

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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CONTENTS

JAILS

Mr. McKee
Hon. Mr. Hogan
Mr. McKee
Hon. Mr. Hogan
Mr. McKee
Mr. McKee
Hon. Mr. Hogan

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. McKee
Hon. Mr. Hogan
Mr. McKee
Hon. Mr. Hogan

INCOME TAX

Mr. Legacy
Hon. Mr. Steeves
Mr. Legacy
Hon. Mr. Steeves
Mr. Legacy
Hon. Mr. Steeves

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

RENTS

Mr. Bourque

Hon. Ms. Green

Mr. Bourque

Hon. Ms. Green

ASSESSMENTS

Mr. Guitard

Hon. Ms. Green

INCOME TAX

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Steeves

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Higgs

ASSESSMENTS

Mr. Guitard

Hon. Ms. Green

Mr. Guitard

Hon. Ms. Green

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

JAILS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The secrecy of this government continues. We learned earlier this week that comments made in the speech from the throne around public safety were based on anecdotal evidence. The speech said that “property crime is rising as thieves steal from neighbours to get drugs”, but the government could not point to any data. It has an outdated crime dashboard that it pointed to. Now, the government members are having a hard time explaining their decision around the \$32-million jail in Fredericton. Reports are showing that the data was actually inaccurate. The information that was given about jails being at overcapacity turned out to be wrong. Was it deliberate, or was it just outdated data? Could the Minister of Public Safety tell us and explain to us the reasoning behind the \$32-million jail?

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 if the member hears from his constituents in his riding. I heard from mine when I traveled around as Minister of Public Safety. It may have been anecdotal, but they all told me how much crime had risen in their communities. And that includes Moncton. When I look at what happened, what the latest report was from... I think that Moncton has been rated lately as having the third-highest crime rate in the country. So I am a little confused by a question that questions the rising crime rate in our province—drug-driven crime.

You know, we talk about some of the issues and some of the facts. He should talk to the Mayor of Moncton, Mr. Speaker. She is the one who was telling me that her citizens do not feel safe in their city. So perhaps, instead of trying to make something out of nothing, the member opposite should ask his constituents how they feel. Thank you.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I would like to hear from the Minister of Public Safety on this. I guess that he is still trying to get up to speed and the former minister will be answering the questions.

This government is basing decisions on emotion—emotion and anecdotal evidence. That is no way to conduct public policy. Now, there are reports that an RTI was requested for information behind the justification of the new jail, but that information is being withheld. Why is that information being withheld? What does the government have to hide? Apparently, anecdotal evidence now carries more weight than real data. Mr. Speaker, why is the government afraid to share the information around the decision on the new jail? Why is the minister withholding information from the public?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again to the member opposite for the question. I do not believe that the government is hiding anything. I think that when the decision to build a

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

new jail in the Fredericton region was announced, there were lots of opportunities in the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to question it. I am quite sure that the members had some questions at that time. Perhaps they do not remember the answers to the questions that they were given.

We have some aging jails in our province, and we need to look at that infrastructure. It presents all kinds of challenges when housing our inmate population in New Brunswick. So the question about hiding something is just incorrect. And I go back to this. If you talk to your constituents as I talk to mine, if you hear from your constituents and what they are saying, then there should be no question in your mind about why we need to build a new jail. It is because, unfortunately, crime is on the rise. A lot of citizens do not report crime for a variety of reasons. We are working on...

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, it is very important that they give this information to the public because the information that they did give as the reason for building the new jail turned out to be false. The jails are not at overcapacity. What is true is that this government is a government of the past. It is a 1980s Conservative government with a tough-on-crime, law-and-order agenda that we have seen before and that does not work.

The government says that crimes that require incarceration are increasing. If they are, maybe it is because of this government's inaction on the root causes of crime. What is government doing for poverty, drug dependence, mental health, and the lack of supports in those areas? Maybe those would be well-spent dollars in helping to keep crime down in New Brunswick. Government could establish mental health courts, which I have been requesting now for four years, throughout the province.

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): It is on the minister's desk. Why is the minister not establishing this right now? Can the government members tell us what they are focusing on in order to address the root causes of crime, instead of throwing money at law enforcement?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is quite a loaded question. I am not sure how many departments that was addressed to, but I am going to address it.

