

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



March 13, 2020

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TAXATION

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Most New Brunswickers have just received their new property assessment by mail, and about 200 000 of these new assessments have increased. This means that property owners will be paying a lot of property tax this year.

The budget includes some tax relief for commercial and industrial property owners.

[*Original*]

According to a story on the CBC, one of the big winners of this measure is Irving. The story notes that Irving Oil and J.D. Irving will see combined tax relief of more than \$1 million. Was the Premier aware that his former employer would receive such generous benefits from his budget?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think it is important to realize that, through a tax benefit to property owners, it affects about 24 000 people and that the total tax benefit of about \$34 million. Out of the \$34 million, I think about \$6 million affects big businesses, about seven of them across the province. Out of the \$6 million, about half, \$3 million, is going to NB Power and NB Liquor. So to put a policy in place... It is a policy throughout the entire province that affects about 24 000, with about \$31 million of tax reductions to individual business owners across this province.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the added thing that we are doing, in relation to the comment on big business, is evaluating, which I have said before publicly. I said it before, I think, in this House. We are going through the assessment that took place and the criteria that were used back in 2013 through the assessment office, and we are going to say: What went up, when did it go down, and should it be coming up now? So, Mr. Speaker, this tax increase may never even come to these companies because we are now evaluating all the industries in this province to ensure that they pay their fair share.

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we are not against lowering business taxes, and we are particularly interested in seeing measures that will help our small and medium-sized businesses. They will benefit, yes, but in some cases, that means a few hundred dollars per year. Was there any discussion on doing a tax break differently, given that the big winners are the Irvings and NB Power, to maybe target small and medium-sized businesses?

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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think I just adequately explained that situation, that particular item on that tax reduction.

The purpose and the difference here, Mr. Speaker, is that the member opposite and the party he represents would say this: Oh, we are reducing the small business tax. The former government did it after the bottom line, on the 2.5%, 3%, and 4%, to make that reduction. Well, if your business is making a profit, that is all right, but if it is not making a profit, you never get there. It is a tax you never pay. In this case, it is the bottom line. It is helping businesses meet their bottom line so that they can expand and grow. It is about understanding what really makes an impact or what makes a headline. Mr. Speaker, our goal is to make an impact. Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Premier, what are you saying to property owners whose taxes are increasing when two Irving corporations are benefiting from \$1 million a year in tax relief?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am not sure I heard that last part, but, nevertheless, it sounds as though it was a similar theme. In the case of big businesses, I have said that we are going through a complete evaluation of industries in this province and we are going to ensure that they pay absolutely every dime that they should be paying because it is not fair for them not to pay their share. This program and this tax reduction on property are across the board. There are 24 000 businesses that are going to benefit from this change, Mr. Speaker. The purpose of having something that matters is that you cannot pick and choose.

But in the case of the big businesses—and in this category, the seven or so that apply—we are evaluating them specifically. I said this months ago. The report is due in August, and we will ensure that we present it to anyone who wants to see it. It will include what that evaluation looks like and how it was done. We will ensure that it is done fairly and responsibly and that industry pays its share, Mr. Speaker.

HIRING

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier is a former Irving employee, and what we know is that he hired some of his former coworkers from Irving to do well-paid, influential jobs in government. At some point, is there not a conflict of interest here? I think that even the appearance of a

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conflict matters to New Brunswickers, Mr. Speaker. At what point does the Premier recuse himself from these discussions?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I have an individual, who had retired from Irving Oil, whom I worked with for many years. He is a fellow engineer who is currently working at DTI. He is evaluating the whole project management to get better value for the system—putting together projects that make sense and a whole process of tendering to get the best value.

What we have in the government in many ways is a totally different analysis of how we manage and develop projects and how we spec them based on what we need and not on what some politician says—I demand—because that is a problem. It is like saying, well, build a bridge today. Well, we will build a bridge when we need the bridge. We will guarantee you that we will always have a bridge, Mr. Speaker, but it does not mean that we are just going to build it because some politician writes it on a cue card.

