

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**March 17, 2021**

### CONTENTS

#### BUDGET

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

#### ECONOMY

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Ms. Dunn

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Steeves

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Steeves

#### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Steeves

#### MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. McKee

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions

Hon. Mrs. Shephard

Mr. McKee

Hon. Mrs. Shephard

### CARBON TAX

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Higgs

### HEALTH CARE

Mr. Austin

Hon. Mrs. Shephard

Mr. Austin

Hon. Mrs. Shephard

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions

[Original]

### BUDGET

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I also want to extend my condolences to Lexi's family. I was able to speak with her mom Shawna, her father Chris, and her sister Piper. One thing I realized is what strong people they are, but I also could not imagine the difficult time that they are going through. I just want again to extend my condolences.

Today is the day after the budget. As we all know, we are going through one of the worst crises in 100 years. When you look at what needs to happen moving forward based on this pandemic, it is going to be economic recovery, action and plan, and mental health recovery, action and plan. I am going to ask the Premier this morning: Can he explain what is in the budget that actually addresses these two areas in terms of recovering from this crisis?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think responsible and stable government will be a big part of the next steps. When you look at how our economy is recovering in the province and what we are seeing for investment and interest in our province, it is leading the country. The economic indicators are leading the country. We have had good reports from RBC that say that our growth is going to lead the country.

Our plan is to provide a stable government that people can make sense out of and to have a balanced approach to investing where we need, with a return on investment, while at the same time holding our taxation levels to the point where people say, I want to be part of New Brunswick's success story. We are seeing that across the country, that people are looking at us for the first time.

In addition to that, we see that we are addressing the social issues. Our mental health plan... We started at the beginning by saying that we need to address mental health in several different aspects, and those include a fast response to mental health demands and needs. I am pleased to say that the Minister of Health has rolled out just that.

[Translation]

### ECONOMY

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the slogan of the Premier and the government is reinventing New Brunswick. When we look at the details of yesterday's budget, we see that there are no new initiatives for reinventing our province, contrary to what the Premier is trying to tell people.

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions

The Minister of Finance is the one who introduced the budget. We are not sure who is really the Minister of Finance, but it has been decreed that it is the member for Moncton Northwest.

Does this government's failure to act in terms of economic initiatives in 2020 not raise questions? In the coming years, according to government projections, we will have structural deficits. This is because our economy is not able to support our social service needs, and it all comes down to government inaction.

[*Original*]

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

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said many times over the years, I think it is important to have third-party evaluation of what we are doing, not an opposition evaluation, because we kind of know where that goes.

In relation to the long-term strategy, what we have also said is that when we leverage taxpayer dollars, we want to see private-sector investment. We can count numerous projects around the province that have leveraged their own investment because they believe in New Brunswick as a future and as a place to live and work. That is the indication of success: when people take their own money and invest in their own communities—not create another job for the sake of creating a job and then saying that it is done as soon as the money runs out.

We know full well that the only economic plan that the previous Liberal government ever had was: How much money can we spend, and where can we spend it? It did not matter whether it had any long-term view. That government just created a job while money was being spent. Mr. Speaker, that is not an economic plan. That is a formula for fiscal disaster.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier, with all due respect, cites all kinds of reports, reports from extreme-right institutions and reports from all kinds of other third parties. The Premier should actually listen to New Brunswickers, the business community, and the people who are actually struggling right now, because this pandemic has been very difficult for our small and medium-sized businesses. Talk to the hotel owners and talk to the restaurant owners in New Brunswick. Go and talk to my barber, who will be closing in the next few months because of this pandemic. Cash flow is a struggle for them. The costs are still there, but the revenue is not coming in. Community centres are struggling to pay the bills.

Premier, with all due respect, your inaction—financial action—to sustain our economy is going to give us structural deficits in the future. Please address the situation.



# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions

**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 to the member opposite for the question. Mr. Speaker, I would say to you today that we are listening to New Brunswick businesses. We are listening to their concerns, and we have enacted lots of things to address them.

