

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



November 27, 2019

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EMPLOYMENT

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Earlier this week, the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour announced changes to wage subsidy programs. Other than the fact that a new name was given to these offices, we really do not know how this will work.

It seems that we are done with the Workforce Expansion Program, the One Job Pledge initiative, and the Youth Employment Fund. There were rules governing the different initiatives, because their aim was, among other things, to help young New Brunswickers find jobs in businesses in the province.

[*Original*]

Can the Premier tell me whether there will be rules around these funds to ensure they are providing these longer-term benefits that the previous fund provided?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am really excited about our new initiative around working in New Brunswick and creating much more flexible funding to have in place. What we were hearing from employers and employees in communities across this province was that the funds that were in place were criteria-based. Our department wasted a lot of time, Mr. Speaker, making sure that we were trying to fit people into those programs as opposed to building programs around the needs of the individual and the employer, and this is exactly what we are going to do. Going forward, I am really excited about the flexibleness and the nimbleness of these programs so that we can meet the needs of New Brunswickers and our communities in New Brunswick.

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): There are other programs, such as SEED, for example, which help place young people in jobs. That was already cut significantly by the Conservatives in the first budget. You have apprenticeship incentives and immigrant settlement programs. All these funds are now gone. Premier, when will employers, young people, and people looking for retraining get the clear picture of what is available and what is not?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, I know the members opposite love to create these programs. Quite frankly, we have all been guilty of it in this House over the years. We create these programs that sound great at election time. They sound great midway through a mandate, to make it look as though you are doing something. Quite frankly, all we did was

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put a whole bunch of criteria around these programs and tie the hands of the folks in our department. They frustrated employers. They frustrated the employees in this province, Mr. Speaker. What we did was put one big program in place with an employment office so that people actually understand what it is, where it is, and what it can do for them.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): My first question was for the Premier, but it was the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour who replied. What can young people expect? We have always seen changes in programs. Usually, the goal is to save money. Will the same funds be made available? Will the same number of young people be able to work? What should employers be concerned about for next season?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Mr. Speaker, there is no cut. There is around \$120 million. That same amount of money is still in existence for this new connections fund that we have put in place, Mr. Speaker, and anyone who qualified before will be able to qualify again going forward.

I will use an example. There was a gentleman from Catapult in Saint John who spoke at our announcement this week. He was 27 years old. He benefited from the Youth Employment Program, but if he had been 30 years old with all the same challenges, he could not have benefited from that program. Mr. Speaker, we need more individuals like that young man who spoke at that announcement the other day. We need more examples of that, and that is exactly what this will allow us to do. This will not tie our hands in terms of criteria. There is every bit as much money in place as there was prior to this. It is just more nimble, and we will be able to meet the needs of our employees, employers, and communities going forward.

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, Opposition House Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the media and again here today, the Minister of Post-Secondary Education said that he now has one big flexible pot of money at his disposal—his disposal. That may sound good to some, but to many, it sounds a bit terrifying, as though the minister is going to have one giant political fund at his disposal that he can dole out to businesses or whomever he sees fit. When will we see some of those guidelines on how this money will be used? Will it be distributed fairly? Is it for big business? Small business? Is it for students? Will there be a regional lens on these programs? Who is this government trying to help, really, with this funding? Is it really nothing more than a new name and cuts a little later on? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Mr. Speaker, the answer to that is all of the above. It is designed to help all those groups and individuals that the member opposite just rattled off. But the fact of the

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matter is that I know the members opposite love having criteria in place that ties the hands of the department. He asks what criteria will be in place. I will tell you what we are going to do, Mr. Speaker. We are going to require each regional office to submit a regional plan that will be in concert with the local economic development strategy and the Population Growth Strategy.

Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, this fund can actually be used to help communities that do not have an economic development strategy in their region in conjunction with Opportunities New Brunswick. This is designed to give us flexibility. I have said it once, and I will say it again: There are no two communities alike. What works in Shippagan might not work in St. George, and what works in St. George might not work two years from now. This gives us the flexibility to deal with that and not to be stuffed into campaign slogans, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, Opposition House Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I see that the minister agrees with me about cuts. He said “all of the above”. That included the cuts that I mentioned, so thank you.

