

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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COST OF LIVING

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To say that the throne speech was bland and lacked imagination is an understatement. But what it also lacked was compassion—compassion for New Brunswickers who have suffered these past few years under this government. The Premier pats himself on the back for having a record surplus that was built on the backs of hurting New Brunswickers and on economic factors that were out of his control.

In this session, what can we expect as real relief to help people? I have asked it before, and I will ask it again: What can we expect as real relief to help people who have been suffering because of runaway inflation and the increased cost of living?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for bringing up topics that we love to talk about. We love to talk about the throne speech, we love to talk about the things we have done, and we love to talk about the things we are going to do.

What have we done? We have reduced taxes, over and over again—personal income tax, property tax, and more. And do you know what we will do, Mr. Speaker? We will reduce more taxes. We will reduce more—more property taxes and more personal income taxes. What we are going to do is make lives better for New Brunswickers. We will do more things like raising social assistance rates. We will do more things like increasing the basic personal amount or lowering personal income tax. We will do more things like raising the minimum wage, which is going up and is, once again, tied to CPI. We will be close to, if not over, \$15 per hour come April 1, 2023.

That is what this government does, that is what this government has done, and that is what this government will continue to do.

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

GOVERNMENT FINANCES

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, raising social assistance rates—I did not hear that in the speech yesterday. They are raising the minimum wage. They raised the minimum wage by \$2 this year, yes, but that was after 5¢ last year—a nickel. That was 5¢, under this government. It has been—what?—four years now, and they had to play catch-up just to reach the status quo with the other Maritime Provinces.



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Now they are offering tax cuts. They are throwing out crumbs, Mr. Speaker, but those crumbs are not going to help New Brunswickers who are trying to find affordable housing, who are homeless, or who are going to emergency rooms and waiting for hours because there are not enough nurses. Those crumbs will not help a senior languishing in a hospital because there are not enough beds in nursing homes. Will the Premier be following his Nova Scotia counterpart, who is investing in his province, and stop padding his surplus on the backs of New Brunswickers?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I find it odd that the opposition is obviously not listening. Not only have we increased money for our most vulnerable in our budget... Let's talk about a couple of things that are very tangible to see right now. The minimum wage has been increased, and the minimum wage is going to be increased again. We have SA rates. SA rates are now going to be tied to the cost of living. It is not only that. Income assistance recipients will now be able to earn \$500 per month that will not be clawed back from their earnings. Those who receive CPP along with SA are now going to be able to have \$200 exempted from being taken away from them every single month. We are listening, and we are producing results for those in our province.

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

[*Translation*]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I am talking about the throne speech that we heard yesterday that contained nothing new. In fact, the government recycled the announcements it made over the last year. I know it failed to deliver a throne speech to us last year because the ministers were afraid to come to the House with the strike going on.

However, all the announcements were recycled; there is nothing new. Mr. Speaker, the throne speech lacks creativity when it comes to the pressure exerted on health care workers. The speech does not acknowledge that they are underpaid. What we are looking for is a creative financial assistance program that will provide competitive wages to our health care workers and incentives that will help us attract and retain the new workers we desperately need. There was nothing new; the throne speech was quiet in that regard. Why was there no recruitment and retention plan, Mr. Speaker?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, when a plan is working, you stick to it. I know that is a foreign concept.

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When you look at the situation of the province, you see that we followed our top priorities from the very beginning, such as energizing the private sector and having the highest level of private sector investment in a long time. We have seen the recognition of our province not only provincially and in the Atlantic Region but also nationally and internationally because New Brunswick is on the move. We have had the greatest population increase since confederation, Mr. Speaker—since confederation.

I know that members opposite would always say: Invent something new. Invent something new. Mr. Speaker, when you are on the trail of success, you do not give up on it. You build on it. That is what every one of the team members here are doing. We are building on that trail of success. Dependable public health care... We are implementing a public health care plan that will deliver results for the citizens of this province. We are recognizing the needs in education that will deliver the needs of students in this province. We are dealing with environmental issues...