Some of those things are as follows. Overall, it is estimated that, so far, \$2 billion has been transferred to New Brunswick businesses and households since the onset of the pandemic. Working capital loans of up to \$100 000 through the Small Business Emergency Working Capital Program with the community business development council have led to more than \$17 million in support for restaurants, seasonal tourism operators, service sectors, and self-employed business owners impacted directly by the pandemic. There are the New Brunswick Workers Emergency Income Benefit, with \$900 to individuals who lost their jobs due to the state of emergency in New Brunswick, and the nonrepayable small business recovery grants of up to \$5 000 for small businesses, with more than 300 applications received, and...

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

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, they can applaud all they want regarding their inaction to sustain the economy of New Brunswick so that we can strive beyond the pandemic. You know, the program that the minister talks about came in 12 months after the pandemic began, and the criteria to qualify were so strict that a minimum qualified.

In the newspapers, the Premier said that he wanted to understand what businesses need. Well, it has been a full year of the business community telling you. They are small and medium-sized businesses—hairstylists, restaurant owners, bar owners, and hotels. They create a lot of jobs. They—this government and this minister—have been telling you what the struggles are, and there has still been no action. Can you please change your mind and address the situation so that these businesses can survive?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, from the onset of the pandemic, we had a singular philosophy. One, which was the primary goal, was to keep New Brunswickers safe. Then on the economic side, we had the philosophy to keep businesses open as much as we possibly could—keep people at work. I know that it would be a different philosophy than what the opposition would have and it could be a different philosophy than what the federal government would have, but our goal was to keep people working and to keep businesses open.

Mr. Speaker, I am proud to say that throughout this pandemic, we have done that more than any other province in the country, and in the cases where we have gone into red and orange, as where we found ourselves after the New Year, we asked businesses and we

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions

created a program that says that we want to make sure that they can stay in business. If you had a viable business before COVID-19, you should have a viable business after COVID-19. If your business was not viable to begin with, then you should not expect the government to now make it viable. It is not about what I can get from COVID-19. It is about...

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, Mr. Premier.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is another example of what this Premier's legacy will be: my way or the highway; let's not listen to what people actually say.

Seriously, we are not trying to be adversarial here. We are trying to give information that New Brunswickers are giving us, which is about small and medium-sized businesses. Go talk to the artists of New Brunswick. Go talk to them because I do not think that you have. They depend on a strong economy, they depend on festivals, and they depend on consumers and people buying and listening to their products and services. There have been zero action and help for them in this budget or certainly over the last year. It is an economy and a business sector of almost \$600 million in New Brunswick, and 17% of them lost their jobs. What are you doing for the artists of New Brunswick, Premier?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, as with every sector, we said from the start that we are working with all sectors to provide their information, whether it be through Tourism, Heritage and Culture or whether it be through ONB, to identify where the opportunities lie. I make my point again: The goal is to make sure that our businesses survive COVID-19 and thrive after COVID-19. It is interesting to see the reaction that you get: Well, if you did not have a viable business before, you should after COVID-19.

In the case of some businesses, they actually have modified, they have changed, they have taken advantage, and they have been entrepreneurial. We have seen that. We have seen major changes and improvements, and some have done very well. I commend them all for that. ONB has targeted many businesses in relation to world markets.

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order, please.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, any institution, any operation, needs to talk with ONB and with the minister of heritage, culture, and sport in relation to what its needs are. I do not apologize for wanting to understand the real needs—not the perceived needs that the opposition might portray.

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, talk is cheap. But actually, the talk that the Premier talks about is having our small and medium-sized businesses, our tourism sector, and our arts and culture sector struggling. The ones that are actually surviving are surviving because of the federal government injecting about \$1 billion into New Brunswick during this pandemic. Let's recognize that. Your strategy is, yes, to keep New Brunswickers safe, because we all agree, but it is also to be critical of the federal government but to accept its money because you are not intervening.

In the budget yesterday, I heard that the tourism sector is going to be bonified by \$1.3 million in the incentive program for people to commute and to become tourists again over the next year. But you also cut \$9 million of the emergency fund for businesses. So, net-net, there is no incentive for small and medium-sized businesses. How...

