

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**December 17, 2021**

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[*Translation*]

### LAND USE

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

I hate to put a serious tone on the day, but we still have work to be done.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries called for tenders last June announcing the development of a new blueberry field on the former Tracadie firing range—or, as we call it in Tracadie, the military camp. To the minister's great surprise, her plan to transform 5 000 acres of forest into blueberry land really was not well received by my constituents.

Mr. Speaker, the former firing range is recognized as the jewel of the Acadian Peninsula, with its rivers, springs, and wildlife. The government should instead focus its efforts on conservation in order to protect its biodiversity. The minister made this decision without consultation and without any prior notice to the municipality. So far, she has shown no signs of slowing down in order to put a stop to this development.

So, Mr. Speaker, I am asking the minister responsible if she is prepared to put in place a moratorium, consult residents, and identify ways to protect flora and fauna in the area. Thank you.

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mrs. Johnson** (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Merry Christmas to the member across and thank you for the question. It is always good to be on our toes and to be kept on our toes.

The approach we have taken with this consultation has been enviable for any type of collaborative service. We have been supportive of environmental concerns, outdoor sports enthusiasts, and hunters and fishers, and only recently, we met with the hunting and fishing association.

Large buffers that are required have been established to safeguard waterways. Treed windbreaks have protected fields and divided them. Wildlife corridors have been ensured. Trails for snowmobiling and hiking and four-wheeling have been protected. Where existing trails were impacted, new trails are being created.

We have consulted with NB Blueberries and with wildlife federations, ATV federations, and hunting associations. Where there are problems, we will find solutions. Where there are

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hurdles, we will overcome them. We have not rushed the process. The Minister of Natural Resources and I continue to have discussions to achieve a collaborative win-win situation.

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

### HOSPITALS

**Mr. Bourque** (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Health. It has come to our attention that many hospitals in the Vitalité Health Network do not offer individual TV services to their patients. It seems that this has been the case for over two years, during which no significant efforts have been made by this government to resolve this issue. I have received multiple calls from patients and families alike to complain about this lack of service.

This issue is even more unsettling because of the pandemic and the fact that visits by friends and families have been heavily restricted. This is when patients need distractions the most. So why is it that this government is not moving ahead on this, especially when, in my riding and in our province, we have a supplier who is ready and able to immediately offer quality, competitive service? Enough time has passed, so will the minister act swiftly? Thank you so much.

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am sure that we can find a way to try to address this with the member opposite.

While I have an opportunity to stand, I want to talk about this past year and everything that we have done. As of December 15, we have administered 1 377 722 doses of vaccine. Also, I want to take this opportunity to thank all those vaccinators who are out there in the community. I think that we absolutely need to understand... Yesterday, my husband got his shot, and it was from a retired nurse—a retired nurse. Hundreds of them have come out to vaccinate individuals.

I understand what the member opposite is saying. We do have things we need to work on. I would be very happy, if he wants to contact me, to try to see what we can do about his issue. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

### TELECOMMUNICATIONS

**Mrs. F. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last December 7, around 7:20 a.m., a school bus carrying children was in trouble on the verge of a secondary road in Saint-Joseph-de-Madawaska. The bus, which had an experienced driver, had broken down due to the poor road conditions, which had not been maintained, even after there had been a very big snowstorm overnight. A good Samaritan turned up,



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and the driver asked her to call his supervisor for help, as he had no cell reception. With children on board, he could not leave them alone to go get help. This is an appalling, unacceptable situation, given that it is almost 2022.

Mr. Premier—I think this question must be put to the Premier—when will New Brunswick develop a plan for deploying high-speed Internet and cellular networks throughout New Brunswick?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. We know the importance of providing Internet service throughout the province, and we now have five providers that are in the hunt to do just that. We have a team working on what that would look like for New Brunswick in terms of having it roll out effectively, ensuring that people can actually afford to sign up and be on the service, and building the number of towers necessary to give us the appropriate cell service where needed.

