

DRAFT speaking notes for Warren (Smokey) Thomas, President, Ontario Public Service Employees Union, for a presentation to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs re: Bill 173, *Jobs for Today and Tomorrow (Budget Measures)*

**Main Legislative Building, Queen's Park, Toronto
March 22, 2016, 9:00 a.m.**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Good morning. I'm Smokey Thomas, president of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union. With me today is Clarke Eaton, Special Assistant to the President.

I'm very happy to be the first presenter on Bill 173.

As you may know, all 130,000 members of OPSEU work for an employer that receives funding from the provincial government, directly or indirectly, so what's in the budget is of great interest to us.

You may recall that when I made my pre-budget remarks on January 29, I was skeptical about whether the government would actually listen to what presenters were saying.

As it turns out, I was right to be skeptical. When I was speaking to you, the budget was already written.

It's no wonder so many Ontarians are cynical about politics. Who wants to get involved in a fake process?

I challenge you to make these hearings a real process. I challenge you to listen to what presenters say over these next three days and actually consider their input. I challenge you to put forward real amendments that will make this budget better.

Most of all, I challenge you to make this budget fairer.

I have many things to say about the budget, from what it means for correctional services and hospitals to how it impacts precarious workers and poor people. I could talk about Hydro One. Or children's aid. Or home care. Or colleges. Or beer and wine in grocery stores.

But in five minutes I can't possibly touch on every budget item that touches my members. So I want to spend my time to propose one amendment to Bill 173.

I propose an amendment that would subject the 2016 budget, and all budgets to come, to a Fairness Test.

Let me tell you why it's important to do this.

First, fairness is a big issue these days. We live in a very unequal world.

In 2008, we saw bankers bailed out as regular people lost their homes.

In 2011, the Occupy movement led a global protest against income inequality.

In 2016, Bernie Sanders is making front-page news talking about nothing else.

In Ontario, our Premier is talking about closing the wage gap between women and men.

Fairness matters. Ontarians care about it.

My second point is that the Ontario budget has a fundamental effect on how fair our society is.

One out of every six dollars spent in Ontario is spent by the provincial government. That spending has a huge impact on fairness. Universal health care and free public schools exist because we believe that, in a democracy, there are some things that are simply too important to be bought and sold in the marketplace.

Markets produce prosperity. But they also produce inequality. That's why we need government spending: to tilt the balance in favour of fairness.

My third point is that every government budget moves money around. Budgets take money out of some pockets and put it in others. The question is, for a given budget, does this make Ontario fairer, or less fair?

We need to know the answer.

A Fairness Test, which could be administered by the Financial Accountability Officer, is all about measuring how money moves – who loses it, where it goes, and who gets it. Where does the budget move money in relation to overall income inequality? How about in relation to gender? How about in relation to race, or disability?

That's what a Fairness Test would tell us.

I encourage you to recommend an amendment to Bill 173 to give the Financial Accountability Officer the powers and the resources needed so that Ontarians can tell whether a given provincial budget is making the province fairer, or less fair.

This is important, because in Ontario, the real effects of government spending decisions are being hidden.

Here's what I mean: the two guiding principles of the current government, and the 2016 budget, are 1) austerity for the public sector; and 2) massive government spending on infrastructure.

Both of these policies are deeply connected to the core policy of this government, which is the privatization of public services and assets.

The result is this: We are seeing a massive transfer of wealth from the public to private interests, especially private investors and major corporations. We are seeing a massive transfer of wages from the most female-dominated sector of the economy – the public sector – to the most male-dominated sector – the construction sector.

These are facts. But I don't think Ontarians see what's happening. They're not supposed to.

By instituting a Fairness Test, and by having the Financial Accountability Officer report annually on the results, Ontarians would get a new window into what's really happening with their money.

More transparency will make government more accountable and our provincial budgets fairer. I encourage you to recommend that a Fairness Test be included in Bill 173.

We would be pleased to take your questions now.