

March 20, 2019

[*Translation*]

Collective Bargaining

Mr. D. Landry: You know, before I begin, I would like to wish all Francophones, all my colleagues, and all New Brunswickers a happy Journée internationale de la Francophonie.

Although people call me the oldest Member of the Legislative Assembly, I have to tell you that I may be the oldest in terms of seniority, but I am not the oldest in terms of age. Nonetheless, I feel like a beginner today.

You know, the day after a budget is tabled, we certainly talk about it and ask questions. However, what worries me a lot today is the situation of nursing home workers. I would like to ask the Premier how things stand with this situation in the nursing homes, which is about to turn into a crisis. Where are we with bargaining?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question. First, I would like to congratulate the member for Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore. Welcome to this Assembly in a different light than you have experienced over the many years.

It is interesting, I guess, that we are in a unique situation. We are in a unique situation, Mr. Speaker, because the opposition members right now are well familiar with the situation. They spent 21 months trying to resolve this particular agreement that we now have. It was rich, Mr. Speaker, to see them standing out on the steps yesterday and saying, Oh well, fix this, as we are being asked today.

I would ask the opposition members to work with us because they know the file. They were having difficulty getting the group to sign the very same deal that they did with every other union, Mr. Speaker. Now, they have changed their tune. Let's put the tune back in place. Let's work together for a solution that works for workers and works for nursing homes, and let's make this go together properly because this time, like no other time, we have a chance to work together. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry: In addition to what the Premier just said, it must be pointed out that we did indeed work on that file, but we were at the bargaining table and never left it.



One thing I would like to mention, though—and I want to thank the Premier for congratulating me on my new role—is that the cooperation the Premier is asking for will certainly be forthcoming. However, when the time comes to react, we will do so.

Looking at what happened yesterday, I have to congratulate all the various party leaders, because they all went out to see the demonstrators.

This is what I am asking the Premier right now: Are you prepared to go back to the bargaining table? That is what the employees working in the nursing homes are asking you.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Ironically, Mr. Speaker, we never left the table. We have been at the table. There have been ongoing negotiations for the past several weeks. The interesting part is that the whole program has changed. I think that it changed back in July and August when a new mandate came along—a new mandate that was different from every other mandate, Mr. Speaker, and a new mandate that is asking for a 20% wage increase over the next four years.

A 20% wage increase in today's environment is not reasonable, but we need to find ways to do more than just raise wages, Mr. Speaker, in a reasonable way. We need to find ways to improve working conditions. We need to find ways to have better health care in our nursing homes. We need to find ways to deal with sick time and issues in WorkSafeNB because people are getting hurt and people are staying out because they are not able to come to work. So there are a lot of things. We presented that to be part of the next round of negotiations, Mr. Speaker, but this round was finished back with all the other unions that were in agreement. Hospital workers in the hospitals were offered the same deal as this group, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: We are talking about negotiations. As you know, I was involved in the labour movement for several years of my life, as were some of the members representing other parties. Nevertheless, it is only when difficulties crop up...

The workers are currently in the position of having to go through the courts. They won their case, but they found out the same day that it was going to appeal. So they are in a very difficult situation. There is one way to solve this problem.

What we asked the workers yesterday was whether they were prepared to refer the issue to an arbitrator. The question remains: Is the government prepared to agree to these employees calling for binding arbitration? In my opinion, at this time, that is the only thing that might allow this disagreement to be settled. The employees are not the only ones who are finding this a tough situation; nursing home residents are too.



[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, what I would offer right now is that I would like to meet with the Leader of the Opposition to review the facts of the negotiations that have been had up to this point and through his party's time in government and to identify, you know, why did the position change on the last round. What happened here? We recognize that going forward, there is a need for a new philosophy in every sector, Mr. Speaker, because we recognize that a third of our workforce is going to retire in the next 10 years. We recognize that it will not be about hiring more people—it will be about trying to find people. And we recognize that we can pay better wages if we find better ways to afford to do that. But downloading more onto taxpayers and saying: Well, we will just do this... Mr. Speaker, we have to have a sustainable operation going forward.