On this side of the floor, we do believe in law and order. Unlike the opposition's federal counterparts, we do not believe that we should take guns away from the law-abiding

Oral Questions

citizens in our country who are not committing any crimes with them. Neither do we think that we should use the limited resources of the RCMP, which has a 20% to 30% resources issue, to collect these weapons. The last thing I heard was that the federal government was planning on using the federal organized crime unit to collect these weapons. So what is it that it wants?

[Translation]

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, we are talking here about several departments. In fact, several departments are involved in public safety. That is why, as a response to mental health problems, especially among young people, Integrated Service Delivery was established in schools. It is a multidisciplinary approach intended to bring every department responsible for providing services to young people together. However, we have learned that, unfortunately, as of January 1, this unit will no longer be providing services in the Francophone education system. Can the minister tell us whether a decision was made to eliminate the Integrated Service Delivery program in Francophone schools?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): I thank the member opposite for his question; it is a good one. This is the first I have heard of this. I will take the question under advisement, and I will ask the department for information on the situation. I know this program works well. It is important in our province and for our young people. We must maintain this program that certainly has a history of success in the Anglophone sector.

I do not know how that could happen in the Francophone sector. So, I will look into it and come back to you with an answer. If what the member says is true, I will ask why the decision was made and what we can do to change and improve services that are really important for our young people and their mental health. We remain concerned about the mental health, safety, and well-being of our youth. Thank you.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Indeed, Mr. Speaker, these services played a key role in reducing the number of young people who might otherwise be placed in a detention facility. As we know, the government likes spending money on detention facilities. However, these young people are also in homes. That way, they are given an opportunity to get better and make a living.

Mr. Speaker, the Child and Youth Advocate recently published a report that recommends improving the Integrated Service Delivery program. So, it is very worrying to hear this news. We have learned from certain sources that this program will no longer be offered in Francophone schools. I hope the minister will get back to us with more information on this.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

I also want to know this: Since the publication of the report from the Child and Youth Advocate, has the minister met with him to discuss his report and figure out how to improve the program throughout the province?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I also thank the Leader of the Official Opposition for his question. I completely agree that what the Child and Youth Advocate said has to be looked at. I know one thing: When there are problems in the classroom and decisions are made to help young people, a plan must accompany these measures.

Suspending students is not a plan. It is a short period during which a student is removed from the classroom. A plan must be developed to tackle these problems. As for students with special needs, a plan to help them is always required. They must be taught, but maintaining good behaviour in the classroom is also necessary. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

INCOME TAX

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the government introduced a new bill to reduce personal income tax rates for New Brunswickers. As is the habit in this House, we usually mention that we cannot wait to see the details and to get more into this, because the devil is in the details. We cannot wait to see the details and to discuss this further. But then the government released the actual numbers—the details of what it is proposing in this bill—and I was shocked. I was shocked to see that some of the earners in the top bracket would get more than double the reduction that those in the lowest bracket will receive—a 1.84% cut for Bracket 4 versus 8.82% for Bracket 2.

Just when I thought this government could not possibly get more tone-deaf to the challenges of those who are struggling the most in our society, it pulls this one out of its hat. Can the minister possibly give us his reasoning for this specific breakdown in tax breaks and for why they are so heavily favoured for the most fortunate?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member across the way for the question. We love to talk about taxes because we have been reducing taxes. We have been taking personal income tax down for New Brunswickers. That is why we love to talk about them.

Specifically, just to give the folks who are listening a little recap, the second bracket of taxable income is going to be reduced from 14.82% to 14%. The third bracket is going to be reduced from 16.52% to 16%. The fourth tax bracket for income will be eliminated and taxed at the same rate as the third, at 16%.

It is true that the more you make, the more you will be helped by these tax cuts. But do you know what? The more you make, the more taxes you pay. I do not know, but it is just kind

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

of a coincidence that the more you make, the more taxes you pay. My dad used to say, I love to pay taxes because the more I pay in, the more I am making. That is true for everybody in New Brunswick. Ultimately, there is...

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

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): You will get more time to finish your rant.

