

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



May 13, 2021

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[Original]

NURSES

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that it is appropriate that we ask the Premier a question this morning. He finally agreed to listen to the advice from the official opposition and meet the President of the New Brunswick Nurses' Union yesterday. It would seem that the Premier and his Minister of Health had a meeting with this group. Could the Premier, who is responsible for this government and continues to lead the collective agreement negotiations, explain to us this morning what was discussed at the meeting? What did he gather from this discussion?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, of course, the minister and I got the invitation from the nursing association, from Paula Doucet, on Saturday. I know that the opposition might like to say that it was at their request, but I think we all recognize that there was an urgency and a need to do that, as she was referencing. Certainly, we did, and the discussion went very well.

I guess what I would like to highlight is something that I have said many times here in the Legislature. Ms. Doucet recognizes the challenges we are facing, and she recognizes that we must find new ways to deliver health care services. The innovation that she is proposing and the reality of addressing what may be chronic issues that have been around for a long time... Maybe through opposition here in the House—whether one party or the other was in power probably did not matter—stagnation had set in. Things were not changed. I am excited about the ideas she is bringing forward and the reality to change. What I would ask is that my colleagues also listen to her as we go forward to make real changes in health care.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier actually raised some of the issues that he wants to see moving forward. What I care about, what the nurses care about, and what New Brunswickers care about is not what you care about and what you want to do.

What we want to know is this. In yesterday's conversation, did you clearly understand the urgency and the crisis that we have in the nursing field in this province? Did you understand that the working conditions that the nurses go through every day are unsustainable? There need to be action now, to be quite frank, to stop the bleeding.

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The Premier wants to talk about long-term stuff. The problem is right now. You are the Premier. Please tell us what you understood about the crisis the nurses are going through.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, what is really interesting about the discussion yesterday is that the President of the Nurses' Union was saying this: You know, I have been bringing forward these ideas for 15 to 20 years in terms of things that need to change in the system because we saw this coming. We saw this moving in the direction that it has been moving because it has been real.

So, yes, as we saw, particularly at the Dumont, over the weekend, there are challenges there that have come to a head. There is no question. And there will continue to be challenges. Certainly, to promote the discussion around that... The CEO of Vitalité, as well, is saying that we need to look at better ways for our two networks to work together—not to duplicate each other, not to argue about who goes where when, but to provide complementary services and to provide a balanced approach to our health care system so that everybody gets better results. That is the challenge we are facing. That is the reality of New Brunswick.

Yes, we have imminent concerns, but they did not start just today. They have been here for generations, and she pointed that out very clearly. These are long-standing issues.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, Premier.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): You know what, Mr. Speaker? When you listen to the Premier again today, he has said the same thing for the last... It is as though he has talking points.

We know that there is an issue here. The question is this: What did you understand from that meeting yesterday, and what are you concretely going to do about it now?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My Premier can be accused of a lot of things, but creating a sense of urgency...

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): But not creating a sense of urgency at a time when it is needed is not one of them.

You know, Mr. Speaker, that meeting yesterday was very refreshing. The members opposite want us to get into minor details because they cannot stand that the government did its due diligence and had a responsible conversation. And we are having another conversation only days away, on Tuesday, because we know that we cannot dictate. We need our RHA

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partners to be part of this conversation to help work forward with contingency plans as we work through the nursing shortage. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the reason they met yesterday and will meet in a week from now is that the official opposition is pushing—pushing—and making arguments regarding the need for the Premier to sit down with the Nurses' Union to identify solutions. The minister talked about creating a sense of urgency. No, no, the urgency is now. We are not creating a sense of urgency. We know that there is an urgency now.

Premier, you are the leader of this government. You were at that meeting. Give me three things that you are going to do—three things that you are going to do—based on that meeting yesterday to resolve the problem.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? Yesterday, I tabled a crisis care plan—one that would have taken previous governments months and years to deliver—and we did it in about nine weeks. I did an interview this morning and was asked how long it will take to get this together. I said that we need to do it immediately because we need to know that we can get through it this summer.

