

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



November 18, 2020

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GOVERNMENT AGENDA

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a privilege for me to ask my first question as Interim Leader of the Opposition.

This government was brought in during the last election and given a mandate to ensure stability. New Brunswickers voted for a government that could manage the pandemic and protect the health and safety of the public.

[*Original*]

They also voted for a government that would position our economy to go through this pandemic. But I will remind the government that only 39% of the population voted for your government and 61% did not. You did win 27 seats, which I would define as a slim majority. Your mandate is to have stability and not turbulence. Can the Premier tell us why he wants to bring this province into a turbulent period?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, stability is exactly what we have had over the past number of years in our province, even through this pandemic in the past eight months. That is the exciting part. It is that New Brunswick citizens did vote for stability, and we are very proud to continue on in that regard.

If you look at our comparison of where we are with the rest of the country, we are doing very well in relation to our movement forward. Certainly, looking at the CFIB report, 72% of our businesses are open and functioning well. That is the second highest in the country. Insolvencies in the province are down 30% from the normal average. We have seen, certainly, areas of... If you look at comparisons of employment, we have seen unemployment rates drop over 1% recently.

The biggest stability that we can have for our citizens right now is our ability to control this pandemic and ensure that our businesses can stay open and continue to function and that our schools can stay open and continue to function. That is our goal, Mr. Speaker.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Yesterday's throne speech mentioned health care. On page 16, it clearly states that the Premier has a plan in regard to health care. On Monday, his Minister of Health said, in a newspaper, that she was going to consult to develop a new health plan. You know, Mr. Speaker, the people of New Brunswick

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cannot be fooled. The Premier has already decided on the new health plan that is coming. Why is the Premier asking his Minister of Health to go through an exercise to try to consult New Brunswickers when his mind is already made up? It is already made up, and he has a reputation for not really having a dialogue with New Brunswickers. It is mostly a monologue with New Brunswickers. Based on page 16 of your speech yesterday, you said that you had a plan. Premier, just table the plan today so that New Brunswickers will know what you have in mind.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): We do have a plan for health care, and it is to be sure that it is there. It is to be sure that future generations actually have a health care system. It is to be sure that it gets better each and every year and does not decline. It is to be sure that we have people who are actually going to be able to operate and work in our health care system. Across this country, we have demonstrated the professional nature of our health care officials—how they can help our province and how they have done that throughout the pandemic.

What we need to do now is to focus on how much better we can be. One example of that is in the hip and knee surgeries that are going on now at St. Joe's. Last week, 20 surgeries were done. With that trajectory, we are not going to have people waiting for three years for hip and knee surgeries. We are not going to have people waiting for two years for hip and knee surgeries. Our goal is to get wait times down to six months, the national average. The status quo has been accepted by government after government. Well, let me tell you, this government is not going to accept the status quo.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): The Premier says that he was elected for stability. We know now that he had a secret plan already in mind last February. He had a secret plan, and the only reason that his plan did not go forward was because of the courage of our new Liberal MLA for Shediac Bay-Dieppe. The Premier clearly understood that he could not win the votes here. The outcome of that was that he had to stop the plan that he had in mind.

My question is to the Premier. We all have the same goal. It is to have, ultimately, better access to health care and continuous quality of health care. Tell us what you want to do in this new plan that you already have in mind and do not bring New Brunswickers into this turbulence that you will be proposing.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, some things never change. The old buzzwords come out. What do we have in our history book here that always works? Just flip them out, flip them out, and see whether that derails the government.

Well, the people of this province voted for stability. They voted for a government of action. They voted for results. There has been enough talk and enough of throwing out their tax



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dollars at whatever might come along and hoping that it sticks. They voted for results—results that they can feel.

I talked about hip and knee surgeries on the health side. Let's look at primary care, Mr. Speaker. We are talking about cutting wait times in half in terms of the number of patients looking for primary care access. There are 34 000 today, and we are committing to cut that in half. We are not just talking about hiring more doctors, hiring more physicians—hiring and hiring. We are saying that we want to find ways to get better and that we are committed to demonstrating better, not just talking about it.

