable.

So we are making a choice.

We are committing to more support for social and developmental services.

More supports for mental health and health care programs.

And more supports for students.

We are choosing to put our strengthened fiscal position to work...

To address the priorities of the people of Ontario.

And as a result, we project a deficit of \$6.7 billion next year...less than one per cent of GDP.

With a clear plan to track back to balance.

Some will argue for more cuts...

Others will call for more spending.

Our choice is deliberate and based upon a clear message from the people of Ontario:

“Continue to manage the finances of the province responsibly.”

“Create more economic opportunities for everyone.”

“And help shoulder the burdens facing many Ontario families.”

Mr. Speaker, the people of Ontario are proud of our universal health care.

Universal health care reflects our society’s values...how we collectively care for each other.

For families concerned with loved ones who are sick, nothing is more important than getting them the help they need.

We all know that a growing and aging population is adding demands on our hospitals.

In peak times and during epidemics, our emergency rooms can become crowded.

So in the 2018 Budget, we are proud to invest an additional \$822 million in hospitals.

This represents a sizable 4.6 per cent increase to hospital funding.

This increase will improve wait times and increase the number of critical services and

procedures such as MRIs, cancer and cardiac surgeries, organ transplants and other life-saving supports.

This increase will provide additional supports for pediatric and psychiatric hospitals.

Plus we are investing \$19 billion over the next 10 years in more than 40 major hospital projects in every region of this province.

From a new hospital in Moosonee for the Weeneebayko Area Health Authority in the north...

To Kingston General Hospital in the east.

From London Health Sciences Centre in the southwest...

To building the pediatric hospital of the future through Project Horizon at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto.

Mr. Speaker, we know that access to affordable, quality child care is essential for families.

For our children, quality child care gives them the best start in life.

For the parents — particularly women — it gives them the choice to return to work earlier.

That's why we invested to provide access to 100,000 more child care spaces.

In the 2018 Budget, we are going further, Mr. Speaker.

I am pleased to announce...

Beginning in 2020, we will implement free preschool for children aged two-and-a-half until they are eligible for kindergarten.

This means an Ontario family with a child of that age in child care could save, on average, \$17,000.

Over the next six years, the government will invest \$534 million to build 10,000 more preschool child care spaces in schools and 4,000 spaces.

And for First Nation communities, we will double current child care capacity on-reserve, creating 4,500 new spaces, starting in 2019.

These are just some of the important commitments we continue to make for children and families.

Mr. Speaker, our seniors have helped build the province we enjoy today.

We are deeply grateful to them.

Today there are over two million seniors in our province.

That number is expected to grow to 4.5 million by 2040, having a profound impact on our social services and our economy.

It will also have a profound impact on those families who often struggle with added costs related to their care and well-being.

Many seniors would prefer to stay in their homes and live independently.

We want to help them.

We will help them, Mr. Speaker.

In the 2018 Budget...we are making targeted investments of \$1 billion over three years in the new Seniors' Healthy Home Program.

We will provide up to \$750 for every eligible household led by a senior 75 years or older, to help offset the costs of maintaining their home.

This payment could be used to help pay for services such as snow shovelling, lawn care or house cleaning.

We are also investing \$650 million more over three years in home care and community care to increase nursing and therapy visits.

It will also include more caregiver hours, to give families a much-needed breather from taking care of their loved ones.

And Mr. Speaker, in the 2018 Budget, we are expanding OHIP+ to include free medication for seniors, beginning in August 2019, by eliminating the annual deductible and co-pay from the Ontario Drug Benefit program.

Every person 65 and above in Ontario will receive free pharmacare, saving the average senior about \$240 per year.

No senior will have to be out-of-pocket to pay for eligible prescription medicine...or have to choose between care and other life essentials.

This expansion of OHIP+ represents an investment of \$575 million per year by 2020-21.

Mr. Speaker, for some seniors, staying in their homes is not an option.

They require long-term care.

This is why, in addition to the development of 5,000 new long-term care beds by 2022 and 30,000 over the next 10 years...

