

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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CONTENTS

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Mrs. Harris

Hon. Mr. Higgs

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

HOSPITALS

Mr. D'Amours

Hon. Mr. Flemming

Mr. D'Amours

Hon. Mr. Flemming

Mr. D'Amours

Hon. Mr. Flemming



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Stewart

FERRIES

Mr. Austin

Hon. Mr. Oliver

Mr. Austin

Hon. Mr. Oliver

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

Mr. Harvey

Hon. Mrs. M. Wilson

Mr. Harvey

Hon. Mrs. M. Wilson

[Original]

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In fact, it is a very sad day in the Legislative Assembly when we look at what is going on in New Brunswick. If you used that excitement, that much joy, and that much energy in actually listening to Indigenous leaders, maybe we would have real change.

Mr. Speaker, last week in question period, we asked the Premier on consecutive days whether he would listen to Indigenous leaders in New Brunswick and call for an inquiry into systemic bias against Indigenous people by this justice system and the police in New Brunswick. The Premier refused to address the question last week, and I do not think that this is the type of leadership that they deserve. Yesterday, he seemed more open to the question, but I am not sure we heard a definite yes to what was being asked for. Is the Premier willing to admit that his answer last week was tone-deaf and agree to a broader-based inquiry today?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, what I said last week and yesterday was in relation to our doing what is necessary to understand all the issues related to the systemic issues that we have here in our province, because we must. My point last week and my point today is that we have independent investigations underway.

We have done a lot of studies. In fact, the study on missing Indigenous women had some 232 recommendations. I would like to say, Okay, how many of those have been done? Mr. Speaker, I want to see action. I understand that in Quebec, they recently formed a group called the “action group”. You know, it is great to have a name, but it is better to have the results.

My goal is to work at getting this behind us in terms of the investigation so that we not only understand exactly what happened and also understand the number of recommendations that have been made in the past. Another public inquiry may be necessary, and I will not rule it out; but let’s look at why we have not moved on all the recommendations from the past.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier talks about getting this behind us. We need this put forward. We need you to agree to this because it is the right thing to do. Last week’s call came in the wake of the tragic death of Chantel Moore, a young Indigenous woman, at the hands of the police in Edmundston. Tragically, this past Friday night, Rodney Levi, an Indigenous man from Metepenagiag, was shot and, very sadly, passed away as a result of the police shooting.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Our thoughts again go out to the families. I visited Metepenagiag on Saturday and again yesterday with our leader, and it was very sad. It is very tragic, and when you listen to the pain and the anguish that the leaders and the community members are feeling, it is almost unbearable. We know that they want an inquiry into the systemic bias in the justice and police systems in New Brunswick. I do not think that they want the Premier to micromanage the terms of reference in this inquiry. Would the Premier simply agree to what our Indigenous leaders are asking for?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, in fact, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs has set up a meeting with the chiefs tomorrow, and it is certainly my intent to attend as well, as I have been asked to do so. I offered to do so in advance of that.

But I think the point is that what we want is action. What we want is to end racism in our province. What we want is to deal with the issues and hear firsthand what the chiefs say are their priorities. It is great to throw out a headline and say: Oh well, we are just going to do another public inquiry. We are going to set up a task force. We are going to do this and that.

The commitments that we make with the First Nations chiefs will be real commitments, and they will be real action items that will get real results. There is a difference. There is talk, and then there is action.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): There are words, and there is empathy, caring, and being sincere as well, Mr. Premier. The broader-based inquiry that our Indigenous leaders are asking for is separate from the investigations into these two shooting deaths that have just happened in New Brunswick. How confident is the Premier that the separate investigations into these actual incidents will be truly independent and take a deep dive into whether there was any wrongdoing by police? This particular investigative team has investigated 117 incidents without filing one charge against an officer. Does that cause concern for our Premier?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that it is really clear that we want to get to the bottom of this. If these investigations do not do that, if there are any questions about it, or if we find in talking with the chiefs that we need to go further with a full public inquiry, we will do that. What I will not do is jump to conclusions based on what have been past practices because past practices have not yielded results. That is my goal. That is the difference.