So there is a new way of doing business, and it is actually getting results. I think that it is commendable, Mr. Speaker, and I think that the people are really going to like it.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier has this skill set of basically saying nothing and hoping for the best. He is asking New Brunswickers to embrace better without telling them what that will be and what it will take to get there.

The Premier talks about eliminating duplication, in his mind, in health care. Well, are the ERs in Caraquet, Grand Falls, Perth-Andover, Sackville, Sussex, Sainte-Anne-de-Kent duplications? Are the oncology services that we have in Moncton and Saint John duplication? Are the services of laboratories in different hospitals duplications?

We already have a hard time recruiting and retaining health professionals, and they have been going through this pandemic highly stressed but highly committed to deal with it. Why, during a pandemic, do you want to bring New Brunswickers and the health care system through turbulence and cuts?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): There we go, Mr. Speaker. There is another new term. It is not new. It has been portrayed for the past number of years, but we will hear all these terms over and over again because that is all that is new for the members opposite on their side. It is not about moving the province forward. It is not about addressing barriers to success. It is about how to throw out the same old story and make it work.

Mr. Speaker, we know that health care professionals are going to be very difficult to acquire. We know that hiring new doctors... I could use half of the Liberal's story here if I wanted. We hired 94 new doctors last year. We lost 104. We are down to net 10. Those numbers are a few months old, so maybe it is a little different right now. But I am telling the full story because the reality is that it is going to be extremely difficult to find doctors and health care professionals. It is going to be extremely difficult to provide the services that we need. So, Mr. Speaker, we could pretend that we can continue doing the same thing in every part of the province and not say this: Oh boy, this is a niche here. Let's make that work in this area. Let's make this work over here.

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Just as I used the example in Saint John and just as the Dumont lab that I mentioned many times... They have done such a tremendous job and are pillars in our province.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier has the same talking points that he has had for the past 10 years. He has not changed. We may have buzzwords, but you have the same talking points. We will see what that really means over the next few months, in the period of turbulence in health care.

[Translation]

ECONOMY

Mr. Speaker, in terms of the economy, as you know, small and medium-sized businesses are having difficulties. Doing business during this pandemic is a challenge for their leaders. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business is predicting that 15% of its members may either go bankrupt or already have. They also note that Statistics Canada is telling us that the unemployment rate increased here from August to September. This is the only province where this happened. We have gone from fourth position in August to eighth in terms of the unemployment rate in Canada. Why can the Premier not admit that his economic recovery strategy is nonexistent and that our small and medium-sized businesses need targeted financial assistance?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): In talking about strategy, we are third in the country with other provinces in terms of our employment statistics and coming back, rebounding after COVID-19. CFIB reports that we are in the middle, but in reporting in terms of businesses being open, we are second in the country, next to Saskatchewan. If you want to look at retail sales, we are over 100% of where we were at this time last year, pre-COVID-19, and we are running fourth in the country. If you want to talk about insolvencies, I mentioned that. We are running about fifth, but much lower than in previous years.

If you want to talk about building permits, in the past three months we have had record numbers in our province—a record number of people moving back, sales of homes, and bidding wars for homes. New Brunswick is a place people are looking at. You want to talk about real numbers and real stats? Let's talk about the stats. You want to talk about food service?

We can talk about nuances, but we can talk about reality, Mr. Speaker. What I am talking about here is a real New Brunswick returning to real prosperity because real people are getting engaged in making our province number one.

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[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier is going to use the statistics that suit him. However, the reality is this: 32% of New Brunswick businesses are only bringing in 32% of the sales revenue they were getting before the pandemic; that is the reality. Up to 15% of our SMEs could go bankrupt or already have.

You have provided programs that increase the financial burden on New Brunswick businesses. You have almost entirely depended on programs from the federal government. Thank you, Mr. Trudeau.