I recognize the situation that the member put forward, and we know that there is a need to get greater connectivity throughout our province. That is one of our many priorities. I would like to say that we are moving on those, and we have been for this past year. That is another item that is high on the radar, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

[Translation]

## CORONAVIRUS

**Mr. LePage** (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Health Zones 4, 5, and 6 have the lowest COVID-19 case numbers and hospitalization rates that are below the provincial average. We remember very well that, on several occasions, the government imposed special and exceptional restrictions just on Zones 4 and 5 over the past two years.

For the past few weeks, case numbers have been very high in Zones 1, 2, and 3, and hospitalizations are more frequent in those zones. However, the government is changing its Winter Plan for the entire province. For people in the Restigouche region, among others, this is a case of double standards. When case numbers are high in the northern part of the province, the government imposes restrictions just on those regions, but not when the vast majority of cases—92% right now—are in the southern part of the province, Mr. Speaker.

How does the government explain the fact that people in Zones 4, 5, and 6 are not excluded from some of the regulations being imposed, like those affecting sports, cultural, economic, and social activities?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you for the question.

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[Original]

Mr. Speaker, COVID-19 has been evolving, and one of the greatest reasons that we have had the COVID-19 Cabinet committee is that it creates an understanding of what is happening throughout our province and why different strategies are needed at different times. I have said this before: Omicron has changed the water on the beans. At this time, this province is in this fight together. North, south, east, and west—we must be in this together. I cannot stress enough that sometimes you never know what you prevent with preventative measures. I am asking the opposition to help us to be strong.

[Translation]

### NURSING HOMES

**Mr. Gauvin** (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Christmas is coming. One of the most serious topics right now is probably the situation of senior citizens throughout New Brunswick, in nursing homes and hospitals. There is a shortage of staff to work in nursing homes. That is why hospital corridors are overflowing. This prevents seniors from receiving the care they need. I have heard staff saying that, during shifts, when there are supposed to be five of them, there are sometimes just one or two. I have heard these stories directly from the staff. This means that senior citizens are not getting bathed, moved, or assisted as they should and that they cannot go for a walk when they should.

The service is not available, Mr. Speaker. The way to solve this problem, as other provinces have done, is by incentives. Will the government tell us once and for all how it is going to resolve this problem in the short term, Mr. Speaker? Thank you very much.

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question. You know, I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you very much to all the frontline workers who have been working so hard during this time of COVID-19 in order to keep the seniors safe.

I would also like to highlight a number of the positive things that we have done this year with respect to the seniors. We have increased the hours of care in nursing homes from 3 hours to 3.3 hours per day, and we have also increased the wages throughout the sector. We continue to work on the sector to make sure that people have the funds they need to provide properly for the seniors in their care.

I was delighted on Wednesday to have an announcement with Fredericton MP Jenica Atwin about broader requirements to allow more people to get involved in the Canada – New Brunswick Housing Benefit. Again, that will put more money directly into the hands of renters here in the province so that they can be better served.



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

### POINT LEPREAU

**Mr. Legacy** (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, around this time of year, the weather typically gets colder, people turn up their heat, and the demand on the power grid increases.

For the second year in a row, Point Lepreau had an unplanned outage. But, for the first time, because of Bill 77, the utility will not have to explain itself to the EUB. We are going to have to get our answers from the minister. We know that last year, the unplanned outages cost NB Power's financials almost \$70 million. Point Lepreau was down in November. Can the minister tell us how many days it was down and what the financial impact will be on NB Power this year?

**Hon. Mr. Holland** (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member opposite for the question. I think it is important to recognize what Bill 77 is actually going to do. It is going to give the utility an opportunity to create and generate revenue in a way other than raising power rates for the province, and that is what this is all about.

It is important to know that there are protocols and that there is a variety of work that is done at the nuclear facility, whether it is operating or shut down. But that does not stop the fact that New Brunswick is generating 80% of its electricity through nonemitting means. It does not stop the fact that we have gone forward with the Electric Vehicle Incentive Program. It does not stop the fact that we are forging ahead on the SMR file to ensure that we can add even more nonemitting energy to the grid.

I think it is important to realize that at the end of this year and with the completion of Bill 77, we will have moved forward with the utility and given it an opportunity to move into the 21st century and to serve customers well here in New Brunswick.