I would ask the member opposite, the Leader of the Official Opposition: Can we get together? Let's talk about a path forward that works for New Brunswick. The members opposite have knowledge on this file, Mr. Speaker, because they spent 21 months trying to make a deal, and it did not happen. We have been here 4 or 5 months. Let's get together. I will offer to meet, and let's talk about this. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: This is not about me; it is about the workers. I will tell you that, when I was Minister of Human Resources, I did manage to negotiate 18 contracts that were signed within a 19-month period. When we were in opposition, we promised corrections officers that we would go to arbitration. When we took office, that is what we did. I can tell you that the dispute was settled without breaking the province's bank. People went back to work, and they were happy to do so. We stopped being a community college because, previously, it was as if corrections officers had to work six months for us and then go work for other provinces or agencies, even at the federal level. When it comes to cooperation, I have no problem with meeting the Premier. I am not the only one who supports going to binding arbitration. I think the other two parties support it too. What does the Premier intend to do?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, I think that the Leader of the Official Opposition would recognize that we have some big challenges in our province. We have some big challenges that are going to engage everybody to help us get a solution. It is not business as usual. We have to find ways to change how we do business in order to ensure that we can continue.

As we said in the budget speech yesterday, we have been failing at the basics, Mr. Speaker, and we cannot continue to do that. Balancing the budget is only part of this. Having fair taxes is only part of this. Finding better ways to deliver the services that we must is a huge obligation that we have.



So, 21 months to get a deal did not work. That was 21 months on a deal that was struck with every other union, and, all of a sudden, we are standing now in a different position. Oh well, it is a new day. Mr. Speaker, we want to work with the official opposition. We want to work with all members sitting in this House to find a solution that works for New Brunswick, and that includes being fair to the workers who are working with and protecting our most vulnerable. Mr. Speaker, there is a solution, but it is not just business as usual. Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry: I would like to know whether or not the Premier agrees with the idea of going to binding arbitration. At this time, I cannot see any other solution, unless negotiations resume. What nursing home workers have told me is that they did not get anything on paper. Negotiations took place, but the workers did not get anything on paper. I understand that negotiations took place. Even if they last 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, or 26 months, the point of negotiations is to result in a signed contract. Today, our most vulnerable people, nursing home residents, are being held hostage. Again, what I want to know is whether or not the Premier wants to go to binding arbitration. Yes or no? That is what I would like to know.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, it is not as simple as that, and we are focused on being able to protect the most vulnerable. The point is, the rules changed. I guess that we have heard that federally in the past, but we have seen it now in this situation. The rules have changed, Mr. Speaker. The same deal that every other union accepted is now not acceptable to this group. The same package that nurses in hospitals accepted is not acceptable to this group. Mr. Speaker, this is not a time just to change the rules and say: Oh well, we will have a new policy. It is a time to say this: Let's get that negotiation behind us. Let's look at what is needed in the future, for future negotiations, in order to do right by patients, do right by employees, and do right by taxpayers.

It is a combined effort, and we need members in this House to be part of that. Let's understand the challenges we have collectively, and let's handle the solutions that we must arrive at together. It is there to be done, but it is not a simple process. Changing the game in midstream is not how we are going to solve it, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry: If we want to retain people in this field, and if we are looking to the future, they certainly need better wages. Employees need more time to provide nursing home residents with appropriate care. Yes, we are talking about the future. If we want to retain these employees, it will be necessary to keep on sitting at the bargaining table and not go to court. If binding arbitration is the only solution, as far as I can see, that will not break the province's bank. I have watched interviews that were done with people on the street, and everyone agrees that this conflict should be settled as quickly as possible, because people living in nursing



homes are almost in crisis at the moment; they are nervous. Even the relatives who would have to look after the people in nursing homes are not prepared for that.

