

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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ELECTRICITY ACT

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, the proposed changes to the *Electricity Act* are a major concern for all New Brunswickers. Over the years, the Energy and Utilities Board has been vigilant in scrutinizing NB Power to protect the interests of ratepayers. It has even disallowed rate increases in the past because NB Power did not make its case. Now, government is proposing an appearance every three years. But what about oversight in between those appearances?

Three years is a long time. I mean, just last year alone, on top of a global pandemic, NB Power had to deal with a shutdown at Point Lepreau that cost over \$60 million. That is twice the amount that it cost for the ice storm in 2017. It will not even have to go to the EUB this year and explain any of it. It is getting its 2% rate increase automatically. Can the minister give us some insight as to how, with these changes, ratepayers will be protected in the future?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise on the first question of question period and address the comments from the member opposite. With respect to the 2% that we are talking about, it is important to realize that over the past three years, NB Power deferred rate increases or took none. In addition to that, we are moving forward with a system where the utility will appear before the EUB on a regular basis and put its case forward and the EUB will apply the same process and techniques toward approving rates as they go forward. We are not reinventing the wheel here. Jurisdictions all throughout the country are in a situation where they appear before the EUB on a period-of-time basis.

We are also taking the long-term strategic plan and lining it up to be a three-year plan as well. You see, we are actually using this Act to make the utility more efficient and to put that money toward meeting its financial objectives and paying down debt. A utility that is paying down debt is good for the province.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, under this legislation, a deferral account will be created for expenses, which can then be recovered from ratepayers. The language used in the bill for this account is that the board will determine what “shall be deemed to be prudent and necessary” in variances. I cannot imagine any words that are more vague than “prudent” and “necessary”.

For example, right now, Point Lepreau has been down since November 12 and NB Power has used up all its allocation for unplanned outages for this year. It is costing us \$1 million per day. Right now, as we speak, NB Power is losing \$1 million, and it will be the same tomorrow. That is a variance. I imagine that the board would deem this to be a prudent and necessary variance, but can the minister tell us who will determine what is prudent and necessary for the ratepayers?

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Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I rise again to discuss the proposed amendments to the *Electricity Act* and to discuss the very basis on which we bring legislation like this forward. Over a period of quarterly and annual statements or a period of years, we have seen that the utility has been working to meet financial objectives, but because of a variety of obstacles and barriers, it has not been able to meet them. When you talk about variance accounts, you are dealing with a utility that has a variety of unknown situations that it must face on a yearly basis.

Right now, the legislation does not give it an opportunity to afford the equalization of that. Therefore, any unknowns wind up coming out of the direct cash flow of that year. How hard is it to meet your objectives when you are a utility that deals with variances that are unknown yet have to be accounted for in-year? This is responsible legislation. This allows the utility to start meeting its objectives and paying down its debt. Mr. Speaker, the member opposite knows full well that the utility needs to move in a direction where it can achieve those financial goals. That is exactly what this legislation does.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, closer to home, we were always told that, to convert the Belledune power plant from coal to another fuel, the analysis being done from a strictly financial standpoint, nothing other than a solution that would be the same price or cheaper than coal would have to be found. With this bill, you do not want Mactaquac to go before the New Brunswick Energy and Utilities Board, because the analysis is done from a strictly economic standpoint. There are so many other factors, though, like the environment, the regional economy, and so on.

[*Original*]

Can the minister explain why one megaproject in Mactaquac is treated differently than another in Belledune? Who will determine which project gets a pass from the EUB and which does not?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, for the member to infer that the Mactaquac project would be able to avoid or escape any level of scrutiny is absolutely not correct. The truth of the matter is that this project is significant. Mactaquac currently provides almost 13% of the non-emitting renewable energy of the province of New Brunswick. It is a huge driver toward our being able to provide clean, reliable electricity.

The EUB is responsible for the financial components of a variety of initiatives. That is not going to change. The EUB will be invited to be part of the financial component. That is within its wheelhouse. It would be naive to say that there are not societal or environmental concerns that go beyond the financial component of it, so we are adding people to the table. We are adding transparency because we need to have consultation related to the

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environmental and societal concerns that are there. This is a significant project that is important to the province. We want a lot of eyes on it, including the EUB's.

