

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**June 10, 2020**

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### CORONAVIRUS

**Mr. G. Arseneault** (Campbellton-Dalhousie, Opposition House Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank the Premier for the update yesterday on Zone 5 and for the work that is being done there. We know that there has been a very unfortunate outbreak of COVID-19 in Zone 5 and, as a result, the Premier has said that he strongly encourages people from that zone to stay at home as much as possible. It was made clear that residents of Zone 5 were allowed to travel outside the area for things such as work and essential services and for other reasons as well. However, we are hearing many stories of businesses in other health care zones that are asking for identification and refusing to let the citizens of Zone 5 enter their premises. Does the Premier find this type of discrimination acceptable here in New Brunswick? Are we not all in this together? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate that we have had this outbreak in Zone 5. We are doing everything we can, working with Public Health and all the many people in the health sector and beyond, to try to contain it within that region. The situation that we always knew we could be in was to have different pockets of the province be at different levels at different times, but we had not experienced that until just the past few weeks. The purpose is this: Let's ensure that our economy continues to grow. Let's deal with the situation locally, and let's hope that, as quickly as possible, we get back to the situation where we will once again be harmonious across the system.

With their businesses running, people are all very concerned about how they manage and how they deal with it. We have said that we encourage people to stay in their zone during this situation until we have it clearly identified. We understand, and we are not going to enforce those borders within our province. We are going to enforce the borders around our province. But I am encouraging people to really exercise caution, wear their masks, keep a safe distance, and follow all the rules.

**Mr. G. Arseneault** (Campbellton-Dalhousie, Opposition House Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I did not hear whether the Premier agrees with businesses barring Zone 5 residents from coming through their entrances.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, I think the Premier will agree with me that health care is an essential service. Again, I would point out that we have heard people in zone 5 are seeing their medical treatment and surgery scheduled in other regions cancelled just because they come from Restigouche.

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So, I ask the question again: Mr. Speaker, does the Premier find this kind of discrimination acceptable in New Brunswick? Who issued that directive? What is the Premier going to do to address this situation? Thank you.

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, what we are going to do to resolve it is to get Zone 5 back to where we all want to be in our province as fast as possible. You do that, not by entertaining more risk throughout the province, but by trying to contain it. That has been the philosophy from the very beginning: Can we contain an outbreak? Can we keep it localized? Can we manage it? Can we do all the contact tracing? And then can we isolate in order to prevent further transmission around the province?

That is our goal. I can understand the apprehension of businesses and why they want to know—is there is a chance that their businesses are going to close down? But I do not like this any better than anyone else. I certainly do not like discrimination of any kind anywhere in our province or beyond. The reality is that we are all trying to raise the bar in living with COVID-19. People have their own ways of doing that, but we are all conscious of the fact that we have to abide by certain rules, certain containment philosophies, in order to minimize the risk to the many. That is what is happening here. I am hopeful that the area gets up and running as soon as possible, but we do have a few more weeks to go.

**Mr. G. Arseneault** (Campbellton-Dalhousie, Opposition House Leader, L): I am very disappointed to hear that answer with regard to outside businesses and health care facilities that are run by the government refusing people essential services such as health care in our province.

Small and medium-sized businesses in Zone 5 are in financial shock at the present moment. Our citizens are working hard to respect all the regulations imposed by the orange phase. The prolonged isolation and discrimination by the surrounding communities are having a negative effect on the mental health of our residents. When will Zone 5 be returning to the yellow phase? What specific criteria do we need to meet in order to progress to that phase? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, earlier the great work of Public Health was spoken about, which I concur with. It will play a key role in the return to the next phase or the move back to where the rest of the province is at this point. The conditions around it are, of course, a period of time when we do not have any new cases, when we know exactly where the situation is, and when the new cases stop. That is not going to be the situation today. We still have issues that are growing. We are going to have to find a way to get that... Well, we believe that it is contained. That is a good thing.

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The more respect that the individuals have, the residents of the area... I commend them because I have seen great discipline in many sectors—not everywhere around the province but in many sectors—to follow the rules as we try to figure out how to work with COVID-19 and have our economy move up faster than that of anyone else. On that point, we have gone from about a 26% opening across the province to a 64% opening in record time. We have seen the results in rising employment statistics.