[Translation]

Some of these initiatives use federal funding. Did the minister consult his federal counterparts on this file? Are federal funds in jeopardy, as we have seen with other infrastructure projects?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): No, Mr. Speaker, there is absolutely nothing in jeopardy in terms of the funds that we receive from the federal government. But quite frankly, the way that we keep doing business in this province... I know that the members opposite are stuck in the past. I know they want to do things the way that they have always done them in this province, but quite frankly, the programs in place were based on a seventies manpower model that is now no longer applicable. We do not have a high unemployment rate as we had in the seventies. We have job shortages coming toward us, and we have to be nimble and flexible.

I will say it again: What works in one community might not work in the next. They may want to box themselves into some criteria that made sense when they committed to the program at election time and they had to create it just to make it look as though they were doing something. Well, that is not how we do business on this side of the House, Mr. Speaker. We make sure that we have a program that is nimble and flexible, and that is exactly what this is going to do.

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, Opposition House Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, this government has a habit of announcing these programs without any details and with no guidelines. The members opposite talk about plans that they have. They talk about an

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economic plan—there is none. They talk about a climate plan—there is none. They talk about a tourism plan—they do not have it. They do not have any details.

Mr. Speaker, when will we be seeing the details of the minister's secret plan? Or is this a case where we wake up on budget day and half of these programs are gone? New Brunswickers are no better off, the businesses in New Brunswick are no better off, and our brightest and best are packing up and heading down the road to other places. Let's keep them here in New Brunswick. Let's have a made-in-New-Brunswick program here. Tell us the details. What do you have to hide? That is what we want to know.

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Mr. Speaker, there is absolutely nothing to hide. I would love to provide a briefing for all the members opposite and to have them come in and talk to our department, because I can tell you that our department is absolutely energized by this new plan. Our people feel that they are empowered to make decisions for the people of New Brunswick regardless of what part of the province they are in. They can tailor what we do for each individual New Brunswicker, community, and business in this province.

But the members opposite talk about no plan. I heard the member from Madawaska the other day accuse us of not having a plan, and he referenced Flakeboard. The number one thing that Flakeboard had in its letter to us when it said that it was closing up shop was the high cost of natural gas. Well, who is leaving the gas in the ground, Mr. Speaker? It is those guys over there. So do not talk to us about no plan. They better learn the facts before they start referencing things.

And where is their leader? When the rest of us were heading to Belledune, he was having a news conference to talk about his own personal political future, and then he could not even stick to that three days later.

[*Translation*]

AN ACT TO AMEND THE ESSENTIAL SERVICES IN NURSING HOMES ACT

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Something is odd, because the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour is removing criteria. However, when it comes to nursing home workers, firefighters, and police officers, the government wants to impose binding arbitration on them, with conditions. The government is totally confused.

Yesterday, the government tabled a bill to designate some nursing home workers as essential workers. The government has the right to amend this act and had the mandate to do so.

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However, these workers also have the right to negotiate a fair salary. The bill provides for binding arbitration, but it unfortunately proposes that one side of the negotiating table—the government side—establish the conditions of this arbitration. We think a qualified arbitrator can find a fair deal without pre-established conditions. Why did the government think it was necessary to establish these conditions?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Nursing home workers absolutely agree and have stated publicly that they are essential workers. All essential workers have designated levels of essential service, and that process was interrupted when the labour board ruled that part of our essential services legislation was unconstitutional.

We are taking steps to rectify that. We have put in that the labour board will facilitate conversations between government and the nursing home employees to get to those designated levels. Then, when that happens—once they are at designated levels—we have a real ability for a union to take strike action. The union has the ability to negotiate through that or without that. A mediation process is also in place. Binding arbitration is not the only answer.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, minister.

[Translation]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): What stands out in this bill is the provision about what is called the ability to pay. Can the Premier, the Minister of Finance, and the Minister of Social Development give the House a very precise definition of the ability to pay? Also, will this definition be the same for all three ministers? I am wondering about that. Is an algorithm based on the number of times the Premier has commented in the media about how badly things are going in New Brunswick also included in the criteria?

