

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



June 10, 2022

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GOVERNMENT

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): That applause does not mean that I am going to be nice, but I will be respectful.

Mr. Speaker, when the Premier was sworn in almost three years ago now, he said—and I will paraphrase—We will give straight answers. We will base decisions on evidence and facts. We will present information without spin. He added this: I mean every word that I say. We will hold ourselves to a higher standard.

Mr. Speaker, this will be my last question period. Could the Premier instruct his Cabinet colleagues to respect what he said three years ago and actually apply it to himself?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Yes, absolutely, Mr. Speaker. That is an easy question to answer. That is the way that we manage our affairs. That is the way that the people of the province expect us to manage our affairs.

And I would only like to return that question to the Leader of the Opposition and the opposition members, because that works for everybody. If we all followed that code of ethics, this would be a better place to live.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the answer, but we will let New Brunswickers judge what the Premier said for himself and his colleagues and what has been done over the last three years.

Last fall, we went through what I would call a very difficult, dark period in New Brunswick. And I hate to say this, Mr. Speaker. In the last five weeks of the year, we had over 1 129 deaths. Actually, it was the highest in the country. Tara Moriarty, an associate professor, said, “The level of... mortality in New Brunswick during that period is enormous... And if it’s not COVID killing people, what the hell is it?” I have asked these questions of the Minister of Health before. I want to hear and we all want to know what happened last fall.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I share the concern here of the Leader of the Opposition because the language used by Moriarty was, I think, a little exceptional. I think it was a little bit of fearmongering. I think that everybody wants to know, so I am going to be very careful with my response today.

I made it very clear to the department that I want to know Public Health’s response to this. Because I am not a clinician, I cannot speak as a clinician. So I want you to know that Public



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Health has been made aware. Public Health follows up on the reason for a death by getting supporting documents from the death certificate or from the attending physicians. Politicians do not sign death certificates, Mr. Speaker—doctors do. Deaths that are clearly due to COVID-19 are recorded upon receipt by our epidemiologists. Deaths where there is not a clear...

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, there were 4 599 individuals in New Brunswick who lost their lives in the last 25 weeks of last year. That is 24% over and above any normal period. We know that in August, on a daily basis, there were about 13 individuals testing positive. That went up to 47 in September, and it went up to 192 in December. I think that it would be appropriate, to say the least, for the minister to clearly tell us—soon—what happened last year. Was it directly related to COVID-19? Was it related to the decision made last summer? One thing is for sure: too many people have died. We, as New Brunswickers, deserve to know.

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I agree with the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, and a decision has been made by the Department of Health that it will complete an analysis of excess deaths once all registered deaths for 2021 have been coded with Statistics Canada. That is very important. There is a lag in terms of confirming. This process is similar to those used in other jurisdictions. The excess deaths being reported by Statistics Canada are all the deaths in New Brunswick, not only COVID-19 deaths, and it is very important that we recognize that. And, Mr. Speaker, all the deaths must be validated. He knows that. I want the public to know that. There will not be anything that is not qualified. The numbers are preliminary, and they will continue to be adjusted month to month until all 2021 deaths are qualified. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the data comes from Statistics Canada. This is an organization that enjoys total national credibility. When we see the number of deaths, we may be able to go back a bit and examine the decisions that were made. This is not about blaming anyone here.

When decisions were made last year, we knew that the Delta variant was going to come to New Brunswick. It arrived, and we saw a drastic increase in the number of people with positive test results. Prof. Moriarty suggests that, even if there is no direct link with COVID-19, there is certainly an indirect link. It is June 2022, six months since the beginning of the year. The minister should have a better understanding. Will she provide us with those details when they are...

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, before decisions were made last summer, the member opposite was part of the all-party COVID-19 Cabinet committee—before he quit. And I know that he has connections to the medical community. He is not unsure of how this process works, Mr. Speaker.

So I am going to say again that every death in New Brunswick is qualified by competent physicians. They sign the death certificates, and they qualify the cause of death. If the death was related to COVID-19, they go further, to ensure that it was a COVID-19 death or that it was the death of someone who had COVID-19. All that information is then brought forward, and sometimes it does take months before every death is qualified. The department will be following up, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I am going to ask a question of the Premier. These are alarming numbers. New Brunswick had the most deaths in the country last fall. Too many New Brunswickers died. We offer our sincere condolences to their friends and families. But because of the seriousness of this matter and because we are still not getting clear answers from the minister, I am asking the Premier this morning: Are you going to call an inquiry into this situation?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the government does not sign death certificates—doctors do. The department has already said that it is looking into this. It is waiting for all the deaths to be qualified before doing an analysis, and an analysis is warranted. It is a question for which New Brunswickers need to have an answer, and I assure the interim Leader of the Opposition that it is going to happen. But we cannot reassess information until we know that it has been validated. With Statistics Canada, some of these numbers might change. There are still enough that we need to be concerned about what the actual picture looks like, and that analysis will be done. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): You know, Mr. Speaker, I can appreciate that there are analyses happening. It is the minimum that we should expect. But I did ask the Premier this, and I will ask him again. Based on what he said when he became the Premier about no spin but facts and evidence, fine, when this analysis is done—and we will give the appropriate time for this to happen—because of the magnitude and the seriousness of this issue, is he going to consider an inquiry?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, any fatality that we have had in the province and, certainly, any fatality related to the pandemic is obviously most concerning. I commend the people who have

