

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



March 25, 2022

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[Original]

### BUDGET

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier believes that New Brunswick and New Brunswickers have it all. They do have a lot, but there are so many New Brunswickers that are struggling. There are so many New Brunswickers whom the Premier does not even recognize as existing in this province. The cost of living is at 6%. People are having a hard time to pay for their groceries. The price at the pump is at an all-time high, and the Premier does nothing about it. People are having a hard time to pay the cost of heating their homes, and he canceled the \$100 to help them out. Premier, could you please, first, correct your words and, second, recognize those people?

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

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to take that question because, certainly, the member opposite, when he himself was in Finance, had a track record that was not really that stellar.

You know, there are a number of initiatives that we put forward in this budget that are going to help the most vulnerable people here in New Brunswick. We have made changes to the social assistance payments so that they will not be clawed back if you are receiving childcare. The social assistance cheques will not be clawed back if you are out there working at a part-time job, for up to \$500 per month and 50¢ above and beyond that. Social assistance payments will not be clawed back if you are receiving an insurance claim or a payment.

I am pleased to see in this budget that people over 60 years of age... I do not know—it is the member's birthday today—whether he is close to that or not. But the fact of the matter is that if you are over 60 and receiving Canada Pension Plan benefits, you can keep the first \$200 of those benefits.

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

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is pretty obvious that the Premier is not even getting up on that subject because he is the one who said that New Brunswick and New Brunswickers have it all. He will not even recognize some of the struggles that exist out there.

Do you know what? People on social assistance need more, but there are other working people that are struggling in this province. They cannot afford their groceries. What about the over 50 000 New Brunswickers that do not have access to a family physician or health care services in this province? What about those people? Do they have it all? What about the nurses who are going to work every day and struggling because the working conditions

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are difficult? They are burning out. Nurses are not being recruited. Do they have it all? Mr. Premier, please answer these questions.

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, I realize that times are tough out there for a lot of people. We all do. The last two years have made it very difficult for the people of New Brunswick, and health care is really important. But the member opposite, the Leader of the Opposition, was in government. For four years, his government watched nursing enrollment numbers decline, year by year by year. Hundreds of nurses, who potentially could have been in our workforce today, are gone, from that government's tenure. And the opposition members want to point fingers, about accumulating a problem like this and thinking it can be turned around overnight?

Mr. Speaker, we are committed—committed—to improving our health care system. We have a plan behind it, and we are working that plan. It is not perfect right now, but it is going to be...

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

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Again, Mr. Speaker, the Premier does not have enough respect and sensitivity for New Brunswickers who are struggling right now. He is not even getting up today to answer the questions on their behalf. On this side, we will speak up every single day for the people who are struggling because there are many. There are many. There are many, Mr. Speaker.

What about all the people who, even before the pandemic, were struggling with mental health challenges and who are struggling even more now, after the pandemic—particularly the kids, our younger generation? This government is doing nothing to address mental health. What about child poverty? There are 21.7% of New Brunswickers and children who are at the poverty level—that is 30 000 kids. Premier, can you please address that?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I hear what the member opposite is saying, and I would really love the members opposite to bring some resolutions. I would really like them to support our health plan.

In 2018-19, mental health and addictions had a budget of \$148 million. We are now at \$175 million. We have implemented one-at-a-time therapy, which has literally almost eliminated wait lists in every major centre in this province. We understand the need, and we understand the need for urgent action, which is what we have done. They sat on it. They sat on it, and they allowed this accumulative effect to happen. We are changing the tide. It is not a quick fix, but we are determined to make it better.

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[Translation]

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, when our government was in office, we had to clean up the mess that the Conservatives had left us with the structural deficit. When they formed the government, we had given them a surplus for the first time in 10 years. Now, the surpluses are accumulating, and that is a good thing: \$1 billion in unanticipated surplus over the last two years. However, today, we have this money and this ability to help the most vulnerable and the people who have been struggling more since the beginning of this pandemic. The Premier must take care of this and ensure these people enjoy more benefits and have a better quality of life.