Mr. Premier, are you prepared, yes or no, to go to binding arbitration?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: I remember a year ago at this time. I was often sitting where the member is sitting today, asking questions such as: Would you agree that it makes sense to change the rules midstream? Some questions were related to me asking questions about the Premier's role. So, Mr. Speaker, I am going to ask that question. Does the member opposite believe that it is proper to change the rules midstream—rules that are going to impact the future of how we develop negotiations going forward? I do not think that is fair. It is not fair to the workers. It is not fair to all the others who accepted the deal before, all those other unions. I am talking about all of them, Mr. Speaker. That is not fair.

We are trying to say, Let's get this behind us. Let's put in a program that sees improvement in wages, improvement in working conditions, improvement in the time available to serve in the nursing homes. Those items have not even been on the negotiating table because the only interest in what is being proposed is wages. There is more to this than wages. It is about sustainability of service delivery. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry: This will be my last question. Yes, when he was on the other side of the House, this Premier may have had opinions, but he is now on the side of the House where decisions are made. I need to know this from the Premier: Is he prepared, yes or no, to go to binding arbitration with this group of people to ensure that this crisis is resolved as quickly as possible?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, I think that through this discussion, I have been clear that it is not as simple as going to binding arbitration. We have challenges that will not be solved by going to binding arbitration at this point when the rules are artificially changed at the last minute. That is what we are dealing with.

We have an opportunity here to work with unions, to work with political officials, and to work with each other to find a path for the future. That is addressing more than just wages, Mr. Speaker. It is addressing the level of service. It is addressing the skill sets within the nursing homes and how we will find people going forward, because that is going to be our challenge. It is addressing the high level of sick time, because that is a challenge. It is addressing people who are getting hurt working in nursing homes or hospitals, because that is a big challenge. It is more than one simple issue, but in this case, we have a situation that has been created as a new thing instead of recognizing that every other union has already accepted this.



Our goal is to get that one behind us. Let's decide at the same time how we will manage for the future.

Budget

Mr. Melanson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I remember when the Premier said at one time that he would give straight answers and that we would have straight talk. We are clearly not getting answers here this morning on this issue.

However, my question is for the Minister of Finance. My question is for the Minister of Finance. Mr. Speaker, I think the Minister of Finance should admit that what he tabled yesterday, to be able to start paying on the debt, did not happen overnight. There have been some key factors that contributed to our getting there. It did not happen over four or five months. There was actually hard work over the past four years. The audited financial statements stated that we went from a \$498-million deficit to a \$67-million surplus. He is getting more money from the federal government. He is getting more money from Ottawa, and, Mr. Speaker, he is doing it on the backs of the poor. Can the minister admit that key factors allowed him to table the budget he did yesterday?

Hon. Mr. Steeves: Do you know what? I will admit that we do not have a revenue problem. We had a spending problem. When the last government got extra money, it spent it, and it did not just spend it once. It spent it twice or three times over. Yes, our government will take credit for the \$4.5-million surplus for 2018-19. The budget from yesterday is a good budget. It is a budget that we can afford. It is a budget that we can afford now, and it is sustainable for the future.

They had \$1 billion per year more in taxes taken in, and then they still added to their net debt by about \$1 billion over the past four years. Mr. Speaker, finally, CIBC Capital Markets put out a rating and said: Credit implications positive. Credit implications positive from yesterday's budget. It goes on to say: The newly elected government of New Brunswick tabled its first budget sticking to its promise of fiscal prudence.

Do you know what? We are sticking to that. We are sticking to the future for New Brunswickers, for your children and for your grandchildren. It will be sustainable, and they will have a future here in New Brunswick.

Mr. Melanson: Mr. Speaker, the minister should admit it. What he tabled yesterday did not happen overnight. It did not happen over the past four months. A lot of work has been done over the years and certainly over the past four years. The previous government never got a downgrade from the credit rating agencies, Mr. Speaker. I think that it is important to underline that.

I will ask the minister this question. In the budget, there is a line item called Supplementary Funding Provision. That line item went up by 46%. It went up by \$53 million. I want to ask the



minister this: What is included in that increase? Is it a slush fund for the government, or is it really detailed investment that New Brunswickers should know about?