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

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question. Let's remember. If you want us to turn down the federal money... You told us one time that you want us to take more federal money, and now you are saying that we should have turned down the federal money. Is that the message I am getting? Do you know what? We will absolutely take advantage of that.

Do you know what? The Tourism, Heritage and Culture budget went up by 13.7% this year—13.7%. I can guarantee you that at a meeting this morning, the folks in Tourism were pretty darn happy about that. Social Development is up by 6.3%. The minister has called this a progressive budget because it is helping the people who need help through Social Development. Health is up by 5.1%. It is 4.4% for Education and Early Childhood Development. That is a budget that is progressive. That is a budget that is taking advantage of what we have right now and trying to help people through what is a worldwide pandemic.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, the Tourism budget is probably increasing for two reasons. You have slashed it significantly since you took office. Maybe it is also to pay for the accommodations and travel of the deputy minister.

We also have to point out that, during this pandemic, one of the segments of our population that has been impacted the most is women. Of the hardest hit, 50% were women in the sectors of hospitality and retail. Women absorbed 65% of all job losses in the accommodation and food services sector. Twelve times more mothers than fathers left their jobs to take care of their toddlers or their kids who go to school. There was no significant initiative announced in the budget yesterday to help women in this province. They are important to our economy. Could you please tell us specifically what you are going to do to help them?

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Do you know what? This is a great opportunity, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the member across the way for bringing this up. This is a great opportunity to talk about our gender-based analysis—first time ever. We had the Women’s Council come to the prebudget consultations and ask us for a gender-based analysis. I said: Do you know what? Absolutely.

The council then further asked for a detailed one, with certain prescribed formulas, so we did it. We did it, and it is outstanding. It is an outstanding piece of work. It is the first time ever, and it is going to be released. It is going to be a public document, and I would love your constructive criticism on it. Quite frankly, we can always do better. This is an exceptional piece of work, so I want to thank the Women’s Council and all who were involved. It really is great.

[*Translation*]

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is true that we have financial challenges. New Brunswick, like every other jurisdiction in the world, is going through the most serious crisis in 100 years. However, financially speaking, one thing is certain: We must enable our economy to grow in order to mitigate our financial challenges. Yesterday, we heard the most unimaginative budget speech with the fewest new initiatives. This is not to criticize the minister; I am talking about the content of the speech, Mr. Speaker. The content was very, very unimaginative.

The economy is suffering, as are our small and medium-sized businesses. I have listed several categories. This government is incapable of taking economic recovery seriously. Could we actually see an economic recovery plan in the coming days? It is apparently ready. We still have not heard any news.

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I did the best I could. There is only so much appeal that this brings.

Do you know what? I think it is a really progressive budget. I think it is a great budget when you are looking at \$7 million going to help mental health and when you are looking at \$12.4 million to support home support workers, community residence workers, special care home workers, and family support workers. There is a wage increase that, according to a promise, was not necessarily due until 2023, and we did it now. There is a \$20-million multiyear strategy and investment for small modular nuclear reactors. There is \$3 million to address gaps in the broadband network, which is so needed as we move forward with technology, distance learning, and all the rest of that. It is an exciting budget to me, but I am a nerd. I am a nerd. Next year, I will wear something sexy. I do not know.



# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions

### MENTAL HEALTH

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, disappointment is an understatement when it comes to this government's commitment to increasing mental health services. The tragic death of Lexi Daken galvanized the call to action to ensure that people struggling with mental health issues get the support they need when they need it. We have since learned that the province is short 24 psychiatrists. We have learned that the youth mental health beds have been eliminated because of staffing shortages and that mobile crisis units are lacking the professional resources they need.