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

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I am asking questions about health care services and the recruitment and retention of human resources in the health care sector. It is the most serious challenge that our province is facing today. There is nothing about this in the throne speech, which says nothing about this topic.

The Premier is now talking about other things. All the factors he is talking about are beyond the government's control. He is talking about fiscal management. All of that is beyond his control. The government underestimated its fiscal position by a billion dollars last year, which is irresponsible, Mr. Speaker.

We are asking for investments in the health care sector and a creative recruitment and retention plan. I know the Premier says money will not solve everything; however, yesterday, we heard on the radio that all the Premiers are asking for more money from Ottawa. Can the Premier acknowledge that, if the government does not invest in the health care system and our professionals, the crisis in the sector will worsen?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am going to help the member opposite focus a little bit because he seems to be trying to just throw as much as he can against the wall and hope that something will stick. Let's talk specifically about health care and trying to relieve some of the pressures that have been felt right across the system. It is not unique to New Brunswick. Let's see some of the new and innovative things that we have done.

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Maybe the member across the way was working on his reply to the speech from the throne and missed the announcement on Monday in Saint John with my colleague from Portland-Simonds. We have done something innovative. We have opened 100 seats—100 new seats—for RNs with Beal University. That is real. That is a focused attack, Mr. Speaker, and that is going to get results. Those 100 seats will result in RNs being able to work here in New Brunswick and alleviate some of the stresses that we are seeing right now.

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

HEALTH AUTHORITIES

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I am going to move on. I have some questions to ask the Premier with respect to the letter of resignation that we saw from the former Minister of Education. He said that major decisions are being made on that side without consultation with Cabinet, Mr. Speaker, and that there is a centralization of power within the Premier's Office. Can the Premier advise under what authority he made the personal decision to fire the health authority boards and the CEO of Horizon Health?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, as we know, during COVID-19, we had a situation in which we had the health authorities work very closely together to get the best results for our province. We saw that. We have records through the pandemic that are second to none, and that was because our authorities, both Vitalité and Horizon, worked closely together. Public Health worked closely together to make decisions that worked. So, Mr. Speaker, the same thing applies now.

Everyone agrees that we have a situation in health care. We have a crisis, as many refer to, in health care. It is not unique to New Brunswick, but it is the situation across our country. The time, the sense of urgency, is now. The sense of urgency requires acute attention to issues that are affecting our health care. I am here to say that there is a lot of great work being done throughout this province to recognize the capabilities of every location. An example of that might be what has recently been done on ophthalmology in Bathurst and the changes there to expedite services. Mr. Speaker, we can do that sort of thing all over the province with a focused attention on results.

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, where did the Premier get the authority to make those decisions? He is centralizing power. The former minister said that it has been ongoing for the past 14 months. It has become a dictatorship. That is what he called it or compared it to. The former minister said that the same thing is happening with the decision to abolish French immersion by 2023, a decision that was not shared with or approved by Cabinet. He said that the Premier is making

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decisions based on emotions, and he accused the Premier of micromanaging. Could the Premier explain why he is acting without the authority of his Cabinet on major policy decisions?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that if you look at the requirements... Working with the Minister of Health, we went through what we could do to put a concentrated focus on health care and health care results.

Mr. Speaker, I do not think that it is helpful to go through a series of what are obviously differences of opinion with my former colleague. I do not think that is going to generate any real, productive behaviour here in the House. I know that it may be a fortuitous opportunity for the opposition to carry on this way, but I do not intend to do that. I do not intend to get into a public altercation. I think that it is an unfortunate situation, that that is where it landed.

