

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**May 18, 2021**

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### HEALTH CARE

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, today is a very historic day for this Legislature. We are actually embracing technology for regular business. While driving this morning, I was thinking: Would Minister Cardy actually use the virtual model or would he be here in person? I guess we have the answer here today, to be quite honest.

[Translation]

You know, on a much more serious note, our health care system is facing serious challenges. We have a shortage of health professionals in several areas. We have noticed that, over the past two and a half years, since this government took office, there has been no action or initiative to define and announce a human resource plan with regard to our health professionals. This afternoon, I want to ask the Premier if he can tell us whether such a plan exists. If not, when are we going to see it?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. While the shortage of health care professionals is not a new phenomenon, it certainly is getting to be more acute, as we have seen in the Moncton area over these past few weeks. Certainly, we do have a plan. We are looking through PETL, certainly, and looking through the RHAs for new hires. We are working with the universities in terms of filling their enrollments, and they have increased, Mr. Speaker. I think it is somewhere up in the range of 80 in terms of our total number available, but people are retiring too.

We have a situation where every province has the same challenges. That is why the conversation has started in relation to how we can best utilize the workforce. How do we find new ways to deliver health care services to every New Brunswicker in this province? It will require innovation. It will require addressing issues head on and saying, let's fix this. It is not about just finding more people because finding more people is going to be extremely difficult, no matter what the wages are. So how do we fix the long-term problem?

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, to the Premier, what we need in this province is a 10-year human resource plan for our health care system. We need to understand the needs now and moving forward in terms of the number of people in different professions. We need to understand the number of people available to us now and how many of those people will retire over the next 10 years, and we need to understand the gaps and how they can be filled.

They are in office—they are in government. We know that this plan does not exist. The Premier was just all over the place in his first answer. There is no plan or road map to

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really understand what we will need in the next 10 years—what we have and where are the gaps—and how this will be filled and achieved. He is talking about all kinds of different things. Can the Premier really give us or table an HR plan for our health care system?

**Hon. Mr. Holder** (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the Leader of the Opposition's question, over the past number of days, we have talked at great length about the nursing shortage in this province. I know he does not like to look at the past, but the reality... He has accused us of not doing anything over the past couple of years, and that is simply not the case.

I want to go back to nurse recruitment and the initiatives that I talked about the other day. First of all, we put a navigator in place to identify internationally trained nurses. We have also put a bridging program in place. We have identified over 400 internationally trained nurses who are in New Brunswick or who could potentially come to New Brunswick. This year alone, we have 72 people registered for that program. Just a few years ago, that was at only 18. In 2018, only 18 internationally trained nurses were registered to get the proper bridging, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, this government has been navigating for two and a half years. It has been navigating for two and half years and not knowing where it is going. The minister just got up... This is a very serious matter. The Premier should be on top of this, and he should be on top of and all over this.

The key elements for a long-term plan begin by having a decent collective agreement. These nurses have not had an agreement since December 2018. This government has been in office since November 2018. Under its watch, there is nothing happening. There is a discussion about potential strikes. Why can the Premier not get up and explain how he sees this human resource plan for our health care system? The nurses need it, our people need it...

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

**Hon. Mr. Holder** (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You know, I heard the Leader of the Opposition the other day taking credit for the fact that the government was having a meeting with the Nurses Association. Giving the opposition any credit for movement on this file and preventing a nursing shortage in this province is like the rooster taking credit for the sun coming up. There has been so much that we have done over the last number of weeks, months, and years since we took office in 2018, that I do not know even where to start.

(Interjections.)



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**Hon. Mr. Holder** (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Yes, I hear the opposition saying, “start now”. That is great. That is what Liberals do once they are in opposition, Mr. Speaker. They talk about all the things they would...

(Interjections.)

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

**Hon. Mr. Holder** (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): As the member from Shediac, Victor Boudreau, used to say, they woulda, coulda, shoulda. I will throw their words right back at them, Mr. Speaker.