Mr. Speaker, the time for us to build what we need when we need it is what I am trying to put into the system. We have to change the game and how we think and act. That is the purpose of bringing some different thought processes into the system. We have great people in the system—great people. But bringing in a different mindset, a different view, on how we get better value for taxpayers... I had to do that in order to survive in my former employment. We...

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

GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, L): Thank you Mr. Speaker. On behalf of our caucus, we want to say thank you to the Chief Medical Officer for her leadership and for the clarity she brings to how we try to deal with this coronavirus.

Mr. Speaker, we knew that the coronavirus was going to come to New Brunswick eventually. We know this virus has been in existence for about two months. We just did not know when it was going to arrive in New Brunswick, but it is here now. My question is to the Premier. As the budget was being prepared and as the information was existing, why did the Premier and Finance Minister not put any contingency or line item in the budget in case we needed economic and financial assistance for this epidemic?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, there are some definite advantages to having a budget with a surplus. There are some definite advantages to having a budget that has room to pay down the debt. There are some definite advantages to having a plan and not just arbitrarily firing money at the wall

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and hoping things work. This budget reflects key areas. It is not only about being able to pay down the debt, but also about having money in the system in case we need to draw on it in an emergency. We have had to do that in the past for ice storms and floods. Mr. Speaker, I am proud to stand here today and say we are prepared to do it in the event that this virus expands in this province as well.

That is why you have stability, Mr. Speaker, in your system. That is why you have continuity in your thought process. That is why you work to have a system with a plan. I have a two-hour call this afternoon with Deputy Prime Minister Freeland, and we will be talking about the national support and the national interest in this path going forward. Mr. Speaker, we have a plan, and we will do what is best and necessary for the citizens of this province. They will be kept safe.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier keeps saying that he has a plan and that he is a good planner and financial manager. We showed yesterday that the good financial planning and fiscal management did not start since he became Premier.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier says that he has been planning, so why did he not include a specific line item of a contingent amount of money that could be used in case we have a huge impact on our economy and certainly on the revenues of our province? Is the Premier also saying this morning that if this is needed and we have to face any revenue shortfall, he not only will be depending on Ottawa, but will also be prepared to reduce the level of surplus that he is projecting?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Of course, Mr. Speaker. Of course, we will do whatever is necessary to protect the citizens of this province. Yes, that means if the surplus is not what it is projected to be, it will not be what it is projected to be. If our debt reduction is not what it is projected to be, it will not be what it is projected to be. We have one single priority, and that is to protect the health and well-being of the citizens of this province. We will do whatever is necessary to achieve that goal.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, I think we could all agree not to mix politics in the discussion on the coronavirus. As was mentioned, the pandemic will have an impact on businesses and there will be an economic impact on individuals.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, we are hoping the impact of the coronavirus disease will be minimal, but, if people are forced to self-isolate while waiting for test results, is the Premier considering funding emergency sick leave for people who will need it? Thank you.

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the purpose of having the conversation this afternoon with Deputy Prime Minister Freeland is to discuss what the national pattern is. How do we protect citizens in terms of their health? How do we protect citizens in terms of the economic situation and the impact that it has on them?

In that process, however, we do expect people to use prudence in their everyday lives. We do not expect people to travel and to expose themselves. We do not expect people to put themselves at risk. We do expect people, as the Chief Medical Officer said, to use common sense. We are also asking people not to be calling 811 if they are feeling fine because it is making that system overloaded and not available to those who are not feeling fine and who need to be looked after in an expedited fashion.

We are now looking at all the consequences of rules or changes that are made. That is why we have to be coordinated across departments to understand the impact, the real impact, of decisions that are being made and the economic impact in order that we do not have unnecessary hardship for our citizens.

ELECTIONS

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, with the municipal returning offices set to open in a few weeks, candidates and people are asking what is going to happen with the elections. My question for the Premier is this: Have there been any discussions about coronavirus and the upcoming municipal elections?