And the 30,000 existing beds that are being redeveloped...

We are investing \$300 million over the next three years in long-term care, starting with \$50 million next year.

This represents increased care hours and the hiring of more nurses and personal support workers. And we are investing a further \$231 million to increase the number of personal support workers, many in underserved communities.

Because we know they provide invaluable care, which helps alleviate the burden placed on families and loved ones.

Mr. Speaker, mental health challenges affect one in three people.

As a society, we have come to understand that mental health is essential to good overall health at every stage of life, from childhood to old age.

So, Mr. Speaker, we are making an additional investment of \$2.1 billion over four years to increase the level of care and access for mental health and addiction services.

This includes psychotherapy, supportive housing, and increased supports for Indigenous communities.

Mr. Speaker, we know that 70 per cent of mental health issues begin in childhood or adolescence, and that early intervention improves outcomes.

We want to ensure that kids get the help they need, as soon as they need it.

We will be expanding services for students in every high school across the province...

And providing counselling, therapy and walk-in clinic services in communities for approximately 46,000 more young people.

Mr. Speaker, I am so proud that this government is making a historic \$17 billion investment over four years in improving access to services in health and addictions...

The largest in Ontario's history.

Mr. Speaker, being able to afford to pay for prescription drugs and dental services is vital to maintaining good health.

Yet today, one in four people of working age in Ontario does not have access to an extended health benefits plan.

Meaning their kids may not have the dental care they require.

Meaning that families forgo medicines they find too expensive to buy.

This remains the great unfinished business of medicare, in our pursuit for a universal pharmacare plan for every single Canadian.

In the past, we have acted to lessen these burdens and help close these gaps. Today, we take our boldest steps yet.

Starting in summer 2019, we will invest over \$800 million in the first two years of the new Ontario Drug and Dental Program for those without benefit plans.

We will reimburse up to 80 per cent of eligible prescription drug and dental expenses...

To an annual maximum of \$400 per single person, \$600 per couple and \$50 for each child in the family.

This means an eligible family of four could receive up to \$700 per year towards their drug and dental costs.

A healthier Ontario is a stronger Ontario, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, our government is reforming income security so that everyone has a chance to live healthy, secure lives.

We will simplify social assistance programs, reduce punitive rules and remove barriers.

I am pleased to announce today, that those most in need will also receive a 3 per cent rate increase per year, for each of the next three years.

Because Ontarians are a compassionate people, we take care of one another.

Mr. Speaker...a growing economy produces jobs and opportunity.

In the face of new economic challenges, we are introducing the Good Jobs and Growth Plan...

Which includes \$935 million in new investments over the next three years.

That's in addition to our historic infrastructure investments, Mr. Speaker.

This plan will build upon our economic foundations...further diversify our economy...support the development of local talent and enterprises and encourage the growth of businesses.

This plan will improve business competitiveness, supporting investments to make Ontario businesses more efficient.

It will support key sectors through our newly expanded Jobs and Prosperity Fund, which will invest in food and beverage, manufacturing and forestry.

It will also support regional economic development, with investments in key regions like eastern Ontario, southwestern Ontario, and Ontario...

Where we are expanding the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation and increasing funding by 50 per cent, to grow and diversify and attract further investments.

Today's economy moves at a rapid pace, and that requires fast Internet connectivity.

So we are investing an additional \$500 million over three years to expand broadband in rural and northern communities.

Ensuring all Ontarians can participate fully in the digital economy.

And we will do this, Mr. Speaker, while ensuring that more people across the province benefit from economic growth and prosperity.

We want to help all students succeed in school...and in life.

This starts with the places where our young people learn.

That is why we are investing almost \$16 billion over 10 years for new and improved schools.

This includes \$510 million since 2013 in construction, additions and retrofits at 62 French-language schools across Ontario.

Because more than 600,000 francophones call Ontario their home...and a strong Franco-Ontarian community means a strong Ontario.

But a great education is about more than buildings and classrooms, Mr. Speaker.

One in five Ontario students has special needs.