The fact of the matter is that we have put in place not only a navigator for internationally trained nurses but also a bridging program to train those nurses and an LPN-to-RN bridging program. Mr. Speaker, I do not know where to start.

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

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, where the minister or the Premier should start is to talk more about substantive matters. I do not care who takes the credit. We need solutions here. We need serious solutions. You know, right now in New Brunswick, we have over 700 vacant nursing positions. That is right now. We have an anticipated 3 400 nurses who will be retiring over the next five years. There are vacancies for over 115 family physicians and doctors in this province right now. I do not care who takes the credit.

What I care about is seeing a real, concrete plan and a stop to living in the past. The issues are now. They are in office. He is the Premier. He calls the shots. He makes decisions. He can make things happen. I do not get why the Premier is not going to lay out what this HR plan is for our health care system.

**Hon. Mr. Holder** (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Mr. Speaker, he wants concrete results, so I will give him concrete results. Since we took office, 32 new seats were created for an LPN-to-RN bridging program at UNBSJ, 25 new seats were created at the Université de Moncton, and 24 new seats were created at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton. Those are real results. Guess what! That is going to mean that there are over 80 nurses coming out of the education system in two years as opposed to four years, based on the plan that the opposition showed complete inaction on.

I might also add that in 2019, in the main program of nursing in New Brunswick, there were 494 students enrolled. This year, there are 581 students, which is an increase of 86. That is because we are having an honest conversation with our universities...

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

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I know that the minister's government is one of inaction, and that is why, when the minister gets up, he sounds mad—mad about his inaction and the inaction of this government.

In 2019, the Canadian Institute for Health Information ranked New Brunswick last in retention of these professional nurses as graduates, with 73.2% staying in New Brunswick and the others just leaving the province. We know that other provinces have clear incentives to keep them here and to recruit new professionals in this domain. In Prince Edward Island, for students who do graduate, there are incentives for graduating and graduates. It is \$5 000 per year over two years if a nurse decides to work in Prince Edward Island, and that is paid in installments. Nurse practitioners can be recruited. Where are...

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

**Hon. Mr. Holder** (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Mr. Speaker, I will tell you that the only thing I am absolutely mad about is when I see that the number of students enrolled in the nursing program seats in our universities in 2010 was 1 300 but by 2017 it was less than 900. That is Liberal inaction. That is what all of us should be mad about, that the Liberal members did not hold the system to account.

We are having an honest and positive conversation with the two universities in this province that are educating nurses. We are getting real results. We are getting results within two years instead of four. In fact, the members opposite were not getting results even in four years, Mr. Speaker, because they showed complete inaction for a number of years.

There is lots being done, and with respect to the question from the Leader of the Opposition, I can have him come to our department and we can lay out for him the number of vacancies and our plan to deal with them over the next 10 years.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I want to ask the minister to take a deep breath, to relax, and to look at the issues here head-on. Just look at the issues. We are talking about really substantive issues.

Just to finish off, Prince Edward Island, in terms of retaining and attracting nurse practitioners, has an incentive of \$15 000, payable in three installments. Quebec has a scholarship program for nurses who want to work in its province—\$13 500 for full-time nurses and \$6 750 for part-time nurses—and it has increased wages by \$4 per hour for patient attendants. Other provinces are being aggressive to keep their graduating nurses in their province and to recruit new ones. We are on the sidelines, hoping that they stay or that they come. Premier, could you please tell us what the plans are?

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**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, I think that this is a time that we are facing all the challenges that we have in our province. Yes, new graduates may come, but do you know what? There are barriers to employment here in the province that do not exist in Nova Scotia or in Prince Edward Island. There are challenges that we have and that we respect and try to fulfill. Just as we are seeing the shortage and the issue that is occurring right now in Moncton, the President of the New Brunswick Nurses' Union is saying: I have been asking for changes in the system for 20 years. Maybe people will now listen because the challenges are acute and you just cannot find people as you could before.