[Translation]

### VETERINARIANS

**Mr. LeBlanc** (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, the government has already been aware for over a year of the shortage of large-animal veterinarians in the province, especially in northern regions of New Brunswick, such as the Miramichi region, the Acadian Peninsula, and the Chaleur and Restigouche regions.

My question is for the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Aquaculture. Can she give me an update and a time frame for this file? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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[Original]

**Hon. Mrs. Johnson** (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Mr. Speaker, I cannot tell you how much I am enjoying all this attention on our final day in the House of the people.

I can tell the member opposite that we are working very diligently on this file. We have invested a lot of time and money in providing incentives for students to come to the province. We are putting energy into getting people into the areas, and we have retired veterinarians accessing those spots that are without vets. I am very ineloquent this morning. We are hoping to have the veterinarians who are on maternity leave return in the spring. That will help to alleviate some of the stress. We are working with universities, retired veterinarians, and veterinarians within the province to help make sure that services are provided to the people who need them the most. Thank you.

### SCHOOLS

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is with regard to the new Bessborough-Hillcrest school site selection in Moncton. There is a parents' group that has been quite outspoken against the selected site. There are a number of issues at play for them, with one being that the school is being built on the outer edge of the boundary, which means that more kids will have to be bused to school rather than walk. Right at the edge, there is an industrial park with a cannabis manufacturing facility, and the odour can be overwhelming at times. And now, they are clearcutting trees, suddenly and without warning, behind some of the residences there.

Most important is the issue of moving our community schools outside the neighbourhoods they serve. There are a number of them now that could be up for renewal, such as Forest Glen, Sunny Brae, Saint-Henri, Queen Elizabeth, and Edith Cavell, which are all in the core of the city of Moncton. Local officials are asking for a bigger role in the site selection process.

What can the minister say about a new site selection for Hillcrest and Bessborough? Also, what can he say about new guidelines to preserve our community schools?

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

**Hon. Ms. Green** (Fredericton North, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Merry Christmas to the member opposite, and thank you for the question. It is a question that involves both the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure and the Department of Education. The new list that Education has developed, with 12 schools that are going to be done over the next several years, allows the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure to plan ahead and work very closely with the stakeholders and to find the right sites with the stakeholders—so to have the city of



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Moncton involved in the decision of where the school is going to go. We commit to doing that.

While I have the floor, I would also like to talk about some of the great things that have happened this year with the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure. In Moncton, we opened the Petitcodiac River bridge early. We have managed to increase the sale of our surplus properties from 16% in 2019 to a success rate of over 70% this year.

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

*[Translation]*

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since the Conservatives took office, many schools that are in need of midlife renovations have simply been overlooked.

This is the case for Cité des Jeunes A.-M.-Sormany, in Edmundston, despite the priorities identified by the school district—which does not make political decisions, by the way. However, the Conservatives say it is important to manage our assets, before it is no longer viable to restore them. We understand that the Conservatives are prioritizing the construction of a new jail—repression instead of education, in other words.

Can the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development indicate to us whether his objectives are simply not to renovate high schools that have midlife needs and just to let them crumble? Alternatively, will he take the situation seriously and make investments to ensure the long-term sustainability of this educational infrastructure around the province?

*[Original]*

**Hon. Mr. Cardy** (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thanks to the member opposite for the question. I wish everyone a Merry Christmas and good holidays, despite the difficulties at this time of year. Hopefully, we can all get a chance to recharge and then get back here fresh and ready for work and for all that the new year will bring.

When we talk about building schools, I am incredibly proud to be part of a government that has taken politics out of it once and for all. And, yes, we have a long list of infrastructure programs. We have a long list of renovations that need to be done and new schools that need to be built.

Now, when the honourable member wants to know when a school that he is talking about is going to be done, he can look on the list. It is transparent. It is not political. The schools will be done based on need, because every New Brunswick student deserves the right to a safe and well-built school. The system that we have put in place guarantees that projects

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with the highest need come first, and then we work down through the list. No one can argue with that.

Thank you for the chance to answer the question. Again, Merry Christmas and happy new year to all.