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been working night and day through this process and who have stuck with it to the very end, Mr. Speaker, to ensure that people have been as safe as they possibly could be.

As the Leader of the Opposition knows, every decision made was based on facts, based on the information provided by Public Health, and based on the best interests of the citizens of this province. He also knows that in many cases, we had people who arrived in the hospitals for other reasons but had COVID-19 when they were tested. They did not come in with COVID-19. That is part of the analysis that is being done. There were many mitigating factors that we provided, but there were also many things that we learned through the process.

So, Mr. Speaker, it is an interesting process that the opposition has taken this morning. The leader knows full well, as he was part of the COVID-19 Cabinet committee until he quit, that we were there making decisions based on the facts of the day and on the best information possible.

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I imagine that the Premier will be happy when I am no longer Opposition Leader. He will no longer be able to accuse me of leaving the all-party Cabinet committee on COVID-19. However, one thing is certain, Mr. Premier: If I were still sitting on that committee—I do not even know if it still exists—I would not have an opportunity to ask the relevant questions we are still asking today about the whole COVID-19 situation. We can do this openly and transparently.

Mr. Premier, we are going to give the process of analyzing the deaths that occurred in New Brunswick last fall a chance to unfold. However, I want the Premier to tell me... Actually, it is not me. It is New Brunswickers and certainly the families of those people who lost their lives. After this analysis, will the Premier consider holding an enquiry into the situation?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition suggests that he could not ask questions if he were on the committee. Well, he is asking questions he already knows the answers to because he was on the committee. When he speaks of the decision made a year ago, he already knows why it was made, how it was made, and the facts that supported it. To stand here as though he is questioning the decision that he was part of is just a tad ironic. If you want to look at the credibility, integrity, and honesty in all that discussion that was had at the beginning of his opening statements, then he should just think about that and think about the questions that he is asking.

Public Health and the Department of Health are reviewing all the stats. We are asking the medical professionals to help us see what we learned from this, as we would for any

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exercise. What are the best practices going forward? How do we protect ourselves and the citizens in this province as we go forward? We will go from there, Mr. Speaker. If there is more investigation or information required, then we will proceed to get everything we can to do better and to continue to improve the health and welfare of our citizens. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we know that before the pandemic, mental health was a very serious issue in New Brunswick and in the entire society of the world. The pandemic actually accelerated it. The pandemic created a lot more challenges for mental health.

We had the unfortunate situation of Lexi Daken, who took her life. From that, there was a report in which there were 21 recommendations that were to be implemented. Based on what the minister said when she spoke to the media, all 21 recommendations were to be implemented by last March. We learned that only 7 of the 21 recommendations were actually implemented. Can the minister explain why the balance is still not in place for protecting and helping...

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Actually, Mr. Speaker, I have explained this. I have even acknowledged that when I used the word “completed” at that time, I guess, in my mind, “completed” was about the ongoing work and all the initiatives that we had to do. So seven were completed. All are ongoing. Some will continue to be ongoing permanently because they are matters of continuous improvement.

But let me say this. We have hired another 26 mental health professionals for our ERs. We put social workers in our ER departments. We have implemented one-at-a-time therapy across this province, Mr. Speaker, which has been a huge factor in reducing our mental health waiting list by 60% in this province. No one else has done that. Those are huge accomplishments that I am proud the department was able to do during a global pandemic.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I listen to the minister saying over and over and over that government is doing all the right things. But she constantly makes goals to get things accomplished, and she never meets those timelines. When it comes to all New Brunswickers having access to a health care provider within six months, it never happened. Actually, the number of people looking to access a health care provider has increased under her watch. She said that this would be implemented by the

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end of March 2021. Only 7 of 21... We have people struggling with mental health even more than ever.

I ask the Premier: Are you going to try to have this minister be accountable to her own goals that she is setting? She is not respecting her own goals.

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, I cannot... If I could go on with the list of accomplishments that the department, the regional health authorities, and our partners with EM/ANB have accomplished through this global pandemic, then I would take up all the time of question period.

