

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



November 16, 2022

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[*Translation*]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is good to see you here, carrying out your role as Deputy Speaker.

Yesterday, during our discussions here, the debate on official languages took on an unhelpful tone. Any discussion on official languages should reflect unity, not division and mistrust. We are trying to achieve this unity by showing compassion toward the minority group, which is trying to protect its language and culture. Yesterday, my colleague from Caraquet challenged the Premier to make the discussion on official languages a public, open, and transparent debate. In the interest of transparency and productive dialogue, will the Premier commit to a public process instead of deliberating behind closed doors as the government is currently doing?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Obviously, the public process went through the normal channels with the commissioners' report, and they went far and wide across the province to put their report together. We are following the same process of reviewing that report as was done, certainly, for the report that was done years ago as part of the agreement in the Act. I refer to the member opposite in basically saying that we are following the same program and we are reviewing the recommendations. As I have said yesterday and many times, we will respond in these very coming weeks but, certainly, before the end of this fall session. That is the plan. So we will continue, and the response will be imminent. That is the process that we will continue to follow. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Madam Deputy Speaker, Conservative Premiers elected before the current one were more focused on unifying principles when it came to official languages. However, this Premier does not seem to share the same unifying qualities. It is known that, during the pandemic, this Premier had promised the benefits of an all-party committee.

I recall the words of this Premier, who talked about the importance of a nonpartisan approach and cooperation. Why is the Premier now rejecting the approach he was advocating for not too long ago? I think it is an approach that we deserve under these circumstances.

We see that the relationship between this government and Francophone civil society is hanging by a thread, and I think that promoting official languages could bring people

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together. In these circumstances, I think it would be important to have a public, open, and transparent debate. Is the Premier prepared to set up an all-party legislative committee to review the *Official Languages Act*?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Madam Deputy Speaker, if I am not mistaken, the Leader of the Opposition was referring to the all-party Cabinet committee which his former leader, the previous replacement, quit. So, I am not sure. There is a reliability factor there that would be a concern for us, right? When the going got tough, they quit.

We are following the process. As I said earlier, we are following it, as has been done in previous reviews. We will continue to do that, and we will report on our findings, the outcome of the recommendations, within the coming weeks. I will say it again: before the end of this session. That is the plan.

It is unfortunate that this continues to be a political issue. I mean, the Prime Minister came here and tried to raise the bar and make more of an issue that, certainly, has nothing to do with the federal government. This is a provincial situation, and we are dealing with it. I would go back and question how anyone has been impacted negatively during this government's mandate. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, in the circumstances, we deserve an all-party committee. This committee would give all members the opportunity to express their opinions on this file. We are not playing petty politics on this file. We are not talking about the Premier and what he is saying. We are here for New Brunswickers.

The issue of the review of the *Official Languages Act* is creating a lot of emotion, fear, and division among people. The review of the *Official Languages Act* should bring the two linguistic communities together, as we have seen with the Conservative Premiers Hatfield, Lord, and Alward, who made positive changes to the Act. However, the Conservative Premier before us does not share the same unifying qualities.

As I have said, civil society is telling us that the relationship is holding on by a thread. This is what I want to know: What steps is the Premier prepared to take to heal this division and reestablish unity in the province?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Madam Deputy Speaker, you know, it is interesting. I mean, all Premiers are different.

We are not afraid to say: Okay, how do we have a longer-term view? How do we have New Brunswick be the greatest province in this country? How do we work together and achieve that successfully by recognizing individual rights, by recognizing linguistic rights?

Madam Deputy Speaker, I continue to focus on the fact that, after 53 years, we need to find a path that we all feel is fair and equitable and that we can move forward on together. So having frank discussions with a group who came here yesterday... I offered to meet with all 21 committees. I did not know who they all were or whether or not they were all paid to be here. Nevertheless, I will meet with every one of them. I am open to doing that. I suggested that, and no one has reached out to me to say they would like to do it. But I am there. We want to have discussions. We want to have frank discussions. I have never walked away from a frank discussion. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[Translation]

STUDENT LOANS

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Many of our postsecondary students are struggling to adapt their finances to the rapidly increasing cost of living. Rising food, housing, and transportation prices mean they have to stretch their student loans as far as they can to make it to the end of the academic year. In some cases, it is not enough.

The elimination of interest on student loans is certainly welcome, but that is not the way to help these students deal with the sudden increase in the price of essential goods. So, I am asking the minister this: What type of assistance is he proposing to immediately help our postsecondary students?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the member opposite for the question. Actually, both the Premier and I have had some very frank and open conversations with a number of the student union leaders over the last couple of days, as a matter of fact. I want to commend the student union leaders that we have met with for their positive outlook. Quite frankly, they are actually commending us, as the member opposite just did, with respect to the elimination of interest on student loans.

