

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



May 17, 2022

CONTENTS

COST OF LIVING

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Steeves

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Steeves

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Melanson

Mr. Melanson

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Flemming, Q.C.

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Melanson

Mr. Melanson

Mr. Melanson

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Hon. Mr. Higgs

FUEL PRICES

Mr. LePage

Hon. Mr. Higgs

PROPERTY TAX

Mr. K. Arseneau

Hon. Mary Wilson

Mr. K. Arseneau

Hon. Mr. Higgs

FUEL PRICES

Mr. LePage

Hon. Mr. Higgs

GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES

Mr. McKee

Hon. Mr. Steeves

Mr. McKee

Hon. Mr. Fitch

Hon. Mr. Fitch

Mr. D'Amours

Hon. Mr. Fitch

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

COST OF LIVING

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, based on the calculation from economist Richard Saillant, since the last time that we were in this Legislature, last Friday, New Brunswickers would have paid over \$300 000 more into the provincial coffers. That was not planned for by this government. This is \$30 million per year of extra revenues to the province of New Brunswick because the price at the pump is \$2 per litre.

Premier, you had four days. The Maple Leafs lost, so you have time. I know that it is tough that the Maple Leafs lost. Actually, I was cheering for them for the first time in my life, but I am not cheering for you. What I am cheering about is for you to explain today what you had in mind when you said that you would potentially bring in a rebate.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you to the member opposite for the question. Do you know what? Yes, inflation has gone up. It has gone crazy, as a matter of fact. But inflation does not hurt just the general person. It hurts the province as well. We are still building schools. There is the cost of structural steel. We are trying to get some structural steel, and we are watching the cost. We are still adding on to hospitals. Additions to hospitals continue. We are still fixing roads. That continues, but it is more expensive.

The answer that you guys would have is to add another tax on top of everything. No. We make our strategic investments along the way for hospitals, for schools, for roads, and for all the infrastructure in this province. All this cost is borne by New Brunswickers, and it is up to us to make the right decisions along the way to save as much money as we can. Do you know what? If we come up and have a huge windfall, then we will be talking. But do you know what? There is inflation, and it happens to everybody, including the government of New Brunswick.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Finance Minister finally got up on a very important issue—very important issue. By the time that this government actually makes a decision—and hopefully, it will be to help New Brunswickers who are hurting at the pump, because they are paying way more than they should—it will be too late. Some New Brunswickers will be on the street. Some of them cannot afford a roof over their heads. Some of them cannot go to work or cannot bring their kids to day care because the price at the pump is too high.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

If the numbers of Richard Saillant are right—and I cannot doubt that they are—the government, over the past five months, in my estimate, would have received between \$10 million and \$13 million more than it forecast. Why can you not give that or a portion of that right now to the New Brunswickers who are hurting? They need to be able to go to work and to bring their kids to day care. Premier, explain this rebate that you were thinking about.

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you to the member opposite for the question, Mr. Speaker. Do you know what? We are looking at consumption levels as well. Is consumption exactly the same? Did your expert have an idea of how much consumption is being put forward in New Brunswick right now?

Do you know what? You talk about us not helping New Brunswickers. Absolutely, we are helping New Brunswickers. Last year, we lowered taxes. This year, we lowered taxes. We are helping New Brunswickers in a way that the Liberal Party never would. Did its members ever find a tax that they did not enjoy adding on to? Will they ever find a tax that they did not add on to? The first thing that the Gallant government did when it came in was to raise the HST, and it went from there. Do you know what? We lowered taxes by changing the basic personal amount and the low-income tax reduction threshold as well. There are 400 000 New Brunswickers benefiting from tax reductions thanks to this government, as opposed to tax increases from the government when the member was the Finance Minister.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it has been three long years of those members being in government. There comes a time when they have to take some responsibilities because the inaction or the difficulty that is happening now is under their watch. It has not been under our watch since 2018. They are in office now, they are calling the shots, and they are making the decisions.

