

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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POLICE INVESTIGATIONS

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, a terrible tragedy occurred in Edmundston last week, and we are very saddened by it. A young 26-year-old Indigenous woman, Chantel Moore, was shot and killed during what was reported as a wellness check performed by police. Can the Premier give an update on the investigation into this incident, particularly with regard to the steps taken to ensure the independence of the investigation?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question. Yes, indeed, it was a very tragic situation a week or so ago. The situation in relation to the investigation at this point is that the Quebec authorities are doing a full investigation of the incident, working with the Edmundston police. Normally, we do not have an independent investigative unit here in New Brunswick. We have used Nova Scotia people in the past, and in this situation, they were not available. But the Quebec investigation folks were, and that is now happening. I, as well, am obviously looking there for answers—answers so that we all can understand how we can do better in the future.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is important for the public to know the facts about this matter. It is also important to see how it could have been avoided, so that it does not happen again in New Brunswick. Can we expect the results of this investigation to be made public with recommendations on how this could be avoided in the future?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Yes, we need to have all the information available to us. I do not know at this stage what can be made public or cannot be made public, but I do want to have the same assurances myself. I would say to the Leader of the Opposition and to my colleagues here that we want to know the details. I want to know the details. To what extent they can be made public, I cannot say at this point in time. But the purpose of this independent evaluation is to get to the very bottom of the situation in all aspects so that we understand what happened, what were the reasons, what could be mitigated going forward, and what could be changed. I would look for recommendations to come out of this to help us in a new direction.

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[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

This horrible incident has raised difficult questions about the relationships between our police forces and our Indigenous communities. Are we engaging the leaders of our Indigenous communities on the breadth or scope of the investigation?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you again for the question. I cannot speak directly as to who is going to be engaged in this, but I would think that, most assuredly, they will indeed be involved. But that will be up to the investigative authorities because all information is to be uncovered to understand what happened, why, and what can be prevented. My understanding is that it will be a full-scope, independent evaluation with no stone left unturned as to what actually happened in this situation and, as importantly, what can be done in the future to prevent any sort of similar occurrence.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, New Brunswick does not have its own provincial unit to investigate serious incidents involving police. The Premier mentioned that in his answer to the first question. This makes it necessary to call on out-of-province investigators to look into such incidents. Last year, it was reported that the province was considering having its own unit of this kind. Is this still being considered, or does the government agree with the way things are currently being done?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Again, that has not been something that I have had any real discussion on in terms of our having our own independent investigation unit. I do think that this is an area in which we can have cooperation between provinces anywhere in the country, as such. I think that the area of independence is heightened with other provinces helping and having the ability to come in with a totally new look at what is happening and asking all the pertinent questions. I do not know that having our own unit would bring any particular additional value to this process. I can ask detailed questions to find out whether it was something that was pursued or looked at, but I am not familiar with it. It has not been anything that I have been involved with in discussions in my time in office here.

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GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Ms. Rogers (Moncton South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Due to COVID-19, the Service New Brunswick centres that serve the public shut down with everything else, which, of course, was understandable. But they have been very slow to reopen, for some reason. I just want to be clear. There are more than 30 Service New Brunswick centres in the province. My question is this: Are they all reopening and offering the exact same services that they did before the pandemic or not? A clear yes or no would be nice.

Hon. S. Wilson (Moncton Southwest, Minister of Service NB, Minister responsible for Women's Equality, PC): Thank you very much for that question. It gives me an opportunity to tell New Brunswickers just how proud I am of Service New Brunswick employees and how they have stepped up to the plate. Mr. Speaker, they have missed one day, when they were not at work, when COVID-19 started. They have been working in those offices every day. As you know, we have been taking calls online, and it is by appointment only. We have 33 service centres in the province, and right now, we have 10 open to the public by appointment only. They are there doing the work.

They have stepped up to the plate to do the COVID-19 help line. They have been doing that work, and that is why we do not have as many people as we need in our service centres to reopen them all right away. It is all being looked at. There is going to be a gradual opening. But, unlike other provinces, we have stayed open. We have been there serving the public, and I am proud of the work that they have done. Thank you.