Mr. Speaker, while yesterday we received more specific information on rates and we got them again today, there has been very vague information on the benefits. The minister says that the average New Brunswicker will receive a reduction of about \$310. Can he be more specific? What is the average reduction for Bracket 2? What is the average reduction for Bracket 3? What is the average reduction for Bracket 4? What is the average reduction for those in the highest tax bracket? Let's put that out there, and then we can have a real discussion on this bill. Can the minister provide us with that information, that data?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Mr. Speaker, I know that the members of the Liberal Party have no concept about lowering a tax. It has been hard for them to understand, as that is not their way. Their way is to tax and spend—tax and spend. They never saw a tax that they did not like. This is about lowering taxes. It is about generating a society and a culture of lower taxes. It is about attracting people from far away.

What did we hit—819 000 people—last Thursday? Statistics Canada hit 819 000 people for New Brunswick. There are 819 000 New Brunswickers—absolutely. Do you know what? People are attracted to New Brunswick because of a culture of lowering taxes, of improving services. We are bringing in the revenue because more people are here. We have not raised any taxes, yet revenue is up. Why? Because we are generating the culture that we need to draw people here to live in this province and to draw people here to increase our population. The services...

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

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): All right, let's try to get some other data then. They said that they are trying to help New Brunswickers, so let's talk about what help is. If you are in the lower tax bracket and you are trying to pay for heat, a home, gas, and groceries, you are going to get a few dollars for help. If you are in the top bracket and you are finding it annoying that it is expensive to fill your outboard motor on your boat at the cottage or that your wine cellar is a bit empty, well, there is also help for you. I think that we need to keep that imagery in mind when we talk about helping New Brunswickers. Can the minister tell us how many will get a pocket full of change to help them to survive and how many will get fat cheques to spend at the lodge over the long weekend?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Mr. Speaker, we will not apologize for helping New Brunswickers. We will not apologize for attracting an atmosphere and a society that allows people to want to move to New Brunswick. We will not apologize for paying down the debt and making it more affordable. We will not apologize for putting New Brunswick in the best financial shape that it has been in for perhaps decades—certainly not when there was a Liberal government in charge. We will not apologize for taking steps to allow Internet access to all New Brunswickers. We do not apologize for making New Brunswick a better place to live. We do not apologize for raising the minimum wage. We do not apologize for putting student loan interest rates down to zero. We do not apologize for anything that does some good for New Brunswick. Contrary to the Liberal government, we do not have to apologize for anything. We are doing it. We are doing the job. We do the work.

RENTS

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, you are right. We need to apologize to New Brunswickers on behalf of the government members because they are not going to do it.

It is no secret to New Brunswickers that there is a housing crisis in our province that not only is in our urban areas but also is trickling into the rural areas, such as in my riding. The lack of housing is staggering, and if it remains unchecked, it will continue to drive rental costs to prohibitive levels. I have been receiving lots of people who are coming into my office and saying that they have received rental increases that will start on January 1 and that they are very, very worried.

The question is for the Minister responsible for Housing, and it is about the cap on rental increases. We know that there is one finishing on December 31. A lot of people are receiving increases for January 1, which is in less than two months. People are worried. They want to know this: Will this government extend the freeze on the rent cap? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. I have been asked this question many, many, many times this week, and I have been very consistent in my answer each time that I have given it. We are analyzing the data. We need all these people who are telling you that they have concerns about significantly increased rent to please call the RTT, the Residential Tenancies Tribunal. We need the information. The tribunal can help these people to assess whether these are reasonable rent increases. If they are not reasonable rent increases, they will be denied, but people need to work with the RTT. Please, if you have residents who are having problems, get them to contact the RTT. That information is going to be used to help us determine how to move forward with the rent cap decision. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the minister for her answer. I find it reassuring that the government uses data for that at least. It would be nice if data were used within the other departments, because, based on the answers we are getting to our other questions, that is clearly not the case.

That being said, what is worrying in the minister's response is that January 1 is less than two months away. These people received rental increase notices starting in July, and they already made those calls over the past few months. The data is available. So, really, I find it is starting to sound like an excuse for inaction. There is less than two months left. These people are stressed out, Mr. Speaker. At some point, having to wait until Christmas is no treat. So, I am asking the minister to move as quickly as possible. Can she do it now? Thank you very much.