We are going to focus on the results that we are seeing in our province. We are going to focus on health care. We are going focus on education. We are going to focus on energy security, Mr. Speaker. We are going to focus on what we see as success in our province—unprecedented success. Mr. Speaker, I for one, with my colleagues here, am very proud to be part of a government that actually has results to talk about, not just talk about something.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, these are serious concerns. It is not just a difference of opinion. The Premier is talking about all of his priorities that he is focused on, but how can we have confidence in his ability to make informed decisions if he is not consulting with his Cabinet? That is the type of democracy that we have in this country, to be a government by Cabinet, and he is not going to his Cabinet for major decisions. He is showing contempt when data is being presented to him that he does not agree with. He tells a senior civil servant, “Data my ass”, Mr. Speaker. What kind of message is he sending? He should apologize for that. Does the Premier recognize the dangers of this disregard for data and expert advice when making decisions that could impact the educational development of our province’s children?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, once again I am going to help the member opposite focus. I know that I was there as interim Leader of the Opposition once, and I do want to say thank you to Roger Melanson, who has resigned and is no longer here. He did a great job as interim Leader of the Opposition and was very focused and very passionate about his items.

(Interjections.)

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

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Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): To the point that the member made a moment ago about the authority, the authority for some of the actions that were taken is right in the *RHA Act*. The *Regional Health Authorities Act* is very precise and concise on how and when decisions have to be made, and they can be made by the minister. Again, these are some of the things that had to happen.

To talk about some of the precise actions, the new innovations, Health Link was an announcement that may have been missed by some of the members across the way. That was a good announcement. Health Link is making sure that patients are connected with primary caregivers so that they can get the...

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

[*Translation*]

FRENCH IMMERSION

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I simply want the Premier to rise and apologize to the civil service for using such language toward someone who brought data to a meeting. This data was requested by the Premier to help him make a decision on French immersion. I want him to rise immediately and apologize to the civil service, given that it is another story and that staff morale continues to plummet because of the actions of this government and Premier. Will you rise, Mr. Premier? Thank you.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that anyone who has known me over my time here is very, very aware of my interest in relevant data. That has been, I guess, a hallmark for some time. Data can drive the right behaviour at the end of the day, and we make decisions based on that. I think that it is unfortunate that this has become a talking point for some. I think that is extremely unfortunate. I think that it is relevant to look at the data, and I would encourage the member opposite to actually look at the data, because that is what we have been talking about continually: Look at the results that are being achieved. We do not have to get sidetracked by any particular comment. Look at the data.

If the Leader of the Opposition would like to spend some time analyzing the report that was put together and the data that reflects a system that needs correction, I would welcome that, because that is what we all need to know. We all need to know the facts. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, according to the data, experts or any person that has done research on the French immersion program, it is the best program to learn French as a second language in our country, especially in New Brunswick, which is the only officially bilingual province in Canada.

It is known that the Premier is obsessed with the idea of abolishing the French immersion program, and his positions have been well rooted for a long time. His positions were known in 1985, but he tells us that he has moved on. That being said, he brought another person with the same opinions into Cabinet, and they have not changed.

Mr. Speaker, can the Premier tell us why he is so obsessed with the idea of abolishing the French immersion program?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the opposition member for his question. I find it a little bit odd because I will never say that the immersion program does not work well for a small number of students. However, the program does not work for the majority of students. The goal of the immersion program is to reach an advanced level of French. There is a percentage of students—28%—who have reached that level. So, I would like to know if opposition members are satisfied with a percentage of 28% in math or literacy.

French immersion is not the only way to learn how to speak in French, and we will be transitioning to another program.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister tells us that it is not the only way to learn French, but why eliminate this program for the students who succeed with it? It is a known fact that we want more students to have access to this program, but we want to change it so that all students have access to the same program. French might be taught half an hour per day. More resources are needed to make it a good program.

The same resources will be needed, but this government does not want to spend money. We heard it earlier: The government has had record surpluses, Mr. Speaker. I am asking the minister if he is ready to put the necessary resources in place to make French immersion a successful program for everyone.

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I very much appreciate the question from the opposition. I cannot change the geography of New Brunswick; it is impossible. Teachers work hard to provide good instruction and prepare students the right way, but certain situations exist where students cannot practice French outside of school. The reality is not

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always the same as in Moncton. Back home, in Woodstock, there are not a lot of people who speak French, so it is difficult.