This is what I am going to say. If I have been overreaching in my ambitions, then I apologize, but we will be accountable. In fact, Mr. Speaker, we in this Chamber all know—we all know—that we will be judged in hindsight. We will be judged by what we have accomplished. It is just as I have mentioned before. The members of the former Brian Gallant government let RN enrollments go down by hundreds and hundreds. We have lost them. If we had those nurses in our system today, we would be better off than any other Atlantic Province. So I am going to stand on our record of what we are accomplishing, and we are tackling every single issue with ambition.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, if the minister, who just apologized, would respect the fact that she has regularly failed to accomplish her own set goals, she would apologize every single day. You know, Mr. Premier, I asked you the first question regarding “We will present information without spin”. Well, she just failed on that standard. She just failed because she is spinning and being political. There are people hurting because of mental health issues. They need help—more help—and the minister committed to having 21 recommendations implemented by March 31, 2021. We are in June 2022, by the way. Premier, can you, at a minimum, ask her to be accountable?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, do you know what are the risks of putting real targets out there? It is a challenge to meet them, and it is a challenge to work harder the next time to get better. The Liberals have constantly put out ambitions but no real targets. When was the last time that a health plan was put together and we could say that we will achieve it within our mandate? There is always a risk to that, but you do not get better by just fluffing it over and saying that we will get better or that we are improving or that we think it is better. No, you get better by saying, This is what it will be.

Just as in education, this is how many nurses are going to graduate next year and the year after and the year after. It is not about saying that we are going to do better. It is about

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saying that this is better. Yes, there will be bumps in the road, but we have a task force working with both health networks, Vitalité and Horizon, to deliver better results in every part of this province. We are also analyzing where it could be better, because it could be anywhere. We could see patients moving around in our province to get a quicker response, because we want to utilize the assets in both Vitalité and Horizon to the very best that we can.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, in November 2019, we unanimously voted on a motion, tabled by the official opposition, to have a mental health advocate. Right? It took two and a half years for this minister and this government to actually do something, but it took that responsibility and gave it to the Ombud. The seriousness of mental health is so significant that an advocate for mental health should be independent, on his or her own. There are so many issues around mental health. First of all, why did you take two and half years just to do what you did? And why did you not make this advocate totally independent of other Legislative Assembly officers?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, we want to talk about ragging the puck. Let's talk about these guys over there. Do you know what? The first thing that we did was put the Nursing Resource Strategy in place, and we provided action after that strategy. The first thing that we did was to create a bridging program, with 24 new seats at UNBSJ. Then we put that number up to 32. Then there were 25 seats at the Université de Moncton and then another 24 in Fredericton. What did they do? Nothing. Zilch.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): That was more nurses in two years than in four years. What did we do after that? We put a navigator in place, moving the number of internationally trained nurses from 5 per year up to 80 last year, Mr. Speaker. They had two ministers—two ministers—in place for that department, and they got none of this done—none of this done. If they want to stand behind the record of this Health Minister compared to the two ministers in the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, I will stand behind this minister 365 days of the year.

FUEL PRICES

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, according to Kalibrate Canada, today, it costs \$40 more to fill up a 50-L tank of gas than it did at this time last year. So who is benefiting from the additional \$40 that we are paying for every tank of gas this year

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compared to last year? Well, almost half of it—\$19 on every tankful—is going to the big oil and gas companies. There is 40%, or an additional \$16 on every tank, that is being raked in by the Irving Oil refinery. Governments are seeing an extra \$5 in HST from every tank of gas while an extra loonie in carbon tax is being used to further reduce provincial income taxes. Mr. Speaker, 90% of the increase in gas prices—\$35 of the additional \$40 we pay now for every fill-up—is creating windfall profits for the oil companies. Will the Premier support taxing the windfall profits of the oil companies to ensure that they are redistributed to the people of New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to stand here on the last day of this legislative session to have a conversation about something that we have been talking about for quite a while. We had a lot of conversation in the House yesterday in relation to that.

I think that one of the things to take into consideration is the fact that opposition members speak a lot about big oil, bad government, and the need to act now, but you know, they have been very successful at—and probably should be congratulated for—creating a narrative that does not properly reflect the reality of the fact that we are in a jurisdictional comparison throughout the entire country. There is 0.6¢ per litre that separates us from Nova Scotia. Other provinces have gas prices that are actually higher than ours, and they are all fed by refineries as well. When the opposition members try to make this a New Brunswick situation by saying that we are horrible, that this is an awful situation, and that we are doing it in isolation, they are not properly reflecting the story.

