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Oral Questions



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COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier has a history of not valuing civil servants. The Premier has often shown that he lacks respect for the work done by the civil service.

I want to remind New Brunswickers that, when the Premier was Minister of Finance, he was unable to negotiate 27 different collective agreements. Can the Premier give us an update on the negotiations?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, you know, we are going through interesting times here in the province. I have said many times that we have to find new and innovative ways to do things. This is the way we worked together to make this happen over the COVID-19 stretch and in the home stretch that we are in right now. I take exception to the comment that I have not valued the role of the civil service and the role that people play in making this province bigger and better than it possibly could ever be.

I know we have to have difficult discussions on how we do things differently, but it is not a matter of just signing the same old contract and saying we will just keep doing what we have always done. In every sector, we are challenged and nowhere more so than in the actual area of health care.

My point is this: Every discussion we have now has to be about a better New Brunswick, a New Brunswick where we think innovatively, and a New Brunswick where we are all a part of the success story. That will be the topic of discussions going forward and the real discussions in our negotiations.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier referenced this pandemic. We have public-sector employees who have sacrificed and worked very, very hard to protect all of us—nurses, social workers, LPNs, nursing home workers, psychologists, teachers, paramedics, lab technicians, teaching assistants, and mental health professionals. These people have put in the effort and have actually put themselves at risk many different times during this pandemic. We appreciate everything that they have done.

What we hear from the government and from these stakeholders is that the Premier and this government want to say thank you to them by saying, Take it or leave it or go on strike. Can you give us an update on what you really want to accomplish with these important professional workers?

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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, some tunes never change, and that is what we see here. There is no innovation on the opposite side of the House from the opposition party. What we see here is an opportunity that the members opposite know is real. They know that every province is being challenged in unique ways.

Part of going through the COVID-19 experience was basically asking: Can we come out the other side so we are not in a position where taxes have to be raised and it costs more to live here in New Brunswick? Can we come out the other side better than other provinces? Mr. Speaker, we are well on our way to achieving that, and we are achieving that through the success of so many people who have worked so hard to get here.

It is not a matter of not saying this: I want to appreciate, I want to recognize, and I want to ensure that the salaries and the compensation and benefits are real and appropriate. We agree with all of that, but we also realize that, together, we have challenges we must face head-on and that, together, we must fix the direction for the next generation. It is not good enough just to say, oh, well, just talk about the money, and leave it at that. We have some good discussions to come...

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

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, when we hear the Premier continue to say that we must work together and find solutions, there is one thing we clearly understand from him: The people he works with are New York bankers and his former colleagues from previous employers. I am not even sure that he works with the members of his caucus.

I think the Premier should work with everyone who, during this pandemic, has done the contact tracing, to verify who had been infected, with everyone who has helped infected people in our long-term care homes, with everyone who has had to work in hospitals, and with all the laboratory workers who have worked overtime to make sure they fully understood the samples brought to them.

[Original]

Why does the Premier say 3% over four years, take it or leave it, that is it, that is all, and then go on strike if you want to?

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is fearmongering, the old process of just bickering back and forth.

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Mr. Speaker, every government puts a wage mandate forward. Our discussions have been revolving around asking: How can we deliver the different ways and different results that we must in order to meet the service requirements that the public is demanding? How do we do that in new, innovative ways?

We know that the nursing shortage exists. We know that it exists all the way across the country, and we know what is currently happening at the Dumont hospital and what challenges exist there. They are real, Mr. Speaker. They are not things that you can ignore and just say that they will go away if we pay 3%, 4% or 5% because they will not. Every province is in the same situation.

I know that it is tough, because most of the discussions that I would see coming from the opposition would be very shallow in nature, but I am saying that we have to have real discussions. We have to find real solutions because we want a real future for our province, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is very unfortunate that we hear language from the Premier that is quite condescending, to be quite honest. The issues that we raise every single time are real issues from people in New Brunswick society. If you had talked to them and consulted them, you would be aware of those issues. That is the reality here. You know, they are the teachers and the teachers' assistants, who have done their very best during this pandemic to give a good education to our kids, the workers in our long-term care facilities, who are always at risk but care and show up for work every single day to help these people who are infected, and the mental health professionals, whom we will need even more than ever after this pandemic. This 3% over four years, take it or leave it—that is not how you negotiate. Respect them. Offer them a decent package so that we will prevent a strike.