These events were tragic, indeed, but they are continuing. In the process, we have to find out what the rules are that the authorities used because, in the process, we also cannot take our police forces and our security officers for granted. We have to find a way to work together and maintain law and order in our society, equally, for all members of our society. My goal is simply to talk to the chiefs firsthand. Let's not talk to them through the media.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Let's have that first discussion. Let's decide what discussions need to happen after that and what action needs to happen after that in order to get results. That is the goal starting tomorrow.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Mr. Speaker, it has been suggested that Indigenous communities themselves have some representation on the body that is investigating these deaths. Apparently, that is not the case, according to the news reports. I quote from the Wolastoqey chiefs' statement: "Non-Indigenous people simply do not have the lived experience to conduct an unbiased investigation of such matters." Is the Premier okay with there being no one with an Indigenous background as part of this investigation?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know whether that is the case or not, but I completely agree. I do believe that there needs to be First Nations involvement and First Nations oversight into the process so that they, too, are satisfied that it is fully independent and it is fully transparent and that the recommendations that come out of it are actually ones that can be implemented and that changes can be made. I would not disagree with the member opposite about having First Nations be a key part of this process, as they should, as they must, and as they will. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a question for the Premier. We know that this pandemic is creating a difficult time for our economy and for our small and medium-sized businesses. Then you ask this question: How is the government reacting to try to see an economic recovery? We have to go backward a little. We remember when the present Premier was Finance Minister and how his budgetary policies, when he was in office, in 2013, shrunk the economy by 1.1% and, in 2014, by 0.3%. His forecast now is telling us that, this year, the economy is going to shrink by 4.3%. An independent agency is saying 5.6%. We are trailing Canadian provinces by the percentage of investment to GDP—0.2%. Newfoundland is at 1%. Is the Premier not concerned that his budgetary policies are going to hurt our small and medium-sized businesses and the economy?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am sure it is coincidental that the honourable member would leave out some other key facts. One is that we are leading the country in economic recovery at a pace faster than any other province. RBC changed its forecast and put us in first or second place in terms of recovery and forecasted that we would be 95% back to where we were in February by the year end or early 2021.

And we had a recent stat from StatCan about 15 000 new jobs. Mr. Speaker, our problem now continues to be that we cannot find people to work. With the federal program that is

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

changing and increasing the CERB, employers are telling us that they cannot find people to work. While the member opposite can talk about our not putting more money here and there, why do the members opposite not talk about the results that we are seeing on the streets and in the field and in the companies that are getting back up and that are looking to invest in New Brunswick and looking to get back to being part of the success and not paying it for the next generation and for the generation after that?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, from listening to the Premier, we know that the pandemic has certainly helped some large businesses, such as Irving Oil, which has received free crude oil. Good for it. However, the pandemic is certainly not helping small and medium-sized New Brunswick businesses in the tourism sector, for instance, including restaurants. Nor is it helping retail operations, artists, and so on.

Mr. Speaker, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business tells us that 67% of businesses have resumed their activity in New Brunswick, but only 24% of them are receiving all the revenue they could be, compared to before the pandemic. Consequently, there are a number of businesses that are not reaching the desired economic level. Can the Premier explain to us what specific financial programs he has put forward to help New Brunswick small and medium-sized businesses?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): It is interesting, Mr. Speaker, that the member opposite would like to talk about the refinery. Everyone saw the headlines about negative oil prices because of the collapse of the industry. Where that money is going to come from to fill federal coffers to pay for transfer payments as usual, I do not know. But to suggest that of the refinery or any other operation that is cut in half or more in production with, for instance, jet fuel no longer being issued, is a complete fallacy, Mr. Speaker. I am sure that the company must be hurting big time while going at half capacity. It must be because that would be the case. It is the same with other companies.

Now, if you look at the current situation with smaller businesses, yes, they are running at limited capacity. In the case of service industries particularly—with hotels and restaurants, as examples—where we go with our tourism sector and how we can open up... Our goal is to open up our economy and to do it in a systematic fashion so that we do not have to shut it back down, and that is why, unfortunately, we have had to kind of isolate the Campbellton region at this point. But the more we open up, the more we see people wanting to be part of New Brunswick's success. They do not want to pay for it all in taxes next year, Mr. Speaker, if we just throw money at them.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government seems to be proud of the fact that it brought in a program or a service called Business Navigators with ONB. Now, I guess ONB has become a call centre. I think that the business community is looking for more than that. It is looking for way much more than having someone navigating, which is important. Small and medium-sized businesses are having a hard time with cash flow and working capital because of this pandemic and the shutting down of the economy.

