

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions this morning are for the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour.

As you know, the employees of the Red Pine landfill, in our region, have been locked out for several months. I am going to ask my question this morning on behalf of the people of Allardville. As you know, all waste from the Chaleur area, Restigouche, Miramichi, and the Acadian Peninsula is disposed of at this landfill. What the people from the Allardville area want to know at this time is whether the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour can update us on the negotiations.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Leader of the Opposition and I have spoken on this issue privately before. I just want to assure all members in the House that mediation services have been put in place, which is the role of our department. Obviously, through the whole COVID-19 process, that has been affected. But those mediation services are in place, and I can assure the Leader of the Opposition that everyone wants to see an end to this dispute. I know that he does, as does the Department of Labour. Everything that needs to be in place from the department's perspective is in place, and we will continue to work with both sides of the dispute as we move forward.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. People are also wondering... Strikebreakers have come onto the site. Lately, several students have also come into the site to work. People very often ask me whether these people who do not have the training to work in such a place—this is specialized work, after all—are working in a safe environment. This is my question for the minister: Can he tell us whether these people are safe when they are working on this site, despite their lack of experience?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, in this COVID-19 environment, all employers are required to put a work plan in place, and WorkSafeNB can come in at any

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time and ask to see that work plan. I would say that this is the case for all employers in this province, including the one that we are talking about here.

I would say to the member opposite that if he has heard of any potential violations with this or any other employer, then he and I should pass those on to WorkSafeNB. I will not speak about any one particular employer, but at the end of the day, if you ever have any concerns like that, let's talk about them. Let's work with WorkSafeNB if there needs to be an investigation or if somebody needs to go in there. I would say that about any employer.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs. First of all, I want to commend the minister for his principled statements yesterday in recognizing that there is a need for an inquiry into discrimination against Indigenous people in the police and justice systems. I would like to ask him this: What do you intend to do to support the call to action by the Wolastoqiyik leaders?

Hon. Mr. Stewart (Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. The first thing I am doing is listening to chiefs and elders. I will be attending the peace rally in Edmundston. I think it is important to know that, being Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and having seen what I have seen with respect to systemic racism and complete bias in the past 19 months, I would be going against every bit of my own belief system not to agree with the chiefs and elders. They are right.

I will be championing this idea with my colleagues, and I will be doing everything that I can because we have to understand that the path to true reconciliation is to understand how to truly build respect and trust. Indigenous peoples had our justice system imposed on them hundreds of years ago. They do not feel confident in it today. This is not a new idea for me to hear. This is decades-old, and as Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, I will be doing everything that I can to help, support, and be respectful to Indigenous peoples of New Brunswick.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The chiefs have stated that they believe that the province's response on the issue has been tone-deaf and condescending. When we asked the Premier yesterday about the chiefs' request for an inquiry, he brushed off the question, suggesting that an inquiry was not needed. I think tone-deaf could apply again to the Premier's comments yesterday. Would the Premier care to give a different response to the same question that we asked yesterday about this inquiry and admit that his answer yesterday was, in fact, tone-deaf?

Hon. Mr. Urquhart (Carleton-York, Minister of Public Safety, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are in a very emotional time. I do want to thank the member for her statement. I think

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that she realizes, because of her past experience in a Cabinet and in a party, that we have a Minister of Aboriginal Affairs who did take this lead and make sure that we are understood and make it perfectly clear there will be a public hearing into this and that the facts will come out. The investigation is going to go forward. The investigation by the BEI will go to the Crown prosecutor. If it decides that charges will be laid, there will be charges laid, and there will be a public hearing after this is done. The facts will come out. There will be a jury, and there will be recommendations made. But this is for a time after we have done the initial investigation. The Minister of Aboriginal Affairs will monitor...
(Interjection.)

Hon. Mr. Urquhart (Carleton-York, Minister of Public Safety, PC): The good Speaker can tell me when it is time.