What we want to do is create a program that is going to... We are the only officially bilingual Canadian province. We want more students to be able to speak French with their friends who have a different mother tongue. I cannot understand how that could be a terrible idea.

[Original]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I will just finish by saying this: This government should press pause. It just reinstated this in 2017. We did when we were in government. It has been six years. The government said that it would follow the 10-year education plan, and then it said that it would not. Just press pause, let the 10 years play out, and then evaluate the progress.

ELECTIONS

Mr. Speaker, I am going to move on. I want to ask this government if it is prepared to set an election. The member opposite talked about Roger Melanson, who retired from politics after a 12-year career. We are going to be presenting legislation to fix this loophole so that we can set by-elections down the road. We know that the Miramichi area was without representation for almost a year. The intent of the legislation is to have the date fixed within six months of the vacancy. I do not care who manipulated the legislation in the past. Let's respect the intention...

(Interjections.)

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Let's respect the intention of the law and set a by-election in six months.

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I understand what the Leader of the Opposition is stating, and I understand what the leader has stated in terms of doing this as quickly as possible. I have said that, yes, I would have an interest in doing that. However, we need to get stability in the system. Mr. Melanson resigned last week, but we had a few others a few weeks before that. I mean, when is this going to stop? I think that we had better get stability in the system. Then we would look at having these by-elections within a reasonable time. I agree that there does not need to be a six-month wait just because that is what the legislation says. But let's get some stability. Let's see who resigns next, and then we will go from there.

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[Translation]

FRENCH IMMERSION

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

Mr. Speaker, let's continue with the early French immersion program, which, as we have learned, has seen significant results, with provincial assessments indicating that over 90% of students who completed the program are achieving at least an intermediate level of French—in other words, a conversational level of French. In light of this proven success, will the minister please tell us what data on the success of the program he does not find credible enough so is scrapping the program?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member on the other side for the question. I do not believe that I am scrapping anything. I do not think that I have said anywhere that I am abolishing anything. We are transitioning to a new framework. We are working with prototypes. We are continuing to do consultation so that we get it right.

Our goal is to create a student population that has a conversational level of French—intermediate. The goal for French immersion is not intermediate. It is advanced and advanced plus, at a minimum. We have only about 28% of our students that have achieved that level, so we want to create an opportunity for all our students to achieve intermediate, and then we will have specialized opportunities. If students at the high school level want a more enriching experience in French, then we are going to provide that.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, minister.

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, even the commissioners, in the *Report on second-language learning*, dispelled the myth that French immersion does not work. Like many others, they cautioned against moving too quickly with changes. Why does the minister refuse to follow the advice of the report commissioners, the New Brunswick languages commissioner, the language commissioner of Canada, the New Brunswick Teachers' Association, and other subject matter experts to obtain solid data and to carefully implement program changes in a reasonable timeline?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That certainly was a loaded question. There is a lot of stuff to unpack in that.

I did not say that the immersion program does not work. It works very well for a very small group of students.

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In mentioning the New Brunswick Teachers' Association, one thing that confuses me is that for over two decades, the New Brunswick Teachers' Association has been talking about classroom composition issues, which are partly created by the immersion program and the two-tiered system that we have in our province. What that has resulted in is that the preponderance of PLPs and behaviours end up in the prime system. So part of what we are going to achieve is not only to have a bilingual student population but also to create classrooms where teachers can teach and students can learn. We are going to spread out what the issues are, and then we are going to work with teachers and move forward in this fashion.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, the New Brunswick Teachers' Association announced its withdrawal from consultations on French as a second language because of the government's unreasonable timeline to implement changes and said that it would destabilize the system. The school system is already facing a serious lack of resources to help integrate special needs students and children of newcomers and offer academic upgrading, among other things. When will the minister bring forward a credible human resource plan to support the existing school system?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is another multifaceted question.

I want to start by talking about the New Brunswick Teachers' Association. I repeat that, for two decades, it focused on classroom composition issues and the inequality in the system. I met with the association last week, and I wonder if it speaks for all students and all teachers or if it is only focused on the group of teachers it represents. I am ready to work with the New Brunswick Teachers' Association, of which I was a member for 35 years.