There was a report last week that we could lose up to 40 000 tourism jobs in the province of New Brunswick. There have been reports that up to 25% of small and medium-sized businesses could go bankrupt in New Brunswick. With the Premier's policies when he was Finance Minister, we saw our economy shrink, contracted by 0.1% in 2013. It is forecasted by his Department of Finance to be 4.3% this year. An independent agency is saying potentially 5.6%. What is the Premier going to do to help these small and medium-sized businesses so that they can survive this pandemic?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the anecdotal information continues. I went through the stats of what is really happening. The Business Navigators program with ONB is touching directly with businesses. When they talk about the industry and 40 000 jobs, I said earlier that the issue we are getting from businesses is that they cannot find people to work. Why would that be, Mr. Speaker? It is because we are paying people \$2 000 per month to stay home and we are going to extend it. The federal government is going to extend it for another two or three months.

Mr. Speaker, if we want our economy to open up and we want jobs to be available for people to access, we need to have a reason for them to want to go to those jobs. That is our challenge, Mr. Speaker. You cannot do something on one hand and the exact opposite on the other and wonder why you cannot move forward. We need people to be part of the success. Mr. Speaker, we have programs in place. Our interest-free loan program is in place. We are working with tourism operators. We have a better advertising campaign than ever, Mr. Speaker, involving companies from all around the province, to have people be part of New Brunswick's success story by participating directly in it.

HOSPITALS

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, it is my understanding that the situation at the Campbellton hospital is putting a real strain on health care in northern New Brunswick. Because of the situation with COVID-19, the hospital is closed, and patients are being diverted to the Chaleur Regional Hospital. Workers at that hospital indicate that staffing issues suggest that it might not be able to handle the extra workload. I know the minister has been informed of this situation. What is the Health Minister doing about it? What will he do to solve this major issue?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Could you stop the clock?

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): I have vertigo, you know. I do not want to fall.

I thank the member opposite for the question. What am I going to do about it? I am going to support the health-care professionals to the best of my ability and to the best ability that the government can. We are going to enable the physicians, the nurses, and the allied health workers and empower them to work to the best of their ability as best we can. This is a technical medical issue. It is a pandemic outbreak, a small outbreak. It is being dealt with clinically and medically.

So what can a politician do? A politician can encourage, empower, and provide resources. That is exactly what we are doing, Mr. Speaker. I have confidence that the good people at Vitalité and the good people of those regions who are working in those hospitals are up for the challenge, that they are putting the patients first, and that, hopefully, over time, we will see things eradicated up there.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, during this difficult time, thanks are due to workers at the Restigouche Hospital Centre, at the regional hospital, and in the mental health sector, as well as to workers in seniors' homes.

Since there seems to be no plan to solve the current labour problems, is the minister considering the idea of ordering the health network to transfer resources to Bathurst, where the need is critical right now? It is time for the minister to present a clear vision to resolve the situation. Can we get an update on his vision?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Well, my vision is quite simple, quite singular, and quite focused. It is the same as the vision of this government. It is to do the things that need to be done to fight COVID-19. I am proud to be a member of a government that has done that in an excellent way, which is world class in the success and the leadership that we have had. That is what I will do. We are going to continue to do that because we are empowering our health-care professionals. We are making decisions that need to be made, and our vision is to see this province come through this in the best possible shape that it can, to be a North American leader if not a world leader. Mr. Speaker, we are on track to doing just that.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, there is a critical need for health-care professionals at the Campbellton Regional Hospital. We received an email from a doctor who is predicting a catastrophe if nothing is done immediately. Does the minister agree that steps must be taken to avoid what is being called a potential catastrophe? If so, could solutions have been found some time ago?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the potential catastrophe... The presupposition of the question is patently false. I do not think the health-care people in Vitalité and in Campbellton could be talked about in terms of such an outrageous word as “catastrophe”. I think they are heroes. I think they are professionals. I think they are doing a tremendous job fighting this disease. I believe that is what they should be called.