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Look, we have said numerous times that one of the reasons we needed to get our fiscal house in order was so that we could start to reinvest in the priorities of New Brunswickers, Madam Deputy Speaker. That is exactly what we are doing. We are working with student union leaders to look at a number of initiatives that we can bring in, and you will start to see some of those as the months go on. But, you know, everything that we have done so far in terms of the investments in our universities is performance-based so that we actually get the results that we need and we meet some of our labour market demands.

[*Translation*]

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am happy to hear that the government consulted students, but the practical impact of the increase in the cost of living means that student loans are no longer enough to cover students' essential expenditures the academic year. In addition, the National Student Loans Service Centre takes into account parental income to determine the total amount of the loan. Despite the fact that students worked full time during the summer months...

[*Original*]

Yes, Mr. Premier, they did get a job.

[*Translation*]

Many of these students must turn to private financial institutions to cover the shortfall. The elimination of interest on the provincial portion of student loans does not apply to this type of financial assistance. Can the minister tell us the percentage of students who turn to financial institutions to supplement their budget? What does he intend to do to address this worrying situation?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. The fact of the matter is that I do not have that percentage in front of me right now. I can get that for you. I think that is easy information to find.

But I do also want to reiterate that if you look at our government's track record over the last four years, you will see that we did not walk into office and just get rid of the Tuition Access Bursary that was put in place by the former government. In fact, we extended the bursaries to make sure that those who were going to a private institution had access to them as well. We wanted to make sure that we left some up-front money in place in terms of accessibility. We have also been very critical over the years of the former government's elimination of the tuition cash back credit.

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Quite frankly, we are working with students now to talk about what other things we can do on the other end to make sure that we have in place what is needed to retain students in this province once they graduate. I also... Anyway, I am sure that the member is going to follow up, and I have something else that I am going to say in a minute.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. Well, that is the issue. You are helping students on the back end but not on the front end, and that is where they need help. We have to get these students through the front door, and we have to make sure that they actually complete their program, to benefit from the interest-free loan. Now, you are talking about what you have done since you got into office, but you are not telling the people that what you have also done is cut the Free Tuition Program and the EI Connect Program for students. They are not getting any help on the front end. We have students here in the gallery, and they are going to be affected when they actually go to postsecondary education.

What you are saying about the American universities, just to summarize, is that if you go to a New Brunswick institution, you get help only at the back end, but if you go to an American institution, you get money up front and also at the back end. It is shameful. I want to ask the minister this: What are your plans to help students get across the front door today, and how will you assure parents that the government will be right there to support their kids until graduation day?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Madam Deputy Speaker, I have made it clear that we never got rid of the Tuition Access Bursary. We just made it accessible to more people in this province.

On that side of the House, they picked winners and losers. That is what they did. There are all kinds of up-front bursary monies in place. There are all kinds of supports up front, but what we do not do... They went in and cut the tuition tax cash back credit because they said that it was not an accessibility vehicle. It was never supposed to be. It was a retention vehicle. They are mixing the two together. We have all kinds of up-front supports, but we also need to look at how we keep the students in this province each and every year.

On another note, I will tell you that one of the other things that the Premier and I discussed with a number of the students was some of their concerns over mental health supports. We have had some really positive follow-ups on that. They make sure that students are connected with the supports that are there and look at how we can enhance that going forward.

EDUCATION

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Madam Deputy Speaker, we have now been made aware that the senior civil servant that the Premier disrespected with his now infamous line, "Data my ass", was the Deputy Minister of Education and Early Childhood

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Development. He was fired last week. Why would the Premier fire a senior deputy for presenting him with important data that he did not want to hear?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am not going to go into details or comment on a personnel matter, an HR matter, and the member opposite is not really able to comment on whether the data that she refers to was relevant or not.

So, I know that we hear a lot of innuendos. We hear a lot of vagueness. I think that at one point this morning, someone mentioned that we cut programs. Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not know what that was about. But I guess it is to throw anything out there so somebody will hear it and somebody will listen. That has been the Liberal philosophy for many years, and nothing would be expected to change. Just continue to throw something out, and whether it is factual or not is irrelevant. That has been a consistent message.

In this situation, I think that all the facts will not be addressed publicly because it is an HR matter. I think that the member opposite would understand that. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[Translation]

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Madam Deputy Speaker, the Premier has now hired one of the commissioners of the report on second-language learning as Deputy Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. The commissioners ask, in their report, that decision makers remain cognizant of the tremendous strain that COVID-19 has placed on our various institutions and government departments. The New Brunswick Teachers' Association echoed this concern about not acting too quickly in making significant changes to the education system. Is the Premier ready to consider this advice given by his own new Deputy Minister?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. I am a little baffled as to why the member opposite would not be thrilled that we have one of the commissioners returning to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and working hard on a file that he knows well. I have total confidence in him.