That being said, your strategy for an economic turnaround or recovery is nonexistent, and we are starting to see the results of your inaction in terms of the economy. Mr. Speaker, the Premier has to wake up, get out of his office, and talk with small and medium-sized business leaders. When are you going to reconsider the absence of action for our SMEs?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the tradition continues—facts do not matter. I would like to add some other facts to this in terms of StatsCan and the material it recently sent out back in August. It is about the confidence and resolve. It said that 46% of businesses are showing no change or an increase in revenue in New Brunswick versus 43% in the rest of the country. It is higher than the rest of the country, Mr. Speaker. Additionally, 78% of businesses have the cash or liquid assets required to operate, 38% of businesses have laid off at least one staff member, and 54% said they did not lay off anyone.

Now, we started a navigator program at ONB. It has had over 4 000 individual calls as it has worked with individual businesses. Do you know what the greatest success of our recovery is going to be and has been to date? It is keeping open. It is having the virus under control and keeping open so that people can live and work and support New Brunswick businesses. That is what we are focused on.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, we have all heard the Premier say that he wants to eliminate duplication in our health care system. Over the past few days, the Premier has mentioned that appropriations could take place in Saint John. This claim is probably based on his new health plan that was mentioned yesterday in the speech from the throne.

Could the Premier explain to us, according to his plan, what the hospitals in Bathurst, Campbellton, and Miramichi, among others, will offer as services?

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Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do not know how we can predetermine a consultation process. The opposition seems to want to infer that is what we are doing. I have made a commitment to every health care professional and every health care provider within our system that we are going to have a consultation. I mean it. We are preparing that now, and we have put a timeline on it to be done within a six-month period. That is very important to the progress that we make in all our communities. At the heart of those consultations will be our communities. We need to understand what their needs are, and we need to understand what their fears are. We need to keep them in the loop and engaged. That is my commitment.

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier promised back in March of this year that consultation will happen in communities, with health professionals and with the people of New Brunswick. We are still waiting, and now you are promising the same thing.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government said in the throne speech that it had a health plan. In the end, this is plan B, the one the government always denied having, last February, during the fiasco of its first health reform. To get out of trouble, the Premier promised public consultations that never took place. The new Minister of Health is talking to us about consultations as well, but the government already has a plan for health reform. Could the Premier explain his health plan today, so that New Brunswickers know what their government's real intentions are?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): The real intentions of this government are to do exactly what I have said. We will consult with our communities and all of those who have an input in the delivery of the health care system in New Brunswick. Do you know what we are lacking right now? The province has not had a health plan for 10 years—no real health plan, nothing that was not thrown together before an election. I guess maybe I do not want to point fingers.

Do you know what? We have an opportunity here. We have an opportunity to figure out what we want our health care service delivery to be, and no one has done that. We have been troubleshooting from the hip every single time that we get someone in this position. We are going to have a vision for this province for the delivery of health care services, and I want the professionals to be as satisfied as their patients. That is what we are going to do.

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[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, if I understand correctly, the plan that the former Minister of Health presented earlier this year was not a plan. If no plan has been presented for several years, that begs the question of what exactly the plan the Conservative government presented us with earlier this year is.

Mr. Speaker, we remember the Conservative government's comments earlier this year, right in the middle of the health crisis. The former Minister of Health talked about centralizing regional laboratory services in one location in the province. Everyone thought these ideas just did not make sense.

Now that the Premier wants to eliminate duplication of services, what will happen to all the hospitals that are providing laboratory services? Are we seeing the Conservative government removing services from every hospital in the province in an attempt to justify closing down hospitals in New Brunswick within 2, 3, or 4 years?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Once again, Mr. Speaker, we have an opposition that is anticipating outcomes. I have made a commitment that we will consult. The fact of the matter is that we cannot get away from the fact that our most difficult challenge in this province and every other province in the country is human resources. That means medical professionals. That means cleaning staff. We have a human resource issue, the same as everybody else, and we need to target that. This is why we need the communities to help us make decisions and derive a plan, with their collaboration. That is why we need to engage every medical professional in this province. That is why we need to engage all the leadership that understands the challenges that we have and how it can help us to deliver a better service. I believe that they are up to it, I believe that we are going to see those outcomes, and I believe that we are going to have a better plan.

[*Translation*]

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, we recently heard that the Conservative government was eliminating an extremely important program for young people in need of immediate assistance. The government has stopped funding the Link Program.