To use the word “catastrophe” with respect to the health-care professionals is so offensive to me that the only catastrophe is anybody that would say such a thing, really. I think it is terrible to call the situation catastrophic. These people are heroes. They are meeting the challenge. They are doing a tremendous job up there. They are being faced with a problem that they did not create, and they are, day after day, slowly but surely winning this war. They are stamping it out, and they should be congratulated, not questioned.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, successive New Brunswick governments have failed to act on many studies and recommendations on the state of Indigenous affairs in this country and in this province. I am with the Premier on that one. The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the 1999 New Brunswick La Forest-Nicholas Task Force on Aboriginal Issues, the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, and the 2019 Calls for Justice through the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls—lots of studies and no action.

Now, 2 Indigenous people, Chantel Moore and Rodney Levi, have lost their lives in police shootings in the last week. Proportionately, those 2 lives lost would be like 70 non-Native New Brunswickers losing their lives in police shootings. This, by any measure, is a crisis. My question is for the Premier: What real action is he going to take now that he is in the driver's seat? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I certainly want to thank the Green Party Leader for his question and his reference

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

to all the previous studies. He has a more extensive list than even I was aware of. The point is this: Let's look at those studies and the recommendations that came out of them. Let's understand why we have not gotten some real, clear-cut items that could be the top five that just need to be dealt with and focused on.

You know, just as we had a COVID Cabinet committee as we worked through this pandemic and as we continue to work through this pandemic, maybe we can start on that same process and get some agreement and alignment among our parties on what are the next best steps and what are the right priorities to take. I would look forward to those discussions. Then we can either present those or, in conjunction with the First Nations chiefs, be able to decide: Here is where we are going to move, and let's have a study done on that item so that we find a path forward that actually implements. Mr. Speaker, as I said, it is time for action. It sounds as though the Green Party Leader believes the same thing. Let's not just repeat the same study that has been done over and over again.

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

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the Premier said that he is going to attend the previously scheduled meeting between members of his Cabinet and First Nations chiefs on Wednesday to listen, in light of the police killings of Chantel Moore and Rodney Levi. Under the circumstances, so he should, but the actions that must come—the actions that must come—need to be a response from this Legislative Assembly, representing all parties and members. The listening must not be restricted to the band chiefs, but must include elders, grandmothers, and traditional chiefs.

The All Nations and Parties Working Group on Truth and Reconciliation that the Premier committed to more than six months ago to hold government accountable to the priorities of First Nations could have played this role, but it has failed to materialize. The question to the Premier is: What is his plan now?

Hon. Mr. Stewart (Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question. It is important to note that the meeting on Wednesday was arranged by me, my department, and the chiefs themselves. The chiefs have been asked to send whom they want in attendance. They have also been asked to send agenda items. Out of respect—mutual respect—for Aboriginal peoples and First Nations, I have agreed to those terms. The Minister of Social Development, the Premier, the Minister of Justice and Attorney General, and the Minister of Public Safety will be in attendance. We are looking forward to the meeting. It will probably be on the basis of the inquiry, which I support and which I now see that others are supporting too. That is nice. We are going to have a good meeting tomorrow, and we are really looking forward to it.



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

FERRIES

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, I was pleased to hear that the Gagetown ferry will be operational for the summer and fall months. That particular ferry has been a political hot potato for well over a decade. My question is for the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure. Can he tell us exactly what are the projected costs associated with the reopening of the ferry in Gagetown and why the decision was made to have it reopened?

Hon. Mr. Oliver (Kings Centre, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, I am pleased to stand today and speak about the Gagetown ferry and its reinstatement. You know, the two previous Liberal governments took away two of our ferries, the Hampstead ferry and the Gagetown ferry, and now, this year, we are reinstating the Gagetown ferry, which is the right thing to do for the Gagetown community. Certainly, it affected them from an economic standpoint and from an agricultural standpoint. We want to make sure that we provide the service that is required there.

As far as the operating time frame this year is concerned, it is a bit of a reduced schedule because of the timing of when we got started. When I look at the costs that we have estimated to provide the service for this year... Normally for a six-month period, we estimate it to be in the \$300 000 range, but because of the shortened season, I would imagine that it will be slightly less than that.

