

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



November 18, 2022

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HEALTH

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, after pressure yesterday, the Minister of Health has finally agreed to release his acting Chief Medical Officer of Health for media availability. It is a first step, but what we are asking for is a full public briefing so that New Brunswickers can tune in firsthand and get the information directly from the medical officer. That is what we saw yesterday from Dr. Strang in Nova Scotia, who had a live stream session. In Nova Scotia, they said that respiratory illnesses among children are at historic levels and urged parents to get their children vaccinated against influenza and COVID-19. They said that acute care services for children are stretched from a perfect storm of viruses all piling up on each other.

We know that only 1% to 2% of children under 5 have had both COVID-19 doses and that only 10% of those children have had a flu shot. So where are Public Health and the Minister of Health and his department with an awareness campaign to encourage vaccination for COVID-19 and to encourage flu shots to increase those numbers?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, I do appreciate today's question from the Leader of the Opposition. You know, it is in the typical opposition style. They are never satisfied, Mr. Speaker—never satisfied. The Chief Public Health Officer has agreed to make himself available to the media to answer their questions. Why does the member opposite not let that event take place to see whether answers come forth with respect to the questions that have been asked? It is never enough for the opposition. You know, it will never be enough, no matter what you do.

As I mentioned yesterday, Public Health and the Chief Public Health Officer have been engaged in answering questions from the media. A significant number of questions come in, in written form, and a lot of research needs to occur to make sure that accurate information is given back. So I am pleased to see that the Chief Medical Officer has decided to come out and have media availability today.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, concerns from the public are mounting, and people want to tune in and get the information firsthand, but all that the minister does is offer advice: wear a mask, if you wish, wash your hands, or sneeze into your sleeves. Meanwhile, he is keeping his Chief Medical Officer of Health in the doghouse.

As you know, temperatures are rising, the holidays are around the corner, and people are going to be moving indoors, likely increasing the spread of these viruses. But as I said yesterday, the more information that New Brunswickers have, the better they can make decisions about their own health to protect themselves and their loved ones. What is the plan from this government if the situation gets worse? Is there a plan to activate New Brunswickers? What would trigger government action?

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Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, this government acts every day, 24-7, to make sure that the people are looked after. We work with the RHAs, which are responsible for the day-to-day operations of health care and the clinical availability for people who are in need here in New Brunswick.

I gave a list of the things that should be done based on information coming from Public Health. I could go over that list again and add to it, but the fact of the matter is that people need to assess their own risk. If they are not feeling comfortable or if they are ill, they can stay home. They can take their own temperature to see whether they are running a fever, and if they are, they need to take action.

Again, the opposition does not seem to be satisfied with the fact that, day in, day out, this government works with our health care providers, who stand up on a daily basis to help the people in New Brunswick. That is never good enough for the opposition. That disparity is really unfortunate, because we want to thank all our health care workers for the great job that they do.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I am going to turn my attention to ERs. We are still seeing and hearing horror stories of people with long waits in emergency rooms. There are people sleeping on the floors. Another story came out today. A mother had to travel to three different hospitals to get services from various emergency departments.

In the last several weeks, we have seen some editorials from different health care professionals. Dr. Linda LeBlanc wrote, in local media, a commentary containing some insight on how we can address this health care crisis. With closures of hospital beds, nursing home beds, and ERs due to a lack of staff, she indicated that governments need to provide family physicians with the opportunity to work in multidisciplinary teams. That was a key suggestion we brought forward in our report, *Series of Ideas to Stem the Bleeding in Healthcare*. The Nurses' Union was in for commentary, and it is saying the same thing about setting up clinics—extending privileges to nurse practitioners and setting up those clinics around them. Where is the urgency from this government to move on making more initiatives around multidisciplinary care centres in order to alleviate pressures on our ERs?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, this government is well aware of the urgency needed in health care, and that is why we are acting. We are acting on a day-to-day basis. We know that the demands are very, very high, and that is why we have tried to fill the gaps with other options such as eVisitNB, which actually saw 800 people in one day—and that is significant. We know that this is not the be-all and end-all when it comes to health care, but it is filling a gap. We have activated Patient Connect and Health Link, which is linking patients to clinical situations similar to what is being suggested here by the opposition. The patient can go in and get treatment and, with a common record, go back and have the follow-up that is needed. That has reduced the wait-list for people



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without physicians down to 54 000, and that is a significant decrease. It is still not good enough—we know that—and we are continuing to work.