We are not taking months and years, as has happened in the past. I remember the past Liberal government telling me that it would have something done in days and weeks, not years and months. Well, guess what! It never got done at all. Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? We accept the challenge to take directive action and to work toward results and solving problems. And that is going to happen.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I think it is clear that the government is unable to identify three initiatives it will implement to address the shortage of nurses. The Premier, who attended the meeting, does not want to disclose anything, or he probably has no idea of what needs to be done. It is not even clear whether he understands the situation.

I am going to ask the Premier a question. We clearly have a shortage of nurses in New Brunswick. More than 100 different positions are vacant, and they are needed just to maintain the services that we have. We are facing a challenge: Graduates from Francophone institutions are not able to write the NCLEX-RN exam. Can the Premier give us an update on this file? Will these people be able to write an exam in the language of their choice, which is French?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to go back to a situation where the Leader of the Opposition mentioned a specific item. I do want to relate to one specific item that was discussed in that meeting. I mean, there will be others coming out of the Tuesday or Wednesday meeting, whenever the meeting is scheduled for next week.

But in this case, one of the things that was asked, with great passion, was regarding a problem in Moncton, particularly. There is a problem with the level of service that they are able to provide both at the Dumont hospital and at the City Hospital. That is because there is a shortage of nurses. It was asked, with passion, that the two hospitals work together to accommodate each other and to provide the services necessary for health care while also ensuring that nurses have a chance not to work extended hours and extended shifts so that they can get caught up and get some relaxation—to look at summer and to look at schedules that make sense.

Mr. Speaker, do you know what it is going to take to make that happen? It will take us, in this building, working together.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, as we listen to the Premier, we now know what this health reform will do. He is going to cut services and eliminate services, but he is not going to address the shortage of nurses and the shortage of the human resources that we need in the system.

STUMPAGE FEES

I want to go to a different subject. Premier, we know that lumber prices are skyrocketing, but New Brunswickers are not benefiting from any of this. Actually, it is costing them. It is costing them significantly. We do know that big businesses and the industry are benefiting hugely from this, and that is good. There is nothing wrong with making money in the private sector. But, Premier, I want to ask you this: What are you, as the leader of this government, thinking that you will do to adjust the situation so that New Brunswickers, who are the shareholders and owners of this resource, can benefit from the huge increase in lumber prices?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition asked a question that follows up a member's statement by the member for Victoria-La-Vallée. I was taking some notes when the member for Victoria-La-Vallée was talking, but I had to stop when he started talking about the desperately low price of Crown land. I thought to myself, At this point, he is just politically posturing.

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Let's talk about Crown land stumpage in other jurisdictions. We have before. Let's talk about how Ontario recently raised its stumpage on Crown land. Do you know to what level it was raised? To New Brunswick's level. Ontario raised its level to New Brunswick's because we have been a strong, stable, steady leader in the country as it relates to stumpage rates.

Now, following that advice, we have to be very careful to ensure that we do not follow commodity pricing and either pass that on further to the customer or get to a point where we are competing with private woodlot owners. I will tell you what—if we did stuff that was responsible for hurting the economy, I would not feel very good about it.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, minister.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I really want to hear from the Premier on this one because I do not know whom he is being lobbied by. But one thing I do know is that the Premier is supposed to work on behalf of all New Brunswickers.

In this situation right now, the price of lumber for certain items has gone up by around 300%—300%. The market conditions will adjust, and we understand that. But right now, because it is as high as it is, the stumpage fees, the royalties, can be adjusted based on market conditions. If the price on lumber is high, New Brunswickers benefit more. If the price on lumber is low, the industry may have some benefits, because it may be struggling. What is the Premier going to do about stumpage fees, the royalties on softwood lumber on Crown land, so that the New Brunswick owners of this piece of our resources can then benefit?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I have to go quickly. I wish I had a lot more than a minute to discuss and unpack the fallacies in the statements made by the member opposite. You know, during that, he said that the market will adjust itself, which is, of course, what we have seen. We saw that in 2008 and 2009 when the world was in a depression unlike what we had ever seen. As a result, at that point, there was a trigger that took some of that into consideration.