This idea that we are somehow not promoting, preserving, and enhancing both official languages comes from the other side. We want to focus on improving the Anglophone school system. We want to talk about the effects of streaming. We want to talk about the effects of classroom composition. I would like to hear a little bit from the other side as to how they feel about classroom composition in the Anglophone school system.

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[*Translation*]

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Madam Deputy Speaker, the commissioners warn in their report that decades of constantly changing plans and strategies have created significant instability in the education system, and the Auditor General has said the same thing. The commissioners also recommend moderation in making changes and a focus on affirming and strengthening rather than rejecting and dismantling.

Why is the Premier on a mission to reduce the quality of French learning when his own new Deputy Minister is advising him to do exactly the opposite?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question. I am a little...

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Well, I am baffled by the fact that the New Brunswick Teachers' Association (NBTA) has refused to comment about the classroom composition issue and has refused to comment about the streaming issue when I know that these are things that they have been talking about for 20 years and when a former president of the NBTA is sitting on the other side. Perhaps he could inform his colleagues. This assumption that we are somehow going to reduce the level of French acquisition in our students is false. We are going to have a universal program of French acquisition for all our students so that they all can have at least a minimum level of conversational French, and we are working to improve the Anglophone school system. That is what we are about. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

DAY CARE

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Madam Deputy Speaker, as the New Brunswick population grows, and that is certainly not thanks to the Conservatives, parents are looking for day care spaces. While the government continues to wonder about the need to invest in new day care spaces, families have to choose between working or staying home. Some parents are wondering about their future in the province if the government does not create new day care places.

To deal with this population growth, what does the Premier intend to do to increase the number of day care spaces? Can parents expect results in the next few weeks? Madam Deputy Speaker, it is certainly not because there is no budget surplus in New Brunswick; so, when will the Premier make sure that we have new day care places here?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an excellent question. As a parent myself, I remember trying to find childcare for my children 30 years ago. One of our major concerns was to have quality childcare, and I do not think that has changed over the years. I was on the radio yesterday, I think, talking about childcare. We understand that we have a need in the province for spaces for infants aged 0 to 18 months.

What we have done in Early Childhood Development is to consult with the parents and with the stakeholders, and we are going to have approximately 3 400 new spaces created in the province. Along with that, if you are going to create a new space or add to your spaces, then there needs to be the obligation to provide infant spaces when that is done. The money exists through the Canada-wide agreement. There is still work to do, and we are doing the work over here. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Hearing the minister say that I ask good questions is nice, but let's remember one thing: This Conservative government dragged its feet and failed to sign the agreement with the federal government quickly. New Brunswick was the last Atlantic province to sign an agreement with the federal government. Meanwhile, Madam Deputy Speaker, parents are looking for spaces. Today, the minister says: Yes, we need more spaces. If the Conservative government did not wait so long to sign the agreement with the federal government, would we perhaps have more spaces? In the meantime, when will the minister do his job and ensure that New Brunswick families have access to day care spaces quickly?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Well, you know, I do not want to judge the quality of the question. That would be inappropriate for me to say.

We negotiated with the federal government for the best agreement possible for New Brunswick. To do that, it took time, and what do we have? We have the best agreement that we could have here in New Brunswick. It is not a question that we are hiding spaces or that we are trying to... We do not have childcare spaces that we can pull out of a tree somewhere. There is a portal where parents can check to see how many spaces are

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available in the province. As I just finished saying, we surveyed the parents and the stakeholders and we are going to have approximately 3 400 new spaces.

[*Translation*]

GOVERNMENT FINANCES

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Madam Deputy Speaker, the government recently announced another surprise budget surplus of \$774 million. Let's be honest: The government was not unaware of it; it was well aware that it had a surplus of that magnitude. Someone somewhere is hiding the data and messing with it for purely ideological and strategic reasons.

Meanwhile, we are seeing action to help the rich, but nothing to tackle the real challenges New Brunswickers are facing. The health care system is collapsing. Professionals are leaving the profession. Some people are not getting the services they need when they need them. So, my question is for the Premier. What percentage of this surplus will you invest in health, and where will you invest it? New Brunswickers have a right to know what your plan is, but maybe you do not have one.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. First of all, let's talk about our predictions or thoughts about where the economy was going to land. There is no secret book out there that gives us secret plans as to how to hide money or anything like that. You know what? We make the decisions, we make our predictions, and as of last week, we were better than five other jurisdictions in Canada, including the federal government. We were closer than the federal government with predictions on where we would land.

