

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



March 31, 2022

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MLAS

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, what a sad day yesterday, but what a day that will make a significant change in how this government governs. You know, I will never be able to put my feet into the shoes of a Tory caucus member, but I cannot imagine that the caucus—actually, all of them—agrees with what happened yesterday.

Premier, supposedly, based on the news, these negotiations, led by you, have been ongoing for three weeks. This morning, on CBC Radio, we heard the member for Fredericton-Grand Lake say that he is looking forward to becoming a Cabinet minister. I want to know this from the Premier. Based on the positions of the members of the People's Alliance—the former People's Alliance, I guess, now—have you promised them things?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): No. No, I have not, Mr. Speaker. But do you know something? Everyone here is looking forward to being a Cabinet minister. That would not be different for anyone.

But do you know something? I am very proud of the two colleagues that have joined us. I am very proud of their courage because it is not easy. It is not easy leaving a party that they built with passion for over 12 years. But, you know, it says a lot about their passion for this province and how they want to be in a position to help by working with the government that is in power to make changes for their ridings and to do things that are important for their communities.

Before he quit the COVID-19 Cabinet committee, the Leader of the Opposition had firsthand experience of working with Mr. Austin. He knows the questions he would ask. He knows the depth of information he would seek before he would make an informed decision or comment. That sort of forethought is helpful in any situation. Unfortunately, the Leader of the Opposition would only want to make mileage out of political hay. Well, the Progressive Conservative Party is indeed progressive. We are diversified, and we encourage all thoughts in order to come up with the right solutions.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, all we are discussing here this morning are the facts—what happened yesterday. But, on the same day that the government announced that it was going to abolish early immersion, it accepted the two MLAs from the People's Alliance. We still do not have a clear—or even any—position from the Premier's government in terms of the report on the review of the *Official Languages Act*.

We know that those two MLAs said on the radio this morning that they do not renege on what they believed in the past. They still believe it. It is worrisome. I do not care what

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happens to the PC Party, quite frankly, but I worry about the next three years, because that party will be governing and those two MLAs will be at the table—governing. Have you made promises to them about how you are going to govern over the next three years?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition is aware. He got an increase with someone who joined his party. Likely, he promised him a bridge. The condition of the bridge would not matter. It would not matter if the bridge was 99% reliable. It was just, oh yes, sure, come my way. We will promise you this, and we will promise you that. That same individual was instrumental in our being involved in a minority government and working with the former People's Alliance in that process.

But, Mr. Speaker, what I want to clarify here today is that both of the members who have, as of yesterday, joined us, which I am very proud to accept, have accepted without question the principles and rules that govern our party. Any member that joins has to do that, and we know that. That is part of the requirement. We all come from varying backgrounds, and we all have varying ideas. Nowhere is that more diversified than here in this Chamber, but we still move forward...

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Premier, how can you honestly say what you just said? Those two MLAs were in the news this morning and last night saying that they still believe in all the positions that they have taken in the past.

When you hire someone, you normally have an interview and you ask them questions. You just do not go in blindfolded and bring somebody on board your team. I guess it really shows your true colours—honestly. I cannot accept what the Premier just said.

Those two MLAs still believe in their own principles, but your government and your party reneged on the party's principles, because you have accepted them. Can you tell us whether you really asked them if they had reneged on their positions of the past?

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, there is no debate or concern in my mind about the fact that they have accepted or not accepted. They certainly have accepted the rules and regulations that govern the PC Party.

The member opposite knows full well... I am sure that he is not happy about two members joining us. After all, the People's Alliance members have stayed with us through the COVID-19 crisis, and as we deal with the COVID-19 issues today, they have stayed with us.

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They did not quit. They did not quit because maybe they thought differently on some issues or others. They stuck with it.