MUNICIPALITIES

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, we all recognize that the city of Saint John is challenged in providing services over such a large geographic area. The Premier had a chance to fix that through his reform. The communities of Quispamsis and Rothesay are closely tied to Saint John, and many community members work in the city and use its facilities. Heck, it is because of the city of Saint John that the Premier was able to have a career and take care of his family. A new amalgamated community would be a sustainable one, and there would be tremendous opportunities for efficiencies. Why did the Premier not consider this in his reform? He could have finally addressed and solved Saint John's fiscal challenges. How is this fair to Saint John? Why did the Premier let politics get in the way of doing the right thing?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. I absolutely agree with the member opposite in terms of spending my career working in the city of Saint John. That is why the surrounding areas need to be partners in the development of the region. That is why the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour was instrumental in supporting a new way of looking at economic growth, with a vision, and in having all communities in the region sign up on an economic development plan for the region—not just for the city but for the region.

Mr. Speaker, that is just a springboard to what we are going to see going forward. We will have all aspects of what goes on in that region be supported by the outlying areas, but it will be done, as many have said here, in a cooperative, listening format where we recognize that the very hands that feed us in the Saint John region are supported by the outlying communities in a willing and participatory way and where those communities also have a voice. I am proud of the work being done by the minister to communicate that and to work with those regions to make it happen. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, it does not make any sense that a French guy from Tracadie is the one standing up for the city of Saint John when the ministers are there just looking at their feet. Saint John needs to lead by example. It was a chance to pave the way for the rest of the province. The minister of municipal reform forced amalgamation everywhere else in the province, and it was Saint John that needed it the most. Before he tables his bills next week, will the Premier revisit this reform and lead by example?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is a very interesting discussion, this morning. We held consultations for a year, but not once—not once—did we see the

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member for Caraquet attend a session. We did see the member for Tracadie-Sheila show up to one session. If you had something to say, you should have taken part in the consultations. You never came to a single meeting.

As a Francophone, I am very proud to be Acadian and to be a Progressive Conservative. I can guarantee to you that, with regard to local governance reform, we have listened to people from all across the province.

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

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

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): First of all, as the Premier said: We are working in all 12 regions, and every one is different. We are going to work together and do the asset and infrastructure management together. Municipalities cannot work alone now; we need to work regionally, and that is why we are abandoning old-style local governance. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, basically, you have a Francophone from Tracadie and a Francophone from Moncton who are rising to advocate for Saint John. Where are the Saint John ministers?

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker, the Premier has said that he is not a fan of equalization. He did not want to accept the money from Ottawa to help the province of New Brunswick, yet Saint John gets almost 30% of the community equalization fund. He could have fixed this problem. He could have fixed this problem.

Fix the problem of Saint John and save the province money. Now, will the Premier stand up to the member for Rothesay and do what is right?

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[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, during the local governance restructuring, we have worked with all municipalities. In fact, we have worked with Greater Saint John. The ministers took part in the consultations; they provided input, because they showed up. Everyone was asked to take part. The member for Tracadie-Sheila and a member from the Shediac area were the only ones who attended meetings.

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

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

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): The silence from the other side of the House is deafening.

Mr. Speaker, I can guarantee to you that the ministers from the Saint John area had their say, and the same is true of Progressive Conservative MLAs. However, where were the Liberal MLAs?

IMMUNIZATION

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government has clearly lost control of the fourth wave of COVID-19. It does not seem to know what to do or how to flatten the curve.

Vaccination of 5- to 11-year-olds is going to begin, but the government does not seem to want to give itself and our 5- to 11-year-olds every opportunity to get easy access to vaccine.

We all know that vaccination is done in our schools so that additional protection can be provided. Can the Minister of Health explain to us why she is refusing to allow the option of providing vaccination in schools?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Well, I appreciate the question, Mr. Speaker, and just before I get into the vaccinations for 5- to 11-year-olds, may I just say that we need to continue our COVID-19 awareness throughout our communities.