Now, when we have opposition members who do not want to join us in talking about areas where we can go to work, who do not want to join us in going after the federal government, and who do not want to have a conversation about how we can collaborate and work together, then that is very disappointing. We have no support here in the Legislature.

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

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, we are paying an extra \$40 to fill our gas tanks this year compared to last year, and 90% of that additional cost is a windfall for the oil companies. Every time we fill up our vehicles, we are forking over an additional \$35 to big oil—every time. As a result, they are swimming in windfall profits. New Brunswickers want to know where the extra money they are forced to pay when they fill their gas tanks is actually going. The answer is Irving Oil and big oil. Irving Oil and big oil are benefiting from something they are not responsible for.

In the U.K., the big oil companies are being required to pay an additional 25% tax for the next 12 months because of their windfall. Mr. Speaker, this is a onetime-only tax, which should appeal to this government's onetime-only approach to things. In terms of collaboration, will the Premier work with me to convince the Prime Minister to establish a onetime-only windfall-profit levy on the big oil companies?

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Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, it is good to hear that he actually wants to reach out to the federal government. We have absolutely been saying that all along. Now, I do not necessarily know that he has the right approach. It seems that a career has been made for members of the Green Party to talk about how to shut down business.

We are not saying that we cannot examine and evaluate. That is evidenced by the work that we are doing to reach out to organizations like the EUB to give us an analysis, to talk about things, and to give us breakdowns, data, and information so that we can make informed decisions.

At the end of the day, I come back to the fact that a narrative created by the opposition to make this exclusively a New Brunswick problem absolutely does not reflect the reality. It is unfortunate because instead of spending time talking about how we can collaborate and work together to find solutions, the members opposite are trying to take cheap political shots, which actually goes to exactly what the former—after today—Leader of the Opposition was saying about how he wants us to shoot straight with no spin. We want that from you too.

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

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, if there had been a doctor in the House, we could have asked for a prescription to calm down the minister who got up just before the last one, because he got all excited. After 23 years in the House, that is what he can come up with? Seriously? If he believes that the Minister of Health is doing a good job... There are 181 vacant physician positions under her watch, and there are 783 nurse positions in the public sector under her watch. Do you know what? It is affecting a whole bunch of services.

[*Translation*]

Yesterday, another service was added to the ones that have already been eliminated. The pediatrics department at the Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont University Hospital Centre is closing—one more. How can you be proud? You are asleep at the wheel. You are asleep at the switch. You are not doing your job. You share information making yourself look good, while there is a lack of results. Explain this to us, Madam Minister.

[*Original*]

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

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Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, history matters. He talked about 782 nursing positions. Would not the 800-plus enrollments that did not happen under the former government's watch have made all the difference today, if we had them?

Here is what I can share: We have recruited more doctors than we lost this year. We have recruited more nurses than we lost this year. And we now know that primary care in particular cannot be one doctor out, one doctor in. That is why we are working on the collaborative care model. By the way, that was issued in their mandate letters back in the Graham land and it was something that that government never got done.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): But we are doing it now, Mr. Speaker. We are working with our allied professionals, our pharmacists, and our optometrists, and we are giving everyone a full scope of practice.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I think that this is the time for the Premier to stand up—stand up—because the unwritten mandate letter that the Minister of Health never received is closing a whole bunch of services. That is why I think that the Premier verbally told her: Close all these services. Affect the ER in Sackville. Affect the ER at the Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont UHC. Close the Upper River Valley Hospital labour and birth unit. Close pediatrics in Miramichi. Close Campbellton's birth unit. Close Campbellton's ophthalmology unit. Affect the Stella-Maris ER. The Moncton Hospital has a huge challenge in its ER.

(Interjections.)

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Today, there is the issue of pediatrics services offered at the Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont University Hospital Centre.

[*Original*]

Mr. Premier, you are failing. You are failing to get the health system back on its feet. When are you going to resign?

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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, the Liberal opposition is well accustomed to quitting when the going gets tough. We do have a challenge in our health system, but we are not any different from any other province in the country. You have read recent reports from British Columbia. Everywhere across this country, there are challenges. But do you know what we have for opportunities? We have the opportunity for both health networks to be as good as they can possibly be in every sector that they possibly can. Does that mean that we can do everything everywhere? No, it does not. But it means that we can have the same innovation that we had during COVID-19, where we worked together and delivered the right service when it was needed. Yes, the health care system in New Brunswick will change. We will not have a choice. In order for it to get better, we will have to innovate and be stronger.

When the minister refers to a mandate letter from which nothing was completed and which was just a bunch of empty words, that is the history of the Liberal Party. There are challenges that we will face head-on, as we have since the beginning of our mandate. We will find a change for improvement. It will happen, Mr. Speaker, and it is happening.

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