If you look at the decisions that they are making or, more importantly, not making... By really explaining his supposed rebate that he had in mind at the last minute last week, as he was walking down and talking to the media... The Premier has not yet explained what this rebate actually is. The driving patterns have not changed, even though gas prices are high. What has changed is that people cannot afford their groceries. But they still have to go to work. That is what they have to do. Premier, please, again, I am begging you. I, on behalf of New Brunswickers, am begging you to explain this rebate.

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do think there is no question that when we look across our province and at the taxes on fuel, we say: Do you know what? The taxes are too high. I agree with the Leader of the Opposition. The taxes are too high.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

We have made massive increases in social services and in spending in health. Across the budget, there are unprecedented expenditures as well as tax reductions, as the minister pointed out. But Mr. Speaker, there is something, I think, that we can agree on. We need to reduce the taxes on fuel because that has an immediate carry-on impact on every commodity.

For everything that is put out there, we have an impact that reduces the cost of that service or that good that is being bought from somebody else. I think that right here in this House, we could solve this problem or make a serious dent in it. I would like to put a motion forward and, obviously, do it in a proper way. But we would actually propose to suspend the carbon tax for the next three or four months and have immediate relief at the pumps. Let's have everyone agree to that—immediate relief at the pump and beyond. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

(Interjections.)

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we are very well aware of the position this Premier and this government have taken on global warming. They do not believe the planet is warming and that that has a huge detrimental impact on people's daily lives and quality of life.

Mr. Premier, when the price is \$2 per litre, you control—you control—28¢ of every dollar the people of this province spend at the pump when they pay for their gas. You control those 28¢. So, when are you going to provide a rebate, a temporary one if necessary, of the 28¢ that you control entirely, Mr. Premier? Reduce part of that 28¢ right away and not when people are living on the streets, Mr. Premier. Explain to us how you will reduce the 28¢ of every dollar spent at the pump.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition knows full well that the taxes that we gain from the taxes on fuel go directly into the roads, into the hospitals, and into municipalities and they go throughout the province. If he looked at the budget that we put forward here a few months ago, he would have seen that the taxes go right on out in major, major ways.

But do you know what? We all believe in climate change, we all feel it, and we all see it, but we want to live to get there. We want everybody to get there, to the point where we are all being greener and cleaner, but there is a transition. I have been talking about a transition for eight years because we have to find a way to get there. What is an immediate way to get

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

there? The 11¢ of carbon tax that we apply right now could be suspended today. There could be immediate relief to everybody filling up at the pumps—immediate relief—but it would not affect health care, social services, or the roads that we are doing. It will just delay a few projects that we have out there that we want to do at some point in time. Let's get together and have meaningful results.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Premier, be bigger than that. Be more serious than that. Let's talk about the real issues here. Let's talk about the real issues.

The real issues, right now, are that you control 28¢—28¢—for every \$1 that is being spent at the pump. You can make a decision right now, without asking anybody else around the country or even in the oil industry. You do not even have to ask your Finance Minister, who is sitting next to you. You can decide that right now. Reduce a portion of that 28¢ and give it back to New Brunswickers now to ease some of the pain that they are going through every single time they go to the pump. Premier, explain to us: Of the extra 28¢ that you are getting, how much are you going to give back to New Brunswickers, at least temporarily, so that some of their pain can be eased?

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, we know that there is 11¢ that we could change right now and that we would not have to cut back on health care, we would not have to cut back on social assistance, we would not have to cut back in areas for the people who need them the most, and we would not have to cut back on our construction projects that are underway. We could keep the province moving. We could cut back 11¢ just like that, with a simple—simple—motion that is unanimously supported by all parties and do it tomorrow. It would have an instant impact on the commodity pricing that everybody is feeling by providing immediate relief at the pumps so you can get to your job and also relief from all those costs that are being incurred in the grocery stores and all those costs for building supplies. For everything that is coming by truck, by rail, or by ship, we would see an impact in our province, where it relates.