Hon. Mr. Steeves: Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? The member opposite wonders about whether it would have happened. No, it would not have happened from the members of the previous government. It would not have happened from them because they would have continued to overspend. Last year, we saw \$1.4 billion in promises heading into an election campaign—\$1.4 billion in promises. Where would we be today?

Today, we are taking our debt down from \$14.1 billion to just over \$14 billion. It is going down. For the first time in 13 years, it is going down. Successive governments have kicked it down the road. Do you know what? It is going down. The net debt is going down, and New Brunswick is doing better. New Brunswickers are doing better. We are looking at keeping it sustainable. We are looking to do what is right for New Brunswick, ladies and gentlemen. Mr. Speaker, that is the future for New Brunswick. It is now assured for our children and our grandchildren. Thank you.

Mr. Melanson: Mr. Speaker, there was no answer to my question. I think that the Premier had promised that there would be straight answers, honest answers, and straight talk. The question again is this. The Supplementary Funding Provision line item in the budget states that there was an increase of \$53 million, 46%, with no details. There are absolutely no details on where these dollars are going to go. Can the Premier, who was a former Finance Minister and is now the Premier, explain to New Brunswickers whether this is a slush fund for his government to do things that the government is not telling New Brunswickers about or whether it is actually a detailed expenditure that we should all know about?

Hon. Mr. Steeves: Mr. Speaker, no, this government opposite, or this former government, would know all about slush funds with its contingency fund. We have no such plans. We pay down the debt. That is what we do. When we get extra money, we decide. It is just like at home. When something goes wrong with your car, do you buy a new one, do you buy a used one, or do you fix up the car that you have? Do you know what? We are fixing up the car that we have. We are trying to pay down our debt. We are trying to get ourselves back into sound fiscal territory. When you get money, do you go away to Cuba for a vacation or do you pay down your debt? Do you know what? We are paying down our debt, Mr. Speaker. That is what we are doing.

Also, we are investing in New Brunswick. We are investing in a strategy for nursing home resources, with \$2.4 million for nursing programs, rather, for the nursing human resources strategy, to get more nurses here. We are in desperate need of them. This government is doing that. This government is investing. This government is investing in the 10-year education plan. This government is investing in the early learning centres and early learning homes in rural areas. This government is investing for the people of New Brunswick.



Mrs. Harris: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is hurting the most vulnerable people in New Brunswick. In January, the Minister of Social Development said to reporters: “I can’t imagine that the department could lose any amount of money without hurting services.” It is absolutely unacceptable that your budget promises more than \$18 million in cuts to Child Welfare and Disability Support Services and Income Security. You said you would fight for more funding and acknowledged that a compromised budget would stop your ability to make the necessary changes. Obviously, you lost your fight with the big brass of the Austin-Higgs government. Do you still agree that these cuts will hurt services for our most vulnerable? Yes or no?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, when your philosophy is tax and spend, you cannot envision a better way of doing things. First of all, let’s talk about what is a budget. The budget for 2018-19, even though this is not estimates... Let’s look at a figure of \$283 million. Mr. Speaker, our budget is \$313 million. We put \$30 million more into this budget than the last government did, and we are going to manage our money better. We are going to deliver the services that we need to deliver on child welfare, on disability, and on our seniors. That is our commitment.

Mrs. Harris: Mr. Speaker, she says that is their commitment, but the budget shows a different story. As the Higgs-Austin government celebrates what it considers to be a great budget, it is being described as an attack on the poor people of New Brunswick. It is being described as a shocking budget. People are mortified, with unions feeling dumbfounded. It is being described as an unbelievable way to hurt the most vulnerable people.