Maybe now, Mr. Speaker, the time is such that we look at our health care in its entirety and ask: What are the barriers that keep people from staying, working, and living in New Brunswick in all cases? That includes the ability to speak both official languages. We need to understand. Do we need to train for the language after they graduate and are able to work in order to keep people here? What are all the challenges?

So far, the only solutions I hear from over there...

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

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier should also take a deep breath and look at the real issues.

The Premier wants to amalgamate and merge health care services in New Brunswick—a change which apparently might not comply with certain Acts. As part of his thought process, and with a view to combining services and maintaining the human resources we need or hiring more people, what I want to find out from the Premier this afternoon is this: Will the *Official Languages Act*, which is enshrined in the Canadian Constitution and carries an obligation to make services available in the language of their choice to all those who wish to receive government services in New Brunswick, be complied with on an ongoing basis?

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): You see, Mr. Speaker, this is why everyone goes silent. This is why everyone goes silent. It is because the realities that we have in the province today are put aside by saying: Oh, well, let's make this a language issue.

Mr. Speaker, it is not a language issue. It is a health issue, and we are trying to find people to serve everybody in this province in the official language of choice but to do it in a way that we can actually meet those service requirements.

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I know that it is easy for the Leader of the Opposition to deflect, defuse, and disarm, but I am not afraid to talk about the real issues that are affecting every citizen of this province in every corner of this province. That is the discussion that we need to have with professional leaders in all sectors, whether it be union leaders, physicians, or nurses. Mr. Speaker, the time for frank, honest, open discussion is now. The government that is prepared to do that is in power right now, so let's have those discussions.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I am troubled by the fact that all the members on the other side of the House are getting up and applauding the Premier's comments. It is really embarrassing to see the reaction from this government's caucus. This is not a language issue; this is about vested rights that are enshrined in the Canadian Constitution. I realize that the Premier is not a lawyer or a jurist, but he nonetheless has a responsibility to have a good understanding of all the issues and the legislation. So, I hope that, despite his comments today, the Premier will continue to respect existing legislation in New Brunswick; otherwise, things could be very difficult for him in the future.

My question is this: Can the Premier tell us, with regard to the existing NCLEX-RN exam, which has been a problem for several years, whether his government has been working since it took office to address the situation for people graduating from French-language nursing programs?

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, there is something that the Leader of the Opposition and I agree on completely: This is not a linguistic issue. It is a health issue, Mr. Speaker. It is a health issue for every citizen in this province, and it is time that we looked at all the issues. We have found ways to work together as we never have before so that we can provide the best health care. Whether it is in a French hospital or an English hospital does not matter. It needs just to be the best health care in this country.

So far, Mr. Speaker, we have found more ways to water down our ability in the nature of competing with each other, and that is what is coming forward here right now. It is now a case that we are struggling for resources and we are competing with each other in our own province for resources and we do not want to talk about that. Well, my point is that it is time to talk about it. It is a health issue for every citizen, and all citizens should be interested to know how we are going to manage health care going forward and to ensure that it is available to them. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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[Translation]

**Ms. Thériault** (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier seems to be speaking out of both sides of his mouth when he says this is not a language problem, but I do not believe he really understands the basis of the *Official Languages Act* of this province.

Still on the topic of health care, the Minister of Health also indicated that she wanted to fill 18 nurse practitioner positions in the province. Can the Minister of Health report on her progress by telling the House how many people in this province are currently on the waiting list and how many nurse practitioners and family doctors have been hired recently?

[Original]

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The Government House Leader.

**Hon. Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Sorry for the confusion, Mr. Speaker. I am just trying to manage between the virtual and the real here. Does the Minister of Health have her hand up?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that there were four full questions in that one minute, so I am going to start with nurse practitioners. As of a week ago, maybe a week and a half, we had 17 vacant nurse practitioner positions and 15 of those positions had identified candidates, with letters of offer going out. We are trying to fill every single position, and as those 15 positions are filled, they will create open positions to backfill. We had 27 full applications, and I expect that there will be letters of offer going out to all those applicants in the very near future. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

**Ms. Thériault** (Caraquet, L): Thank you, I only had one question.

[Original]

## ENVIRONMENT

**Mrs. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, residents of Fredericton North and throughout the province were horrified to learn that a nature preserve wetland was drained as a result of work being carried out by a Department of Transportation and Infrastructure maintenance crew. Will the Minister of Environment advise us as to why there were not sufficient checks and balances in place to prevent such an ecological disaster from happening?