Last year's budget shows that the province generated more than \$9.7 billion in revenue and that this government is expecting a surplus for the coming year. Can the Minister of Social Development explain why her government does not want to pay nursing home workers what they should be paid?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I know it is a new concept for the members opposite to talk about how we manage our finances in our province and how we live within a framework that does not require more taxes to be paid by the people of the province. Every decision we make here is reflected on the financial side in more taxes that somebody has to pay. I know that it is an easy decision for

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those on the opposite side to make. How many more taxes can we put out there in order to stay in government? That was the philosophy.

Well, the ability to pay is not a difficult concept. We have heard it from municipalities and cities all over the province. We have heard about the situation they are in, in every community. And who ends up paying the price? The actual citizens and residents who live there. So there is a balance somewhere, Mr. Speaker. It is not about throwing caution to the wind. It is about saying: We need to work within a framework that allows us to get our tax base down in order for people to come back here—to want to live here and work here because they are not being taxed out of our province.

There is a difference of philosophy. When we talk about chasing kids away or chasing businesses away, the numbers speak for themselves. People have left our province. We want them back, and we want to fight to bring them back.

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): I am glad the Premier said the numbers speak for themselves. I would remind our Premier that 68% of New Brunswickers did not vote for his party in the last election.

[Translation]

As we have seen in the Restigouche region this week, we are having trouble finding people to work in nursing homes, and this has a disastrous impact on the whole health care system. If I were a retirement home worker, under this government, I would definitely be looking for work elsewhere, given the way this government has treated and continues to treat these workers.

Honourable Minister, if you agree with me that we must do better for these nursing home workers, can you point out one aspect of this bill that treats these employees fairly?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, the essential services designation is in place so that workers can be assured that they have a meaningful position from which to negotiate and/or strike. It has always been the will and the wish of this government that we negotiate a fair settlement. We do not agree at this time on what that fair settlement is, but essential services legislation is imperative to this process. We have tabled legislation that will correct the previous legislation that was deemed, in a portion, unconstitutional. This is an important process that the Labour and Employment Board must facilitate to help us reach agreeable numbers. The Labour and Employment Board will mediate and facilitate this discussion, and there are many levels to what happens before binding arbitration. It is always our hope that we can negotiate a fair settlement.

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HERBICIDES

Mrs. Conroy (Miramichi, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I sent an open letter to the Premier expressing concerns over the dangers of herbicide spraying and the use of glyphosate in New Brunswick. In his reply, the Premier stated that the government relies on Health Canada's evaluation regarding glyphosate. However, there is a huge scientific debate on glyphosate.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer has serious concerns about this herbicide. Furthermore, the 2018 Auditor General's report on toxic substances criticizes Health Canada for being slow in removing substances that research shows are toxic. Rather than hiding behind the Health Canada review and placing New Brunswick residents and wildlife at risk, will the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development halt glyphosate spraying in light of serious questions concerning its use and safety?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I very much appreciate having the opportunity to answer questions here in the House. When we talk about herbicides, we talk about conservation, we talk about health, and we talk about habitat. Unfortunately, when we have the conversation related to conservation, the herbicide becomes the sole focus. It is very important to understand that there is a significant number of components including but not limited to the herbicide.

We need to have the conversation about the announcements that we just made where we doubled the conservation forest here in the province. We have to have the conversation where, for the first time ever, stakeholders—credible stakeholders—excluded from the table to talk about conservation and these issues are now welcomed. We also have to recognize the fact that I have travelled throughout the entire province and I have talked about how we are working to create that biodiverse and ecologically sustainable forest for New Brunswick. I wish the members opposite would join in the process of working together instead of sitting silent in the face of this progress that we are making.

FOREST INDUSTRY

Mrs. Conroy (Miramichi, PA): Thank you, minister. We do look forward to sitting beside him and doing everything that we can do to ensure the safety of the wildlife and the creatures in it. I want to turn for a second to the department to see what you are doing regarding the forest industry and wood allocations. Can the minister explain what the plan is going forward for the wood allocations and to make it fairer for the private woodlot owners?