Mr. Premier, what do you say to children and parents who, every morning, do not know if the school bus will go by on their street because there is a shortage of bus drivers? Do these people have everything? Mr. Premier, please rise and speak to them.

[Original]

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

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question. Happy birthday.

Do you know what? He is asking about what we are doing for the most vulnerable. Well, what we are doing is stuff that the former government did not do. We are raising the minimum wage by \$1. It starts next week. Okay? Then, we will raise it by another \$1 in October. We are absolutely spending another \$4.1 million to continue the work in the Nursing Home Plan. We are increasing the hours of care in nursing homes. We have \$9.7 million there.

While the leader across the way is telling New Brunswickers that they have a terrible lot in life—do you know what?—there are other people who are telling them that New Brunswick is doing pretty well. I will read to you some of the quotes from the banks. RBC said this about this year's budget:

*The theme of the budget was "Building on Success." As the first province to deliver a pandemic surplus... and maintain a positive balance, New Brunswick has plenty of success to build on.*

People of New Brunswick, if you are listening to this, the members opposite are telling you that you have a terrible lot in life, but I am telling you that New Brunswick is the place to be right now.

(Interjections.)

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

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**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Do you know what? The bankers do not care. They do not care about the 30 000 children who are in poverty in New Brunswick. They do not care that over 20 000 New Brunswickers... I am getting mad because I care about these people, and the government members over there do not even care.

(Interjections.)

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

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): There are 20 000 people—20 000 people, 20 000 people, Mr. Speaker, 20 000 people—who are using food banks under their watch. Over 7 000 New Brunswickers do not have a roof over their heads. Then there is complete confusion about rent control. The Premier does not know what he is doing. It is total incompetence. Then the minister comes out to try to correct or to bring in some information. Who knows what is right? Who knows what is right? Based on the Finance Minister, it is the bankers, but New Brunswickers know. They are struggling, and they need help.

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

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite. Do you know what? When the members opposite were in power, they did nothing. They did nothing for people. As recently as a couple of weeks ago, we gave \$1 million to Food DEPOT Alimentaire in Moncton—\$1 million to feed the poor. There is another \$5 million for home support workers. We are helping them pay for their gas. Because it is so rural in New Brunswick, there are a lot of gas bills, and the price of gas is going up, obviously. We are putting money toward it. There is another \$38.6 million to increase wages for human service workers. There is the income exemption. As the member for Riverview said, the first \$200 of Canada Pension Plan income for social assistance recipients is free and clear.

But do you know what? You talk about the banks. We are using the banks because the former government sent us so far into debt that it is going to take us forever to pay it off. Yes, the banks are talking about it.

(Interjections.)

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): The National Bank.

Few governments can claim to have traveled through the pandemic with their balanced budget relatively intact. New Brunswick is one.

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



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**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): As I listened to some of the comments from some ministers over the past couple of days and heard the comments from the Premier, something came to mind. We need a Cabinet shuffle on their side. We need a Cabinet shuffle, because there are actually MLAs on their backbench that want to make it to Cabinet and I think they would do a better job. Honestly, I think they would do a better job.

You have a Minister of Health who was actually questioning her own reform, which is not working. We knew that it was going to fail. We have a Premier who... I know he cannot shuffle himself, but New Brunswickers will do that in 2024. They will get rid of him because there is no empathy. He does not care about the struggles of New Brunswickers. It is frustrating. On behalf of those people who are hurting: Get your head out of the sand, Premier. Go listen to New Brunswickers and help them out.

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

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am glad that the Leader of the Opposition had a thought. I am sure there is not a crowd there, but it is a thought.

I have a thought. Maybe he should read the budget. Maybe he should look at the budget because it is obvious that he has not gone through it cover to cover. He has not seen where we are now able to put money into every sector to make real change.

I am proud of the ministers here who are delivering on their portfolios. That is a foreign concept to the members opposite. All they want to talk about is, well, maybe last year's budget, maybe last year's comment, or maybe something from three or four years ago.