Minister, you promised to do better. You promised to improve... Mr. Speaker, the minister promised to improve child protection. You made commitments to children, to seniors, to the most vulnerable people in New Brunswick, and to the staff at Social Development, who were counting on your government to do better. How do you plan on doing this with these massive, massive cuts?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, it is the same rhetoric over and over. Child welfare services have been increased by \$8.4 million. The Savoury report and the Child and Youth Advocate’s report... With the help of all our partners and with the help, especially, of the staff of the Department of Social Development, we will be addressing the recommendations from both those reports. Mr. Speaker, there is nothing in this budget that they need to fear.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: You know, that is the attitude. That is the attitude from the members opposite.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.



Hon. Mrs. Shephard: We have an opportunity here to deliver services better, to deliver services well, and to make our province better, especially for those who are most vulnerable. Mr. Speaker, the most vulnerable, they want... You know, we call them vulnerable, but everybody brings something to our province—everybody. We are going to take care of everybody, and we are going to do it within our means.

Mrs. Harris: Mr. Speaker, I agree. Every single New Brunswicker brings something to this province, but this government is taking it away from the most vulnerable people who have counted on you. You celebrate what you consider to be a great budget. Celebrate away as we look at people who are going to lose essential services. We look at children and seniors who need your help and who depended on you and whom you turned your back on, so your celebrations will be short-lived.

As well, I ask the minister: Does she agree with the cuts to Income Security for those people who have the lowest income in the province? We were promised straight answers. Do you agree with this cut or not?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do not want to be arrogant, but I know my files, all right? We are adding \$16 million—\$16 million—in the budget for home support workers, special care home workers, day care employees—highly, highly a workforce of women—and we have increased the budget so that we can support those in our communities who need it. There is \$8.5 million more for the child welfare budget and \$21.5 million more for disability. Mr. Speaker, they can look at numbers and they can distort them all they want. The fact of the matter is that they do not know how to control spending. They do not know how to work a budget. We do, and we are going to show it.

Housing

Ms. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Clearly, this government does not recognize the opportunities for economic and fiscal growth when we help everyone achieve his or her personal potential. With exceptions to only two areas that we invested in, which I am happy to see will be continued here—they are postsecondary education and wages for home support workers, and I will give credit there—other than that, the budget delivered yesterday is an attack on the poor. Cuts to the most vulnerable are irresponsible and disrespectful. Stakeholders helping those living on the street have been waiting for this budget to release the provincial housing implementation plan and the money for it. Where is this money?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, Mr. Speaker, again, when we look at the budget lines and we see what was budgeted and what was spent, we see a previous government that did not control spending.

We know that communities are waiting for the housing strategy to come out. The housing strategy has been sent on, just recently, to the federal government. We are the fourth province to do so. There are many provinces that are not there yet. When we get approval on the



housing strategy, the House will certainly know that. But, Mr. Speaker, I just want to say that we have provided \$91.4 million in the housing budget and we have been working with our communities on homelessness. We were very effective this winter in bringing all our community partners to the table and implementing a strategy. Those strategies continue, Mr. Speaker, and I will be happy to share that with the House.

Ms. Rogers: Mr. Speaker, yes, there was \$91.4 million in this year's budget for housing, but in the year before, there was \$100.2 million. Mr. Speaker, this attack-on-the-poor budget showed cuts in child protection, disability support, income assistance, and housing services, leaving New Brunswickers wondering: Why does this government not care about the hundreds of New Brunswickers who will again find themselves out in the cold in 12 days when the funding of emergency shelters depletes?

I am very disappointed that not one government member from Moncton attended last week's standing-room-only CBC forum on homelessness. Would the Minister of Social Development please answer for the Finance Minister how he justified cutting \$19 million on the backs of children, people with disabilities, income assistance recipients, and those needing housing, and this being from the only Social Development program that is proactive and about prevention?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Once again, Mr. Speaker, we were within \$1 million of the budget that the members opposite provided in their last year. The thing is that they can talk about how they overspent, how they did not manage, and how they just always considered that more was better. It is a tax-and-spend Liberal philosophy, and that is not what we are about. Every department was asked to come to the table with a reasonable budget and to keep in mind our priorities, and all of these—housing, child welfare, and seniors—are a priority for the Department of Social Development. Mr. Speaker, we are continuing to work with our community partners. We are continuing to make sure that plans are in place for the homeless. This is not something that we have been dillydallying about, Mr. Speaker. Communities have been engaged. We are engaged. The job is getting done.