So it is simple. We can have it all. We can move forward, we can keep our economy moving, and we can save the expenses for the people who need them the most. So let's have a unanimous decision: Scrap the carbon tax for the next three or four months, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): You know, Mr. Speaker, I think that this Premier wants to be the Prime Minister of Canada or something. I do not know. I do not know. But I have to tell you that there are a couple of people trying to get that job who have the same ideology as you. They have the same ideology as you, and they do not believe that there is climate change or that the planet is warming up. But the 28¢—the 28¢, Premier.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

You control that 28¢ right now, and you do not have to ask anyone—anyone—to be able to reduce some of that amount.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, could this minister please quiet down?

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Continue, please. Members, a little respect, please.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that.

So, 28¢. You could take some of that 28¢ and give it back to New Brunswickers to ease their pain so that they can go to work and pay for their groceries.

Hon. Mr. Flemming, Q.C. (Rothesay, Minister of Justice, Attorney General, PC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know whether he knows anything about balance sheets, but a balance sheet is not something that you put on a mattress. It is something that you have to pay attention to.

Yes, there is an increase in revenue as a result of the high prices, but the province is not immune to inflation. We have to heat our hospitals—it costs more. We have to heat our schools—it costs more. We have to build our schools and build our hospitals. We have to fuel our trucks. NB Power has to buy more fuel to generate electricity.

Why do you think that there is this one-sided windfall and that the government is suddenly immune to inflationary prices? We are building schools. We have to buy lumber, and it is up. Steel? It is up. Everything is up. We are not immune to that. It is not a windfall. It is good government, and this is what you are going to get: good government from this side of the House.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, for about a minute, this minister contributed to global warming with the hot air coming out of him.

At the end of the day, when you go through your budgeting process, you have to budget for inflation. And if the Finance Minister did not do that, well, it would certainly be irresponsible on his end.

There is \$33 million of extra revenue that is going to come out of these incremental costs at the pump and go to the provincial government within six months—\$15 million if you cut that by half. Within one month, there will be \$2.5 million more. New Brunswickers are paying the price at the pumps. They have to make a decision: Do I put gas in my vehicle because I need to go to work? I have a family to feed, but when I get to the grocery store,

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

my God, I cannot buy as much. It is too expensive. So my family is starving to a certain extent.

Premier, you have mentioned a rebate. You mentioned it last week. Explain to us today what that really means.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I know that the Liberal opposition wants to say that we can do it all. And you know, I think that there is a path forward here. First, we pass a motion to eliminate the carbon tax for the next three or four months as we go through this period of high prices. We pass a motion, and everybody says okay, we agree that it is time to do that.

That is instant relief, Mr. Speaker. It is instant relief for people who are driving every day, for people going to their job, and for people who are buying. We will see a change in the grocery stores. We will see that impact. Likely, within a week, we will see some changes. Mr. Speaker, that would be the first thing.

The next thing is, okay, we said that when we understand our increasing costs... When everything is inflated because of what we are seeing for high energy prices, then we also want to say that we are not looking for a surplus in this. We are looking to keep doing what we promised to do in the budget because people expect it. When we talk about good government, we know that it is about being a rational government and being one that makes sense. When you commit to people, you deliver. That is what we will do.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, outside experts can already tell us, as we speak, how much additional revenue the government will receive because the price at the pump is so much higher. Gas costs \$2 a litre.

Mr. Saillant said that the government of New Brunswick has the means—this is according to him, and he is credible—to help drivers. Once again, the Premier does not seem to want to assume his responsibilities. He has become an expert in the art of passing responsibility on to other levels of government or to various groups in society. However, he never assumes his responsibilities.

This is about 28¢ that the Premier can, today... He has control over 28¢ of every dollar spent at the pump. He can reduce the amount by 28¢ right now. Mr. Premier, will you reduce every \$1 paid at the pump by 28¢?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it appears that we can go around and around on this. With the motion to suspend the carbon tax, I guess the opposition is saying, no, it does not want immediate relief for people buying every day. It does not want immediate relief in the grocery stores or in the lumber yards. It does not want to see that immediately.