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The people of New Brunswick know and understand how they can protect themselves. We need them to pay attention to their surroundings. We need them to wear their masks in public spaces, keep social distancing, wash their hands, and get vaccinated, as they are continuing to do with their boosters.

On that note, may I say that as of eight o'clock this morning, 8 383 children have been booked for vaccination appointments. We are scheduling more clinics today to continue to meet and keep up with the demand, and we have schools that have already organically taken the course of putting on vaccine clinics in their schools in the after hours. So, Mr. Speaker, we are on it.

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

[Translation]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, if clinics are being held in certain schools, why has the government not decided to standardize school clinics throughout the province as a vaccination option?

[Original]

Mr. Speaker, many of the vaccination clinics throughout communities are on weekdays, when children are in school and parents are at work. Given that the minister wants nothing to do with vaccinations in schools, do we need to remind her that flexible and diverse vaccination windows are needed to facilitate and to help maximize the vaccination of our children? Can we make life easier for families and children instead of making it harder for them? It is just a matter of common sense. Does the minister know that children are in school and parents are at work on weekdays? If she knows, then where is the plan?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, you know, the Liberal opposition walked away from the COVID-19 Cabinet committee. Maybe the members opposite would be informed if they were actually still participating.

Let me tell you that we are beginning vaccination for children on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. We are in rural New Brunswick, we are in urban New Brunswick, and we are in the schools after school hours, when the children are still there and their parents are coming to pick them up.

Mr. Speaker, I think that we have been very thoughtful about the rollout, and I want to commend the team at Public Health for all that it is doing to ensure that we get vaccinated these 8 383 children and the more that are coming behind them.

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ELECTIONS

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is bringing in significant reforms in health care and local governance that will impact citizens throughout the province. The people of Miramichi Bay-Neguac and Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin need and deserve MLAs. There are two vacant seats over there, and the people need those MLAs to be here in the House to represent them on these crucial issues and on so many other issues that come up here.

I am wondering whether the Premier could inform the House as to when he is going to call those by-elections and when they will be held. The Premier will understand why I am asking those two questions. There is a little nuance in the regulation that allows him to call an election but to hold the election way down the road. It does not have to be held. So I am asking whether the Premier could enlighten the House today with regard to his decision. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, if the decision had been made, then we would be able to announce a date at this time, but it has not. We will be making that decision over the coming few weeks or months in order to meet the schedule as required by Elections New Brunswick. At this point, we have said that there are factors that are being considered in relation to COVID-19 and what would now appear to be a new normal in relation to the number of COVID-19 cases. I guess that the more relevant documentation is in terms of what we see in hospitals and how we can manage that.

But I think it is important to know that we are focused on helping those regions that are not represented right now because we recognize the comments made here today and the issue around representation. We have to be a little broader in our coverage and a little more reachable, I guess, in relation to those individuals in those areas. As an example, I know that the Minister of Local Government travels around a lot and will continue to do so throughout this exercise. He will spend as much time in those regions as in others, so we will continue to stay connected.

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

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Through you, I would like to thank the Premier for his comments. I just want to remind him that Bill 28 was passed unanimously in the House last week and then sent to the law amendments committee. The gist of the bill was to have an election held within six months of a seat becoming vacant. In the debate, many other jurisdictions across Canada were outlined as having an even shorter time frame. Seeing that the House was unanimous, I am wondering whether the Premier would take that into consideration when making the decision that an election be called within a six-month period following a vacancy—at least, a minimum of, six months. Thank you.