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**Hon. Mr. Crossman** (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you very much to the member opposite for the question. We would like you to know firsthand that both departments were on that during the weekend. Natural Resources and Energy Development was as well, right from the start.

The way that things happened was certainly unfortunate. The departments were in place for general work along the road. Over the weekend, work was expedited to put things back the way they were, with the proper permits in place and the departments working together. We spoke to the minister and her department on the weekend as well.

Going forward, we will be better at educating ourselves and others as well to ensure that it does not happen again. Certainly, we appreciate the question because the departments are working together. It was unfortunate. But it certainly was not done on purpose—it was an accident. Thank you.

**Mrs. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, apparently, DTI had a wetlands alteration permit, but it is a broad permit that covers the whole district. Would the minister advise as to why a separate permit is not required for ecologically sensitive areas?

**Hon. Ms. Green** (Fredericton North, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Department of Transportation and Infrastructure was working under an environmental permit. The permit allows us to do maintenance within our rights-of-way, which we were carrying out, and we did that work within the right-of-way on Route 105. We cleaned out a beaver dam that was causing problems in front of our infrastructure, not understanding what would happen as a result of removing that beaver dam. We immediately got on the problem. We put protections in place, and we started pumping water back into the wetlands. The water was returned to the level that it had been by end of day on Sunday or early Monday morning. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure damaged the Nature Trust of New Brunswick's Ferris Street Forest and Wetland Nature Preserve last Friday by draining the wetland, with the permission of the Department of Environment. This caused critical damage to the nature reserve, raising concerns about the species at risk found there.

The Atlantic Canada Conservation Data Centre's assessment of wild species in New Brunswick for 2015 found 345 species at a high risk of extinction in New Brunswick and 356 species at very high risk of extinction in New Brunswick. Government needs to make the protection of their habitats of paramount importance.

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From here on in, will the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure require staff on every job site to ensure that they do no damage if their work brings them close to a protected wetland, a protected natural area, or an ecologically sensitive area?

**Hon. Ms. Green** (Fredericton North, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have quite a lesson to learn after what happened on Friday, and we realize that. We are taking the opportunity to learn what we need to do in the future so a situation like this does not happen again.

We have committed to an environmental training program for employees so that they stop before they dig to look at the area around them to ensure that something like this does not happen again. We are partnering with our other team members at Natural Resources and Environment to ensure that the training that we put in place is acceptable and that the employees feel comfortable and can do the jobs that they are being asked to do. We are also partnering with the Nature Trust on this particular incident to ensure that it has some feedback as well on what we are going to teach our employees.

We are working very hard to ensure that something like this does not happen again in the future. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, part of the problem seems to be that the Department of Environment uses a district-wide permitting system to permit the alteration or destruction of wetlands by the Department of Transportation within a big district. That department receives more than a third of all of its permits issued by the Department of Environment to alter watercourses or wetlands.

Clearly, this approach is failing to protect wetlands and, I daresay, rivers and streams as well. This big disconnect between the department's environmental permitting function and actually protecting the environment has got to be fixed. The survival of over 700 imperiled wild species in New Brunswick is dependent on preserving their habitats. Yes, this requires a complete change in the way forestry is practiced, but the Minister of Environment has got to ensure that the freshwater habitat species in peril are protected.

(Interjections.)

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

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Will he have the use of his district-wide permitting system and actually protect the environment wetland by wetland, stream by stream, and brook by brook?

(Interjections.)