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Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): The Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development. We just recently changed the name, and I am very proud of that as well. I would love to answer that question as it relates to the holistic picture of what we are doing for the woods and the water. Private woodlot owners were a part of our platform that we campaigned on. We are committed to ensuring that those folks have a seat at the table as well. We have had meetings with private woodlot owners—everybody in the supply chain, right up to and including the New Brunswick Federation of Woodlot Owners. Unfettered access to the minister's office is something that has never been seen before.

As a result, we are working through a process—and very much looking forward to doing so with all members in the House—where we can create an opportunity where the open-for-business mindset of the Higgs government translates to that as well as to every other sector in the province. We are looking to next month, when we are going to be making some significant announcements as it relates to the steps—not just the talking points but also the steps that we are taking to put feet behind the initiatives to see that private woodlot owners thrive in New Brunswick.

STUDENT LOANS

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, a major issue for many young New Brunswickers is the crushing level of their student debt. By graduation day, young New Brunswickers are carrying an average debt load of \$40 000, which is almost 50% higher than the national average. Successive governments have cut programs that helped graduates with their debt. The newly reimplemented Tuition Tax Credit will help some, but as of December 31, 2019, there will be no student debt relief program in New Brunswick.

The New Brunswick Student Alliance has called on the government to create a New Brunswick debt relief program that would forgive a maximum of 20% per year over five years. This would ensure that young New Brunswickers are not buried in student debt for most of their adult lives. Will the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour institute a New Brunswick debt relief program, as requested by the New Brunswick Student Alliance?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): I want to thank the member opposite for the question. What I can tell her is that I have been meeting with the New Brunswick Student Alliance and I know that she has as well. We are having, at the moment... I have told the students over the last number of months that all the programs that we have in place are currently being reviewed. We will continue to look at options going forward.



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I also think that this is important. As I have said numerous times over the last number of weeks and months, we need to have a bigger conversation about postsecondary education in this province—one that involves students, involves faculty, involves the administration, involves the citizens of New Brunswick, and involves the business community as well. That way, we can continue to have a bigger conversation going forward about how we deal with issues such as debt relief and also how we can line up our training and education with our labour market demands.

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): I look forward to being part of that conversation. Another change the government could make that would help recent graduates would be to forgive the interest on student debt. The previous government committed to this and budgeted for it; however, it was not quite ambitious enough to implement it before the last provincial election. Other provinces, including British Columbia earlier this year and Nova Scotia five years ago, have implemented this policy.

Students pay about \$10 million in provincial student loan interest annually in New Brunswick. The latest financial results published by the government are projecting an \$88-million surplus, so there is lots of money in this budget that could be allocated to make this small change that would have a big impact on the individual debt of recent graduates.

Considering New Brunswick's demographic challenges, we need to find incentives for recent graduates to stay in our province. Will the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour eliminate the provincial interest on New Brunswick's student loans?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): As I have indicated before, all these particular options are on the table, and they will all be considered. I think that what is important, as I said a minute ago, is having that bigger conversation, properly facilitated. And yes, I would love for you and all members of this House to be part of that conversation as we move forward.

I do think it is critical, as we move forward, that we do more in this province with our publicly funded colleges and universities and also our privately funded colleges and universities so that they are more aligned with what we do and with our labour market demands. That way, the young people of today are positioned for the future. More importantly, our province is positioned going forward to be the best that it can be to meet the labour market demands and create prosperity in this province.

MINISTERS

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): We will give the Minister of Fisheries another chance to set the record straight. He has not answered the question. Can he give his side of the story that was described by a Transportation Department worker who said that he was



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verbally and physically abused by the minister and his executive assistant in an incident on Route 112 this summer?

Hon. Mr. Wetmore (Gagetown-Petitcodiac, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Mr. Speaker, I say again that it has been dealt with. Both sides know what has taken place.

I obviously view the job of Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries as being very important, and I am going to continue to represent this portfolio to the best of my abilities. For the past year, I have had the privilege of meeting with various groups and stakeholders to see how we can help them energize our private sector. Mr. Speaker, I have been all around this province and have met with groups who had never even heard from the members opposite when they were sitting on this side of the House.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): There was absolutely no remorse with that reply.