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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, again, for the question. Certainly, we will continue to follow the rules and regulations that exist today with Elections New Brunswick. Obviously, I will take under consideration what the House is recommending. However, the important part for us will be to continue to ensure that we follow the rules that are currently in place and to make sure that we continue to represent those unrepresented areas as best we can during this time lapse. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just want to follow up on the questions from my colleague from Tracadie-Sheila. The Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform said that the ministers of the Saint John area had their say. I think it would be important for the minister to explain what actually was their say in this consultation within his own caucus and Cabinet. That is because when you look at the changes that are being proposed, there are very significant changes in all parts of New Brunswick except—except—Saint John, Quispamsis, and Rothesay. So I guess the question needs to be asked because Saint John does have economic and fiscal challenges, for sure. We all want it to succeed even more and to be able to grow because it is going to be good for the entire province. But in this exercise of making changes to local governance, why did the minister not make any changes to those three communities?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, when we were working on restructuring, we looked at the following basic criteria for determining what projects were viable: the profitability threshold, a population of 4 000 and a tax base of \$200 million, geographical boundaries, linguistic profiles, communities of interest, school zones, and so on.

Mr. Speaker, let's talk about the RSCs in the three metropolitan areas. We are talking about the capital region, Greater Moncton, and Greater Saint John. We launched a mandate for tourism and for social development. The RSCs are also going to work on a social mandate. The RSCs in these three areas are prepared to work together on the homeless file and on affordable housing. So that is significant. There are various files they want to work on.

In this specific region, the communities are certainly viable. I am referring here to Rothesay and Quispamsis.

[Original]

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

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[*Translation*]

MINIMUM WAGE

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, just two weeks ago, civil servants were out in the streets calling for better salaries and working conditions for themselves and for all New Brunswickers.

Tens of thousands of New Brunswickers live in poverty, even though they work full time or more. They struggle to pay their ever-increasing rent, they go to food banks, and they go into debt just to survive. New Brunswick has the lowest minimum wage in Canada. New Brunswickers are sick and tired of being cheap labour in this country.

My question is for the Premier, and it is very simple: Will he commit today to providing a real wage increase to workers in New Brunswick by immediately increasing minimum wage to \$15 an hour?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the member opposite for the question. I can assure him that at the moment, we understand that there are a number of rising costs in New Brunswick that affect the folks in our population that the member opposite is referring to. We are currently looking at things such as the minimum wage, and I will be reporting back to the House on that in the very near future.

[*Translation*]

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What people want is justice, not charity. Therefore, minimum wage must be increased immediately.

Among the lowest paid, the most undervalued, and the most overburdened workers in the province, we find 12 000 caregivers and community workers—overwhelmingly female—who are all essential. Given the aging workforce and ensuing shortage in the care sector, recruitment and retention will not happen unless people are given better salaries and the fair working conditions they deserve.

While certain people avoid paying their taxes, the poor are taking care of the most vulnerable, who are subsidizing the government, and that is completely disgusting.

My question is again for the Premier: Will he commit to providing equal salaries for work of equal value in all sectors affected by this gross injustice?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Once again, I thank the member opposite. There is a lot of validity to what he is saying. I want to say very clearly that we in this province have committed, as our Premier has with the other Atlantic Premiers, to creating harmonization with the other Atlantic jurisdictions on this file. I can tell you, the fact of the matter is that we have the lowest minimum wage in the country. We know that it is a problem. We know that it needs to be dealt with, and we are taking steps to look at it right now.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, since the release of the white paper, I have received several emails and phone calls from concerned residents about its contents and about what it means to them. Some are adamantly opposed to the changes, while others are open to the changes but worry about some of the details. Like me, they understand the need for reform but want some time to digest the report and get insight from the department on what these changes mean.

For example, there seems to be a conflict in the report regarding roads. Pillar 1, found on page 10, states that the new municipalities will define the responsibility for roads, yet on page 15, section 1.3 clearly states that roads in LSDs will continue to be the responsibility of the provincial government. Can the minister clarify what seems to be a discrepancy between these two pages with respect to roads? Who will be responsible for roads that are currently outside incorporated areas? Will it be the new municipality or the province? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. When a government wants to establish a solid, audacious, and vigorous plan like this one, there are certainly good questions to ask, and we have seen that the one about highways is a timely one. More specifically...

[Original]

The roads that are in unincorporated areas today will stay with the province. If they go through a municipality, they will still stay with the province. So today, all roads in unincorporated areas that are under DTI will continue to be under DTI.