Ms. Rogers (Moncton South, L): Thank you to the minister. But, Mr. Speaker, I would like to know whether the minister would share with the House a detailed list showing us clearly which Service New Brunswick centres are opening and when. I mean fully opening so that the public can be served. The private sector, for example, is reopening and doing its best to restart the economy to serve New Brunswickers. It is using COVID-19 measures to mitigate the spread of the disease, so I am wondering why government is not leading by example here.

Hon. S. Wilson (Moncton Southwest, Minister of Service NB, Minister responsible for Women's Equality, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to correct the information. We have been open. We have been serving people. They call in, on the line, and they are served. If they need to go into an office... As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, Service New Brunswick offers 429 services. We can do all of them online, and if you cannot do it by computer, we can do it through the telephone. Everybody has a telephone. There are only 30 of those services where people need to go into a centre to be helped. But we have been open. There are 10 centres open, and some will be gradually reopening soon, in the next couple of weeks. It will be a process. We are looking at what we can do to best serve the public. Again, I am proud of the work that is being done.

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[*Translation*]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Mr. Speaker, even if the minister mentioned this, I want to remind her that the offices in Kedgwick and Saint-Quentin are currently closed, so people in these communities are being asked to go to the Campbellton office. I would like the minister to understand that the people of Kedgwick and Saint-Quentin are in a yellow zone, unlike the people of Campbellton, who are currently in an orange zone because of COVID-19.

People are frustrated about this directive, and the minister answered me, again this morning, saying: Well, do not send people to Campbellton, but to Woodstock or Edmundston. Alternatively, they can call the office.

I would like the minister to tell me this: What offices are going to reopen and when? In addition, I would like to know whether she herself has tried the toll-free number she is recommending so strongly.

[*Original*]

Hon. S. Wilson (Moncton Southwest, Minister of Service NB, Minister responsible for Women's Equality, PC): We recognize that sometimes when we call in the number, there is a wait time, but as I said, people can call the number. Service Canada sometimes has a four-hour wait. Ours is up to 10 or 15 minutes. Yes, we have had difficulty with some of our old equipment that we have been trying to work with. There are times when people do have to wait longer. We have had problems with the lines for a couple of days, actually, but they still have to call the number. It is the process right now. We are dealing with COVID-19, but we are still there doing the work. If they need help, call that number. They will be assisted over the phone. Maybe there are things that they do not need to go to a centre for. Those things are being done now, and the work is getting done.

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Mr. Speaker, last week, people who advocate on behalf of the province's more vulnerable were surprised to find out about sweeping changes in the Department of Social Development with the reduction of management zones from eight to four. Claude Snow, the social justice advocate, says there had been no announcement that the government was going to change the regions into administrative zones. They did not give us a chance to give our comments and warn the government about the possible effects of such a restructuring. Can the minister tell the House which of the groups that advocate for the poor, the mentally ill, and others in New Brunswick that she consulted with on this decision?

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Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think it is really important to make it understood as to what exactly is happening with regard to the so-called sweeping changes. Eight regions were taken to four zones. This was facilitated by a number of retirements and a couple of regional directors who had also applied for promotions, which were realized, within central office. The four zones are now going to be directed by executive directors. Those executive directors are going to be members of the senior management of the department. Every Monday, they will be part of the senior management meetings, working much closer and intimately with the department as a whole. It will be better service with regard to how policies are implemented, and it will give them more input. It will give them a greater voice, Mr. Speaker. This was a very good move.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is not a very good move when you are cutting jobs from rural regions in the province. Miramichi will not be better served by somebody sitting in an office in Fredericton that does not understand what is happening. Not only did this happen, but it happened during a pandemic without any thought or consultation about how hard all the people in Social Development have been working and about how they have been putting their own lives at risk to serve the most vulnerable. To up and cut this without any talk is unreal, Mr. Speaker. As Claude Snow said: On paper, it is a rational plan because they were simply working with data, but on a practical and functional level, it is something else. It will create injustices and inequalities.