Hon. Mr. Carr (New Maryland-Sunbury, Minister of Environment and Local Government, PC): I appreciate the question, Mr. Speaker. I have been in discussions with my department, and my department has been talking with EMO, Elections New Brunswick, and the chief public health officer as well so that we have a coordinated effort. I will be talking to the municipal associations this morning. I would expect that I will also be talking to the member opposite who just asked the question along with representatives from the other parties later on today or just after noon to discuss the next phase or the next plan forward.

With those municipal elections, we want to make sure that they are coordinated right. We want to make sure that there is no unneeded confusion in that system as well. But we want to make sure that people are safe. We want to make sure that leadership is shown. We want to do it with all our partners that need to be at the table. I would expect that when we have those discussions, especially with my opposition colleagues in different parties, we need to have a coordinated approach so that the municipal levels of government can have confidence that we can continue governing in the province under this crisis, Mr. Speaker.

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Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, the pandemic that we are in the midst of has caused us to think about how we can best limit the spread of the virus in accordance with the advice and direction of our Public Health officials. Has the Premier considered possible funding for Elections New Brunswick to invest in new technologies for mail-in or absentee ballots to allow more New Brunswickers to participate in our democracy without risking public health? Has that been considered, Mr. Speaker? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, at this point in time, we have not heard from Elections New Brunswick about what additional capabilities it would need or what additional requirements it would have.

However, we are asking all departments within government and, in this case, outside of government, with Elections New Brunswick, what their specific needs are as related to this virus and its impact. That is the purpose of the national call: to understand what the trends that we are seeing are, but also what the reactions and the requirements that other provinces are experiencing are, and what the federal government is willing to participate in. We are in the process of actually categorizing and compiling all the information. We have asked every department to do that—and that would certainly include Elections New Brunswick—for feedback on their specific needs and requirements because of this virus.

TAXATION

Ms. Rogers (Moncton South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We know that the so-called double property tax was referenced in this year's budget. But we have had and pursued an idea that could see more of that tax eliminated more quickly. I have taken it upon myself to discuss this idea with some of the ministers over the past year to give an opportunity for this to be built into the budget. This is something that we think is important. We are bringing forward a motion that calls for the complete elimination of the double tax on rental properties if they include affordable housing units. Is this something that the Premier could support?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am not sure that I completely understand the question. The purpose of reducing the tax is to encourage private-sector investment. It is to get more affordable housing in the system. It is to get more activity in the construction industry. It is to get more activity in businesses so that they will start to invest in their companies because they are not being overtaxed.

The reason that the double tax and the whole concept of the property tax are being looked at is that we are being considered as an unfair tax jurisdiction. The reason that we got there is that some governments believe only in tax and spend. If that is the philosophy, that is why we are in the situation that we are in. All that we are trying to do now is to level the

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playing field with our respective provinces around us so that people look at New Brunswick, not as a province that they cannot afford to live in, they cannot afford to build in, and they cannot afford to invest in, but as a province that they want to be in. Thank you.

Ms. Rogers (Moncton South, L): Mr. Speaker, some governments think we should invest only in those who need it the most. We also want to help those in New Brunswick who are vulnerable. This is not only an opportunity to help private-sector apartment owners to put more money into the renovation and upkeep of their buildings and to build more. This kind of policy, which would tie the elimination—the full and immediate elimination—of double property tax to apartment owners who give some of their units to affordable housing, helps both, Mr. Speaker. It helps the vulnerable, and it helps the private sector to grow. I am wondering still whether the Premier would support such a motion.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member opposite for the question. She and I have had this conversation in the past, and it is worthy of further discussion. Certainly, I think there is a middle ground that we can come to on this. I believe that the initiative that has already been implemented by the Minister of Finance and the Premier is a really good start. But, you know, in our government, we have increased the housing budget by \$9 million more this year over last year. We are building, in our three-year strategy, 151 affordable units, which is 10 more per year than the previous government.

Look, we know and we appreciate the need for affordable housing, and we are so happy that the private sector wants to come to the table on this. I believe that we should consider having some incentives for those businesses who want to build affordable units and incite them to do it. We will do that on a case-by-case basis, and we will start to have those conversations. I would welcome that collaboration with the member opposite. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I like that plan.