Mr. Speaker: Excuse me. We have only 14 minutes left. We have to go to the other opposition members. I will come back to you after. I will go with the member for Fredericton South, the leader of his party.

House Sitings

Mr. Coon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After being out of this House for more than three months, we recently learned that the Legislature will sit for only five weeks this spring. Sitting days in New Brunswick have trended down dramatically over the years, and it appears that the trend is continuing under the current government, Mr. Speaker.

On Terry Seguin's political panel on CBC last May, referring to the former Liberal government's legislative calendar, the member for Riverview said: "With the reduced sitting days, you don't



have that pointed question period, you don't have that opportunity to put other bills on the floor, that would again, bring the government to account."

Well, I could not agree more, Mr. Speaker. Can the Premier tell us how the members of this House are supposed to carry out the people's business with so few sitting days?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, it is my understanding that this schedule that was put together was an all-party agreement on what would go forward. The Leader of the Green Party would have been one of the participants in that exercise.

I do not know if every bit of the schedule is complete at this point. We know what the spring session is looking like over the next while. But if there are opportunities to go further and to discuss what is needed, we are open to doing that. I guess I am surprised at the comments, because, with your being one of the committee members who was working on this very thing, the schedule, I would have expected that if that was an issue, it would have been brought forward within the committee, not here. Thank you.

Mr. Coon: Mr. Speaker, we brought issues forward in the committee—absolutely. We did not agree to this schedule.

Mr. Speaker, in a CBC article from August 21 of last year referring to the number of sitting days in the Legislature last spring, the Premier himself—this Premier—said at the time, "I can't imagine we would stay at the level that is the lowest sitting days that have ever been in the legislature." He was referring to the Liberal sitting days. Yet that is exactly what has happened under his leadership. He and his entire caucus signed a declaration of intent to cooperate in this Legislature, initiated by my caucus. I do not see how cooperation can occur when we spend so much time out of the Legislature. In his election platform, he wrote that elected officials are not allowed to be as strong as they could and should be in the Legislature. He said, I want to be the Premier who says: No, we don't do it that way anymore. We are going to do it differently.

Well, Mr. Speaker, here is a chance. Will the Premier bring his proposed legislative calendar to the floor of this Chamber for debate and adoption?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: This is not really a news flash that we are in a minority government situation, and we are not the majority in the committee either. The committee rules and regulations around the sitting of the House are a consensus among the committee. I am not in a position to arbitrate some particular arrangement because that is what the committee is for. If this needs to go back to the committee for further discussion, then I encourage that, and we can decide what makes sense going forward.

In this scenario, we are working together in a minority House. We have to find solutions together. It is expected of us not only on this particular issue of how many days we sit or how many committees we hold but also in our ultimate decision making and our ultimate decisions around what is best for the province.



I would say to the Leader of the Green Party that if he wants to recall the committee and have discussions, then, by all means, do that and let the members of that committee work toward a solution that makes sense for the group. Thank you.

Collective Bargaining

Mr. K. Arseneau: Find solutions together, as long as the Premier is okay with them.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday, while the budget was being tabled, hundreds of citizens were outside this Legislature asking for better working conditions. Instead of sitting down and negotiating, our Premier prefers to bring these citizens who care for the most vulnerable in our province—nursing home residents—to court to try to find their last democratic recourse available to them to end over 10 years of appalling working conditions and diminishing wages.