Some people have compared this to the ill-fated health care reforms that targeted rural New Brunswick not that long ago, which this government also said was very good news. This means less service for people in this area. Why is this different from those cuts?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): First of all, Mr. Speaker, the opposition would want to define these as “cuts”, but no one has lost a job. We worked with retirements, and we elevated others to management positions, into central office. If we want to do everything the same as we have done for years... This setup has been the way it is for literally years.

The zones are now of equal size and components. The managers are well skilled. The executive director positions that are now being put in place will have direct contact with central office every single Monday. Every single week that these meetings are held, they are a part of it. Their voices have now gotten bigger, better, and more influential, and the delivery of services is going to be more realized on a level playing field throughout the province. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): There is no point of order during question period.

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Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Mr. Speaker, let me just be sure to let New Brunswickers know that when we go from eight to four, that is a cut—period.

The announcements, such as this one, that this government has made during the pandemic are unreal. Also, the announcement—the very sad announcement... The day that we had to announce our first death in New Brunswick was also the same day that you announced the opening of visits to other nursing homes outside the Restigouche region. Not only did you make that announcement, but also you made it without letting the nursing homes know you were making it so that they could be prepared—prepared to get the residents ready to go out to visit and prepared to bring them back in. In fact, most nursing homes were not able to do that the next day. I know because my father-in-law lives in a nursing home and my mother-in-law called to find out and was told the nursing home did not know. When are you going to start consulting with New Brunswickers?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I personally asked for the phone calls to every administrator to take place two days before our announcement. The member opposite wants to say that we announced the opening of visitation, but we announced that homes could prepare, plan, and be ready for the opening of visitation. We made it very clear to each and every home that this is under its control. Every home needs to be prepared. All homes need to feel comfortable that they are able to protect the health and safety of not only their residents but also their employees.

Mr. Speaker, it has been a long road for families who have residents in nursing homes. Our loved ones have been separated for a very long time, and we have to start planning for a new normal. That is what we are going to do. No nursing home and no long-term care facility will ever be pushed into making a move that they are not comfortable with. We will support them.

EDUCATION

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La-Vallée, Deputy Speaker, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Speaking of stealthy changes, another stealthy change that came as a complete surprise was the elimination of diversity and respect leads from the Anglophone school system. Given the climate that is going on in the world and the need for change, is this not a role that our education system should be expanding and embracing? My question is obviously for the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the member up above for the question. The positions were not eliminated. The members opposite are likely aware that some time over the past number of months, this province, this country, and this world have

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dealt with something called COVID-19. This has transformed the way in which government services have to be delivered, in the same way that it has changed the ways that all of us have to live our lives.

The honourable members are well aware because I have raised this issue and honourable members, when they were on this side of this House, raised the same issue around the shortage of teachers in this province at the best of times. Mr. Speaker, we are no longer in the best of times. We are facing a global pandemic, and in the face of that global pandemic, we have to make adjustments to the way our schools are run to make sure that we can adjust to the new normal that my honourable colleague just referenced. We are asking people who work in districts, people who work in departmental offices, and people who have experience in the education system to be in classrooms, which is where we need our teachers in the face of this pandemic, to continue their educational journey. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La-Vallée, Deputy Speaker, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for the answer. With the climate that we find ourselves in, we see marches all across the States, all across Europe, and all across the world asking that we embrace diversity. Does the minister at least acknowledge that it is important that we teach our children and that we teach our young students the importance of diversity and the importance of equality? Would the minister at least acknowledge that part?

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable member for the question. Absolutely, yes—absolutely. We need to embrace a New Brunswick that welcomes people from around the world, that recognizes our citizens and all their diversities and strengths—New Brunswickers who bring to the table different backgrounds and histories and different experiences. We need to build a province that encourages everyone to move to New Brunswick once we can open our borders safely and securely and offer a province with a thriving economy, with a government that does what it does best and a private sector generating the wealth that we all need.