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CORONAVIRUS

Mrs. Conroy (Miramichi, PA): Mr. Speaker, with the ever-changing rules of COVID-19, people are getting frustrated and really tired. While most rules make sense, there are some rules that just make people wonder why. With the new vaccination rules, people are not allowed to work if they are not double-vaccinated, and that is understandable in most instances. But we are also told that people who are taking courses that they have paid a lot of money to get into are not able to continue if they are not vaccinated. I am told that we have 14 students in a GED course who were initially told that they would not be affected by this but were then told that they could not continue the course.

Mr. Speaker, many people taking GED courses have overcome personal struggles from their past and have taken this initiative to better themselves, and they are now getting one more kick to the curb. Can the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour please explain the rules? Some people who are taking online courses or even working from home, for that matter, were first told that they would be able to continue their courses online and now they cannot continue unless they have both vaccinations. What risks are they causing to others?

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

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We will take that question under advisement.

But let's be perfectly clear. We need to make sure that all New Brunswickers out there get vaccinated to protect themselves and the rest of our population. If there are ways that we need to work to make sure that people get their education, we will work with them on that and deal with things on a case-by-case basis. But let's be very clear. At the end of the day, we are committed to making sure that our population is vaccinated and that we deal with this pandemic.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the question is for the Premier as the Premier and also as the MLA for Quispamsis. When you look at the percentage of Cabinet ministers, you see that over 40% are from the Greater Saint John area. When we take a look at the proposed changes to local governance, that is the region of the province where there are the fewest changes, according to our perspective as we do the analysis of what is being proposed.

The minister said that the ministers from that area had their say. Well, it seems that they really had their say because their say seems to be that there would be no changes or that there would be a minimum number of changes in the Greater Saint John area. We know



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that the city of Saint John has some huge challenges fiscally and economically. We know that. So the Premier should explain to us what his position really was on the changes in his area.

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

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, this is the politics of division from the official opposition party: one region pitted against the other—one against the other.

Mr. Speaker, there are many municipalities that are going to remain unchanged. Some communities, like Memramcook, for instance, in 1995, have gone through restructuring. The same is true of Tracadie and Upper Madawaska.

Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, basic criteria were applied. To be viable, municipalities need a population of 4 000 and a tax base of \$200 million. Current boundaries and natural demarcations, linguistic profiles, and communities of interest have to be taken into consideration, too.

So, if some members on the other side of the House had taken part in the consultations, they would have heard what we heard. We heard from the people. People sent us briefs. We received over 200 briefs. So, Mr. Speaker, we have listened to New Brunswickers. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

BELLEDUNE GENERATING STATION

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, in the past week, we have noticed that the government has discovered green. It is now looking at getting away from coal before 2030. We have just found out on CBC that the equivalency agreement that this government asked the federal government for has been refused. Good job getting ahead of that story, guys.

We have been working on the Belledune project forever, to convert it from coal. The answer has always been this: As long as it is not more expensive than coal. We have looked at wood pellets. That was twice the price, and it was a no-show, a no-go. Last summer, the price of coal had increased by 500%, which is well above any other solution that we have had, but there is no word on what is happening with this project.

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Mr. Speaker, to the minister, there are 300 people whose livelihood depends on this right now, either directly or indirectly. They want to know this, from you: What are we going to do in the next bit?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, we can stand here all day and talk about the price of coal. It does not do a thing to move us forward to find progressive solutions to what we are talking about as it relates not only to the footprint at Belledune but also to the entire province. Yes, we certainly have an area of New Brunswick that has seen its fair share of challenges. That is why this government has been in meetings with stakeholders in that region probably more than anybody else has.

We also know that, regardless of equivalency, work is taking place right now to ensure that we generate megawatts and megawatts of green, clean power. We are working on a variety of things, whether they be solar-power pilot projects, the commitment to move forward with more embedded energy, or the SMR file. At the end of the day, we are very aware of what we have to do. But we are also very aware of the fact that New Brunswick is ahead of the game. We generate 81% of our electricity through non-emitting means right now. We put \$1 billion into wind. And we are not going to stop until we reach zero emission.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister. The time for question period has ended.