I have said that we have no issue with looking at and adjusting royalty rates, but we will not do it with a knee-jerk reaction. The member opposite is talking about an idealistic scenario, but I will tell you this: If you put us in a situation where we follow the commodity and, all of a sudden, the price of Crown timber is \$10, \$12, or \$15 cheaper per cubic metre than private wood, I want the Leader of the Opposition to commit to walking into that room and telling the private woodlot owners that his initiative now has us directly competing with them. Do you want to lead into that room with me? I will have the Leader of the Opposition face that...

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

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Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier and this government are not working on behalf of all New Brunswickers. The market conditions will adjust for sure. But in the meantime, the government is saying that we will look at it in a longer period of time, when the market conditions will have adjusted and New Brunswickers will not have had any benefit from it.

The way to do it is to find a mechanism where the stumpage fees adjust based on market value. It is a fair system. Now, the decision is made by Cabinet. Do you know who leads Cabinet? The Premier of New Brunswick. Cabinet makes the decision on stumpage fees. Why do you not consider, before it is too late, having a formula where the stumpage fees can be adjusted based on market value?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the minister is reviewing the history of the stumpage rates. I guess if we go back to what was quoted here a little while ago about the rates that were reduced in 2008 and 2009, we know that we had a recession. We know that we lost three or four mills and a number of sawmills across the province because the pricing was so low and the industry crashed. Now, Mr. Speaker, if you were to take our stumpage rate and compare it over the last 10 years, you would say, whoa.

Under what the Opposition Leader is proposing, you would have reduced the stumpage rates over the last eight years. You would have reduced it substantially because mills were just barely hanging on. They wanted relief. They wanted relief. High lumber prices or tariffs in the United States were causing them great grief. We have those down to half now, but we want them gone.

Mr. Speaker, all those variables would have caused a much-reduced stumpage rate. Now, we have a blip in time. It is a blip in time where, yes, the rates are high, but our stumpage rates have remained solid. Also, the average would show that it makes sense to go the long route and protect both private woodlot owners and Crown land, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): If the Premier believes what he just said, then do what you just said. If you think that we should have reduced the stumpage fees, okay, that is your position—that is your position. Adjust the stumpage fees when the market is high and the price is high.

Hamir Patel at CIBC Capital Markets says, “It seems like there’s a landlord in the province that doesn’t want to collect their rents”. It is a market condition. You can adjust it.

(Interjections.)

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

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Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): You can put a formula in place where it would adjust to the market conditions. In good times, everybody benefits, and you need to share the wealth. In tough times, you adjust to the circumstances. It is a fairer formula. That is what you just said. Why do you not just do it? Why do you not do it for all New Brunswickers so they can benefit from their wood?

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

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, we have been happily collecting the rent to the tune of \$75 million each and every year in a \$100-million department. To say that we are leaving money on the table would only be accurate if we followed a pricing model that the Leader of the Opposition is suggesting.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Following a commodity is tremendous when it is up, but be careful. You have spoken about how greedy and disparaging the industry is. Do you think for five seconds that if stumpage rates went up significantly, they would not be passed on to the consumer? That is taking care of the province of New Brunswick and New Brunswickers. On the contrary, when that dives and we start chasing that commodity and we are competing with private woodlot owners, do you think that is a happy day when I have to go tell the private woodlot sector that we are now directly competing with them by undercutting them to industry? That circumvents the work that we have done—the historic and unprecedented work that we have done—to regulate this industry, Mr. Speaker.