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT

**Mr. C. Chiasson** (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During the few hours that we had in economic policy this week, I was fortunate enough to be able to engage with the Minister of Local Government concerning a few wrinkles in the new plan for my riding.

One of the issues is with Saint-André, which feels that it has the fiscal capacity as well as the tax base to basically go it alone. Then there is Drummond, which submitted a plan to merge with one of the local service districts as well as with New Denmark. New Denmark expressed its desire not to be part of a rural district that includes five other rural areas that are 25 minutes away and do not share any boundaries or linguistics. The minister assured me that by the end of this week, he would be calling those communities and giving them the answers to their questions. My question to the minister is this: Has that call been made, or will it be made today?

*[Translation]*

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In fact, we are still working on this file in order to assess all the requests. I do not know whether this will get done today or on Monday, but we are certainly going to do that.

I certainly want talk about local governance reform. There have been good discussions and good debates. I just want to say, Mr. Speaker, that this reform will have a positive impact on this generation and the next.

The Act will certainly come into force, so I am asking everyone, including all members, to show leadership and work for change. Support the communities. We will be consulting, and we want all MLAs to be fully involved, because it is so important for us to go ahead for the next generation. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

*[Original]*

**Ms. Mitton** (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The people of Dorchester and Sackville, including me, were blindsided by the proposed forced amalgamation of these two municipalities with multiple local service districts. I support these municipalities and their call for the Minister of Local Governance Reform to halt the proposed amalgamation.

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Municipal reform must be done, but it must be done right and in cooperation with the people of Sackville, Dorchester, the surrounding LSDs, and Fort Folly First Nation—not rushed through. It is essential that the minister listen to the feedback and adjust accordingly instead of entering the transition period proposed for January 1, 2022, with the forced amalgamation as a *fait accompli*. Rather than charge ahead, will the minister halt this specific proposal for so-called Entity 40 and engage in a meaningful consultation process on it with the municipalities and the people of the region that are within the proposal?

*[Translation]*

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, we have established a timeline. We have engaged in thorough consultation over the past year. What the member for Memramcook-Tantramar is asking for is for change to be paralyzed. The consultations lasted a year. We are going to be consulting for another year. That means we will be taking two years, Mr. Speaker, to make the necessary changes and improve our municipalities. We want to make sure we have services. We want to avoid a crisis.

All industries are currently in crisis. We have named them. We are aware that the health care system is fragile right now. We acknowledge that. However, I want to ensure that... All members want to ensure that we have quality services in the long term. We need infrastructure. That is why we have to go ahead for the next generation, Mr. Speaker.

*[Original]*

**Ms. Mitton** (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The people in my riding did not even know that this was on the table, or they would have engaged differently in the consultation process. The minister is saying that this is good for the people in Entity 40; however, the democratically elected representatives in these municipalities are saying differently. The councils of Dorchester and Sackville have clearly stated that they are opposed to this specific proposal.

If municipal reform is about improving democracy, then the minister must listen to our elected municipal officials and hit the brakes, not for the whole province but at least for those who are asking for change—listen. These deadlines that are in place are arbitrary and can be changed. It does not need to take a whole year, but the minister needs to consult with the people in this area. I am asking again: Will the minister consult in a meaningful way with the people in the proposed so-called Entity 40 and come up with a plan that they are confident in and that they agree with? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, that is where we have a difference of opinion. I have confidence in the entity of Sackville and Dorchester. The federal government will be investing over \$500 million in this entity over the next few years. Personally, I am confident in the ability of the village of Dorchester and the town of Sackville. These communities will be able to flourish by working together. So, Mr. Speaker, it is time to go ahead.

[*Original*]

We must—we must—make these tough decisions for the next generation. Yes, there are some questions. Yes, people are concerned. However, we have, for the first time in a long time, associations and municipalities that want to move forward. There are wrinkles, as the MLA from Grand Falls, the member for Victoria-La-Vallée, has indicated. There are wrinkles, but we work. We are going to be leaders. We are going to embrace change—not for us but for the next generation, Mr. Speaker.

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

## HEALTH CARE

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In part of the health plan that was released not too long ago, I know that there was a lot of discussion in relation to mental health and virtual care. Virtual care in the province, really, over the last several years, has been receiving a lot of positive feedback from patients and doctors alike.