Do you know what they are doing here? They are sticking with their communities, and they are sticking with the ability to work in a government and to deliver for their communities because they are compassionate and that is where their compassion lies. I have no reservations about their loyalty to the PC Party and their loyalty to our aims and principles, and I am not concerned about that whatsoever, Mr. Speaker.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I have a very diverse group here. You have heard us all speak on different issues and in different formats. But at the end of the day, we find a way through it, Mr. Speaker.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the government spokesman on this decision by the leader was the Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform. We learned that caucus members were informed about these two newcomers to their party at the last minute.

This morning—this morning—the Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform was on Radio-Canada saying that the two newcomers would adhere to his party's principles. That was what he said. At the same time, the two members were on CBC saying the opposite: They would adhere to their own past principles and positions. That is the reality. Listen to the news; listen to what they are saying. Mr. Minister, how can you agree to these two members not accepting your party's principles?

[*Original*]

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, unlike what we would see from the Leader of the Opposition or maybe from any member on that side of the House, these members stand up to what they have done and what they have said in the past and do not make any excuses for it or deny it, because it is the reality.

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We all move on in society. We all move on, and I have done the same thing over the years. It is because we find the greater cause, the greater good, and the greater need. Do you know what that is? It is not debating back in here and trying to shoot each other down. It is doing what we have done for the last couple of years: working in this community for every community and engaging everyone to help make this a better place to be. And we are doing that, Mr. Speaker. So we can do it with all party members, or we can do it with those who want to be part of a successful New Brunswick. There are those who want to find fault, and there are those who want to get it done. I am proud of everyone on this side of the House who want to get it done.

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is not so easy for us to wipe out clear positions taken by various politicians. Both new government members took crystal-clear positions. Since yesterday, they have told the media again that their ideas and principles remain the same.

The Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform has a responsibility. I know him, and he is a good guy. I think he has certain values. However, does he agree and is he willing to accept that these positions are now part of the government to which he too belongs? Mr. Premier, let the minister answer my question.

(Interjections.)

[Original]

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

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. When I was a student at Université de Moncton, I was in classes with the Leader of the Opposition. Our first political science book was *Janus: Les deux faces de l'Occident*, by Maurice Duverger. This book explains right- and left-wing politics. What we are seeing this morning is that the Leader of the Opposition is absolutely playing politics. New Brunswickers want to talk about local governance, finance, and the budget. Mr. Speaker, I can guarantee you that we have a good budget.

Today, we are working according to Progressive Conservative Party principles. I have those principles here; there are 10 of them. I would like to talk about the third principle, which is about the equality of the two linguistic communities. We believe the diversity of our linguistic communities is a unique strength of our province.

(Interjections.)

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[Original]

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

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): We believe in official bilingualism.

(Interjections.)

[Original]

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

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): We believe in protecting and promoting our culture and heritage.

(Interjections.)

(Exclamations.)

[Original]

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

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): That has to be done while treating each community fairly and equitably. Mr. Speaker, we are not playing politics on the backs of...

(Interjections.)

[Original]

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

Order.

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[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, if talking about facts... What I am saying today is public information. It is the reality. If talking about reality... The minister thinks I am playing politics, and that is his problem. I am talking about things that are real. I am talking about those members' clear positions. Just this morning, they still wanted to adhere to the positions they took over the previous years.

The minister is unveiling his party's principles to us. I have not been concerned about his party. I am concerned about the next three years, because two more members will now be sitting on his government's side. These individuals will influence his government's decisions. Mr. Minister, why do you agree with the idea of accepting people who do not adhere to...

[Original]

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

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, as you know, yesterday was a good day. It saw the disbanding of a political party that was harmful to New Brunswick. I admit that; those are my values. However, today, the fact is that the Liberal Party of New Brunswick has no position on the files we are currently working on. The opposition members are not doing their job. Mr. Speaker, it is blatantly obvious.

There were 21 people in Grand Falls to meet the party leadership candidates. Where are those candidates this morning? There is not a single one here, Mr. Speaker. It is time there was some leadership on the other side of the House. I can guarantee to you, Mr. Speaker, that we are going to work together. I will be there to stand up for Moncton East as well as for Francophone rights. We are going to work as the Progressive Conservative Party. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): It is a little ironic to hear the minister saying that I am playing politics when I am talking about facts. As for him, he is going full steam ahead with the politicking.