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, over the past 16 or 17 months, as we worked together on the COVID-19 Cabinet committee, there was great cooperation among all our colleagues. That includes both sides of the House, through our caucus and everywhere. We were focused on one issue, and that was how to get through this pandemic as safely as possible. Do you know what has been a success so far? I say “so far” because we are at the tail end and we are optimistic, but anything could change any day. It is obviously looking better every day that goes by, and cases are under control.

Mr. Speaker, we did that because there was a common focus. Now there needs to be a common focus on how we get better at health care outcomes, how we address the challenges we have with aging care, and how we have more services available to those who need them when they need them and where they need them. Those issues have to be addressed in real terms, in real discussions. We will meet with all the professionals. I

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commend every one of them, as the Leader of the Opposition has done, because they have gotten us this far and they will continue to do so.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Oh, Mr. Speaker, the Premier keeps referring to the all-party COVID-19 committee. I said and will repeat that I participated in that committee not to support your government but to work with Public Health and Dr. Russell to save people's lives during this pandemic.

When you talk about cooperation on any other matters, you want to cooperate if it fits your ideals. You do not cooperate when other people have suggestions. That is the reality in this province now, with your leadership. I will cooperate on any of these matters when we can have decent, competitive wages because we are losing our highly professional nurses and people in all other professions. We are competing with other jurisdictions. Why do you not offer them a decent package so that they can stay in New Brunswick, work in New Brunswick, and live in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, what we see is a case where... We should be able to agree that results matter. We should be able to agree on the question: Okay, what should we be able to do in health care? As an example, should every citizen in this province have access to primary care? I would say that we probably would agree with that—yes, they should. All right, so what are the avenues to get there? Is it about hiring more doctors? Well, we already have about the average per capita of other provinces. So where are the challenges that we have in facing that challenge?

Then you look at other access, whether it be in our long-term care, can we do things differently with the facilities and the people we have? Can we use our resources more effectively if we focus on what will be the best results for the province? Then we say this: Okay, how do we match the compensation with those results?

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, results do not seem to matter to the opposition. It is as though, if you spend more money, the results will just come. Mr. Speaker, that has not been the case, so we have to do both. We have to tie results with pay and make it fair for all, Mr. Speaker.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the outcome we are seeking here is to avoid strikes—avoid strikes—in services that are extremely essential and for which continued pressure is being exerted to recruit and retain personnel. I am

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talking about nursing, teaching, work in long-term care homes, and so on. That is what we are trying to do. We want to avoid strikes. The negotiations led by the Premier are pretty well nonexistent. There are no negotiations.

The Premier says: Take this, remain at the table, and accept our offer. If people are not at the table, he makes them feel guilty. Mr. Speaker, how can people negotiate with a Premier who has a history of stubbornly imposing solutions?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting when the Leader of the Opposition talks about negotiations. What we have not seen from the Liberal Party at any point in time is real negotiations on the two-phased issue: How do we improve the outcomes, and how do we pay the appropriate amount of money to improve the outcomes? So, it has always been kind of one-sided. It is just like what I said earlier: If we pay more money, things will get better.

What we are saying is that, yes, we understand that we have to be competitive. We want to be competitive with our Atlantic counterparts. We must be competitive. We get it, Mr. Speaker. But we also must find ways to deliver services in a different manner. In the past year and a half, we have seen great cooperation between Vitalité and Horizon. How do we continue that cooperation? How do we continue the value that they both bring to our entire province and work more collaboratively together—not competitively but collaboratively? There is a huge opportunity in that field. Mr. Speaker, these discussions are about the big picture and not just next week.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier will stand here today talking about delivering services in a different manner. However, this dates back to his ideology from 2010 when he was Finance Minister. He was not able to negotiate any contracts then. It is all about cuts and reduction of services. There are over 30 collective agreements up for negotiation with the province, and the Premier seems determined to be inflexible and miserly in negotiations.