The Link Program was created in New Brunswick by New Brunswickers 20 years ago, following a rash of suicides throughout the province. Link worked so well that this program was imitated by several other provinces across our country. This resounding success gained national recognition and fulfilled the program's mandate of providing young people

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with direct assistance at school, for just \$40 000 a year. My question is very simple: Why was this program eliminated?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thanks also to the opposition member for his question.

[Original]

Mr. Speaker, we review programs on an annual basis. I want to thank the people who have been working on Programme Le Maillon, also known as the Link Program, over the years. I know that they did help a number of people and a number of youth. That is very, very important, and it is one thing that we also stand up for.

You know, Mr. Speaker, every now and again, as we go through programs, we look to see whether we are duplicating programs. Have the programs achieved the outcomes that they initially were tasked to achieve? When we looked at this and at the integrated programs that we are using within the Department of Health and the Department of Social Development to meet the needs of various sectors across the province, we found that this is where, unfortunately, we have to make some difficult decisions. We want to make sure that the needs are met throughout the province, and we feel that we are doing that within the various departments and meeting those needs of the community.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): This program was working well; there was no duplication involved—it was working well. With \$40 000 in annual funding, this program provided students with assistance right in the schools. I would like the Premier or his minister to talk to Audrey Chouinard, a young lady whose father committed suicide when she was 16 and in school. I talked to her this morning, and she said that, if it had not been for the Link Program in her school, which provided her with support from a person she met with several times a week, she would not have completed Grade 12. Now, she is joining the workforce.

My question remains: Should the worst happen again, will the government have the courage to explain the negative consequences of its decision to parents?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you again for your question, honourable member.

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[Original]

Mr. Speaker, all these programs that we have across the province are very, very important, and they meet various needs in various situations at various times across the province. When we looked, again, at the program review that has gone on year after year, we made sure that if these programs were being duplicated within the various departments and were meeting the needs of the various individuals around the province... Mr. Speaker, that is why some of these tough decisions have to be made.

Here on this side, we want to work with the communities, we want to work with the staff within the departments, and we want to work with the various residents across the province. Mr. Speaker, we take this very, very seriously. We know that it is not just an act. We want to get things done. Sometimes, tough decisions are made, but we know, again, that the needs that are being addressed at various points in time are going to be met over time.

EDUCATION

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, as we know, the pandemic has shaken a lot of things at all levels of our society and, namely, within our school system. I want to take this time to salute all education personnel, including teachers, educational assistants, janitors, and school bus drivers, as well as all other management and staff within the schools, the districts, and the department. They have all pulled together to provide a safe and learning-centred environment for our students across the province.

Having said that, I remain somewhat perplexed about why the government and the minister have chosen to have high school students go to school 50% of the time. Would the minister elaborate on the reason for this decision?

[Translation]

Thank you.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to be able to rise in the House again after the election to represent the folks of Fredericton-West Hanwell. I am very happy to answer the question from the honourable member opposite and to welcome him as the new critic from the official opposition. I hope that we can have a productive exchange here in the Legislature.

Around blended learning in high schools, we took the guidance from Public Health to make sure that we could, as much as possible, preserve the educational experience for our



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students. For younger years, the classroom bubble offered that best form of protection. High school students, by definition, have to be able to move from class to class to take different courses in different subjects.

The blended option was the only one that we could really adopt that would still protect those public health and safety requirements that have become so important to all of us. That was the core of the argument of why we adopted that blended model for high school students and why we chose a different model for the younger years. Certainly, we are going to continue to look at the system and how it rolls out, but so far, New Brunswick's record on the front line of the Atlantic bubble, helping to protect the bubble from this pandemic, shows the results...

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

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): I want to thank the minister for the answer. I understand his logic, but it is also my understanding that very few jurisdictions across the country have adopted a similar model. Most jurisdictions have high school students attend school full-time, as the K-to-8 levels do. There are other ways of doing it. Having the teachers going from class to class and having the students stay there would work just as well.