Mr. Speaker, what happened yesterday is an example of the rotten potato concept. What is this concept? When we put a rotten potato in a potato shed, it rots the other potatoes. That is what members of that caucus should be worried about. Even members of that party should be concerned, but they will do as they like. As for me, I am worried about the next three years. Unfortunately, those members are on the government side. They are there.

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If the minister, who still has not clearly stated whether he agreed or not... He is playing with words. Go tell that to your constituents and people in the southeastern part of the province. Tell people throughout the province that those new government members really are going to adhere to the principles you just listed.

[Original]

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I take great exception to this concept of a rotten potato theory. I am extremely impressed with the quality of the two individuals who joined us yesterday. I have worked with them for four years now. As I mentioned, they did not quit the COVID-19 Cabinet committee in the middle of a pandemic. And back in the days when we formed the first minority government, working with the...

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I do not know whether that was the cuckoo clock or what it was that just came out of the door over there.

But, Mr. Speaker, we worked very closely together with them because they generally wanted the right things for this province. So I am very proud of the two individuals who have joined us. They are quality individuals who are representing their ridings in a true, sincere manner, which is the job of every single one of us.

And we will talk about all the issues. We will continue to do that. The Minister of Education is looking at how we can get better results in our classrooms and how we can make improvements. We are doing that on every file. We have a diversified group of people who express their opinions—sometimes before I even hear about them.

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

GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Premier, enjoy yourself. Enjoy yourself and that caucus and Cabinet. We will see. We will see what that gives. We will certainly be here on this side looking at what is going to happen.

Speaking of what is happening, Mr. Speaker, did the Premier hire a gentleman named John Correia to work in his office? Is that person on the payroll of the Premier's Office?

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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Yes. John Correia is currently working on projects for us out of the office. He spends maybe a day or two days per week in this area working on specific projects, moving them along in different areas, working with the people out in the communities, and reporting back to the caucus or Cabinet as required, depending on what the project is.

I have known John for a long time. He is an individual who is very passionate about the province and very passionate about getting results. I would say that if you look at the results of having Cannabis NB and ANBL working with the minister and the Finance Department, you will see that this group of individuals, including John, the board, and the leaders of both Cannabis NB and ANBL, have done an admirable job through the pandemic. They achieved results that the former Liberal government would have only dreamed of but never achieved. Yes, John is helping, and he will get results for us, Mr. Speaker. I am proud of the work that he does.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you for confirming what we knew. Mr. Speaker, John Correia is the Chair of the Board of NB Liquor and Cannabis NB.

Premier, do you not have any ethics? I would say and people who actually look at this would say that it is a conflict of interest, if not a perception of a conflict of interest. The Chair of the Board of NB Liquor and Cannabis NB works for the Premier in his office. Does that make any sense? It is maybe double-dipping, but it is more than that. It is more than that. Premier, you can have him on your payroll, but did you ask or tell him to resign as Chair of the Board?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Correia is working on a contract basis, Mr. Speaker, a project-related basis. This will not include issues that are part of the decisions of NB Liquor, the board that is running NB Liquor, or the executive.

Mr. Speaker, I would actually like the Leader of the Opposition or any of the opposition members to have the board members do a presentation on Cannabis NB and ANBL in terms of just what they are doing in that field across this province. Most notably, they are working with Minister Dunn on an actual agreement with First Nations. It is the first ever, Mr. Speaker. Yes, Mr. Correia played a key role with the minister in that file to make that happen.

I know that results do not matter to the group across the hall, but Mr. Speaker, results do matter on this side of the hall. That, too, is part of the reason that we have two new members. They like to see results too, and they see that it is getting done on this side of the hall.

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[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is clear. I think the Premier has no ethical awareness, because it is a conflict of interest to have the Chair of the NB Liquor Board of Directors on the payroll of the Office of the Premier—a conflict of interest. At some point, it is necessary to have certain principles—which the government does not have, as we saw yesterday—or at least certain ethical values.