We can do that, Mr. Speaker. We can delay some of the projects that were directly focused on climate action. We can do that. We can maintain our health coverage. We can maintain our social services. We can maintain our commitments to build and continue on with projects throughout the province.

Mr. Speaker, there is a way forward. The Leader of the Opposition can certainly agree to that, and we can do it tomorrow. There is a path forward, and there is a solution. I am proposing that we have a unanimous decision on a motion to reduce the carbon tax by 11¢. Let's do it immediately. We will put it in as a temporary measure. We will do it now. I would like to ask the opposition whether it would support such a motion.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): No. Mr. Speaker, when people listen to this Premier, he is all about one-liners, trying to get the headlines, and trying to blame others.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): You are contributing to global warming, minister. Please stop.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Please continue.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier wants to get the headlines. I get it. Every single time he says something, he does not do it. We need to see how this Premier is going to reduce the 28¢ of extra money that this provincial government is getting every time people go to the pump and put a dollar of gas in their vehicles. You control 28¢. You control it. You can reduce that any single day and temporarily, for that matter, so that people can have an easing at the pump, because it is very expensive to them.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I wish I had a recording because I would just play it back. I will ask it

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

again. We can actually have an impact immediately and continue everything that we committed to in our budget. It is a budget that has record spending in all categories. We can continue the economic momentum that our province is having right now throughout the province. People are traveling, and there is building. Things are happening in New Brunswick. We can do this with a temporary measure, and we can do it in a responsible way—a responsible way—where we manage through this period of high inflation and high energy costs. We can manage this, Mr. Speaker, and we can do it effectively.

The problem is, the Liberal Leader does not actually want to address one of the main issues that we have to move forward. We have proposed an ideological theory, that we can just continue down this path, shut the lights out, and hope for the best... Let's suspend the carbon tax for a period of four months.

[*Translation*]

FUEL PRICES

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One litre of diesel now costs more than \$2.60, and, as Richard Saillant pointed out, this astronomical price is helping put an additional \$30 million into the provincial government's pocket.

According to the Atlantic Provinces Trucking Association, filling up a semi-trailer costs between \$1 500 and \$2 000. Mr. Speaker, the increase in the price of fuel is another challenge that the trucking industry must overcome. I am mostly talking about independent truckers and small operators. We also know that these additional costs have an impact on consumers, who already have to pay excessive prices for everything from eggs to furniture.

Can the Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business clarify which measures she and Opportunities New Brunswick are taking to help these people and lessen the impact of the fuel price increase on the trucking industry and consumers?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that what we have said here earlier in this whole process has been about how we can reduce this effectively. And the way is to reduce energy consumption, and the way is to reduce energy costs. We are in a situation right now where we are seeing the same thing with NB Power. We are seeing that the cost of the operation now could be up by \$100 million or \$110 million more than it was.

How do we manage this going forward? Whether it be in the construction business or whether it be anywhere, the same logic applies. How do we manage it, Mr. Speaker? We try to do what we can to reduce consumption and to reduce the cost. We have the wherewithal to do both. We can do the cost reduction immediately with 11¢ per litre, right off the bat.



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

We can look at our resources here in our province to help solve not only the situation in North America but in Europe as well. We can be part of the solution. So let's just grow up and have an adult discussion here about the world events and what we can do to help. Thank you.

PROPERTY TAX

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Let's talk about a solution, Mr. Speaker. While New Brunswickers are struggling with the high cost of living and gas prices that are now over \$2 per litre, the big oil companies have been raking in billions more in profits over the past few months. In July 2019, almost three years ago, the Premier committed to reviewing the property tax assessments of the Irving Oil refinery based on an improvement in the market conditions. When asked by the media earlier this year about the status of the review, the Premier said that he had just learned that the review had not been completed.