When I think about this move, I know that many students are in a precarious state within the school system and it seems counterintuitive to me that many students that are struggling for various reasons... I do not think that they benefit by staying at home. How can they be better supported by staying at home? Many parents and teachers feel that these children are drifting away and may never be able to reintegrate into the system properly. I think that the minister needs to take ownership of this. Can he have the students stay one hundred percent of the time in the high school system? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thanks to the member opposite for the question. There are two things. First off, it does not make sense to have the teachers move from class to class with high school students because, again, high school students are taking different classes. Unless you are going to have a class of students who are all going to take the same courses, having the teachers come in means that you are eliminating the personalization that is at the heart of high school.

If we all look back to our high school years—in my case, many decades ago—and imagine what it would have been like if we had had to stay in the same class all the time, taking the same courses as everyone else. I certainly would have been a disappointment and a drag on my colleagues who wanted to take physics and biology, because those certainly were not my strong suits, and political science and philosophy certainly were not the interests of other people in my class. So personalization is core to the high school experience.

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To the member's point, to begin with, that other jurisdictions did not follow our example, do you know what? We are leading the world in our response to COVID-19. We are being seen as a global example. We are at the front line of the Atlantic bubble, and we are making sure that we set the standard. We have had other jurisdictions follow our example, and we are going to keep up with that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With this level of having the students not being in school all the time, I am afraid that we will also be leading the pack with mental health issues within our student population if this continues. I think that the minister needs to be aware of this and look at how half of the students can be in class as much as possible, because we are losing students. How can these students that are already on the brink... We are on the brink of losing them, and suddenly they are gone half the time. How can we think, in our minds, that they will be motivated to come back and stay within the school system, to integrate into the workplace properly? I mean, I understand what the minister is saying. We are leading the pack for now, but we will be, at the end, behind the pack if we continue on that path. Has the minister thought of that? I would like to hear his thoughts on what the mental health supports are that are given to the students in that fashion. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thanks again to the honourable member for the question. There are a couple of points there to unpack, but first off, I take full responsibility for this program, working in conjunction with all the folks that the honourable member listed, whom we thanked and praised for their work. They are the folks who came up with this system. We will absolutely continue to look at it as we go forward and, hopefully, as we start to see the light at the end of tunnel for COVID-19 and we develop and roll out the vaccines that are going to protect all of us, then, hopefully, we can get back to normal. Absolutely, the mental health issues that the honourable member raises are important, and we have to continue to look at them.

But let's remember the reasons that we put these measures in place. We put these measures in place to protect our population against a pandemic that has swept the world, destroyed economies, and ruined lives. If you want to talk about the negative mental health impacts on the student, imagine being the person who spreads COVID-19 into your classroom and into your school. Imagine losing a family member or a loved one because they did not follow the proper precautions. We are keeping our students in our province safe, Mr. Speaker, and I will not apologize for that.

[*Translation*]

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Four months ago, the Premier's Council on Disabilities released its action plan containing 43 recommendations

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to ensure reliable, consistent, and inclusive services for people suffering from disabilities. No one wants to see this report sit on a shelf like so many others. It is said that a society can be judged by how it treats its most vulnerable members. That is why recommendations have been made, including an accessibility Act that must be adopted by the end of next year. How does the Premier expect to implement the recommendations of his Council on Disabilities?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question from the leader of the Green Party. There is money. I think that \$15 million is for vulnerable populations. Certainly, the report that the leader outlines is one that we need to focus on in the coming months. I agree. I look forward to working with the leader to do just that and set the priorities based on those recommendations. It is an area of concern and interest and a priority for this government.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is good news. The Premier's Council on Disabilities wants to ensure that persons with disabilities have enough income to meet their basic needs and to provide a reasonable standard of living in the community. Income assistance provides way too little money to achieve this. To make matters worse, Social Development's Household Income Policy can take away that income entirely, as Kaitlyn Layden in Saint John found out when she married the love of her life and her income assistance was shut off, leaving her entirely dependent on the modest wages of her new husband.