We are in the middle of a pandemic. These are frontline workers. Many of them have been on the front lines and putting their health on the line and their families' health on the line. They have done that without even a contract with the province. They are acting in good faith, Mr. Speaker, but the province is not in these negotiations. Will the Premier commit to treating workers with respect and truly entering into good faith negotiations with them?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, there is not any negotiation that I would not enter into with good faith and understanding of all issues and all sides. These discussions have to be considerate of all issues, Mr. Speaker. It is not any one particular point. While the members opposite would

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carry on about it being all about the wages... That is their solution to everything, Mr. Speaker. It is all about the money. Throw more money on the grants.

With the discussion about grants and the fact that our total number of grants are down, do you know what is up, Mr. Speaker? The total amount of private-sector investment. The investment is unprecedented in a time of a pandemic. People are coming to New Brunswick and investing in New Brunswick. Why is that? It is because they are seeing a stable government that is looking out for taxpayers and encouraging people by helping them get through the red tape in order to invest here. The same thing applies as we sit down with our colleagues across this province who are working diligently. Let's have fair and reasonable discussions on how we work together for our province.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, it is not about money. It is about respect. It is about going to the table with respect. It is about listening to workers' concerns and not just listening but also hearing their concerns at the same time. This Premier and this government would rather take them to court, as we have seen over the last two years with the nursing home workers. We have five negotiations now at a deadlock.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier is known for his attitude of my way or the highway, and it is certainly evident in these negotiations that we are seeing now. The unions are frustrated. The negotiators are faced with this hardened stance of a government that would rather walk away from the table than make a reasonable counteroffer. That is what they want—a reasonable counteroffer, Mr. Speaker.

Will the Premier quit interfering in the process and let government negotiators have the power to make a decision without having to run back to the Premier's Office?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite would suggest that I have participated and been involved in every discussion and every negotiation that has happened in the last three or four years. That is not the case. Now, it may have been the case in relation to the past when the negotiations just ended up in the Premier's Office. I realize that at some point, it could happen if it becomes stalemated.

However, Mr. Speaker, I will continue to contend that the discussions we have must be real and reflective of the challenges that we face in our province. We cannot go elsewhere to find resources in terms of personnel, so we know how valuable our people are here. We have to decide how we mix and match both so that we improve our services for the people of this province and, at the same time, improve wages. That is our goal, and we will continue to pursue that. Discussions will be a balanced approach in improving our performance levels, as we must, and paying the right compensation, as we also must.

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[*Translation*]

M. McKee (Moncton Centre, L) : Mr. Speaker, the Premier rises today to say that he does not get involved in negotiations, but, let us remember that, when NB Liquor negotiated a contract, the file came back to the table of the Premier and the Cabinet, who cancelled a contract that had definitely been negotiated.

We are in the middle of a nursing shortage, which has forced the temporary closure of some hospital services. The Minister of Health talks about recruiting and retaining nurses, but let us also remember that both registered nurses and licensed practical nurses have been without contracts since 2018 and 2019 respectively. We are seeing patients diverted from the Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont Regional Hospital emergency room. We see 36-hour shifts for nurses. Doctors have to do nurses' work, Mr. Speaker. When will the Premier acknowledge that his inflexibility in contract negotiations and his refusal to pay nurses a fair wage...

[*Original*]

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Once again, the honourable member opposite is confused. The government has always put a wage mandate forward. I would suggest that was even done back in the former Liberal government because that is quite commonplace. It becomes an issue, as it did previously, if one group or another says, I am not following that mandate. But that is the way that the system has worked for years in government after government, just to be clear.

In this case, Mr. Speaker, as we look at how we face challenges together, it is going to be a concerted effort. When I say that I am not involved directly in discussions, I mean that I have not been at the negotiating table with my colleagues as they have gone through this. But we are talking about which issues we have to address. I talked about primary care here, a few minutes ago, in terms of everyone having access to a doctor. We talk about nursing. If you look at the nursing results over the last while, you will see that there has been a concerted effort in the last couple of years in order to get more nurses, and it is much higher than it was in the previous five years, Mr. Speaker.