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

[*Translation*]

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): People in Restigouche, particularly those in Zone 5, feel this government has abandoned them. The COVID-19 outbreak in our region is putting severe restrictions on our residents and having a devastating impact on our economy.

These people are being denied medical care outside Restigouche. Their medical visits are being postponed. Workers are being denied access to restaurants. CCNB students are not being allowed to write their final exams. In NB Liquor stores and other government agencies, they are being asked if they come from Restigouche or Campbellton. Yet, these services are essential and allowed in the Restigouche region.

Mr. Speaker, can the Premier clarify the directives and restrictions on authorized services and travel throughout the province today?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate that the residents of the Campbellton region are under another phase of the recovery program due to the outbreak that we have seen in that region. Unfortunately, that outbreak continues with new cases. It is the first time that we have had to separate different regions of the province. That, too, is unfortunate because we went down together and the goal was that we come up together. Unfortunately, if we do not isolate the zone and if we do not contain it, we will end up with the whole province moving back down.

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Hopefully, this will get... We believe not only that it is contained, but also that it is still growing. But, hopefully, that will stabilize, and we will see within the next week or two weeks an ability to get back into the same phase that the rest of the province is under. But caution has to be exercised because we want our province to continue to grow. On the one hand, we hear talk about opening businesses. On the other hand, we say: How do we protect health care? Mr. Speaker, we are trying to do both.

[*Translation*]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Mr. Speaker, I had asked if, today, we could get some clarification on directives about travel and services that are provided and delivered by the province, meaning medical services, NB Liquor services, and services at CCNB and other government agencies. These services are under the purview of the Premier, who is completely ignoring the people and entrepreneurs in Restigouche.

Can the Premier support Restigouche community leaders, today, who, in this time of crisis and on behalf of people and entrepreneurs in their area, are calling for concrete action to eliminate discrimination against their citizens? If so, what are these actions, and when is the Premier going to carry them out? When can we expect Restigouche to go back to the yellow level?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, our rules around coming up and coming down were very clear. We have the three phases or the four phases—the red, orange, and yellow. Unfortunately, the Campbellton region is back in the orange phase. The criteria in the orange phase are very clear. There is no confusion. If the member opposite would like to read that, he would certainly see that those are the rules that are imposed. The restriction on moving around in the province is a recommendation, Mr. Speaker. It is the same for people moving in as it is for people moving out.

I had a question earlier about essential services being provided. Of course, essential services will be provided. Of course. That was the rule throughout our entire pandemic throughout the province, and that continues to be the rule within the Campbellton region. All those activities must continue as necessary to ensure protection of the citizens in the region. Right now, Mr. Speaker, it is in an orange phase. It is very clearly defined what an orange phase means. There are no rules invented. There are no rules created. The rules are only being followed in order to protect the whole province. We hope that they are back in a couple...

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

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FEDERAL INFRASTRUCTURE PROGRAM

Mrs. F. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, infrastructure is one of the best ways to invest in projects we need while creating jobs and helping local businesses. A federal Finance Minister in the Harper government, Jim Flaherty, did so in the late 2000s. Even though it was against his nature, he decided that it needed to be done. For his efforts, he was named the world's Finance Minister of the Year for leading Canada through a recession.

Our Premier has been reluctant to invest in infrastructure even when the federal government is offering to pay for most of the projects. Upgrading wastewater systems, green infrastructure, and rural broadband would all fall under the federal program. Ottawa has been flexible. Ottawa is flexible. Why has this government not been able to identify projects for infrastructure investments that will be mostly paid for by the federal government?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, never let the facts get in the way of a good story or question, in this case. The reality is that we asked for complete flexibility on the \$600-million investment in infrastructure. The reason we asked for that... We got 10% of it, \$60 million. I will tell you why we asked for that. I wanted to put the money toward rural and urban roads, streets, bridges, schools, and hospitals, which are the things that we would be incurring costs on down the road, Mr. Speaker, because every one of our assets has a lifespan and every one of them needs a certain maintenance program. But, no, I cannot get that flexibility, so what I have to do is invent other projects in order for them to qualify.