That policy needs to be extinguished, Mr. Speaker, but we can do better—much better—with the establishment of a guaranteed livable income. If there was a time for the establishment of a guaranteed livable income, it is now during a pandemic. Will the Premier ask the Standing Committee on Social Policy to make recommendations to this House on the adoption of a guaranteed livable income for low-income New Brunswickers, beginning with persons with disabilities?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I think that there are challenges in all aspects of what a livable income can be, how money is being spent, and where it can best be used. We are seeing it in every category. We are certainly seeing it in areas of the homeless and in mental health conditions, and we are seeing a rising situation in terms of drug addiction, violent crime, and weapons-related crime. There is a spectrum of how we ensure that the priorities of all vulnerable populations are being addressed, certainly commencing with those with disabilities and how we manage that.

In terms of what has to happen through this process, how do we look at the entire spectrum? What is a livable income? What are the standards that we expect in our province? At the end of the day, it is about trying to find the right path forward. As I



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mentioned about the priorities that were listed in the study, let's put all the cards on the table and let's figure out together what makes sense so that we can get on a long-term, sustainable program of improvement. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MENTAL HEALTH

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Many people in New Brunswick of all ages and backgrounds live with mental illness. When they struggle with their mental health, they often face gaps in services and challenges and barriers within our system. It has been one year since the Legislative Assembly unanimously adopted a motion calling on the government to create the position of a mental health advocate in New Brunswick. All New Brunswickers who suffer from mental illness need to have someone defending and protecting them.

The pandemic has only worsened the mental health crisis in New Brunswick since this motion passed last November. Despite this, government has not made an announcement regarding the creation of this position one year later. Can the Minister of Health update us on what progress has been made and when she expects to announce the creation of a mental health advocate in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the member for her question. It is certainly no surprise that mental health is going to be a topic of great concern for our province in light of COVID-19 and all that is happening. Addiction and mental health services are extremely important parts of the health care system. We do need to make sure that they are viable and accessible.

Speaking to the member's question on the mental health advocate, we absolutely do realize that it has been a year. It was December of last year when that motion passed. I was proud to be part of a House that worked with the opposition in order to make that happen. The onslaught of COVID took a lot of people within the health care system and the social development system—really, in fact, throughout all of government—and dispersed them away from doing their day-to-day jobs, with the intent of ensuring that we could protect our province through COVID. That work is ongoing now. Do I expect an announcement any day? No, but it is on our radar to happen very soon. I promise you that this work will continue.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business did a survey among its 5 000 members here in New Brunswick to see what the most pressing issues are for survival and growth. Of the 10



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issues listed, taxes and red tape were at the top. As a matter of fact, 93%—93%—of those businesses surveyed said that reducing provincial taxes and fees and reducing red tape are the most important issues. Mr. Speaker, government has two options when it comes to help for businesses during the pandemic. It can roll out new programs that offer temporary relief, or it can cut taxes and fees to provide long-term economic advantages.

My question today is for the Minister of Economic Development. Will this government listen to the 93% of businesses that took part in a recent survey and reduce taxes and fees to grow the private sector?

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you, member, for the question, and also thank you, Mr. Speaker. In terms of CFIB, I am actually meeting with it tomorrow. I will say, however, that I have met with a number of business leaders across this entire province. The number one issue that they are telling me they want to make sure we look after is keeping this province safe—keeping it open for business and making sure that businesses do not shut their doors. That is what we have done, and we are going to continue to do that and be open for business in New Brunswick.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I agree with the Minister of Economic Development. I believe that we do need to stay open. That is why I have said repeatedly that lockdowns can often have more of a negative effect than a positive effect. I think we have done exceptionally well in that regard.

But the reality is that New Brunswick has been last in the country, along with other Atlantic Provinces, when it comes to business growth and economic development. That is a fact. So we cannot simply use the pandemic as an excuse to divert from economic growth in the private sector. The only way that you can grow the private sector is by reducing taxes and regulation and by allowing the free market to take its course in growing the economy here at home. Again, I will ask the minister this: Will she commit, along with this government, to decreasing taxes, fees, and regulations so that the private sector can be set free to grow the economy here in New Brunswick?

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, I would say to the member opposite that we have not been lax. If you look at the globe and look at New Brunswick in terms of leading the nation and leading the globe, we are doing that. We are back to 97.7% employment. Our economy has turned around quicker than that of any other province in this nation, quicker than any other economy in the globe. I will say to you today that I commit to actually working with the CFIB to determine what its needs are. Until I have that discussion, that is all I have to say on that issue.