It is necessary both to have dedicated resources for student inclusion...

[*Original*]

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

FEDERAL FUNDING

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, last summer, federal Minister LeBlanc had to make a strong request for the Premier to finally submit projects for the Canada Community-Building Fund. There was a severe backlog of requests, and many had been waiting for answers—some since the first year that the program came out. There was still over \$300 million of the program that had not been committed at the time. If the Premier failed to submit projects prior to the required deadline, the province would risk

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losing this opportunity and losing the balance of the program. Can the Premier give an update on whether projects have been approved and whether we will meet the federally imposed deadline?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the question. You know, the fact of the matter is that we were on-target. We had over 50% of our projects identified in 50% of the time allotted to do so. The federal government moved that timeline forward, and we have identified projects in order to fulfill that requirement, basically allowing us to do projects and to meet federal contributions at the same time.

But, Mr. Speaker, what I would like to add to all of that is that we are in a position to do so. Because of the economic situation of the province, we are in a position to actually look at more projects and look at how we can define what is needed, still focusing on what we need to do in this province and on what the right projects are to do. We could maybe look at asset management and at places where we have not been able to do projects before and where we can now because the timelines are important on the terms of their conditions. Mr. Speaker, the answer to the question is, yes, we are in good shape in relation to the schedule. Thank you.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): That is an interesting answer. Yes, it was at 50%. But we were also well behind—actually last—every other province, and the pressure was coming from the other provinces to get New Brunswick moving.

In the first year of the program, RDC confirmed that over \$800 million in projects had been submitted. There were 164 projects submitted by municipalities and by volunteer and community groups. They put their time and effort into trying to improve their corner of the province through this program. Furthermore, the department confirmed that well over 90% of those projects qualified for and fell within the scope of the program. I would imagine that those numbers have only grown exponentially since the first year of the program. If that is the case, why would the Premier ask last summer for the scope of the program to be widened so that he could find more projects to allocate the remaining funds? The demand was obviously already there. Why would he do that?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, as the member opposite likely knows, we had a strategy around sewage systems, water systems, and utility systems. We wanted to upgrade them across the province. There were areas that were key to some locations over others, because they were well behind the eight ball there. We were focusing on trying to raise the bar, which is no different from what is happening with municipal reform. The idea of municipal reform is to have equal representation across the different regions and to allow the raising of the bar in every region throughout our province, whether the region is connected to a municipality or whether it is not. The idea is that we have better representation, that we have better



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amenities, and that we can do a better job servicing every person in every corner of our province. That is the goal.

Mr. Speaker, then you ask: Why would you not widen it? Well, do you know what? We do not spend money before we have it. That is not even a concept that the members opposite can relate to. With respect to the increase in what we have seen in the economic activity in our province, we do not know how long that is going to last. We have heard people talking about a recession. We will balance our path forward.

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

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is a bit of a different answer from previous times. We often hear the Premier explain many projects away by saying, some projects are wants, and some projects are needs. We have been repeatedly told by this government that it can afford to support only what it would qualify as needs, yet all these community groups and municipalities are submitting projects under specific criteria. The Premier has never provided his definition of what is a “want” and what is a “need”. That is not a whole lot of clarity for these groups to work with. Can the Premier provide assurances that the projects that he approves under this program will measure up to his standard of wants and needs and not to what he wants versus what New Brunswick needs?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that you are all aware of the position that I held a couple of weeks ago. One of the things that we in New Brunswick struggle with is aging infrastructure. We have 5 500 bridges, and many of those bridges are getting past their useful life. Those are needs. Our transportation network is a need. We, as a government, have to balance our infrastructure, our bridges, and our roads against community projects. That is what we do as a team. We look at what is needed on the public side of things, we look at what is needed in individual communities, and we look at what we need to deliver to all New Brunswick so that we can have the commerce that we need here in New Brunswick to support our infrastructure going forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, we are seeing local governments and regional service commissions refusing to pass their budgets because the minister has put them in the unattainable position of having to significantly raise taxes or drastically cut services. One third of municipalities are facing potential deficits. My question to the minister is this: How much additional funding has the province set aside to help these municipalities?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that the extra 15 minutes are not being spent well.