The other day, I asked the Minister of Finance about his plan to ensure that the tax break for the double-tax reduction would trickle down to tenants who, in this province, pay ridiculously high rent. The answer, unfortunately, was less than encouraging. It was a wait-and-see approach. Mr. Speaker, crossing our fingers and hoping that landlords pass some of these savings along to tenants is not a plan. I would like to press the Minister of Finance here again. Will he commit to a rental freeze on rates to ensure not just that landlords are receiving the benefit, but also that tenants who need it the most are seeing some benefit from that tax reduction?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. We have been talking to the apartment association about how landlords will work with this situation

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where extra money is going to be coming into their hands. We certainly confirmed that we are looking at a rental review where we will take a deep look into what people are paying and how this is going to affect the market. That is where we are going with it at this time. The rental review will certainly happen.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Another tax reduction that we see in the budget is something that we have called for in the reduction of the commercial property tax to spur business growth and alleviate some of the financial burden for small and medium businesses here in New Brunswick. The difference is that our plan for tax reduction also included tax classes for municipalities, which may include machinery and equipment, to ensure that large industry is paying fair and reasonable taxes.

Mr. Speaker, the Irvings of the world, the Costcos of the world, the Home Depots of the world, and NB Power, which needs to get its own fiscal house in order—all these entities—do not need tax breaks. Small and medium businesses need tax breaks. My question, again, is for the Minister of Finance. Will he ensure that the municipalities have tax classes to offset the breaks that large industry will receive from this tax reduction?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. This actually does help medium and small businesses tremendously: 83% of the businesses that will be benefiting from this tax relief are under \$400 000—83%—and 93% are under \$1 million. This is helping the middle class and the small and medium-sized businesses. We are also doing a tax assessment of large industry along the way. We want to make sure that it is paying its fair share. But in the meantime, please know that 93% of the recipients have properties valued at less than \$1 million and 83% have properties valued at less than \$400 000, so it is the small and medium-sized businesses.

HIRING

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Like most New Brunswickers, I was appalled by the recent hiring of the Executive Director of the New Brunswick Public Library Service. New Brunswick libraries are working. A recent report found that library users in New Brunswick are overwhelmingly satisfied with the service that they receive, and the quality of the collections is key to that success.

To maintain a strong library system, it must be run by someone with the relevant qualifications and appropriate experience. Clearly, the government has made a mistake here, putting someone lacking any formal experience or education to administer our public library system. I bet he does not even have a library card—by the way, I do. Will the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour admit that this was a mistake and ensure that someone with a background that would qualify that person for this job,



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such as a master's degree in library science, for example, is hired to run our important public library service, which is a bedrock of our communities?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will reiterate some of the things that I said publicly last week when I spoke to the media on this issue. Very clearly, this was done through the *Civil Service Act*. My former deputy minister made the appointment. I have complete confidence in that individual, my deputy minister. I can tell you that she followed the process. The Talent Management Program was used, and it has been used throughout the years to move people around throughout government. That is exactly what happened here.

Having said that, I understand that there is some public concern here, and that is why the Premier and I have spoken to the department of human resources. We are actually currently having a review of the Talent Management Program, just to make sure that it does what it is supposed to do. If there can be any improvements made to that program, we will do that, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

NORTHERN NEW BRUNSWICK

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, even though I am quite relieved to see that the budget includes continued funding for economic development in the north, a plan should be developed locally to steer investments in that region.

When I toured New Brunswick in February, I saw how much the people from the north of the province felt abandoned. They are finding that Fredericton is always getting in the way of their development initiatives, which are based on their ideas and local assets.

Will the Premier direct the Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation to support the local development of a regional economic strategy for northern New Brunswick?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, I think that since the closure of the smelter, there has been a huge amount of activity, working with the port of Belledune and business leaders in that community, to find the next best thing for that region. There has been a lot of effort in the reporting. I think that we get an update on what is happening there, so we are putting extensive effort in that regard.