I am saying this: What is going to happen next year? Last week, I asked the Prime Minister this: What about next year? I am seeing the revenue coming into Ottawa shrink. I am seeing the Alberta economy collapse. Where is the money coming from? Are we going to see our \$3-billion transfer payments cut next year? We, as a province, cannot afford that, so I want to spend money where it is needed. I have asked for flexibility to do just that, and to this point, I do not have it.

[Translation]

Mrs. F. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well-developed broadband infrastructure is essential to promote participation in the economy and, more and more, in digital education. Whether online education, teleworking, online sales, or personal transactions with Service New Brunswick are concerned, it is essential to have reliable Internet access. Many areas of New Brunswick do not even reach the minimum Internet speed targets set by the CRTC.

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One of my constituents wrote to me yesterday that the Internet speed at his home is 50 times slower than the minimum recommended by the CRTC. Wouldn't it make sense to prioritize this type of infrastructure, to which the federal program would apply?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. M. Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, PC): Thank you for this very important question this morning, Mr. Speaker. As mentioned a couple of weeks ago, we absolutely do recognize that one of the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic is an increased sense of urgency for access to quality broadband. I am happy to announce today that the completion of the Xplornet-Stonepeak deal has been done. We can say, as everybody knows...

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mrs. M. Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, PC): Results are coming. That is right. We are pushing for this to move fast. In Phase 1, as you may all be aware, there was \$40 million, \$10 million of which was contributed to this plan. In the next phase, we have \$40 million from the federal government and \$80 million from Xplornet. Xplornet will remain here in New Brunswick with the head office. All is good. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

MUNICIPALITIES

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, municipalities have taken a stand on economic recovery in New Brunswick. They want to be part of the solution, and they are asking for a seat at the table in order to be involved in the establishment of a viable economic plan for our province. Because of this government's inaction, in recent years, municipalities have become real economic drivers for our regions. We have a duty to listen to them and make room for them. The federal government says that team Higgs is refusing to cooperate, and we are now hearing the same thing from municipalities. Obviously, we have a common denominator here.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker, I ask the Premier and his fractured Cabinet why they do not want to consult with our municipalities.

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Hon. Mr. Carr (New Maryland-Sunbury, Minister of Environment and Local Government, PC): Mr. Speaker, quite the contrary. During COVID-19, as an example, I or my staff have been on conference calls with the municipal associations three times per week. Mr. Speaker, the Premier himself has attended numerous meetings and has had numerous correspondences with the municipal associations. In fact, Mr. Speaker, the municipal associations claim that they have never had better access to a Premier than they have right now.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Carr (New Maryland-Sunbury, Minister of Environment and Local Government, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is about more than that. It is about listening to the municipal associations. I wish the member from Miramichi would sit over there and just listen for a change. Thank you. We will continue, with the help of the member opposite, to have more discussions with the municipal associations and municipalities. We know they are an important part of our province and the economic feasibility of it. Thank you.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, having a Zoom meeting to talk about the weather and his garden is not what I call a consultation. Both associations came out in the press a couple of weeks ago saying they want a seat at the table. The Premier just got up and said he is looking for new projects. Well, if he had consulted with these associations and the municipalities, he would have heard that—do you know what?—he could put money in a designated highway program. Bring the funding back to what it was a couple of years ago. He would have heard about regional infrastructure projects that are shovel-ready. He would have heard about new green infrastructure projects.

My question to the Premier is this: Is he willing to make an engagement and meet with the municipalities and make sure that they have a seat in order to put this province back on track?

Hon. Mr. Carr (New Maryland-Sunbury, Minister of Environment and Local Government, PC): Absolutely, they have always had a seat at the table. They have never stopped having a seat at the table, Mr. Speaker. In fact, our honourable member, the Minister responsible for RDC, has been in constant contact, sending correspondence to the municipal associations. But I notice not all municipal associations signed on to that letter. Why not? I do not know the answer to that question. Perhaps the honourable member knows the answer to that question.