We are looking forward to working with the community, as the Premier promised. When we talked about the ferries, the Premier promised that we would work with the communities to restore that service. Thank you.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank the minister for the answer. Seeing that we are opening the Gagetown ferry, I know that another controversial ferry is the one at Campobello Island, where you literally have residents who have to go into the United States and back into Canada to get necessities like groceries and other supplies most of the year. So I guess that my question would be for the Premier. Where we are seeing the Gagetown ferry now reopening as a matter of convenience, can we also look forward to the Campobello ferry reopening anytime soon?

Hon. Mr. Oliver (Kings Centre, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, again, Mr. Speaker, for the question from the member. We are certainly very much aware of the situation on Campobello. It is something that has been troubling the residents there, and we actually went down there and had a meeting with those citizens. We have had conversations and telephone conferencing with the mayor and some of the concerned citizens. I have also been in touch with the federal ministers, Minister Garneau and Minister McKenna, to discuss it. It is very much on their radar. They said that they are aware of the situation and that we will be discussing it further. Fortunately for now, the season has

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

started for East Coast Ferries so that gives us a bit of a time frame in which we can work with the federal government and with the MP for the area as well. We are looking forward to further discussions with the federal government. Thank you.

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

Mr. Harvey (Carleton-Victoria, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, the Prime Minister, who, unlike the Premier, has continuously stepped up to help New Brunswick businesses during this pandemic, called on the provinces to ban evictions of businesses by landlords. Five other provinces have already made this move. Sadly and predictably, the Premier again said no to businesses in New Brunswick. Here is a quote from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business: With the provincial government sticking to its position on spending and not putting forward anything to help, it is getting harder and harder for small business owners as they try to reopen their businesses.

We have other quotes from the Fredericton Chamber of Commerce and other chambers of commerce on this issue. We are seeing the province doing very little to help small and medium-sized businesses in the province. Mr. Speaker, when will the Premier get off the sidelines and get in the game to help New Brunswick's small and medium-sized businesses?

Hon. Mrs. M. Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you for the question. I would like to point out that New Brunswick was the only province out of the gate when all of this started and it had eviction notices stopped. Across this country, we were the only province that protected businesses and tenants right up to May 31—the only one, Mr. Speaker. It gave businesses time for discussions with their landlords and for putting a plan in place. I spoke earlier this week with a business owner who thanked me for that. He said: You know, minister, you are right. That gave me time to make plans with my landlord.

I would like to say, Mr. Speaker, that our economic recovery plan started on March 16 and we have been working hard on it ever since. I spoke with a small business person on social media last week who said: New Brunswickers are a resilient...

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

Mr. Harvey (Carleton-Victoria, L): It is nice to hear that comment, but if the government members have an economic recovery plan, please table it in this Legislative Assembly because New Brunswickers have not seen it, Mr. Speaker. They have not seen it. It is the invisible plan. It is the invisible plan. We will work with the feds. We will get the money from the feds, we will bring it down from Ottawa, and once we get it here, we will start



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

criticizing the federal government. That is their plan. That is their plan, and New Brunswickers know it. They have no plan.

The Premier talks about opening up the economy. Yeah, well, that is a laugh, Mr. Speaker, from the Premier who is saying that they are opening up the economy when all that they are reopening is the Gagetown ferry. When they talk about closing government offices and Service New Brunswick offices around the province, that is not reopening the province. When they talk about closing the Tobique salmon barrier in Nictau, it is a small thing, but it is a big thing to the people in Carleton-Victoria. That is not opening up the economy. Will the Premier stand up and say...

Hon. Mrs. M. Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, PC): Mr. Speaker, we are taking a whole-of-government approach to this task, and with every decision, we are championing the needs of the business sector in New Brunswick. We are moving ahead with the economic priorities outlined by the Premier at the state of the province address. Our plans support both traditional and emerging sectors right across the province in a more focused way, to reduce duplication and to help them navigate government faster. And, yes, with our Business Navigators system, which is amazing, business owners do not have to run all over the province to get information. We are going to do this to support their growth. Government staff is actively working to implement these strategies while balancing the need to support New Brunswick's economic recovery due to COVID-19.

So, to quote a small business owner on social media last week, "New Brunswickers are a resilient lot to begin with. But as a reminder, please support small businesses whenever you can. If we keep our supply chain local and stick together as a community and province—this too shall pass!"

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