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

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, on February 23, the Minister of Health announced the Mental Health Action Plan. She also announced that the plan would focus on 12 initiatives. On May 12, the minister added 21 recommendations, some of which, strangely, look like those already announced on February 23. It took a tragic incident before the minister asked the health authorities to give her more recommendations. Clearly, the minister had not consulted with the health authorities before tabling the action plan. Can the minister explain the reason that those in charge of the frontline service had not been consulted before issuing the plan?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): My goodness, Mr. Speaker, the opposition makes a lot of assumptions. The five-year Inter-Departmental

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Addiction and Mental Health Action Plan is a plan that took a long time to prepare, and we consulted with everyone with regard to services that were needed. Mr. Speaker, the RHAs were at the table for our roundtables in November 2019 and January 2020, and they had input.

The mental health and addictions strategy is a good one. Sorry, I was going to say another word there. The fact is that we are proud to have tabled it. But what events showed us was that crisis care needed a more urgent response, so we did that. We collaborated in a very thoughtful and thorough way, and we came up with help to bolster that plan and improve crisis care.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): The minister clearly has no answer about what I mentioned.

Last week, the Child and Youth Advocate told us that only 83% of youth aged 12 to 17 in our province had a family doctor in 2019. We understand that access to a primary health care professional is the gateway to health care.

Now that we know how many children do not have a family doctor, and that we also know that a primary health care professional is the gateway, can the minister explain why she did not see fit to ensure that all children have access to a doctor? This could have been the 22nd recommendation on the list that she introduced yesterday. Do we still have to wait for a tragedy before this government takes action?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I believe I made a very public statement not too long ago saying that we want every New Brunswicker to have a primary care provider within six months. We have not done any of this work in isolation. That is the beauty of it. Not only have we included our RHAs, but also we have included community stakeholders and talked with those with lived experience. We have tried to be all-encompassing, and I believe that we put forward a darn good plan that is actionable now, one that empowers the RHAs, empowers our community resources, and empowers the department working with mental health to move forward. We did not wait, Mr. Speaker. We did not stop. We kept going, and we are determined to empower the people who can implement this. They will have the clinical expertise to do it. Trauma-informed care will be prevalent in the delivery.

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RENTS

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, a recent investigation by the CBC in Nova Scotia found that tenants in Halifax are sometimes hard-pressed to find out who owns their buildings. In one example, property records are cryptic, listing the ownership as 9741631 Canada Inc. It turns out the numbered company is the creation of the pension investment arm of TELUS Corporation, which owns more than 45 apartment buildings in Nova Scotia, largely in the Halifax region. The investigation determined that, in short, this is an investment vehicle. Each apartment unit is a tiny revenue stream that helps pay for the retirement of employees of the country's second-largest telecom.

The company that manages these buildings also manages six buildings in New Brunswick. My question is for the Minister of Service New Brunswick who is in charge of both the Corporate Registry and *The Residential Tenancies Act*. Did the *Review of the Rental Landscape in New Brunswick* include investigating out-of-province ownership of apartment buildings in New Brunswick and the effects that it has on tenants?

Hon. Mary Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question, Mr. Speaker. I want to point out that this is probably the third time that the member opposite has brought up this very important issue. I can assure him and everybody else in this House that our Premier, our Finance Minister, and Service New Brunswick are working together, collaborating, to make sure that this issue on beneficial ownership will be taken care of.

Amendments are in the works to ensure that we know who owns incorporated, privately held corporations. Corporations will have to maintain a registry of individuals who have significant control in their companies. This information will be made available to law enforcement and tax and other authorities. The amendments will bring us in line with changes that were made to the *Canada Business Corporations Act* in 2019. Our Premier has committed to doing this, and I can guarantee you that this will be done. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would add that the deputy minister said also that this registry should be free and accessible to all. One way to solve this problem would be if New Brunswick had a beneficial ownership registry so that citizens could easily see who owns privately held companies. Again today, the minister says that we will have it.