It is hard to understand how this Premier's decisions are made. To have the Chair of the NB Liquor Board of Directors on the payroll of the Office of the Premier, contract or no contract, is a conflict of interest. The Chair of the NB Liquor Board of Directors must quit now. Will you ask him to do so?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, if we are going to talk about a conflict of interest, I want to talk about an individual who was in the Premier's Office when Premier Gallant was here. Jacques Pinet comes to mind, negotiating the deal on the First Nations tax agreement while at the same time negotiating a deal on a fueling station in Moncton in which he is a partner. If we are going to talk about a conflict of interest and personal gain, maybe we should just have a little study into that program because that is when direct benefit results from direct authority.

I do not see any of that from Mr. Correia. I just see results for every one of us in our government and for every one of us in particular projects because that is what he does. He gets results, and they will see that happen—not that they will want to see it happen, but they will. If we want to deal with conflict of interest, then let's look at the Jacques Pinet connection with Premier Gallant and the new fueling station in Moncton and the First Nations.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, after promising again and again that communities would be empowered and listened to, the Higgs government abruptly stopped listening at the end of last year, after the municipal reform white paper was released. At every juncture since then, the Minister of Local Government has been unwilling to slow his timeline to consult with local community members. But it seems that he has no problem consulting with private corporate interests such as J.D. Irving, since he agreed to the changes requested to exclude its private land from Entity 40, which makes up Dorchester, Sackville, and the surrounding areas in my riding.

I want to know what J.D. Irving is so afraid of. Is it fear of taxes, or is it fear of regulations? Maybe it is worried that the new Entity 40 will ban glyphosate spraying or clear-cutting

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within municipal boundaries to protect drinking water. I want to know how many times the minister has been lobbied by JDI on this reform and who is really calling the shots—he or Jim Irving?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for finally giving me an opportunity to answer a question from the member for Memramcook-Tantramar. The most recent comparison between apples and oranges is about vacant land and Crown land that are being adjusted on a province-wide basis. One of the principles of cartography... As I explained yesterday, when we did each property assessment, we removed rural parcels of land that had a small tax base and did not include any voters. There is nothing more rural than that. The aim was to keep people who were in rural areas in those rural areas. There is nothing more rural than vacant land and public land within rural districts.

Mr. Speaker, I can guarantee to you that, if the member opposite first makes a request for information under the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, I will certainly provide the facts. At no time have I been lobbied by a single New Brunswick business.

[Original]

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

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that it is a big problem to completely divorce the people of this province from the resources.

Anyway, earlier this year, the minister named transition facilitators across the province. While some of these facilitators are excellent choices with extensive backgrounds in local governance, many of them are longtime Liberal and Tory insiders. I was surprised to learn that the minister appointed someone who was registered to lobby his department as the transition facilitator for Entities 39 and 40 in my riding. It turns out that Chad Peters is not the only lobbyist appointed by the minister. Bill Thompson, Don Ferguson, Greg Lutes, Hermel Vienneau, and Maurice Robichaud are all connected to lobbying and communication firms, and they all have strong ties to the Liberal and PC parties.

My question for the Minister of Local Government is this: What topics are these individuals lobbying his government on, and does he see it as a conflict of interest that someone who is registered to lobby his department is working as a transition facilitator for the province?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): First of all, there is the registry of lobbyists. There is a registry that indicates

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that every time a lobbyist lobbies one of the 49 MLAs... Approximately 20 members will be lobbied by the Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick. I will be meeting with this group. The registry is in place. So, Mr. Speaker, there is no conflict.

First of all, we needed facilitators. We needed people who were familiar with the workings of government. That was important.

[Original]

It is important when we have facilitators that we have people who know how the system works and who have great career experience. As the MLA across indicated, there are great people who have extensive knowledge of the way that government works, and we have those relationships while moving forward on local governance reform. Mr. Speaker, this is a plan that has been elaborated for the past two years. We are moving forward with local governance reform not only for the people who are sitting here today but also for the next generation. Thank you.