The diversity of people whom we will see come to this province from places such as South Korea and from countries across Africa... People will look to make this province home. People within this province who come from a variety of backgrounds and people with a variety of sexual orientations... We welcome everyone in this province. That is what makes New Brunswick a great province, and I think I can say for all members of the House that we celebrate that diversity. I thank the honourable...

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La-Vallée, Deputy Speaker, L): I thank the minister for his answer, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister feels that it is important and that it is something that we should be doing, will he then commit to introducing diversity and respect education into the curriculum in all schools and in all classrooms in this next school year?

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Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable member. Times are strange. I recall an honourable member in a lower place who looked similar referencing the need for no changes at all to be made in the face of what I believe were references to the minister's hasty efforts to transform the education system in this province. We needed calm, we needed stability, and we needed no changes at all because the team opposite had left things in such a superb shape when it left office.

Mr. Speaker, I have always been someone who is committed to action. I can say right now that we are going to be working to move ahead not just on the file that the honourable member references but also on a range of other changes. Unlike the honourable member's team, on this side of the House, we believe in action and we believe in moving forward in the best interests of our province's children. We will do it based on evidence. We will do it based on consultation like the green paper consultations that happened earlier this year and were widely heralded by people in the education system, the people who know best, as something unprecedented in the history of this province's system. We are going to keep moving, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the question.

POLICE INVESTIGATIONS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, last week, New Brunswickers were horrified to learn that Chantel Moore, an Indigenous woman and young mother, was shot dead by an Edmundston police officer. Family members from British Columbia have now arrived in New Brunswick to join her mother Martha and her daughter Gracie, and they need to know exactly what happened.

Chantel would not be dead. She should not be dead. The officer should not have her death on their conscience. Something went tragically wrong, and there must be answers to all the family's questions—not six months from now, but now. It is unacceptable and cruel for the family to have to wait for a final report to be prepared by Quebec's serious incident response team, which is accountable to Quebec, and reviewed behind closed doors until it finally will be made public. Will the Minister of Public Safety ensure that a preliminary report of findings be provided to the family and then, after that, made public before the end of this month?

Hon. Mr. Urquhart (Carleton-York, Minister of Public Safety, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As you can imagine, there is nothing harder than having to bury one of your children. I pass my sympathy out to the family. Especially when you are in a community like the Native community... As you know, my wife is also. I called Chief Bernard from the First Nation, and I made it very clear to her that we are doing everything we can. The unfortunate or difficult part of this... Everything is going to be investigated. The family is now here from around Canada, and we are with them at all times. But in an investigation, in the event that there

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are criminal actions or there are not, you cannot release a lot of information until you know what the story is. We have heard a lot of different situations.

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

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, New Brunswick does not have a serious incident response team—so it is difficult to control the time in which they are going to work on this—despite a recommendation for the creation of one in the Alphonse MacNeil report, which was submitted to the Minister of Public Safety just last October. At that time, the minister said he would bring together stakeholders within a month or two to discuss the feasibility of setting one of these things up. Chiefs of police have already indicated their support of the recommendation. We remain dependent on the serious incident response teams from other provinces, and without direct intervention from the Minister of Public Safety, it could be half a year or more before Chantel Moore’s family and the public have their questions answered about her shooting.

Will the Minister of Public Safety commit to this House that New Brunswick will have its own serious incident response team, properly constituted to reflect the diversity of our society and accountable to New Brunswickers, up and running by this September?

Hon. Mr. Urquhart (Carleton-York, Minister of Public Safety, PC): No, I am afraid that cannot happen. I wish it could. I wish I could do that. I have had the discussion with the honourable member, and I have had it with my department. I have serious concerns about how we answer in a police... I truly feel that we should have another party look after it. I am not sure that New Brunswick having its own is the right answer. My direction to my department, to my party, and to your groups is that I am looking at it and I want it moved forward. Everything has come to a grinding halt here. There is the possibility of a Maritime or an Atlantic party where we could have it. To be an expert in this field, you have to be working on these. Luckily, we do not have a whole lot of these files at the present time. But if we had a team that we could use in all three Maritime Provinces, I think we would be better served.