We are moving in the right direction. It is unfortunate that the Campbellton area is a little bit behind right now.

### INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

**Mrs. Harris** (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like, before I ask my question, to offer condolences to the family of the late Chantel Moore.

Today the chiefs of the Wolastoqey Nation in New Brunswick issued a call for an independent committee to review systemic bias against Indigenous people in New Brunswick's policing and justice systems. This is about not just the tragic death of Chantel Moore last week but a wider look at the issue here in New Brunswick. We believe that the request has merit and warrants support. Will the Premier order a truly independent look at this issue in New Brunswick?

**Hon. Mr. Urquhart** (Carleton-York, Minister of Public Safety, PC): Thank you for your question on this very important issue that is happening. I agree with you. These are two issues that have to be addressed. We are presently, as I was on the phone with my staff, sending out another letter to the chiefs to get together to look at the situation of the whole province and how we handle policing and our Indigenous people here in the province. We will be, hopefully, meeting. As you know, we have had a number of meetings on the reconciliation committees. I know these chiefs personally, and I am hoping that, within a very short period of time, we will be able to move forward with it.

**Mrs. Harris** (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): I am hoping that you will be moving forward with the independent committee to review. The chiefs say that the province's response on the issue in the wake of last week's tragedy has been "tone-deaf and condescending". That is an indication that the trust is broken with the government. The issue needs addressing.

This is not just about last week's tragic death. This is a much wider problem. As the chiefs stated, it is simply not good enough for the minister and his Cabinet colleagues to claim that dialogue is ongoing when it is not, to claim that a process is unbiased when it is not, and to tell Indigenous leaders to sit and wait while the communities continue to suffer from a broken system. Justice delayed is justice denied. The Cabinet has the power under the

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*Inquiries Act* to hold such an inquiry. Will this be brought to Cabinet for discussion and, most importantly, for action?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that we reacted very quickly with officials with the minister and the Department of Public Safety in order to have a full independent review of the unfortunate situation in Edmundston. There is a process that is involved to do this. It is extremely unfortunate—any loss of life is—that this was a young Indigenous woman. That does not mean that the whole system is broken, but it means that something went wrong, very seriously wrong that night. That is why the independent analysis is underway. That is why we have a review from, in this case, Quebec. They are looking at this in a whole new way by asking what happened here.

Mr. Speaker, if this leads to further national issues, national concerns, then, absolutely, let's go the distance and let's understand exactly what is required because too many incidents are happening that cannot be rationalized, justified, or warranted. We need to find the solution. But is this one? I hope that in the coming months, we will certainly know that.

**Mrs. Harris** (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Mr. Speaker, tone-deaf and condescending. I can understand why they are saying that. It is unreal to see what is happening. There needs to be action, not just talk. As they have stated, it is not because of this one incident. This has been going on, and we, as leaders, need to realize that we need to listen, we need to learn, and we need to act. That is what these Indigenous leaders are asking you, Mr. Premier, to do. Please listen to their request, and most importantly, act upon it.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): We know that the member opposite is very quick to jump on any particular situation to try to make more of what is already happening, Mr. Speaker. What is already happening is a fully independent investigation of this situation. We have a very unfortunate situation right here in New Brunswick, right here in northwest New Brunswick, in Edmundston, and we are reacting very clearly through an independent analysis to find out exactly what happened there. That is the proper process to follow. It may turn into more than this, Mr. Speaker. It may turn out that this was an isolated incident that was very unfortunate and very untimely and, certainly, one where lessons can be learned to avoid any future cases like this.

But the process is unfolding, and for the member opposite to make it a national issue at a time when we have a very localized concern here that we are addressing immediately... Let's focus on what we have to deal with. Let's decide, with the lessons learned there, Mr. Speaker, where we go next. Thank you.

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[*Translation*]

### CULTURE

**Ms. Thériault** (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture. In this time of pandemic, arts and culture, which are strong pillars of our society, were among the first sectors affected and seem to be the last that will reopen as the lockdown is progressively lifted.