NB POWER

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, we have been discussing the provincial budget in the House for a couple of weeks now, but tomorrow, residents of this province will have to work on adjusting their own budgets, since power rates will increase.

Now, in most years, we would have witnessed a healthy debate at the EUB over this increase, with NB Power appearing and showcasing its performance to justify the request. As we know, that did not happen this year because of Bill 77, and the minister alone now bears that responsibility. So here we are with an increase of 2%.

And as I read the Q3 results for NB Power, I see that, despite an increase in revenue this year, the net debt has increased once again. It is actually \$85 million higher than the projected target. As we ask New Brunswickers to dig further into their pockets to pay for this commodity, what assurances can we get from the minister that this increase will actually allow NB Power to achieve its targets?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise and have a conversation about the recent changes to the *Electricity Act* because it is very important for us to talk about the fact that the Q3 results were under the old Act, not the new, changed Act. I am also very excited to say that in the event that the utility had been operating under these new regulations, there would have been over \$10 million more positive equity going toward the utility's bottom line. That just shows that as we go forward, we are going to see results.

The member opposite does realize this. I am sure that he was very thoughtful in his deliberations when we debated that bill for over 12 hours and had conversations about

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how this is a transition year. This is the year that is taking the *Electricity Act* into a more progressive and forward-thinking future, allowing the utility the flexibility to deliver those results, as we would have seen if the third quarter had been under this new legislation. It is very exciting to see. That 2% was a transition, and there are great things to come as it relates to the utility.

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

ENERGY EFFICIENCY

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, last winter, we witnessed a few days when our power grid maxed out. Actually, NB Power had a large public awareness campaign asking residents to conserve power at peak times. There is a narrative among many people in this province that whenever we cannot produce our own power, we can just reach out to Quebec and buy cheap hydropower. The problem is that at peak times in winter, that power is not cheap or limitless. In fact, as New Brunswick was hitting its peak last winter, so was Quebec. That means that energy efficiency is going to become more and more crucial.

The problem is that this government has done very little to support energy efficiency programs in this province. Can the minister clarify just how close this province came to having brownouts last winter, and can he clarify that the government's strategy for efficiency goes beyond New Brunswickers taking their morning showers at ten o'clock instead of seven o'clock?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, apparently, the question writer for the Liberal opposition was not paying attention the other day when we introduced amendments to the *Electricity Act* on first reading to implement and absolutely to put those efficiency programs in place so that New Brunswickers can benefit from them. Absolutely, we are moving forward with steps that are going to take that into consideration and to provide that access to efficiency for the average New Brunswick ratepayer.

In addition to that, the member opposite is fully well aware of how important it is that we do exactly what is needed with that bill that we introduced at first reading the other day. Of the electricity transmitted to New Brunswickers, 72% is done through the less than efficient means of baseboard heaters. We are very excited about creating programs that are going to allow the utility to expand and to offer programs that will reduce that number. In addition to the low level of emissions we create when we generate electricity, people will be creating efficiency, and it will be a mutually beneficial arrangement for all New Brunswickers.

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

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[Translation]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The St. Joseph Community Health Centre in Dalhousie provides essential primary health care services to people who do not have a family doctor or access to a nurse practitioner. Vitalité closed walk-in services for a month. That month is now more than over, Mr. Speaker. This is unacceptable. Can the minister confirm that this valuable service will be restored and that all other services will be maintained at this community health centre? Thank you.

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I very much appreciate the question from the member from Dalhousie because this is a big concern not only for him but also for us. I want him to know that I have met with Mayor Pelletier. My deputy continues to meet with Mayor Pelletier. Our task force has met with Mayor Pelletier and the community to ensure that we get this clinic back up and running.

We have been making great efforts in recruiting so that we can ensure that this is a continued service. It is meant to return. The closure has been longer than we would have liked it to be. I am looking forward to delivering good news to the community of Dalhousie. We are going to push forward and make sure that this happens for you, and I am sure that we will be celebrating with you on that day. Thank you.

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