Mr. Speaker, I am going to read from the press release:

Highway Worker Makes RCMP Complaint

A New Brunswick highway worker has had enough of the bullying and harassment made by a Cabinet minister and his right-hand man. A DTI road worker is pursuing a complaint to the RCMP against the executive assistant of Minister Wetmore.

In July, a DTI road repair work crew was on Route 112, when Minister Wetmore and his assistant got out of their vehicle and started shouting and insulting the work crew: The Minister got out and shouted at us, insulted us, using derogatory words and saying road workers were incompetent; both of them were insulting us; this was not the first time that he has used his position to abuse us. The situation then escalated when the worker was forcefully grabbed by the shoulders and had shouted in his face: Do your bleeping job.

Will the Premier show some leadership, put an end to this bullying and harassment, and remove...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, member.

Member, you have mentioned the name of a member here. You are not allowed to mention the name of a member, even if you are reading a name that was put in by someone else. You are not allowed to mention the name. You have to refer to members by their riding names.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, we spent a lot of time on this issue yesterday. We spent a lot of time on it when it actually happened or just after. Mr. Speaker, we did deal with it promptly

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and quickly, and we feel that we dealt with it in an appropriate manner, working with our own HR resources.

Now, the member opposite can talk about what she has read in the paper, and that is all well and good. If the RCMP pursues an investigation, maybe she will be the first to know about it. But we do not know about that. We have only the same information that is being reported in the paper.

My only assurance here would be that whatever the RCMP wants to do with this matter and proceed with, we will cooperate fully, Mr. Speaker, because we want any sort of issue to be resolved in that regard if it still exists. We think that we dealt with it, but if the RCMP proves otherwise and wants this dealt with in a different manner, then we will cooperate a hundred percent, Mr. Speaker.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Mr. Speaker, what I am hearing is that this Premier thinks that it is okay for a minister and an executive assistant to physically assault and call a DTI worker derogatory names, that it is okay for that to happen, and that the minister can keep his position. Mr. Speaker, it is wrong. You need to show some leadership, Mr. Premier. Show leadership to the young people in this province, to the workers who work hard each and every day. You need to stop this assault and harassment. You are the leader in this province. Would you kindly show some leadership and show that we do not accept bullying, harassment, and assault in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, this would not be the first time that the member opposite has had an interpretation of the word “said” much different than the word “said”. I know that sometimes you say what is the point of speaking because there are usually a whole lot of things that are added to any sort of commentary that is actually spoken.

In this situation, Mr. Speaker, I have been very clear. We dealt with it immediately. We cannot disclose how we dealt with it because it is a human resources or private matter issue. We have said that if there is indeed an RCMP investigation, we are not aware of it. We have only the same documentation that the member refers to.

We have said that we will cooperate fully with the RCMP in any investigation. We have said—and I have said—that we do not tolerate abuse of any kind in the workplace. How much clearer and how much more that can be misinterpreted only remains to be seen because I am sure that it can be, Mr. Speaker.

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CARBON TAX

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): The government says that it has submitted its latest carbon plan to Ottawa. It has not, however, shared the details of that plan. In the interest of openness and transparency, can the Premier share with this House the details of that plan and specifically how it will affect gas prices and also how it will affect the current rebate that is offered to New Brunswickers? That rebate is up to \$256 per household, and it was given this year under the federal backstop. How will this be impacted, along with gas prices and along with the proposed carbon plan? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Carr (New Maryland-Sunbury, Minister of Environment and Local Government, PC): Out of respect for our federal colleagues during this negotiation back and forth over the plan that was submitted, they asked that we not disclose any of these specific details publicly until the Cabinet in Ottawa is sworn in. The Cabinet can have a look at our plans that were submitted until the federal staff at Environment and Climate Change Canada has had an opportunity to properly evaluate what was submitted.

In my department, we have offered briefings to the Environment Critic on the opposite side on many different files so that we can share as much information as possible through our collaborative efforts. The member opposite has really declined many, many opportunities and invitations to come and see exactly what we can share so that she could share it with her colleagues on that side of the House. When and if our plan is accepted by Ottawa...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, member.