We have a vague commitment here of \$3 million for "the growing demand for addiction and mental health" and \$350 000 to help address shortages of psychologists in schools, community mental health teams, and hospitals. I submit that this is not going to be enough to cut it, Mr. Speaker. What kind of mental health crisis or tragedy is going to be required for this government to start taking mental health services seriously? Will the minister tell us today whether she is prepared to accelerate her plan to three years to get the resources we need to address mental health and addictions?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I thank the member opposite for the question, Mr. Speaker. When I was invited to the mental health table back in late 2018 and early 2019, I made a commitment that we were going to give mental health the attention that it deserves. We have put together an interdepartmental deputy minister steering committee. We have accelerated the mental health plan. We understand that the tragedy of a young person's death is impactful, to our whole province and whole population.

I have taken immediate steps to get the RHAs to bring options to me by the end of this month. We will then engage with some stakeholders. By mid-April, we should have some options. We are targeting crises and near-crises in an accelerated fashion. The five-year action plan is being implemented in a very timely fashion. We are moving forward, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, another example that we have learned of was that the very well-received and effective Link Program had been refused the mere \$40 000 per year required to keep it operational. I will say that the lack of real and substantial investments in mental health by this government is not because of a lack of funds. The federal government has provided funds. It is because of a lack of will, the will to make sure that the well-being of New Brunswickers comes before the bottom line.

Mr. Speaker, if you will recall, in the Canada-New Brunswick Home and Community Care and Mental Health and Addictions Services Funding Agreement, New Brunswick was set to receive \$41 million over the last five years. It received \$2.09 million in 2017-18, \$5.17 million in 2018-19, \$9.31 million in 2019-20, \$12.42 million last year, and \$12.42 million in this fiscal year. That is almost \$25 million over the last two years. Where

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions

are the funds for mental health going—the funds received from the federal government to address the needs of New Brunswickers in terms of mental health and addiction?

(Interjections.)

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Yes, I can tell.

Mr. Speaker, mental health and addictions are very serious issues. While the opposition can use them as political lightning rods, we have gotten to work on putting together the five-year action plan, which needed to be done. We are working on our health review and bringing together our entire Department of Health to understand the importance of mental health. We are supporting our sister departments—the Department of Social Development, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and the Department of Justice and Public Safety. We know that this is all hands on deck. We are committed to ensuring that these programs are enhanced, accountable, and give us the deliverables that we need. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

## CARBON TAX

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the budget is projecting that the government will collect \$163 million in carbon tax revenue. That would represent a meaningful investment to help people, families, businesses, and communities transform our province. However, \$90 million is going to subsidize gasoline and natural gas consumption, which will only deter people from making conservation-minded choices. There is \$35 million that is dedicated to the Climate Change Fund, and the minister just said about \$20 million of that is going to research in atomic energy. There is \$9 million for First Nations communities. That leaves \$28 million that is unallocated from the climate tax revenue.

Can the Minister of Finance explain why that \$28 million would not be added to the Climate Change Fund so that it could help families, businesses, and communities install solar power, purchase electric vehicles, or retrofit their homes and buildings? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. I am pleased to say that the money that is being allocated throughout different initiatives is important. We have a committee that works on that, together with the climate action committee, in identifying certain targets. We have also made investments in SMRs because we are looking at a non-carbon-emitting source to alternate with or replace our current energy supplies that we have not only in New Brunswick but also in the world. It is to be a player in that field. Other allocations are yet to be made where that would be best suited in order to address current needs.

One of the principles in relation to the carbon tax from the federal government is that it has to be seen that some goes to climate change, some goes to initiatives, and some goes back to the population. We have to identify what is the best process going forward. We are under



# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions

the administration of the federal program, and initially it had a rebate program going directly. I do not know what it looks like at this point. We have not decided, but it is under review.

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Well, speaking of principles, Mr. Speaker, the budget is silent on what criteria are actually being used to determine how the \$163 million in revenue collected from the carbon charge we pay on gasoline can best be used to achieve the transformational change we need. Nova Scotia is helping families, businesses, and communities to install solar power, purchase electric vehicles, and retrofit their homes and buildings so that everyone can be part of the solution. Premier Iain Rankin aims to supply 80% of Nova Scotia's energy from renewable sources by 2030. However, the budget commits to spending millions of dollars in carbon tax revenue on speculative research into atomic energy.