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We understand the urgency to make this decision. When I have answered this question, as it has been asked over and over again this past week, I have said that I have had two weeks on this file and I need a bit more time to get the information together and to work with my team to make a decision about what to do with the rent cap. When it was passed, it was a temporary rent cap—a one-year, temporary rent cap—which we were very, very clear about. The decision to extend it is a very important one that cannot be rushed into.

Again, as I said, if the people you are talking to received a rent increase in July, they should have already had an answer back from the Residential Tenancies Tribunal. They have 30 days to file with the tribunal. Our average time to make a decision and to get back is 30 days, so they should have already had their answers and followed up with you. Anybody who is receiving a rent increase now needs to call.

[*Translation*]

ASSESSMENTS

Mr. Guitard (Restigouche-Chaleur, L): Mr. Speaker, my questions are for the Minister of Service New Brunswick this morning. If I am not mistaken, today would be the last day to appeal our property assessments. A number of New Brunswickers were flabbergasted, just as I was, when they saw their property assessments for tax purposes.

Some regions, including the City of Saint John, were not affected or were affected to a lesser extent. Could the minister explain to me how the system works and why some cities would not be affected in the same way as others in New Brunswick?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member opposite is correct. Today is the last day to appeal your assessment. For anybody who is watching or anybody who has contacted you, today is the last day they have to do it. They can do it online, they can call, or they can go into a Service New Brunswick office, and other people can help them, if necessary. I know that my constituency office has helped some of our residents file their appeals.

A property assessment is based on the real and true value of a property. We are experiencing economic growth as we have never seen in New Brunswick, and it has not been equal across our province. Moncton and the Beauséjour region are having the greatest increases in the economy, the Fredericton area is second, and Saint John is third. That impacts the value of property within those areas. Therefore, the property assessments can be different, and the change can be different between different municipalities. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

INCOME TAX

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the Premier plans to cut \$70 million out of provincial revenue by awarding the financially comfortable and the wealthy with a reduction in income taxes. This is an unfunded gift that is most generous to those earning between \$143 000 and \$162 000 per year, and it plays Scrooge to those in the lowest tax bracket. If there is \$70 million to spend, why would the Premier not use it to open urgent care centres for people without a family doctor to divert them from the ERs and give our nurses a break, or to institute a basic livable income for the disabled, many of whom are living in deep poverty? Why is the Premier giving \$70 million to those who do not need it instead of giving it to those who do?

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—although, do you know what? Saying that we do not help the less fortunate and that we do not help those in the lower tax level is absolutely false. My friend in the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour raised the minimum wage by \$1, and then another \$1, and now it is going to be tied to the consumer price index, which will be a large amount next April 1. We absolutely have done that. We absolutely have helped out with day care costs. Yes, it is a program that we are working on with the federal government and with Education and Early Childhood Development. We absolutely have helped out with day care costs.

We are budgeting for this generation. We are budgeting for the less fortunate people. We are also budgeting for the middle class. The first two personal income tax drops we had were absolutely for seniors and lower earners. But do you know what? This one will help



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

the middle class as well. I think that we should be helping all New Brunswickers, and that is what we are absolutely trying to do with this tax cut, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, Bloomberg reports that Arthur Irving increased his wealth by \$1.18 billion this year. I had to read that three or four times. It is a \$1.18-billion increase in wealth in one year. The Premier is gifting Mr. Irving a reduction in his taxes when people are living in tents, which this government should apologize for, waiting in ERs for up to 21 hours, which this government should apologize for, and going to school hungry and without a lunch program, which this government should apologize for. The Premier is gifting Mr. Irving a reduction in his taxes when nurses have been sacrificing their mental health and their families while trying to hold a crumbling health care system together without fair compensation, which this government should apologize for.

How is the Premier advising his caucus members to explain to their constituents that they are handing out money to those who do not need it and denying it to those who do?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, what we are doing in all cases is trying to find innovative ways to have people want to come, work, and live here in New Brunswick. What we are seeing is that that is happening in unprecedented numbers. When people look here, they do not want to see the highest-taxed jurisdiction in the country. They want to see the qualities of working and living in New Brunswick. We raised the wages. When the Leader of the Green Party talks about nurses and such, we raised all of that and made it compatible with the whole Atlantic Region.