Mr. Speaker, look at every other third party that is looking at New Brunswick. Look at the people who are moving here. When the minister comments about the banks, do you know what they say? New Brunswick is the place to be. New Brunswick is on the move, nationally and internationally. People are seeing that this is a province to be in. It is not a slogan. It is not just something that we talk about. It is what everyone is talking about. I am proud of what is happening in this government.

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

[Translation]

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I have read the budget. I have in fact read the budget. We cannot trust the numbers in it at all. I would ask the Premier to read the report on the review of the *Official Languages Act*. He has not done that yet.

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We have read the budget that the Premier and this government tabled. The problem is what we are reading. We cannot trust what is in the budget at all. That is because, historically, since the Premier took office, he has never spent what was projected in the budgets he has announced. He does this to increase the surplus. He has also underestimated revenues.

Meanwhile, people are struggling every day. It is even worse now, since the pandemic began and the cost of living increased. There is also the price of gas at the pump. The Premier should recognize that there are difficulties in society and that people are struggling. Help them, Mr. Premier.

[Original]

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

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am disappointed to hear the Leader of the Opposition criticize the civil service and the quality of its work, basically saying that what it puts out is not accurate. Our province has been recognized across this country as one of the most transparent and most accurate provinces—one that is laying it out there, letting people see what it is saying, and identifying the differences. During the pandemic, we actually recorded everything that was being sent out—every dollar that was being sent out. Every dime of the federal money, the \$2.3 billion, went out into the community. Additionally, we spent another \$300 million. I think that the Leader of the Opposition, before he quit the COVID-19 Cabinet committee, knew all of that.

But, news flash: I am not sure what birthday it is for him, but maybe he is forgetting a bit about the fact that we are in a pandemic. For two years, we have been in a pandemic, and the numbers... Yes, it has been hard, but guess what! Look across the country. We are as accurate as or more accurate than just about every province, Mr. Speaker, because we have a team that delivers in the system as well.

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

## OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

**Mr. Bourque** (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, I have to deplore the condescending tone of the Premier, not only toward the Leader of the Opposition but also toward the civil service, which he has been throwing under the bus day after day. Just look at the strike last fall. That says it all.



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[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, a little over a year ago, the Premier announced the process for reviewing the *Official Languages Act* and the appointment of the commissioners. This review was provided for in the Act. In accordance with the statutory requirements, the commissioners tabled their first report in mid-December. That is what was planned. At the beginning of February, they submitted a second report, this one about language learning. It was not set out in the Act, but they still carried out this work.

We are talking about radio silence from the Premier about the recommendations in the first report. We have been awaiting news for over three and a half months now. This was a process shrouded in secrecy, and it is just as secret with the current Premier. Can he give us a response concerning this report? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it was quite a process. It was done on time by the commissioners, and I thank them for their work. Both of them did great work and delivered. There was much criticism at the beginning, asking: Could we get it done on time? Would there be a report?

The member opposite is correct. We do have to get this done and dealt with in the next few months so that we can actually have a path forward in terms of what this will look like. We are analyzing that and its impact and what it will mean across the civil service and across the province. So, Mr. Speaker, we will do that. I understand my colleague's comments.

In relation to the second report that he referenced, the idea is to consider how, after all this time, we can get better and have a province that is truly bilingual, where we can speak to each other anywhere we go in this province. It starts in the schools. It starts with the ability to have kids coming out of school conversing with each other. You know, that has been something that has escaped us for 50 years now. So I would think that the members opposite would applaud our efforts in trying to fix that so that, 50 years from now, we will not still be talking about it.

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

**Mr. Bourque** (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, when answering the question, the Premier just said that it is going to be over the next few months. That is way too long. It was supposed to be completed last year. Now, we are going to wait another three months just for an answer? We are not even talking about implementing what he is going to be saying in a few months. That is unacceptable as an answer. I am hoping that the Premier will be much faster on that.

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While a lot of New Brunswickers rightfully struggle with the Premier's evasiveness regarding this review, I remain somewhat puzzled and concerned when it comes to how the Premier is interpreting the second report regarding the acquisition of a second language. This report does give a glowing review of the effectiveness of the French immersion program. It also says that more needs to be done to improve it. We all agree. We are, after all, the only officially bilingual province, and we need to show that. We show how, clearly, this works. Will the Premier assure us that more will be done with immersion programs and that he will not see this as an excuse?