Can the Minister of Finance explain what decision-making criteria he expects to be followed in determining the most effective use of the carbon tax we pay to best immunize New Brunswickers from the effects of the climate crisis? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I take the Leader of the Green Party's position, and I understand the requirements around many of the issues that we are rolling out. Many of them are issues that are preparing for climate change, as we have seen, in relation to flooding, in relation to changes in how we build and design future projects, and, yes, in relation to how it can be used to best offset costs for others in different homes, whether it be energy solutions or whether it be encouraging different models or requirements for investment from individuals.

But I also think that there are criteria, which are part of this requirement for additional expenses that people are paying for their everyday lives, to understand what, if any, portion should be returned directly, because that was the original program. It was a rebate program. How would that work? How would that end up? Mr. Speaker, I am not sure at this point, but I think that we are maintaining some flexibility in that regard by trying to do maybe the best we can in many different areas but also recognizing that people are paying more in taxes today.

## HEALTH CARE

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week, I had the opportunity to meet with the President of eVisitNB, Dr. Serge Melanson. Dr. Melanson has over 17 years as a frontline ER doctor at the Dumont hospital in Moncton. He is an innovator. He is one who has travelled around North America to see the effects that virtual care can have on our health care system.



# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions

Mr. Speaker, when I think about virtual care, I do not see it as a footnote to health care reform. I am glad to see that the minister is going to go around the province to get ideas from everyday people on health care reform, but I am worried that she is missing the people who work on the front line every day on health care reform, people like Dr. Serge Melanson at eVisitNB.

Mr. Speaker, this is not 1960. This is a day and an age when we can use IT and digital technology to make the system better. For crying out loud, we are still faxing prescriptions to pharmacies to get a prescription filled. My question is this: Has the minister met with the President of eVisitNB?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Well, I can answer the first one. No, I do not believe I have.

You know, Mr. Speaker, COVID-19 has taught us a lot. Virtual doctor visits are certainly one thing that has come out of it. I see it being a part of our health care system in the future as well. But, you know, there has to be an accountability to that. By that, I mean that sometimes those in-person visits are equally necessary.

Mr. Speaker, I am happy to say that I believe that virtual appointments will continue into the future, and I am happy to say that we are going to work with the NBMS and with the nurse practitioners. We are going to work with all our medical professionals and primary caregivers to understand how that can look. It is going to take some time and probably some investment. As we all know, government IT systems are not always the frontline operators. It is a frustration of mine. But it is what it is, and we are progressing. We are moving forward with it. It is here to stay, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, minister, for that response. However, when you talk about in-person visits, let's not be naïve here. Of course, we understand that there will still have to be in-person visits, but ask the 70 000 people in this province who do not have a family doctor what they think of in-person visits and the fact that they are showing up at an ER and still waiting eight hours to see a doctor.

Mr. Speaker, I am convinced that virtual care can be one of the major reform changes in health care if it is properly resourced and if there is a vision there to see it implemented. Think of mental health. How many people could go to an emergency room and see a psychiatrist not from their community but from possibly anywhere in the country as they are scheduled in through a virtual-care system?

Mr. Speaker, the minister says that virtual care is going to continue. It is not going to continue if you pay doctors half the amount that they are paid in person and you do not pay nurse practitioners at all through virtual care. Will the minister change course on that and

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions

make sure that doctors are properly funded for virtual care and that nurse practitioners get...

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

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that we are just going to have to have the Leader of the People's Alliance come to the department to be briefed.

The fact is that virtual care has certainly become a prominent tool in keeping a connection with patients. Primary caregivers are using virtual care now. I see it staying. It is going to be a part of our health care delivery system, but we also have to have those discussions with primary caregivers on accountability. You know, Mr. Speaker, I thought that I had an ear infection. I was absolutely sure that I had an ear infection, and I had a virtual appointment set up. At the last minute, my physician's office opened and I was able to go in to see him in person. Guess what? I did not have an ear infection, so I avoided that 10-day prescription and time being wasted on dealing with an issue. So, Mr. Speaker, virtual care is important, but we need accountability.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister. The time for question period is over.