I can tell you one thing is for certain, Mr. Speaker. Any of those projects that the member opposite speaks about is not new news. We all know where the infrastructure deficiencies lie in the province. We all know that we will work together with a plan in place to move forward. The Premier is right. He needs some good instruction from Prime Minister Justin

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Trudeau on how we can move forward with these things and how we can have the flexibility so that municipalities do have a greater say, Mr. Speaker.

I will also remind the member opposite that maybe he should call the Prime Minister of this country and ask him to allow the municipalities to have more funding, which the FCM has been...

[*Translation*]

GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the beginning of the pandemic, we all recognized the importance of shutting down our government services and our businesses, and respecting the lockdown measures put in place to ensure the wellbeing of our fellow citizens.

I am questioning certain government decisions which were clearly biased towards the large corporations, deeming their services more essential and throwing our small and medium-sized businesses into confusion.

Now, we are clearly seeing an imbalance between urban and rural areas regarding the reopening of government services. I want to talk to you specifically about Service New Brunswick offices here. Since my question is very simple, I would appreciate a simple answer, even if it means taking the question under advisement and coming back with a concrete answer as quickly as possible. Can the Minister of Service New Brunswick tell the people of Kent County when the Service New Brunswick office in Richibucto will reopen?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. S. Wilson (Moncton Southwest, Minister of Service NB, Minister responsible for Women's Equality, PC): Thank you very much for that question. Again today, it gives me an opportunity to talk about our Service New Brunswick centres. Pre-COVID-19, we had among the shortest wait times in the country, and with our new appointment system, there are no wait times. Our service centres have been open, working all the time. We now have 12. They are open by appointment only.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Ms. S. Wilson (Moncton Southwest, Minister of Service NB, Minister responsible for Women's Equality, PC): Right now, we have 12 open. There are others that will be opened.

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Our staff have been working on the COVID-19 health line. As soon as we have those resources back, others will open.

COMMUNICATIONS

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): That did not answer the question at all. It is a simple question: When will the Richibucto one open? You could not even answer that.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, on February 22, the new Minister responsible for La Francophonie said, in an interview with *Acadie Nouvelle*, that his role as Minister responsible for La Francophonie is to make sure Francophones' concerns and needs are being heard, and that he was going to work as hard as he could in their interests.

I want to thank the Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Jennifer Russell, for her compliance with the *Official Languages Act*, but I cannot say the same about this government and its elected officials. In the 2018 report of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages for New Brunswick, it is explicitly mentioned that simultaneous interpretation is an accommodation and not equal treatment of both linguistic communities.

My question is for the new Minister responsible for La Francophonie. Does he find the lack of communication and media access from elected officials to ensure equal information is provided to Francophones during the pandemic acceptable?

Hon. Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure for me to rise in the House for the first time to answer questions as Minister responsible for La Francophonie.

I can say that I am the Minister responsible for La Francophonie; however, I am not the minister responsible for official languages. It is good to know that, as Minister responsible for La Francophonie, it is important to promote and advance the interests of Francophones throughout the world and also here, in New Brunswick.

As Minister responsible for La Francophonie, I engage with the OIF, and that is exactly what I am doing in my role as minister. It is not for me to talk about official languages, but if the opposition members have questions for me about matters pertaining to the OIF or the Francophonie, I would be happy to answer their questions. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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[Original]

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was not too long ago, during the state of lockdown here in New Brunswick, that the decision was made by government to ban temporary foreign workers. That decision was, however, reversed, and now temporary workers are in New Brunswick here today. I am wondering whether the Premier can disclose to the public exactly how many temporary foreign workers are in New Brunswick today who were not here prior to the state of emergency.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Yes, actually. Since the pandemic came into play here about three or four months ago... We have about 430 new temporary foreign workers in the province at this time.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, Premier, for that direct answer. With the 430 temporary foreign workers who are here, I am wondering what parameters are on them upon their entering the province. What failed, given the fact that there is at least one who has tested positive for COVID-19 in the Moncton area? What failed in relation to the parameters that were in place around temporary foreign workers?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): At this point, the system is such that a temporary foreign worker entering the province has to isolate for 14 days. Workers are assigned to a particular company because that is how the policy works through the federal government and through PETL.