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

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to assure my colleague that we are going to have an education system that delivers for the students of this province. We are going to have an education system that improves not only our ability in the sciences and maths and literacy but also our ability to converse in both official languages. Regardless of what the member opposite may feel about one program or another, the fact remains that in the Anglophone system, about 65% do not graduate with the ability to speak both official languages. And this is after 50 years.

The member opposite says, I hope you do not do this or do that, but it is not about what I do or do not do. It is about our education system and looking at how we can get better. How do we deliver better results for all New Brunswickers? How do we have a system where, when people graduate in this province, they can go anywhere in this province, they can talk to each other, and they can all be coming out of the gate as graduates with equal opportunities? That is the goal. I think it is a commendable goal. Thank you very much.

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, when the minister responsible for municipal reform rendered his final boundary decisions a few months ago, he made it clear that no changes were to be made and that things were now set in stone. Fast-forward a few weeks, and we are now learning that some of these changes are being made on the fly without consulting the advisory committees who are responsible for putting together the building blocks of the soon-to-be new municipalities.

Such a case is happening in Entity 40, where a large tract of land of over 25 000 ha in the Midgic and Cookville area is being relocated from the newly proposed entity to the regional rural district. An inquiry by CHMA news has revealed that the land in question is registered to J.D. Irving. The mayor and council of Sackville and the advisory committee are crying foul after learning, not from government but from an engaged citizen, about the news.

I ask the Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform why he did not consult with the advisory committee before making such an important decision.

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[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): We are certainly seeing a member who has not done his job. He is sharing conspiracy theories. This is unbelievable.

Mr. Speaker, in this House, we established a timeline that was very easy to understand. In January 2021, we proceeded with the launch. In April, we published the green paper. In August, we talked about what we heard during the consultations. In November, we published the white paper. In December, we asked everyone for their input. We listened to them. In March, we established borders and boundaries. Maps were drawn. They certainly exist. We worked on the composition of the council in March. In May, we are going to work on toponymy and names. In September, we are going to work on the human resources file. On November 28, we will have special elections.

Mr. Speaker, the department and the transition teams are working hand in hand. Were minor mistakes made? We have made seven major adjustments in the past few months, and I could certainly list them in a second response.

[Original]

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

[Translation]

## CIVIL SERVICE

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, I would first like to wish a happy birthday to my big 3-year-old daughter, Aube Chiasson-Arseneau, who is watching us live at home: Dad will arrive soon, sweetheart.

Mr. Speaker, we learned last week that thousands of civil servants, who are CUPE members, have not yet received their retroactive pay following the signature of their new contract. When the budget was tabled, the government admitted that its own employees were in a dire situation. This is what the government said: "Workers across multiple departments will benefit from the increase in minimum wage".

We all know the Premier insists on paying off the debt of the province to avoid paying interest. So I do not understand why he does not see the same urgency for front-line workers who pay more interest in a world where everything is becoming increasingly expensive. My question to the Premier is therefore very simple: Will there be compensatory damage payments for all those who receive their retroactive pay late?

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[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the question. What happened was mostly the fact that we signed the 12 agreements in quick succession. We are allowed 90 days to get the retroactive pay out. Those agreements were signed in the middle of December, so 90 days later would be the middle of March. Last week, I guess, they should have been done.

With 12 contracts in a row, there were upwards of 20 000 people all of a sudden. When we do the calculations for the back pay, they have to be done one at a time, and they are manually done. So far, the average time one takes has been over 20 minutes. Twenty minutes is a short one. It has taken as much as five hours to do some of these things because people work in different departments.

One of the things that we have been really good at or have become good at during this pandemic is seconding people, getting them to move around, and using them in different departments.

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

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT

**Ms. Mitton** (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I did not hear a clear answer from the Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, so I am going to follow up and ask about what is happening in my riding of Memramcook-Tantramar, especially regarding Entity 40. As has been outlined, there are lands that have been removed from what was supposed to be Entity 40, lands which belong, in particular, to J.D. Irving.