As for using the money, yes, we are coming up with ways to help out New Brunswickers—all New Brunswickers. All New Brunswickers—we are not just picking and choosing. We have already done the Fuel and Food Benefit, and we are looking at a similar program coming up again and at other programs to help out as we head into this winter season. We will help all New Brunswickers. That is what this party is about—helping New Brunswickers, stabilizing the economy, and growing the population at the same time.

[*Translation*]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): To get help from this government, you have to be friends with it, Madam Deputy Speaker.

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I am told about predictions. The government continues to put zeroes in some places, even if it knows there is growth there. So, do not tell me that there is accountability or that the government is doing an exceptional job. Some numbers are easily... Economists tell us that this will not disappear overnight; we know there will be growth. Despite that, the government continues to put zeroes where it could be putting numbers.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we have no idea what impact Airbnb has on housing in New Brunswick. The government has no idea. The explosive increase in rents continues unabated. Meanwhile, wages and fixed incomes are stagnant. Our accommodation capacity is limited because of housing. What is your plan for this surplus to ensure affordable housing for all New Brunswickers? The public has a right to know, but, again, I think that maybe you do not have a plan.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yes, we do have plans. We do not share them immediately. We do not share them half-baked. We fully study them. We make sure we know where the money is going. We make sure the money is going to help people. Past governments have just thrown money out—just thrown it out and let it go.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): That is right—plans on the back of a napkin.

You know what? Once again, there is \$41 million in Health for surgical backlogs. How about that? Once again, I will go back to other things we have done along the way. There is the food and fuel benefit that we will bring forward and the insulation and mini-split program that the folks from NB Power and the government of New Brunswick have brought forward—that is close to \$400 million. We have a number of programs hitting a number of different segments of society, not to mention that, once again, you bring up how students with postsecondary education are now paying zero interest on their student loans, you bring up the minimum wage, and you bring up the fact that we have lowered the tax brackets for the working poor—that we have lowered taxes for the working poor.

[*Translation*]

HOUSING

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Madam Deputy Speaker, the minister does not seem to know his Premier. The Premier spends his time sharing plans when he has no idea what he is doing. He shares ideas left and right; it makes no sense. He does not take notes. He admitted yesterday that, in Cabinet committees, there is no need to take notes. The report

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will be the notes; the government does not take notes. Madam Deputy Speaker, at least be consistent.

The working class creates the wealth and the surpluses here in New Brunswick. Instead of doing what is right, the government gives tax breaks to the wealthy. The working class continues to see skyrocketing prices for food, transportation, and energy, but receives no assistance. What is your concrete plan to help New Brunswickers who are affected by food insecurity and struggle to make ends meet? Again, New Brunswickers have a right to know, but I know you do not have a plan.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): We absolutely have a plan, Madam Deputy Speaker. We absolutely have a plan. It is the same plan that we had all along, as when we lowered the bottom two tax brackets for the working poor. How about that? It is the same plan that we have had all along, as when we raised the basic personal amount. How about that? It is the same plan as when we raised personal taxes throughout the province, brought in a minimum wage reform, brought in extra money to Health, brought in the food and fuel benefit, brought in lowered personal income taxes, and brought in the students...

We can keep saying this over and over again. They are all great programs. We have not cut programs. We have supplied the programs with more money. We have helped people by handing out more money at specific, strategic times. We have said all along that we will spend strategically. That is what we are doing. We do not rush into it. We do not throw money up in the air. We find out where it is needed and how best to deliver it. Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Madam Deputy Speaker, the people of the province, newcomers, international students, and people from other provinces who come here to work or study cannot find a place to live. Population growth and a housing shortage are a bad combination. The Conservatives are completely asleep at the wheel. What kind of message is the government sending to these people who want to come and live in New Brunswick? The Conservatives manage housing needs in the same way they manage health care: They do absolutely nothing.

Madam Deputy Speaker, when will the Premier bring forward a concrete plan so that New Brunswickers and the people who want to come to our province have a place to live and raise their family?

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[Original]

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, PC): Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question. I do want to acknowledge the fact that housing is an issue. It is an issue not just for international students. It is an issue right across the province. I think that is one of the reasons that our government recognizes the crisis that we are in. We actually now have a minister that is specifically allocated for housing, and that is actually going to make a big difference with respect to the file.

I also want to acknowledge the fact that this government, under the tutelage of population growth, is now up to 820 000 people in the province, as you know. On top of that, we now have the youngest median population since 1961 at 45.7 years of age, which is a massive improvement. For the first time in the history of this province, we now actually have over 200 people between the ages of 18 and 24 who have come to this province.

Going back to your question with respect to housing, it is a priority for us. It is going to continue being a priority, and we are working on avenues to correct those issues and build more housing units. On top of that, I will tell you that as a representative for ONB, we act as a catalyst for stakeholders...

Madam Deputy Speaker: Time, member. That concludes question period.