The Premier talks about working together, and it looks as though we are starting to find a consensus here. What we need is leadership, Mr. Speaker. This Legislature has the tools for just that. Section 79 of the *Industrial Relations Act* lays down a meaningful alternative to a strike—a dispute resolution mechanism called binding arbitration. Residents would continue to have full service, and this injustice could be solved face-to-face. Will the Premier commit to resolving the dispute by sending it to meaningful, fair, and good-faith binding arbitration?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, I think this question has been asked before, and the situation is this. We have a new offer on the table, one that was different from every other one that was accepted. If binding arbitration was brought forward and the conditions around the binding arbitration were such that it recognized what every other union has agreed to and that it was the basis under which a decision would be made, maybe we would have room to talk about this. But if it is a case of just throwing the door open because we have come up with some new numbers at the last minute, that is not a fair negotiation, not for government, not for taxpayers, not for the people working in nursing homes, and not for the people who are being served in nursing homes.

I would say that this whole scenario that we have right now . . . Let's think about it. A decision was made back in December that no longer would those positions be considered as essential. I am not disagreeing in the sense of whether 90% or 70% or 60% is the right number. However, at the end of the day, to all of a sudden say: Okay, now, that was thrown out, and we are going to walk out and leave the nursing homes vulnerable . . . What has changed in the rules that all of a sudden gives someone the right to do that? If we need to change how . . .

Mr. Speaker: Time.



Tax Reform

Mr. Austin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know that here today the former government members are lighting their hair on fire over the fact that the debt is not going to continue to grow. But the reality is that in this situation that we find ourselves fiscally, we have to balance the books, and I commend the government for doing just that.

Now, despite having balanced books, there is nothing in the budget that I can see that drives private sector growth. We have been saying this for some time, and we will say it again here in this House: We must have meaningful, substantial tax reform. Get out of this archaic double tax, which is killing businesses in this province and driving everybody to Alberta. I do not see that in this budget. I will ask the Premier this: When is the government going to move on tax reform for the people of New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question from the leader of the Alliance party. We do recognize that tax reform is needed. We said it in our platform, and we said it because we agree with that position. We are one of the highest-taxed jurisdictions in the country. We said that the double tax was a hurting tax to the people of the province, and we said that we want to do municipal reform so that we understand what the fairness is in all of this and so that we can have a tax regime that is reflective of best practices. That includes a complete review of the double-tax situation, and that is going to start. That will start within the coming weeks as a full review. I am encouraging members to be part of that as we have discussions around what is real and what is not real.

I recognize that if we do not get the private sector economy starting to reinvest in our province, we will not have enough money, we will not have enough workers, and we will not be able to tax enough for sustainability. It is crucial, but I think we have stepped the first step. We have shown the financiers of this province that we can balance our budget and we can act prudently. Now, it is a matter of getting the further work done. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Austin: I think New Brunswickers, frankly, are tired of hearing about more reviews and studies. We do not need more reviews and studies on this, Mr. Speaker. What we need is the elimination of the double tax, which is crippling businesses. The fact of the matter remains in New Brunswick that businesses will not come here and they will not invest. While we can look at the lost revenue by eliminating the double tax, I would argue that we are losing revenue from investment every day because of the double tax. I will ask the Premier a very pointed question. Will you eliminate—not study, not review, but commit to eliminating—the double tax in the province of New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question to the leader of the Alliance party. The situation, Mr. Speaker, is this. There were \$3 billion in taxes collected. I guess you could say that over four years, \$4 billion. There was \$1 billion more per year but no room left to make a significant change like this in the tax structure. There was no room left in relation to what it will cost,



\$90 million to \$100 million. We are committed to reducing or eliminating it and doing it over a period of time. We will define that time when we understand it.

I do not disagree—and I have said this as well—that the number of studies and committees and all this stuff that goes on and on and on to delay anything getting done is real, because we have seen lots of it. I have said it many times: I do not want to do that. I just need to understand the impact. Right now, I understand that, financially, it is \$90 million, and we need to understand how much we are going to have to be able to pay that down so that we do not go back into deficits. I will share that information with the leader of the Alliance party and anyone else when we can do that, and we will do it as quickly as we can, Mr. Speaker.