It is unclear how these changes would be made based on the wishes of private interests when the village of Dorchester made requests that were denied. The town of Sackville made requests that were denied. There are other places, such as Lac Baker, where requests for changes to the boundary lines have been denied. Yet, here we are, where resource lands, like those of forestry, have been taken out of the reach of the local governments. I would appreciate a clear response from the Minister of Local Governance Reform.

[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I thank the member for her question. No change was made at any time. The boundaries of Entity 40 have pretty much remained the same throughout the process. If this person who spoke to the media shared some crazy idea, we are certainly clearly seeing the result.

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Mr. Speaker, 48 hours after the budget was tabled in New Brunswick, we are no longer talking about this document in the House.

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

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

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): I want to remind New Brunswickers of the spending we are doing. There has been a 26% increase in the budget envelope for tourism.

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

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

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC) : The budget for education is increasing by 11%. It is 6.5% for health. It is 5% for social development.

I am raising my voice, Mr. Speaker, because I am passionate about the New Brunswick budget, too. We are giving New Brunswickers the tools they need to move forward. We are still in a pandemic, but we want to ensure that both government and businesses keep working, going forward. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

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

## LEGISLATION

**Mrs. Conroy** (Miramichi, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year, a bill was brought forward to the Legislature for opt-out organ donation. The bill was supported by all four parties but did not pass second reading because the government wanted to ensure that it was done right. Therefore, it was sent to the Standing Committee on Law Amendments. That was done on October 5. The bill has not yet been passed, so *Avery's Law* seems to be in limbo, with fear of it dying on the Order Paper.



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This bill is to ensure that more people can receive the lifesaving organs that they need. It will also ensure that organ donation is assumed, removing unneeded stress from family members who are facing difficult decisions such as what Avery's mom, Michelle, had to go through with his sudden passing.

To the minister, what is the current status of the bill and when can we expect to see it come back to committee so that it can go through the necessary steps, be voted on, and pass royal assent to finally make *Avery's Law* a reality?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I appreciate the question, Mr. Speaker, because all the members of this House fully supported this bill. As it went through committee, there were certainly a number of questions that staff went back with. They are working on it. As you know, we had a lockdown in January. We came through the Omicron wave. It has not been in any way taken off the table. It will be back. I hope that we will get something back for you before the end of this sitting so that we can see it put through.

But, Mr. Speaker, I do want to say that I think that the people of New Brunswick need to know that... I believe, if I am not incorrect, that we have about 90% of our people with driver's licenses who have made their intent known, either yes or no, regarding organ donation. This bill will target a small number of people. It is important. It is also important that we work with our partners in Nova Scotia to ensure that we have a plan that we can actually meet. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform has been telling us constantly for a year that all decisions were made in a transparent manner. Moreover, he said that they were made following consultations.

[Original]

He said in this House that he put 50 000 km on his vehicle and that he has consulted every Tom, Dick, and Harry. I think that it is more about his future leadership race than actual municipal reform, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Several communities requested changes. We just have to look at Chiasson Office, Savoie Landing, Lac Baker, Chipman, and Minto. Each request was denied. Then we find out that decisions were made using the back door.



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[Original]

To come back to Entity 40, I would like to know whether the minister ceded these parcels after Irving or the Premier stepped in.

[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, once again, this is what we call defamation. There is no truth to what has been said this morning. So far, as you know, the Department has had a hard time separating some things on the maps. We have improved the maps. There will be a website for each new entity.

Mr. Speaker, we are very proud to be doing this reform. The 49 members here voted on the reform. There is transparency. We are working with transition committees.

Honourable member, I agree with you that there have been small changes. There were changes concerning the Grand Falls LSD, which is now part of the Grand Falls entity. The Denmark LSD is part of one of the 12 rural districts. The communities of Baie-Sainte-Anne and Escuminac were removed from the Miramichi region to be put with the Kent region. Chiasson-Savoy is grouped with Lamèque. The Maltempec LSD is in a different entity. Saint-Thomas-de-Kent is grouped with Bouctouche.

[Original]

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister. Thank you. The time for question period has expired.