Although I appreciate the government's initiative to establish programs that provide artists with opportunities to be paid for performances on social media, we cannot sustain this indefinitely. We need real personal experiences, and, moreover, artists need to get back to work.

Since Friday, the government has been allowing churches to hold gatherings of 50 people with social distancing. Why do we not allow performance venues to do the same? What is the difference? The arts are as necessary for some people as religion is for others. Arts and culture foster personal, social, and economic development, so why not reopen churches and performance venues at the same time?

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, PC): Thank you very much for your question today in the people's House.

[*Original*]

Thank you very much for that question. I appreciate it. Mr. Speaker, the member is correct in saying that the arts and culture sector is a very, very important part of the fabric of our heritage in New Brunswick and that it also makes a substantial economic impact in the province.

I think that everyone will agree that the number one priority is making sure that the well-being of the people in the province is at the forefront of this. Every opportunity that we have had to support the arts and culture industry has been taken, with programs that we have rolled out from the department and also by working with federal counterparts on programs that they have rolled out for that sector as well. Certainly, every case, every opportunity, that comes up is reviewed with the chief medical officer, the Department of Public Safety, and Cabinet, and these are things that we are discussing all the time.

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[*Translation*]

### TOURISM

**Mr. J. LeBlanc** (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We think that, despite the difficulties encountered this year, tourism is a sector that is extremely important to the economy of our province. Yesterday, tourism industry officials published a letter, addressed to the Premier himself, in which they state that 40 000 jobs are at risk in New Brunswick if the province does not intervene to help them.

We know that New Brunswick has been very reluctant to support the economy, doing less than all other provinces in Canada on that front. Prince Edward Island, a province with which New Brunswick is competing in tourism, was quick to intervene to help this important industry, by announcing a \$66-million aid package specifically for tourism operators a month ago.

Mr. Speaker, my question is this: Is New Brunswick considering specific assistance for tourism? Or is the message to people who work in the industry...

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am aware of the letter that was sent because it was copied to a number of the ministers.

You know, Mr. Speaker, there are some things that the letter agrees with regarding how we are acting in the province. It says that it fully supports the efforts that have been made to ensure the health and safety of all Canadian residents and that remains the first priority. That is our Priority 1. Second, the letter talks about wanting to avoid a second wave of the virus, and it is certain that reasonable measures can be taken to help mitigate that risk. We agree with that too. That is one of our goals. The third thing the letter does is point out how important tourism is here in New Brunswick.

Tourism employs approximately 40 000 people in the province. We are making sure that many of those 40 000 people will be reemployed this summer as time marches on and that we work with the industry in various ways and with the individual sectors and companies so that they can open and hire some of those employees.

**Mr. J. LeBlanc** (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Do not forget, actions speak louder than words. We believe that if competing provinces are helping the tourism industry, they will be better positioned to rebound and New Brunswick will once again become the drive-through province. Let's not forget the bad decision that was made



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before the pandemic that gutted the tourism budget, which was to appoint an inexperienced, political deputy minister of tourism who promised a new tourism strategy that never materialized. Does the minister not agree that not doing more now for tourism puts the industry in serious risk in this province? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, PC): Once again, Mr. Speaker, the Liberals use an opportunity to attack an individual hired by the government. The member across the way talks about actions speaking louder than words. How about the action when we repaved the road to Parlee Beach in his riding? Is that an action that he does not think worthy of note? I stood with the MLA when I announced that road. He could have asked all these questions there, but again, he wants to use the political arena here to make some points.

The fact of the matter is that we are working with corporations. We are working with companies. We are working with the association. The various departments, which I could point to here on the floor and in the gallery today, are working with the various stakeholders to make sure that those people who are employed in the tourism sector will have an opportunity. We do not know exactly the percentage that will be recalled. The last chapter is not working, but Mr. Speaker, we are working very hard to make as many people employed as possible.