So we are announcing \$250 million in new funding over three years to tackle the waitlist for assessments and improve special education.

Mr. Speaker, Grades 7 and 8 are crucial years for our young people to explore pathways to apprenticeship, college, university and the workforce.

That is why the government will invest more than \$120 million over the next three years,

hiring over 450 new guidance counsellors to help students better prepare for the transition to high school.

A good start today means a better future tomorrow.

Our highly skilled workforce provides Ontario with a competitive advantage.

Our skilled workforce is key to our economic growth and prosperity.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, we have already made significant changes to OSAP to help more students go to university or college.

The 2018 Budget announces further improvements.

Starting in fall 2018, students from middle-income families will find it easier to qualify for

OSAP and will receive even more financial assistance.

We are also investing more than \$3 billion to renew and modernize Ontario's university and college campuses.

And we are moving forward with our commitment to create a new French-language university in the province.

Last December, the Université de l'Ontario français Act, 2017, was given Royal Assent.

Mr. Speaker, for some, Ontario's skilled trades are the way to a better career.

That is why we are investing \$170 million over three years, modernizing the new Ontario Apprenticeship System.

Helping our young people make the transition from high school into apprenticeships...

And making it easier to find high-quality jobs upon completion.

And to ensure that employers have access to talent, the 2018 Budget announces the establishment of the Ontario Training Bank.

This \$63 million additional investment will bring employers, employees and training institutions together to develop skills programs to the needs of the local economy.

Taken together, these steps improve the skills of our workforce, giving Ontario businesses a strong competitive advantage.

Mr. Speaker, let us also be reminded that Ontario plays a leadership role in Canada.

We have always been a significant net contributor to the federation.

This government...and this Premier were the driving force behind a CPP enhancement — enabling greater retirement security for all of us.

We are a founding member in creating the Cooperative Capital Markets Regulatory System, which will benefit Canadians by helping to attract and raise capital more efficiently.

We will continue to work with the federal government and other provinces on the formation of a national pharmacare plan, with our program.

And we are promoting trade negotiations during these uncertain times.

Premier Wynne has met with 37 governors over the past year to strengthen trade relationships and highlight the mutual benefits of free trade between Canada and the U.S.

These initiatives...and more...are good for Ontarians, and good for all Canadians.

Mr. Speaker, this government has undertaken the most significant reforms to our retirement security system in generations.

It's about ensuring that people can maintain their standard of living in retirement.

Which, in turn, is good for our economy.

As I mentioned, we were instrumental in enhancing CPP.

We created a new funding framework for defined benefit pension plans, to help protect retirement income security for workers and help businesses maintain their pension plans.

And we are consulting on key design features to improve the sustainability of multi-employer pension plans.

Last fall, we took steps to increase the guaranteed monthly payment of the Pensions Benefit Guarantee Fund by 50 per cent...to \$1,500.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to announce...

That in the 2018 Budget, we are proposing to make this amendment retroactive to May 19, 2017...

To ensure that former Sears Canada employees could benefit from receiving this additional support.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, we truly cannot speak of creating opportunity without tackling the systemic barriers that hinder women's full par workforce...head-on.

Advancing women's economic empowerment is good for business, good for the economy and good for society.

Empowering women economically will bring more people into the workforce and build on the strengths of our people.

Estimates show that women's full engagement in the economy could add approximately \$60 billion to Ontario's gross domestic prod

Our strategy supports female entrepreneurs and promotes women on boards and in senior management roles.

And it promotes pay transparency in the workplace — to help close the gender wage gap.

Creating more equitable workplaces is not just about fairness.

It's an economic opportunity we can't afford to miss. Mr. Speaker, the 2018 Budget reflects Ontario's values.

This Budget uses our strengthened economic position to address people's priorities.

This Budget makes the choice to help the people of Ontario better manage the pressures of everyday life.

This Budget provides greater care for our children, students and seniors...

And keeps us on our path of building Ontario's economy...boosting growth, creating more jobs and expanding access for all.

The 2018 Ontario Budget is a plan for care and opportunity.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.