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I think the idea of being able to have economic growth in our rural areas, no matter where they are in our province, is basically having an economic plan that has a sustainable 20- or 30-year vision. We have the same amount of money in the system, and it is to help spur economic growth in regions that need it the most. But the purpose of having economic growth is not economic growth until the money runs out. It is economic growth that is built on a vision of 20 or 30 years. In the coming weeks and months, you are going to see the plan in action, and I am excited about that very thing, Mr. Speaker.

HOUSING

Ms. Rogers (Moncton South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The lack of affordable housing is not a problem unique to New Brunswick. In fact, other jurisdictions have also legislated the private sector to come to the plate. What better way to incentivize the private sector than to offer more affordable housing, to invest in its properties to give it a break on the provincial property tax, and to do so now? This would create more affordable housing for hardworking New Brunswickers.

I am asking the Premier: Do you really want us to vote for another tax break for corporate giants and leave out protection for affordable housing for New Brunswickers? We are seeing a shortage in affordable housing. We are seeing rents rising and rising. Both younger and older working New Brunswickers cannot afford their rents. Should we support tax breaks for big corporations or for people with low incomes who are working hard in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to present that our budget does a lot of what the member opposite was just talking about. You know, budgets are meant to be fair. I think that we have created a very, very, very good budget that supports the needs in our community along with the needs of our business community, which raises our stability.

The member opposite and I have talked about taxes for those property owners who want to invest in affordable housing. That is why we have our new strategic 10-year plan, bilateral agreement, with the federal government, with a three-year initiative for 151 units—10 more units than the previous government built. We are going to use every opportunity that we can to increase the affordable housing stock. We will do that collaboratively with our colleagues. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. When we take into consideration that the investment in this budget does not even bring it up to the cuts that were imposed last year... It has not even been brought up to what it was. You are making it look as if you are investing, but with what you cut, it is not even yet. There are people who are really struggling and trying to get subsidized apartments, and you have cut those as well. It is unreal to see what is happening.

Julie Gaudet, an advocate for New Brunswickers living with disabilities, pointed out that the increase in social assistance rates amounts to \$33 per month for those certified as blind, deaf, or disabled. This leaves New Brunswick with the lowest rates for single adults with disabilities in Canada. Considering all the influx of money coming from the federal government, does the minister think that she may be able to do better to help those New Brunswickers living with disabilities and help them get out of deep poverty?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): I appreciate the question, Mr. Speaker. I think that it is really important to understand that when I was in the David Alward government, we doubled the social assistance for single employable people—doubled it. This year, we have increased the social assistance rates for those who are single employable people and those who are on disability, with the reason being that we are doing a review of the social assistance profile so that we can truly understand where these monies need to be put.

I am not saying that we are done. But what we need to understand is that for four years, the previous government did zero—zero. I appreciate where the members opposite are coming from. I would advocate for more as well. We would love to do more, and we are going to see whether we can do more. We are going to see where those needs truly are. I know that those living with disability and singles are certainly the ones who need it, and that is where we started.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I wonder whether we can go back and remember the Informal Caregiver Benefit that really helped those living with disabilities. This government cut that \$107 per month and did not even show any care or concern—none. That is the thing. That is the difference. Over here, we care about people. We do not consider New Brunswickers to be just pawns and numbers.

You talk about increasing it, but you are not even bringing it up to what it was. It is smoke and mirrors, and they are drastic cuts. What you are doing is implementing that on the most vulnerable people that live in New Brunswick. It is high time that you looked at these people in New Brunswick who need that hand up and genuinely cared about them. It is time for you to invest more.

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Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, that is spoken from a member of a government that never planned beyond two months. That government implemented a benefit and did not have any money to give it. Not only that, but it did not actually ensure that the benefit would go to the people who needed it.

I understand that some people who needed it got it. I did not like the fact that we had to take that money and give it to 15 000 home support workers who would support more New Brunswickers. It is a decision, Mr. Speaker. It is leadership.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Order.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): It is taking hard decisions and moving forward with them and not kicking them down the road as the previous government always did. I know it is not easy, and I have learned to accept the fact that I am imperfect. But I will challenge my record of 16 months to their 4 years.