The idea in this case is that, on Day 10, there were tests done and one of the foreign workers tested positive. That then moved to the next phase of testing for contact tracing. On arrival here... I mean, they do not all come separately. They come on chartered planes. In this particular case, there were 158 people who were on that plane. The point is that we will do the contact tracing. They did isolate after leaving. I think they went to three different locations. We have now tracked it. In those three different locations, one individual has been identified at this point. All the contact tracing for that individual will be followed, including any exposure to the outside. At this time, we believe that there is not any because those are the rules. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HOUSING

Ms. Rogers (Moncton South, L): Mr. Speaker, Moncton has an enormous issue when it comes to affordable housing. The mayor has been duly keeping local MLAs, including

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members opposite, up to date on how dire the situation in our metro area is. There is growing homelessness and thereby problems related to this. There is a low vacancy rate for rentals—period—and especially in terms of affordability for those working but with modest incomes.

Mr. Speaker, money is available for affordable housing under the 10-year agreement signed—in fact, by me—in July 2018, but the province is not using it. I am told that \$49 million is off the table, not meeting New Brunswick housing needs. I am with the mayor, NGOs, and neighbours on this need. Since the Finance Minister is a local MLA, perhaps he can explain why he is not addressing this very real and serious problem. Thank you.

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. I know that she is very passionate about housing in Moncton. You know, she and members of our government certainly have frontline seats to seeing the needs that are in their communities.

Mr. Speaker, we are not standing still on this. Housing does not appear overnight, and we have not only signed the bilateral agreement. We have the three-year action plan already signed. We were the first province in Canada to deliver that plan. Over three years, we are building 151 units, which are more available units than in the previous government.

We understand that this is a very urgent need, and we are relying on communities to come together to help us as well. We have worked with the mayor. We have tried to extend the understanding that people are not in this alone. Mr. Speaker, we will continue to progress with our Housing Strategy. Thank you.

EDUCATION

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La-Vallée, Deputy Speaker, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, the Minister of Education said that COVID-19 was forcing his hand on changes to the education system, such as getting rid of diversity leads. He also said during the same question period yesterday that he has consulted on changes that are coming. Can the minister inform the House as to whom he has consulted on COVID-19-related changes to the classrooms since the pandemic landed on our doorstep?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, the minister is not able to be here today, but we will take that question under advisement and have him respond to it in the next question period.

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Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La-Vallée, Deputy Speaker, L): Well, as far as I know, Mr. Speaker, there has been no consultation on COVID-19. The first change we heard about on this front was the elimination of diversity leads. That is terrible news for the LGBTQ2 students, and it is not very progressive from a minister who refers to himself as a social liberal on his Twitter profile. Can we expect the elimination of other positions in education that address very important issues that matter to social liberals, issues such as diversity?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, certainly, I can answer that question because all diversity issues matter to all of us in this House and outside of this House, so there is no debate. There is certainly no debate in that.

But we know that bringing the schools back up this fall is going to be challenging in every category, and how we manage that is something that the deputy ministers are working on. The teachers are in the classrooms and have been for the past three weeks. The discussion is ongoing as to what can be the best practice to get up and running in a COVID-19-related world. We do not anticipate that we are going to be outside of that in the coming weeks. There will be more information shared. There will be public announcements shared and public consultation as far as saying here is what we think works.

We are also talking about a national strategy on the school start-up, and I brought it up on the call with my colleagues in the Atlantic Region just last night. We have seen different experiments. We have seen what Quebec is doing right now. We have seen what Saskatchewan is doing right now. What is the best practice? We know that there are going to be additional risks. We know that there is going to be exposure. We are going to have to be prepared to accept it, Mr. Speaker.

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