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The member for Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé knows that there is not one municipality in New Brunswick that will be in a deficit position. They are not allowed. Under legislation, you cannot have a deficit.

Again, to his question, we are working on Local Governance Reform. People have been advocating for 25 years. We are working with the RSCs. We are working with municipalities. Transition teams are making tough decisions. Yes, it is budget time. It is normal. It is the tit for tat. That is normal. But we are going to move forward. We have a special election on November 28. If people want to put their names in as candidates, it is on October 28 at 2 p.m. They should make sure that they are there and that they have a say in their community. Representing a community, as many of the MLAs here have done, is a great honour. Mr. Speaker, we are going to work in partnership with the municipalities and RSCs. I can assure you of that. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L) Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am having a hard time understanding the minister's answer. We have talked about cuts and increased taxation.

Mr. Speaker, according to the former commissioner for local governance reform, this government wrongly forced local communities to pay for the cost of providing additional services without giving them the needed tax revenue. My question is again for the minister. When can we expect a full review and restructuring of the tax system to make sure local governments are adequately funded?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The only person fearmongering in New Brunswick is the member for Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé. When I meet with the associations, people are positive. The only people who talk about cuts are opposition members, Mr. Speaker. During question period this morning, we have heard how minimalist it is; no idea comes from the gallery or the opposition.

Mr. Speaker, we are going to work with the people and municipalities of New Brunswick to ensure that... With regard to the financial pillar, we said that we were going to speed up the process.

Mr. Speaker, I am looking forward to seeing the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board table his budget. On this side of the House, we work together as a team. The only people who speak about speculations and hypotheses and who are fearmongering are sitting on the other side of the House.

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L) Mr. Speaker, the minister should know that, in the House, people in the gallery do not answer questions.



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Mr. Speaker, this local government reform will penalize small municipalities that lack fiscal capacity. People living in these communities will be at a disadvantage. Why does the minister refuse to acknowledge that these reforms are going against Equal Opportunity equality principles?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): On the contrary, Mr. Speaker, it is written in the white paper that the reform maintains the equalization system. The member for Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé knows very well what is happening because he was at the meeting of the Association francophone des municipalités du Nouveau-Brunswick. He listened to the mayors. There is no inequality. We are maintaining the equalization system.

Mr. Speaker, the local governance reform contains four pillars: structure, regional collaboration, land use planning, and financial sector restructuring. We are moving forward. We have been waiting for this reform for 25 years. If we were Liberals, we would pause everything. There would have been moratoriums and other research.

Mr. Speaker, we are a government of action. We saw in the throne speech yesterday that we want to move forward. We want municipalities, communities, and New Brunswickers to move forward. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

RENTS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, I was surprised that yesterday's throne speech did not include the announcement of an extension of the government's 2022 rent cap. I am getting panicked calls and emails from constituents who have been receiving notices from their landlords of staggering rent increases for 2023. This is madness.

[*Translation*]

This is madness.

[*Original*]

The cost of everything is going up. Housing is a basic human right, but without a rent cap, there will be another wave of New Brunswickers who are forced out of their homes because of unaffordable rent increases. The new Minister responsible for Housing could give some peace of mind to renters and some certainty to landlords today. Will the Minister responsible for Housing extend the rent cap through 2023?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have a housing spectrum here in New Brunswick, and historically, each government has looked at one small piece of that



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housing spectrum. This government has made the recognition that the housing spectrum spans from homelessness through to affordable housing, workforce housing, first homes, and seniors' housing, but never have we put a lens on the entire spectrum. Finally, this government has made the commitment to appoint a minister of housing who is responsible for that full spectrum. By having a vision of that full spectrum, we can see where the gaps are and make changes where we need to, to fill those gaps. You were speaking about one tiny piece of the housing spectrum, and we are going to have solutions for the entire housing spectrum.