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

[*Translation*]

GOVERNMENT REFORM

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform has been boasting for months about going all around the

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province to meet with elected officials to discuss municipal reform. How many times did he rise in the House to give an update on the mileage on his car? Despite all these meetings, he seems to have forgotten one group of people: Everyone who is not an elected official, which, in my opinion, must represent more than 99% of the population.

So, what is the minister's solution to encourage participation by citizens? One set of provincial public consultations to discuss structures and finances and another to discuss regional collaboration and land use planning.

Mr. Speaker, the direction that the municipal reform will take will have a major impact on the people of this province. So, my question is simple: Why is the minister just holding one public engagement session?

Hon. M. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This morning, I believe that the member for Tracadie-Sheila misread the press release on local governance. As you know, we are having 22 consultation sessions with the public. Over the last eight months, we have conducted more than 100 virtual meetings with LSDs and municipalities. It has just been announced that 22 consultation sessions will take place over the next few weeks. Next week, there will be four consultation sessions, which will be held from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. So, I am inviting New Brunswickers to come and talk about local governance.

In addition, we will meet with the 12 RSCs, including the new elected municipal officials. We are talking with people and we want to make sure that everyone is hearing us and has access to these meetings. Unlike the Liberal government, we are listening to people. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The health care consultations have ended. Now we are all wondering what is next. Community members, patients, and health care workers have weighed in on worker shortages, primary care access, mental health care access, prevention and wellness, and issues with transportation to medical appointments as well as many other issues with our health care systems. New Brunswickers want to know what is next. What is the government's plan to improve health care so it works for all New Brunswickers?

(Interjections.)

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

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Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): As legislators who represent our constituents, we need a chance to see any drafts or plans this month so we can ask questions in June, before the House takes a break until November. Can the Minister of Health clearly lay out what comes next?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question. As I believe I have indicated at the majority of my sessions—certainly, my public community sessions—we now need to delineate that information and the input that we have received, from 49 sessions, I might add. One of the things that our COVID-19 reality has given us is the opportunity to utilize technology. I do not know that we could ever have made 49 physical meetings in communities, but we did so virtually. All of the people were well engaged, and we talked to over 1 800 individuals, including stakeholders, members of the community, and local medical communities. That was never done before by any minister, and I am very, very proud of that, Mr. Speaker.

The next steps are to delineate that information and to bring forward a plan that we will deliver to government, get approved, and then deliver to the RHAs. I guess that is it, in a nutshell. I am hoping to do that by the end of June. That is our target.

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unfortunately, that means that the House will have risen and MLAs will not have had the chance to ask questions when this is released.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, emergency rooms in Sackville and Moncton were temporarily closed due to a nurse shortage. I am echoing what Dr. Cormier of the Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont University Hospital Centre stated on the radio. Access to health care is already very difficult. These emergency room closures can have a negative impact on patients. Nurses and other health care workers are exhausted. Successive governments have let the nursing shortage worsen to the breaking point.

It is International Nursing Day, so I hope that, today, the minister will have good news for nurses. Can the Minister of Health say what concrete and urgent steps she plans on taking to solve this problem?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): There was a lot in that, Mr. Speaker, so I am hoping that I am going to get to the crux of the question. Look, we value what the nurses bring to the table every single day. They are the largest employee group, I think, in our health care sector, so we meet with them and talk with them. We are actually having a meeting with them today.

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The crisis... I apologize. The shortage of nurses has certainly been a long-standing issue. I can actually take a moment to answer a question from yesterday, which the Leader of the People's Alliance asked, in regard to how many nurses have left their positions. We have had 77 nurses who have left Horizon or Vitalité over this past year through various means, Mr. Speaker. But we have actually had some positive gains in that, and I can certainly provide more information.