## APPOINTMENTS

**Mr. Bourque** (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, I think we need to set the record straight here and find out what the facts are. The Premier has said on more than one occasion now that he believes the appointment of the same person as deputy minister of the Department of Natural Resources and Energy Development and the Department of Environment and Local Government was a temporary measure and that he was in an acting role. However, the order in council making the appointment, dated May 26, 2020, does not state that it is an acting role, which it normally would. In the past, when acting deputies were appointed, the order in council specifically stated this. Which is it, Mr. Premier? Is it what you have said previously, or is it what is written over here?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, every member on the opposite side would know that the deputy ministers are put in different roles at different times and, in this case, consolidating two departments and one deputy taking over is quite normal. It is an acting role for now. It may be a permanent role in the future. I do not know at this stage. What we do know is that we have learned a lot through this whole process of how we can work together as departments and how different deputies can work together in joining departments with two ministers still in place and how that works, just to make sure that we do not stall from one department to another.

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As we look at ways to make better results come out of the government and to allow people to do their jobs, we have learned through this COVID-19 experience that there is a whole different way to get results for the citizens of this province. There is a whole different way to improve the services that we deliver every day. We have also learned through this that, it is not only us and the elected officials who are here representing our different regions, but we have a lot of great people in the civil service who are just wanting to do a better job. And we are allowing them to do it.

### MEDICARE

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, I was very pleased to see that e-visits would be covered under the provincial Medicare program. E-visit patient care is modern, efficient, and streamlined for doctors to diagnose simple ailments and renew prescriptions. However, I was discouraged to hear about Medicare reducing payments for these visits, which runs the risk of some of these services to be scaled back or shut down altogether. My question is for the Premier: Why did Medicare scale back payments for physicians performing e-visits when they are working so well?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. I guess I am not sure that I understand it exactly in terms of scaling back because we very much encourage the e-visits and the process. I know there are discussions about how the pay scale works for each different one. I know that is happening right now. But, certainly, we are encouraging that to continue because we feel that is the access to primary care and the access for more patients to be able to get primary care when they need it. We also feel that we are not the ones who dictate to the Medical Society and the physicians when it needs to be a physical visit versus a virtual visit. But I am certainly with the leader of the People's Alliance that we need to have more access to primary care and a way to do that going forward is with the virtual care, which we have learned with the experience through COVID-19. If it is scaled back, I would want to know the reasons why, and I will ask those questions, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): I want to thank the Premier for that answer. It is a reality that when e-visits came out, Medicare decided to cover the cost during the pandemic, but we have learned that e-visits are greatly used. I think it is something like 77% of New Brunswickers approve of this form of health care. I think we are all in agreement that it is a good system. Where we may differ is that when you reduce payments, when you pay doctors a certain amount to do e-visits and then abruptly reduce that amount significantly, then doctors will be less likely to do e-visits and will revert back to the old draconian system of in-person visits. Again, I would ask the Premier whether it is cheaper for patients to go to ERs and clog our ERs as they were before the pandemic or whether it makes more sense to keep the pay rate at what it was during the pandemic and allow e-visits to continue in the manner that they have been going.



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**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you again for the question. I think that what is important to recognize here is that, as technology advances, we need to take advantage of that technology. That means, if you can do 50 e-visits in a day, should they all be at the same rate as a personal visit? At the end of the day, how do you at all manage that?

Technology will allow us all to do things quicker, faster, better, and that is what we are learning through this COVID-19 experience. For meetings, we are not travelling as we used to, with airline tickets. Everything is down, lower. We are doing more virtual meetings online. Yes, it is cheaper, but we are not sending a hotel the costs, saying we would have stayed there.

I think the point is that we take advantage of technology. The rate needs to reflect what that means. It is unfortunate if the rate is going to change the attitude of medical professionals about whether they need to see a person or whether they do not. We rely on our professionals to make decisions based on the need, and we need to ensure that can continue.

## GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

**Ms. Mitton** (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We hear it all the time: Small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of our economy. Yet many are struggling to stay afloat due to COVID-19. From restaurant owners to retail stores, many are grappling with reopening their businesses. In my hometown of Sackville, the Black Duck Cafe and the Thunder & Lightning pub both closed last month. Others are at risk of closing. We need to protect and support entrepreneurs so that they have a fighting chance.