You can see across the country that we are competing for the same resources. What are the wins that bring people to New Brunswick? They are a better lifestyle, a cost of living that is second to none, and other areas, which we will continue to focus on for those who need the money in order to survive and continue living here. But Mr. Speaker, the people who are paying the bills are the middle-class sector and the people who are paying taxes and spending money so that we get revenue on HST and personal income tax. That is where we are seeing the gains because more people are working in this province than ever before, Mr. Speaker—than ever before. Thank you.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, on top of the \$70-million cut to provincial revenue, the Premier plans to axe another \$28 million from provincial property taxes paid by property developers. That is almost \$100 million chopped out of the budget—money which is badly needed to provide services, such as keeping the care sector from collapsing. Our nursing homes have only enough staff to allow residents to have a bath once a week. Once a week, Mr. Speaker—that is extraordinary. Some of the \$100 million that he wants to cut from the budget could be used to increase wages and hire more staff for our nursing homes. But, no, he is gifting the \$100 million to high-income earners and property developers. It is as though this is his last chance to reward his friend



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

circle before he retires. Mr. Speaker, can the Premier confirm that he plans to retire following this session of the Legislative Assembly?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I am proud of what we, as a government, are accomplishing here. When we talk about the resources and whether this money could be used... Mr. Speaker, we cannot get more resources. We cannot find more people. Every province in the country is searching. So our goal has to be this: How do we do things differently? How do we do things more innovatively? But, Mr. Speaker, you attract people, you attract nurses, you attract health professionals, and you attract key people to come to your province because it is fair—to work here, to live here, and to be taxed here—and it does not matter what area you are in or what demographic you are in. You look at the bigger picture.

On the energy solution, it is about \$300 million or so that we are putting into reducing the cost of energy. I would think that the Leader of the Green Party would be very focused on that and think that it is a great program. I do not necessarily hear that, but nevertheless, there is a huge amount of money being spent to reduce consumption and to make it more affordable. We will continue to look at that and at every aspect of what it takes to live, work, and thrive in this wonderful province.

ASSESSMENTS

Mr. Guitard (Restigouche-Chaleur, L): I can work with or accept the answer that the minister gave us about different prices and different evaluations between different cities. What about when it is in the same city? Can the minister explain why the Saint John Community Food Basket and St. Joseph's Hospital saw increases while offices such as the Irving Oil headquarters, J.D. Irving, Limited, the Golden Ball building, and the Red Rose Building did not see any increases? Can the minister explain? We are talking about the same city now.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I did not catch the end of his question, but I will answer the question.

With residential properties, transactions happen very regularly, so we can gain information about the real and true market value of properties in a certain area based on the sales that occur. With commercial properties and heavy industrial properties, you do not see transactions happening regularly, so our team must keep an eye on the market and understand it and look at individual properties to assess whether there are any changes that they see in the market area. But assessing them is very different from assessing the

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

residential properties. So you do not see their assessments changing each year as you do with the residential properties. Our team keeps a close eye on it and works individually on those commercial properties and heavy industrial properties. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Guitard (Restigouche-Chaleur, L): I will give the minister another chance to answer. If my memory is good, in 2020, we were informed that schools in New Brunswick were assessed at nearly 100% of the construction costs, while the newly built Irving Oil headquarters was assessed at \$30 million below cost. So, you said that there are different prices because there is not much activity, but here we are talking about the same situation—a new building. Some of those, mainly the public ones, are assessed at the full value or full construction cost, whereas the Irving headquarters was assessed at \$30 million below that. Can you explain that one, minister?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I said, we have 47 000 properties that we assess in New Brunswick. We actually have an increase of 6 000 properties this year. The majority of those properties are residential properties. There are some commercial and heavy industrial properties. I cannot speak here on a specific property, but I would be happy to talk to you more about it on the side.

I will say that the Property Assessment Services Branch of Service New Brunswick is an arm's-length branch. There can be no political messing with it. It is completely at arm's length. The way that the staff assess properties is the standard way that it is done across North America. They are doing their job as they should. They assess the properties individually, and I am very pleased with the team that is doing the assessments of the properties. Thank you.

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