HIRING

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, before the pandemic, I always had great concern with workers from out of province coming in and, many times, taking jobs from New Brunswickers here, especially with such a high unemployment rate. But during the pandemic, the issue was raised even higher in my mind. We have received several calls in our office about “essential workers” coming into New Brunswick from out of province. My question is for the Premier. Do we know exactly how many essential workers there are in the province that are not from New Brunswick?



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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, we do. I do not know the number exactly, but these workers who come into the province have to set up through WorkSafeNB to ensure that they are following all the protocols. That does not mean that they isolate for 14 days before they go to work. It means that their workplace has been defined, that they know what area they are working in, and that they are isolated from other workers in the province. If that cannot be the case, then they do have to isolate for 14 days. But we are doing the same thing with our companies here as they move into other provinces, as well, to work or tender on contracts. It is part of starting up an economy. It is part of taking additional risks and getting our businesses up and running as they did in the past.

With regard to the point of having WorkSafeNB evaluate the site, the applications are made to WorkSafeNB. It evaluates the site, and it determines what protocols need to be in place to make it safe to operate. I can get the number of how many are here now, but I do not know that off the top of my head.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Premier for that answer. I would like to dig a little deeper down into that because it is not just the number of people and companies from out of province that are here working. The question is this: What deems them essential? If we have workers here in New Brunswick who can do the same jobs, is it not fair and right that we protect our own New Brunswick workers, especially considering the pandemic and the fact that we are closing our borders to everybody else? My question, again, is for the Premier. In terms of essential workers, how is that classified? What deems a worker essential to come in from outside New Brunswick to take jobs from New Brunswickers?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, I guess that it reminds me of the temporary foreign worker thing where I was trying to give more jobs to New Brunswickers. That did not seem to get as much support in the House, particularly, as it might have. In this case, businesses go out and tender their contracts and then people bid on them. It is part of opening up our economy.

There are also situations where it appears that some are using this particular pandemic and maybe saying: Well, I have the capability to do this. When, in the past, history would have shown that... Let's say that you are working at a mill or working at a plant and there are certain skill sets required to work at that plant. You bring a variety of people in. They can be different groups. Certainly, with any of these companies, we expect the majority of people they are using to be from New Brunswick or all the people they are using to be from New Brunswick, people who are actually trained and able to do the job.

There are specialties that are required from time to time and for project to project. They will bring in people from out of the province or maybe even out of the country in order to get their plants up and running or to do the speciality work. That is what I am told is the case here, and we would expect that to be followed.

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[*Translation*]

APPOINTMENTS

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

My colleague was talking about stealth changes. Well, talking of more stealth changes, we had a recent deputy minister shuffle. Unlike previous deputy minister shuffles, there was no news release announcing this change. The Deputy Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development is now also the deputy minister of the Environment and Local Government portfolios. This sounds a lot like the cat babysitting the canary. This decision clearly was made by the Premier.

We know that conflicts of interest stem not only from reality but also from perception. Will the Premier admit that those two departments clearly give the impression of at least perceived conflict of interest, where one is seen as a developer and the other one is seen as a regulator? Can the Premier see the conflict of interest here?

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the environment is not at any one department's sole discretion. It is up to all of government to look after our environment. In this particular case, a legal opinion was sought as to whether there was any concern about a conflict here. The advice was that we move forward with it because there was no perceived conflict of interest.

But, Mr. Speaker, I want to elaborate on another little particular point in relation to the Department of Natural Resources and Energy Development. It was not Environment. It was the Department of Natural Resources that made the largest contribution to conservation in the history of this province by going from 5% to 10% conserved land. Minister Holland deserves particular credit for making that happen. But it was the Department of Natural Resources that made that happen. Every department has a conscience, a conscious need, a responsibility, and an obligation to protect the environment of this fine province.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Question period is over.