We saw during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic that virtual care played a major role in accessing health care. However, there were some changes, from what we understand, in what doctors were able to bill the province in relation to virtual care visits. There was a gap between virtual care and in-person care billing, and as a result, a lot of physicians would not sign up for virtual care.

I know that virtual care is part of the health plan, so I guess my question today is for the Minister of Health. Can the minister tell us whether the pay for virtual care will be at least close enough to the pay for in-person care so that doctors will participate in that program?

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

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I appreciate the question today, Mr. Speaker, and I guess that this is what I can say to that. The New Brunswick Medical Society, the RHAs, and the Department of Health negotiate through a contract. Those billings are all duly negotiated at every contract.



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If something arises, as with COVID-19... COVID-19 was a tremendous opportunity. In New Brunswick, we were probably at 1% for virtual visits before COVID-19 hit. Now, we have expanded that tremendously, and it has been a very, very effective way for physicians to keep in touch with their patients.

Are the billings close? I do not know today, at this moment, what those differences are. But I do know that it is all negotiated through the New Brunswick Medical Society. So I think that if physicians need to have a consult on that, they really need to do it with their lobbying party.

### COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I am going to try to adjust my mask before I get going here.

Mr. Speaker, we are going into the Christmas holidays, and there may be more pressure points on our health care system. One of the things that have been very difficult over the past few months has been collective bargaining, pushing workers or even nurses to the limit of either going on strike or voting for a strike. There are many different groups that are still not part of a legitimate collective agreement. To try to avoid any ER closures or any disruptions in our system and to have our paramedics have a nice Christmas, would the Premier commit to having all the unresolved collective agreements resolved before we get back on March 22?

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to answer the member's question. Yes, we continue to bargain. Of course, the nurses are voting this weekend, and we hope for a positive outcome there. I would like to say that I expect that the paramedic situation will be finalized today. Today, we will get that done, the reclassification and the long-term disability plan. We absolutely are working on that, along with a number of other things at Finance.

I heard broadband mentioned earlier. We had 10 000 more people on fibre op this past year, and we expect thousands more. About five of my meetings with the federal representatives were canceled for one reason or another, because of their schedule. But do you know what? We are working on that, and we are working on getting fibre op for tens of thousands more people here in New Brunswick.

We are working on our capital budget. We did the capital budget recently. That is going to amount to about half a billion dollars added to our GDP—half a billion dollars—and 6 500 new jobs.

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





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[*Translation*]

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I am extremely pleased that we are at the Legislative Assembly, and we should be continuing our sittings here as of February 8. When we ask questions, from time to time, we get answers.

I am pleased to hear that the paramedic issue is supposed to be settled today. Nurses are in the process of voting, and we hope this will be resolved. Teachers have not had a work contract since last February. So, teachers are due for negotiation.

There are 15 or 16 groups that still do not have a collective agreement. It is important to have a good relationship with our civil servants. This government has made a mess on several fronts with regard to labour relations. Can the Premier make a commitment—I know he will not rise—to ensure that all these expired collective agreements are addressed before March 22, when we come back to the Legislative Assembly?

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am extremely proud of the work that has been done in this province over this past year. I know that there have been some rough patches.

But some of this is in addition to what the minister just said. On our record of increasing the number of people coming into our province... I think StatsCan said we are at 794 000 people. We are well ahead and beyond the target of 800 000 people. I think that it is the highest one-year percentage increase in the number of residents in this province in 20 years, Mr. Speaker.

This province is on the move for a number of reasons. Yes, we could point out the issues and the difficulties, and yes, it has been tough with all of this through COVID-19. But if we talk about what has been going on through COVID-19, whether it is having the municipal reform, the health plan, or the meaningful discussions with First Nations, we will resolve those too because we will work together for the right solution for all.

Yes, we do want the contracts settled, and we are confident and hopeful that the nurses will settle this weekend because we recognize the challenges and the need for parity among our respective Atlantic Provinces. We are doing what is right for our citizens, and we are doing what is right for our employees. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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