The government could use the additional revenue that would be brought in from a higher tax assessment to help New Brunswickers get through this crisis. Does the Premier have an update on this important review of Irving Oil's property tax assessments?

Hon. Mary Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question, Mr. Speaker. Following ongoing discussions with the Service New Brunswick Property Assessment Services team and a review of current information, government has been assured that the current assessment of the Irving Oil refinery falls within the acceptable range of value and that a review is not recommended at this time. The refinery was last fully reinspected in 2013.

The SNB Property Assessment Services heavy industrial team has been regularly monitoring market activity, new construction, and demolitions occurring at the refinery. The reinspection of heavy industrial property follows an established program, Mr. Speaker. Analysis is used to determine whether there have been market changes, either positive or negative, that warrant a reinspection. If new information is brought forward that indicates that a reinspection is warranted, priority will be given to the property in question. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, acceptable for whom? For a Premier who touts his managerial skills and his ability to get things done, I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that I would fire the guy. While thousands of New Brunswickers are struggling to go to work, put food on the table, and pay the rent or the mortgage, the Premier responds: Tough luck. I have got billionaires to help.

While Irving's property assessment went up by 1.5% this year, it received a 4.2% cut in its tax rate. I do not think that anyone in the working class got that kind of preferential treatment. This resulted in a \$280 000 cut on the refinery in Irving's headquarters. I do not



Oral Questions

think that anyone in the working class got that kind of preferential treatment. Considering the record profits being raked in by the oil and gas sector, how can the Premier justify this tax break?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I know that the member opposite kind of has difficulty with anyone in the private sector who is investing and keeping a business running. Back a few years ago... Actually, it was probably less than a year ago that there was concern with the pricing model that existed, with the carbon taxes that were being imposed, with the clean fuel standards that were being imposed, and with all the emission standards that were being imposed. The question was: Would it stay running? Would it keep going? Then when the market shifts and things turn, the minister would have us move up and down, move up and down, just to follow how the wind is blowing every day.

Mr. Speaker, that is not how business works, and the member should know that. Maybe he does not, but he should know that. No one would ever invest in anything in our province if that were the way that we audited, the way that we analyzed, and the way that we assessed. But I can assure the member opposite that if, indeed, we find that this trend continues and we see the opportunity to say that things have changed and the market is now at a rate where we should reassess, we will do that because it is the right thing to do, not because it is the...

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

FUEL PRICES

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Mr. Speaker, every single small and medium-sized business is facing the negative impacts of these increased fuel prices.

[*Translation*]

Whether you are a small manufacturer or an independent forestry contractor, record fuel prices are a big problem. The Premier made headlines last week by saying that he would bring forward a plan. The Minister responsible for Justice, on the other hand, gave a strange performance here in the House to divert our attention from the inaction of this government when it comes to helping New Brunswickers.

Can the Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business at least give us two potential solutions that she and her government could bring forward to help SMEs with fuel prices, other than doing nothing, Mr. Speaker?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think we brought forward during the budget period a reduction in nonresidential assets. That included all the small businesses that the member opposite talks about. It included every one of them in this province, so it was a way to say, look, we want you to continue to invest. We started programs at ONB, such as the navigator program, so that we could work through the bureaucracy. And we have seen an unprecedented level of new investment in our province. Now, we are at a point where those same businesses are saying: Wow, the cost of energy is really hurting. We would like to see some action.

You know, energy is a commodity. It comes, and it goes. But the carbon tax? It could come, and it could go. It will not affect the hospital, and it will not affect the social systems. We could do that immediately. I was asking this, and maybe the Leader of the Opposition is not so inclined. Maybe the member would actually say, Yes, I would support a four-month moratorium on the carbon tax. We could actually use that to directly help those businesses that are trying to keep their trucks moving.

GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned earlier, the flagrant disrespect that this Premier and this government have toward the public-sector workers is on display again. For a third time, this government has missed a deadline to provide these important workers with their retroactive pay, and in some cases, it is for work that was done over five years ago. Mr. Speaker, we have heard a litany of excuses for this regrettable situation, but all of the excuses can be likened to the dog ate my homework.

In addition to the delays, some of those who did receive their back pay were shortchanged while others received too much. Here, we have another complete mess created by this incompetent government. Mr. Speaker, enough is enough with these excuses. Will the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board definitively tell this House when these workers will be paid and whether those payments will include interest as compensation for his government's ineptitude?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. This is what happened. Before Christmas, we signed 12 collective agreements in a very short time, so things got backed up in a hurry. These figures, these equations, have to be done one at a time, and they are done manually. They are done manually. We have now come across with retroactive pay for about 25 000 employees. We still have a couple of thousand employees left to go, absolutely. We are working on that. We expect it to be done by the end of June, and we will continue to honour our agreements.



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Do you know what? This is an unprecedented situation. The employees absolutely—absolutely, member—will get exactly what they are expecting in retroactive pay, and we will get it done as soon as possible. Once again, when you are doing everything manually, it takes some time. We appreciate the patience. Thank you.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the government has \$30 million in additional gas taxes on top of the \$1 billion in surpluses over the past two years. It has the capacity to hire more data entry workers to get the job done. So, get it done.

In addition to this retroactive pay fiasco, the New Brunswick Nurses' Union is crying foul for the latest impasse in contract negotiations with the New Brunswick Nursing Home Association. Although mandated to do so, the association has not signed the collective agreement negotiated in January. The situation is intensifying the crisis in nurse recruitment and retention. The interim CEO of the association says that this will be rectified by the end of the week. Can the minister, again, step up and tell us what measures are being taken to ensure that the situation is resolved as soon as possible?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am more than happy to take that question. As the opposition should know—I will not set the bar too high for it, but it should know—that negotiation is between the Nursing Home Association and the nursing home. We want to see that finalized by the end of the week as well. We have asked staff to assist the association in making sure that the collective agreement is complete.

To the member opposite, the answer to the question is, yes, we are aware of that. We are working with the association to help it finalize that agreement, which was ratified earlier in the year. Mr. Speaker, I had that as a supplementary question, and I can come back to it after this moment, if necessary.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period has expired. Minister of Social Development, you had a response.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last Friday, the member for Edmundston-Madawaska Centre asked a question about the collective agreement for nurses working in nursing homes.

[*Original*]

As I mentioned earlier, the employer, the New Brunswick Association of Nursing Homes, negotiates with the nursing home union. As the Department of Social Development, we have come forward and we have stepped up. We are now actually engaged in those

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

discussions to help resolve any of the outstanding issues. We are working with the association, as mentioned, to have the agreement ratified in the coming days.

[Translation]

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the minister for his answer. However, Mr. Speaker, this is the question that needs to be asked: Why did the Official Opposition have to intervene last Friday to wake this government up? Today, we are learning that the issue will be resolved in the coming week.

Where was this minister, the Minister of Finance, and the Premier, when it was time to make sure this collective agreement was finalized and signed and that our workers, who deserve decent wages, got a signed employment contract? The minister was asleep at the wheel. Now it is time for him to wake up. Mr. Speaker, really, next time, I hope this government will not need the opposition to tell it what to do.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, we do not need this opposition to tell us what to do because we are taking care of business on this side of the House. With his vast experience, the member over there should know that this negotiation is between the Nursing Home Association and the nursing home union—and the Nurses' Union.

Mr. Speaker, the member opposite may want to point fingers over here, but what we have done is step up. We are using some employees from our department and the Finance Department to make sure that these negotiations are finalized. We have set a goal to have this finalized by the end of this week.

Again, that is the reason that this government is the one that is making decisions for the people in the province of New Brunswick and making sure that they are safe and secure no matter where they are receiving care, whether it is home care, at a special care home, or in a nursing home. Mr. Speaker, we are the government of action. We listen, and we get it done.