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

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**Hon. Ms. Green** (Fredericton North, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There was some distraction there. I am not one hundred percent sure what the question was. I believe the member opposite was asking about the fact that we have district-wide permission through the Department of Environment—a permit—to do maintenance.

We conduct maintenance all summer long. Mostly in the spring, we work on our culverts, cleaning debris out of them, to ensure that other things, such as flooding in areas, do not happen and cause damage in that way. We do obtain a district-wide permit for our work within our rights-of-way.

In this particular case, this wetland was not a provincially designated wetland. That was actually on the other side of the roadway. Our teams were operating as they should have within the required permit that they had. Unfortunately, this incident happened. We are learning from it, and we are repairing the damage that was done. We are actually putting in a more permanent solution going forward. Thank you.

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

## HEALTH CARE

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to revert to some of the interesting discussions in question period between the Leader of the Official Opposition and the Premier on our health care crisis.

It is very clear that the Liberal opposition is going to take the same old tired strategy of language over life when it comes to health care, which is the same position it took when it came to the paramedics. But I was interested to hear the Premier say that we should not be competing with each other. Mr. Speaker, I agree wholeheartedly. Whenever you have two health authorities, that competition is going to continue.

My question is for the Minister of Health and is specific to the Dumont hospital and the Moncton Hospital. Can the minister tell me what her plans are in relation to the nursing and staffing shortage at those two hospitals specific to Moncton?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question. I think I have been pretty clear about the fact that the regional health authorities, Vitalité and Horizon, are very, very willing to work together. They must work together before this summer to create some strategies and a contingency plan to ensure not only that we have nursing resources but also that our nurses, who have been working quite diligently, get a break and get time off. Vacation time is very important for them. Vitalité and Horizon have committed that they will be working closely together to fulfill that strategy.



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**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, but frankly, that is kind of a vague answer. We are talking about having two health authorities, which was introduced by the Liberal government years ago. You are going to have competing resources. There is no way around that. You are going to have competition for nurses, you are going to have competition for equipment, and you are going to have competition for budgets, and so on.

That is why, Mr. Speaker, we have long said that having one bilingual health authority in the province of New Brunswick will best serve everybody, both Francophone and Anglophone. The French hospitals will continue to be French, and the English hospitals will continue to do what they do. There is no change in that regard. But we cannot allow these two health authorities to continue to compete with each other. We are seeing now that people are finally speaking up about this.

Again, my question is for the Minister of Health. Is she willing to look, not just to Moncton specifically, but provincially, to see how we can bring these two health authorities together to ensure that all New Brunswickers get adequate health care when they need it?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I appreciate the question, Mr. Speaker, and I fully understand the position of the Leader of the People's Alliance on the health authorities. At this time, we have two health authorities, and it is pivotal that we ensure that they work together in order to put our resources together and to ensure that good health care services are delivered to the people of New Brunswick.

In fact, it has been part of the conversation with the health review. We have spoken with over 1 800 New Brunswickers and medical professionals in 49 sessions. It is pivotal that we ensure that the people of New Brunswick get the health services they deserve. In that, the health authorities will be working together. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

## LEGISLATION

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, people who are on a waiting list for an organ donation were deeply disappointed that the Liberal bill providing for presumed consent for organ donations was not passed but was instead referred by this government to the Standing Committee on Law Amendments. Yet this government would have had plenty of time to amend the bill if it had chosen to do so.

Mr. Speaker, this bill could change and save lives. I would like a yes or no answer to the following question: Will the minister ensure that this bill comes back to the House for a vote before the end of this legislative session?

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[Original]

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am almost speechless in terms of knowing how to respond to this question. The member opposite was certainly given every opportunity to ensure that this bill came to fruition, but he chose the political path. We offered to work with the opposition to make this bill happen over the summer, and our choices were put to us: We could vote for the bill, vote it down, or see it live on by sending it to the law amendments committee. We chose to send it to law amendments. Mr. Speaker, there is an enormous amount of work that needs to be done to bring something like this to fruition in New Brunswick, and we are going to do the work.

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