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

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Well, Mr. Speaker, I did not get an answer to a straightforward question that affects a lot of renters in this province. We know that we have an affordable housing crisis. We know that if people lose their apartments, whether through unacceptable rent increases or renovations, there is nowhere to go except to live in their cars or their trucks. That is what we are hearing from constituents. Without a rent cap, there is a certainty of being priced out of the house and home market. It is terrifying for renters of modest means because there will be nowhere to go.

The Minister responsible for Housing does not seem to understand the problem. The rent cap is set to expire on New Year's Eve of this year. Renters need to know today whether it will be reinstated for 2023. Will the new Minister responsible for Housing extend the rent cap into the next year? Yes or no?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To say that I do not understand the spectrum of housing is inaccurate, and I actually do not appreciate that whatsoever. We are working on the entire spectrum of housing. We put a rent cap in place—a one-year rent cap. And we were very clear that it was a one-year rent cap.

We have put a number of other different things in place, but we have not even had the opportunity to see whether they have had the intended benefits that we need. We have a Residential Tenancies Tribunal that will help any renter who is experiencing problems. We have put changes into what landlords are allowed to do to renters. Anyone who is going to be experiencing homelessness needs to immediately contact the Residential Tenancies Tribunal. We will help any people who will be experiencing homelessness to find a solution to their problems. We are here to help, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

FRENCH IMMERSION

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, the Premier has had a misguided desire to eliminate French immersion for decades now. Instead of respecting both official languages and respecting a program that supports bilingualism, the Premier is hastily



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getting rid of the proven French immersion program, which ensures that over 90% of students achieve at least an intermediate level of French.

In the 2018 report, the Auditor General found that the changes to French immersion announced in 2016 were to fulfill a political platform promise and that one year was not adequate implementation time for those changes. Now, the Minister of Education is calling for even more radical changes to be rolled out in less than a year. Call it whatever you want—you are cutting immersion.

Why is the Minister of Education slamming the door on French immersion learning, and why is he denying French immersion learning to all future Anglophone students?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. I am not really slamming any door. We are looking at the prototypes that we have been implementing in the province now for several years. We started consultations and work on this four years ago. We have a common goal that all students in our province will achieve a level of conversational proficiency in French. There is still the opportunity as they get through to the high school years to enrich that experience.

There is no secret mission here. And it was not hastily put in. We are not throwing the baby out with the bathwater. It is Grade 1. I am talking only about Grade 1. We will transition through the system with the new framework, starting at Grade 1. I am not quite sure where the member opposite gets that idea.

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, with French immersion, the earlier you learn and the more frequently you learn, the better. If there is an issue with not enough French learning, how is cutting the amount of French learning that is happening going to help? My daughter, since she has already started French immersion, will get to learn French, but my son will not have access to French immersion. How is that fair? Instead of improving access and investing resources into learning French as a second language without diluting French immersion, this government is on a path to hastily cut the French immersion program and erode bilingualism in the province. This is wrong.

This is from a Premier who refuses to respond to the review of the *Official Languages Act*. Two years ago, the former Leader of the People's Alliance said that he had been in talks with the government for over a year on eliminating French immersion and was thrilled that French immersion would soon be relaxed. Six months ago, he joined the PC caucus. You must stop this plan. But who is really calling the shots? It is obviously not the Minister of Education. Is it the Premier or the Minister of Public Safety?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. I am not sure whether she is referring to my former portfolio or what. We will be providing an

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opportunity for all our students to achieve, as a very minimum, a conversational level of proficiency in French. We are not taking anything away. We are actually improving access to the language.

At the same time, we are going to address the inequities in classroom composition in the Anglophone system. French immersion creates streaming at its absolute best. You have a small group of students, and then you have a large group of students and a preponderance of PLPs, behaviours, and all the other issues. The students who have to drop out of French immersion do not know what to do at Grade 3. We are going to address that at the same time. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Members, the time for question period is over.