The government has been saying for the past couple of years that this legislation will be brought forward. In 2021, the government brought forward 27 bills that it is trying to get passed in the next month. To my disappointment, this is not one of them. My question for the Minister of Service New Brunswick is simple. Are amendments to the *Business Corporations Act* coming before the Legislature rises for the summer break next month? If not, who is she protecting?



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Hon. Mary Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question, Mr. Speaker. Again, amendments are in the works to ensure that we know who owns incorporated, privately held corporations.

I will repeat: Our Premier is committed to fixing this problem. We are here for New Brunswickers, and we are going to make sure that this is taken care of. We will continue to reiterate that. I am sure that we will have the same question next week, and I will be here for you. Thank you.

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, the recent release of the *Review of the Rental Landscape* has laid out most issues surrounding the housing crisis in New Brunswick, but it has very little to offer any concrete, tangible solutions to the problem. It is also disappointing that one of the key barriers to addressing the demand for housing in New Brunswick is a double tax. Yet, that main problem barely got a mention in the report. My question is for Minister of Finance. Can the minister tell me why the key issue of the double tax received only three brief lines out of a 42-page report? Does the minister believe that the double tax is still a barrier to meeting the housing demand here in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for the question. Actually, in the rent review, we found that there was not a whole lot of talk about the double tax. It was surprising because I, as well, expected that there would be. The fact of the matter is that the double tax has been put off because it is going to cost us about \$96 million per year. We cannot afford to take that hit in revenue right now. Certainly, at this time, with COVID-19 affecting our economy and affecting our revenue... It is affecting everything in our daily lives. The double tax is something that I have spoken about in the past. I would like to get on that, but the timing is not right.

I also want to reiterate that we did not find very many comments about the double tax from the landlords.

[Translation]

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I would like to say that the report on the rent review was very disappointing and offered very little comfort to people struggling to find an affordable rental or worrying about future rent increases. The study took 90 days. It was an internal study commissioned by this government, and it still

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needs to be studied. The review was after 90 days. Usually, after a review, there is no more study.

My question is for the Minister of Social Development: Could he tell the House how many suitable low-cost rental units are currently available in the province, by region, and how that number of rentals compares to demand?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am more than pleased to take that question. You know, in New Brunswick, there are just under 15 000 units that the Department of Social Development is in charge of, either by subsidizing the rent or owning them directly itself. I was glad to put forth a budget this year that actually saw a significant increase in the housing budget—from \$98 million last year to \$117 million. Thank you very much for the support of all my Cabinet and caucus colleagues.

Mr. Speaker, this government is punching above its weight when it comes to housing. I can point to the Rising Tide initiative in the city of Moncton that this government supports to the tune of \$6 million. I can point to the City Motel here in Fredericton. This government contributed \$1.4 million to that project.

Mr. Speaker, I sign letters every week that go to renovations of apartment units across the province...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, minister.

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, it was a very simple question: How many? I guess that I have to use simpler words.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, there are a lot of people on the waiting list. We learned something very distressing this week. The budget was tabled in April, but NB Housing has not yet received the money for the inspection and renovations so that people who are waiting for apartments have access to them.

When will the government give the money to NB Housing? It is all well and good to determine amounts, but will you please hand over the money? I ask because, everywhere in the province, the money for NB Housing has not yet been distributed. That is a big mistake.

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House, it is not just an act. It is not just an act. On this side of the House, we do the work. This is government. We get it done.

Another item that I was going to mention in answer to the last question is the Canadian housing benefit.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): The Canadian housing benefit is an agreement between the federal government and this provincial government that actually has \$98 million being given directly to tenants over the next seven years. This money is given directly to tenants so that they can afford the apartments that they are in, they can spend the money on day care, or they can spend the money on food. This is helping on the ground right now. It is not an act. It is getting the job done.

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

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): You want to extend it?

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): It is over.