FOREST INDUSTRY

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, our province is facing a crisis in the construction and finished lumber industry. Lumber prices have skyrocketed, and it is affecting homeowners and contractors alike. I fully understand that the supply issue and inflation costs are not unique to New Brunswick. What is unique is that when discussing lumber, we know that we have huge exports from wood harvested from our Crown land. I believe that this current problem should be viewed as an opportunity to show the country that New Brunswick is resourceful and able to mitigate global trends. It is an opportunity to be creative and to engineer our made-at-home solutions to this problem.

The Premier has talked about all the people moving to New Brunswick. Unfortunately, some of those people are moving back because they cannot find a place to live. Mr. Speaker, can the Premier tell us what he is doing to address the present supply issue as it relates to lumber here in New Brunswick? Does this government have any plans to bring together stakeholders to develop a solution to help mitigate the problem of lumber supply?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for the question. I am going to go through as much as I can in a short period of time. The member opposite, in his member statement earlier, was referring to a policy to sell the products in New Brunswick first. I had to hear him say it again because to hear a suggestion that we are going to dictate where a private company sells its product in a private industry seems confusing. Actually, if the member opposite heard that statement made in any other industry except forestry, he would create an outrage about that—about that being a government overreach.

Now, the truth of the matter is that there have been a lot of discussions about this subject. We are going to ensure... I said last week that, in the event that we need to look at royalty rates, no problem. But it will not be done as a knee-jerk reaction. It will be taking into consideration the ramifications of higher prices and, more importantly, the lower prices so that we will not wind up competing with the private woodlot sector...

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



[*Translation*]

GOVERNMENT REFORM

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister said something very interesting a few weeks ago about implementing municipal reform. He said in the media that he was open to a reform model that would be tailored to different regions in the province.

I do not believe the minister is aware that he is contradicting himself with this statement. On the one hand, he sends the message that Equal Opportunities principles will be at the heart of the process and are non-negotiable. On the other hand, he tries to please everyone by giving them space and permission to shape the reform as they wish. I am afraid that, with such an approach, Mr. Speaker, we will go back to the era before Louis J. Robichaud, where it was every region for itself, and long live inequalities.

Can the minister clarify his plan and explain why he said such a thing publicly, before his famous public consultations were even completed? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, I can assure the member for Tracadie-Sheila that I am proud to hold consultations. I for one am talking to New Brunswickers. We want to know what New Brunswickers want. That is why we have undertaken a robust process.

On January 19, we began local governance reform in New Brunswick. On April 6, we launched the green paper. With the green paper, we are working on four pillars: structure, taxation, regional collaboration, and certainly land use planning services. We are working on these types of things. That is why we have held more than 100 consultation sessions. There will be 22 more over the next few weeks. There are working committees for the four pillars.

So, Mr. Speaker, we are there to work with people. We are certainly there to listen to people. This is the difference between our government and the opposition: We listen to people and we talk to them.

[*Original*]

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

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister said that there were 28 consultations. I have counted not 28 but 16. I am thinking that maybe the minister is adding the meetings that he is having for his leadership bid to the number of public consultations.

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Mr. Speaker, the truth is that for public consultations—not with elected officials but the public consultations—there is one in French and one in English to talk about structure and finance and another one to talk about regional collaboration and land-use planning. There is one of each. Those are it for the entire province. Obviously, it is a big decision about municipal reform, and the minister is bragging about going around the province and meeting everybody. The truth is that it is very limited in terms of the number of people who can actually give their input on this municipal reform.

[*Translation*]

So, here is my question for the minister: How can he guarantee that the voices of those who are worried about the changes will be heard at the decision-making table?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, the member from Tracadie was not too good at math in school, I think. The only leadership that we are talking about right now is the Liberal Party's. I can tell you that Shediac is number one. Guess what, you are not even on that list. That is all on that one.

I can tell you right now that we are talking with New Brunswickers. Last night, with one of the hardest-working ministers, the minister from Sussex, we met with the LSDs of Sussex and St. Martins. I was with the member for Carleton-York last week and with the Minister of Education talking to the Mactaquac Country Chamber of Commerce. We are talking to people. That is the difference is between us and you guys. We actually talk to people. When we are talking about budgets...

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): When we talk about budgets...

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): The difference is that we will not go to the ATM and press spend, spend, spend.

(Interjections.)

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