The P.E.I. government is offering nonrepayable grants of up to \$2 500 to entrepreneurs, not-for-profits, and NGOs. This will help them access professional advice and support to adapt or recover from the impacts of COVID-19. Will the Premier commit to implementing a similar program in New Brunswick to help small businesses and nonprofits get over the many hurdles of reopening their doors to the public?

**Hon. Mrs. M. Wilson** (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, PC): Thank you very much for the question. This gives me the opportunity, Mr. Speaker, to go back to a couple of weeks ago when the official opposition was talking about how there were not going to be any political statements in the House during this time. The next day, the member for Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston stood up and said that it is only thanks to the federal government that New Brunswick businesses have managed to remain open today.



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Mr. Speaker, I would like to point out that our government, if anybody remembers, put \$50 million on the table for the business sector here in the province. I would also like to remind everybody that our public servants worked day and night, seven days per week, to identify the gaps—many gaps—in the federal program, one being that if you did not have a payroll between \$50 000 and \$1 million at the time, you heard: Do not call us; we will call you. Here in New Brunswick, we made sure that all those businesses were able to apply for our programs.

**Ms. Mitton** (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It seems that the minister answered a question from another week. I did not hear a response to my question. I have another question to add. The COVID-19 pandemic has also had severe consequences for those working in arts, culture, and media, as we have heard a lot about today. Artisans, artists, writers, performers, and those who work behind the scenes with them have seen their opportunities to work and their incomes plummet. This includes those who work in independent and local media.

On March 25, the *Sackville Tribune-Post*, one of only two English-language weeklies in New Brunswick that are not owned by Brunswick News, announced that it would be suspending publication for 12 weeks and laying off its staff. The owner of the *Tribune-Post* is SaltWire. There are many questions to be asked about the arts, culture, and media, but today I will ask this: Will the Premier take action to ensure the survival of small independent newspapers and media so that New Brunswickers have access to local sources of news?

**Hon. Mrs. M. Wilson** (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, PC): Thank you very much for the question. Mr. Speaker, I just want to make sure that everybody understands that these programs that we have put in place are there for any businesses here in the province to contact us. Do not hesitate to start with our Business Navigator line, where we have received over 3 300 calls at this point and where we provide assistance to any businesses here in New Brunswick. If they have questions at all, we will direct them where needed. I also want to make sure that our businesses recognize that we know how important they are to our economy. They are the top priority. We also have to be ready for the second wave this fall. We know it is coming, so we have to make sure that we are well prepared. We also keep in mind that, with everything we do, we have to be accountable to the taxpayers of this wonderful province. Thank you.

[Translation]

## APPOINTMENTS

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



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[Original]

Well, let's come back to this deputy minister here. Yesterday, the Premier clearly said that it is okay to be in this current situation because a recent decision from Natural Resources and Energy Development shows that it can self-regulate. So there is no problem. There does not need to be a regulator because this department did a good thing? How twisted is that logic, Mr. Speaker? We believe that this is a terrible idea, as stated yesterday. We think that this will effectively drown out environmental voices on issues related to things such as forestry practices.

I have another question, though. If the Premier is all about saving money—it is all about the money—and if we have one deputy in two departments, why do we need two ministers? Let's have just one minister for both departments. Let's have just one political staff and one administrative staff. We only need one. Let's keep the logic.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, this is rich. I was thinking back to when we came in here. I guess going through the history, which some will know better than I, there were two ministers in each department and departments were added. This is kind of the reverse to that. I recall coming in where we had multiple ministers in Finance—Finance, Treasury, and HR, which were all in one in 2014. They are now all in one again.

It is not about saving money, Mr. Speaker. It is about the future of the province, and it is about having a future.

(Interjections.)

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

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): With the businesses that we talk to and the businesses that we reflect about, given the situation that we are facing today, do you know what they want? They want to know where they are going to be next year and the year after and the year after. My concern, when I look at this, is on what is going to happen with our transfer payments, Mr. Speaker, when nothing is left in Ottawa. I know that is not a conscious effort on behalf of my colleagues that I am looking at here because it does not matter to them. For them, it is just about today. Well, for me, it is about tomorrow.