Collective Bargaining

Mrs. Conroy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with great concern that we see 4 100 unionized nursing home workers preparing to take job action over wages and working conditions. There were hundreds here yesterday showing their concern for the nursing work crisis. Mr. Speaker, some of the most vulnerable and deserving citizens in our province rely on the care that they receive from these LPNs and resident attendants who work tirelessly as they attempt to care for those living in the nursing homes where they work. The lack of enough staff for... These workers go home at the end of the day knowing that they have often failed to provide the level of care to these seniors simply because they are overworked and underpaid.

The government and CUPE must return to the bargaining table quickly and with the willingness to negotiate a settlement that is both fair and financially reasonable. Mr. Speaker, are the government and the Minister of Social Development willing to invite CUPE to return to the bargaining table, and when can we expect negotiations to resume until they can come up with a fair and financially responsible agreement that fits all? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you. Thank you for the question. Absolutely, to return to the bargaining table, that offer is open, and we are absolutely willing, able, and ready to do just that and to put all the facts on the table in relation to the challenges that we are facing. Without the officials in the union, without the workers in the union, and without people saying that they want to be part of the solution, it is not as simple as just going to a 4% or 5% increase in wages each and every year. It is not as simple as just saying: That is all we need, and we are done talking.

The negotiations thus far have not been about all the challenges that we have. They have been about wages, Mr. Speaker. I have said that, and we have translated that back to the group that has actually been meeting and negotiating: Look, we are open to discuss everything because everything has to be on the table. We have to find a long-term solution, and we will talk about anything to make that happen. Obviously, that includes better service for the people that need it the most in our nursing homes. Yes, we are back and ready to go to the table at any time, Mr. Speaker.



Mr. Speaker: The member for Moncton South has a third question.

Homelessness

Ms. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The very real problem of homelessness means that people cannot participate in skill development or in the much-burdened labour force. It means that children cannot be fully successful in school, hurting their future outcomes. Many of our nonprofit partners have been working hard to end homelessness, and they have been patiently waiting for the provincial government to come to the table with the funds from the housing agreement signed this past summer. Yesterday's disappointing budget leaves us all still wondering what is being done to address this homelessness file. Thank you.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, in December, when the serious situation of homelessness was brought to our attention, we acted immediately. It was a situation that was there before us, and we acted quickly with our community partners, who, by the way, just did an exemplary job in pulling together action plans really at the last minute. They did an exemplary job in delivering services throughout the winter, and I am very grateful for all their efforts, Mr. Speaker.

The housing strategy is in the works. It was begun by the previous government, and the members like to keep saying: We signed it in July. We signed it in July. But they know that signing the agreement does not complete the action plan, and the action plan was delivered recently. We will await the federal government's agreement to that action plan. When we get that agreement, Mr. Speaker, we will make it public.

[*Translation*]

Collective Bargaining

Mr. D. Landry: If I look at the majority of members who are here, whether they belong to the People's Alliance of New Brunswick, the Green Party, or the Liberal Party, I can tell the Premier and the Conservative Party that everyone agrees that negotiations must be resumed. The Premier replied to that effect just now, but I want to know this: When will his government be prepared to go back to the bargaining table to ensure that this dispute comes to an end so that nursing home employees can finally go back to work with their minds at ease? Can the Premier give us a date when his team will be prepared to resume negotiations with nursing home workers?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would anticipate that probably the next time back will be this Friday. I think that would probably be in the works. As for the idea of looking at it



and us coming back with a renewed offer, Mr. Speaker, the renewed offer has to reflect the next set of negotiations.

We are already at the tail end, and everyone else... As I have said over and over again and as the Liberal Party would know only too well, this was proposed and signed by every other member. If we say no, no, that does not count anymore, then the nurses in the hospitals are going to say: Well, what about us, since we accepted a program that these people are not accepting? What is different, Mr. Speaker? We cannot change the rules midstream, but we can go to the next level and say: Okay, now we need to really fix this going forward in the negotiations.

Mr. Speaker, changing the rules midstream is not fair bargaining. That is not a fair practice. That is taking advantage of a situation. Mr. Speaker, I do not want to take advantage of this situation, and I am sure that the workers in the nursing homes do not want to take advantage of the situation either. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Question period is over.