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HEALTH CARE

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have been in this Legislature for about 10 years now. I have listened quite carefully many different times to what the present Premier has said over those years. When I heard the Minister of Health say that the official opposition was trying to preclude the consultation process that she is supposed to begin... The reason that we said what we just did is that the Premier has a record of always having his mind made up before discussing with New Brunswickers and stakeholders. On page 16 of the speech yesterday, it clearly states that there is an existing health plan. The Premier has had many occasions to make that public, even during the campaign. The platform did not mention it. Why can the Premier not table that plan that he has in mind today?

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting when the only avenue, I guess, is the status quo. The minister has very clearly laid it out. I will make no exceptions or... I apologize for the situation that we went through in the first quarter of this year because there were improvements to be made, but do you know something, Mr. Speaker? People that I spoke with in every community in relation to the hospitals that were of concern at that time, people who were working with us for a solution, said this: We understand that there is a problem. We understand that we need to be sure that we have a better health care system, and we want to be part of that. None of them said: Do not touch us, and do not talk to us. It was just: Let us be part of the solution.

That is what I am seeing all over the province. People expect us to have those discussions, and we will. The minister has committed to that. I have not seen any conclusive plan that involves this hospital or that hospital and how it is all going to be laid out. If the health authorities have that, we should all share it and understand it and how it makes us better because that is the goal. It is to make it better, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): It was quite revealing this morning when the Premier said that he has not seen a plan. Why did he write in the speech from the throne yesterday that he has a health plan? It is so ironic. But the fact of the matter is that he does have a plan. It was a secret plan in February. It has continued to be secret since then, even during the election campaign.

New Brunswickers, at 39%, voted for stability, for sure. I respect that. I respect that—for stability, not turbulence. There were many occasions for the Premier to make that plan public and not keep it secret and not go through a fake process of consultation, because he

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has already decided. Why did he write in the speech yesterday that he has a plan and today he does not even want to table that plan? Just table it, Premier.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting that we have announced... Already, the minister has announced and is laying out a program to talk with all the communities to work through the challenges that we have—to lay out very clearly where the challenges are—and then to come up with the next steps. What does this look like? How do we save health care? How do we ensure that we have the best health care? How much better could we be if we are willing to look at the whole system and say this: How much better can we be by doing that? That is the plan. The plan is this: How can we say that this is how good we can be, and then how do we get there? Then we start working with communities to do just that.

I think that what happens so often is that we get caught in a little rut. Usually, the rut is right here, in this building, where we just cannot change. We just cannot talk about anything new. We just have to go around and around and around. Well, this government is not prepared to go around and around. We are moving in a direction that sees us get better and sees us being noticed all over Canada.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier thinks that this Assembly is a rut. Well, the members of the official opposition are going to do their job and speak on behalf of New Brunswickers to make sure that with regard to what he has already decided to do, he is going to be transparent and he is going to be accountable for what he decides to do. That is our responsibility.

The Premier has a record. The record has been clear. Over the years, he has already decided what he wants to do about health care. It is to cut services in health care. When he says that he wants to discuss it with stakeholders, the concern is that it is not that he wants to discuss it with stakeholders. It is that he will impose his way of seeing how health care should go about and how it is delivered. That is the concern because, historically, that is how he has operated to make decisions—it is to impose his views.

As for his plan that he mentioned in the speech from the throne yesterday, table it. Table it so that we can see it, so that everybody can see it.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the leader of the opposition is right. Our Premier has a track record. He has a track record of not being afraid to have the tough conversations. He has a track record of providing stability to this province. He has a track record of empowering his ministers to do their jobs. I am going to do my job. We have said that we will consult. We have said that we will provide a plan. We are going to do that.



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I am honoured and privileged to be in a position where meaningful change can happen. We are going to deliver on meaningful, progressive change. That change can only come when the community is at the centre of what we want to deliver and how we want to deliver it. They need to help us make those decisions, and we will do that. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period is over.