[Translation]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I now turn to the Premier, who assured us, over the past week and the last few months, that he would not weaken or rescind language rights in his review of the *Official Languages Act*.

I have a hard time understanding the Premier's strategy for managing his relationship with Francophones in the province, as he has appointed the former leader of the People's Alliance of New Brunswick, who reconfirmed his position on official languages this week, to the review committee. The Premier talks about abolishing French immersion, and he is threatening to eliminate the position of Commissioner of Official Languages. Now, we find out that he is looking for ways to get around the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Official Languages Act*.

What are you trying to achieve, Mr. Premier? It certainly is not unity in the province. If it is a strategy, it is not the right one. Why take such a divisive approach that creates trouble in the province for no reason?

You should be proud to leave your mark on language rights as your predecessors did, not by rescinding them or honouring your 1989 election promise, but by enhancing them. Why are you acting this way, Mr. Premier?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, it is an interesting discussion here this morning with the Leader of the Opposition and with the fact that the people in the group on the opposite side of the House are talking about nothing with substance, because they have no real substance in any of their comments. There has been no erosion of rights. There will not be any erosion of rights, and that is clear. So, they can have all this nuance, all this innuendo, all this fearmongering, and all this continual debate, but there is not one element of substance.

Would it not be interesting, for once, Mr. Speaker, if there were any real factual information being presented that justified the comments being made today? It is unfortunate that we cannot have open discussion in our province. It is unfortunate that we want to simply silence everyone who does not agree or has a different opinion. Well, Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House, we believe that diversity is important in our province. We believe that, as

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we all speak to one another and understand each other's position, we will build a better province—and that is our goal.

[*Translation*]

TRANSPORTATION OF SCHOOLCHILDREN

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier wants facts, so here are some more. Yesterday, we learned that the Conservative government is considering a private, bilingual school bus system in New Brunswick, potentially contravening section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which guarantees the right to an education in the minority language. The Conservatives are considering the elimination of linguistic duality in school transportation, and, in addition, the documents that were obtained are dated and show that this would begin in September 2023, so at the start of the next school year. Mr. Premier, the public is extremely worried, so can you tell me clearly whether you will be establishing this new private, bilingual school bus system?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): In the messaging, Mr. Speaker, there is no evidence of any timeline that is going to say...

Yes, we have been looking at whether we can work with municipalities, as other people do in other provinces. Could we have a bilingual bus service in the cities of our province? Could we help the cities be able to fund their bus services in a more economical way, because they have more people, more kids, and more people on the bus, as other cities do?

Do you know what? Do you know what issue we are facing, Mr. Speaker? CUPE put forward its proposal for wage increases. It is an average of 25%—30% in the first year, 28% in the second year, and 22% the next year. Mr. Speaker, how can that possibly be reasonable? I am not sure what the members opposite would think about that, but we are going to be forced to look at ways to do things differently because we will not be able to afford anything else. That is why we look at all the options.

But there is no timeline. There is no substance, once again. It is just another fearmongering effort on a common practice. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Mr. Speaker, rarely have we seen a Premier who does not understand the Acts and does not understand the *Official Languages Act*. He does not even understand the concept of linguistic duality in New Brunswick, the only officially bilingual

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province. He is exploring courses of action that would be very, very, very dangerous legally. He keeps telling us that we are sowing discord; he is the one who creates it.

We want a province that is united, fair, and equitable, and this Premier is dividing us. Not a single government member in his Conservative caucus will stand up and defend us. You are all quiet on the other side. There is not one of them who will defend us and defend the *Official Languages Act*. There is not one of them who will defend linguistic duality. There is said to be other documents in circulation. What are your intentions in that regard?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): On the contrary, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

The actual review and work with the cities that were done, I do not know... It was looked at maybe a year ago or so. The cities were keen, Mr. Speaker—the cities. I am talking about the three major cities that have bus systems. There may have been even a fourth one that has a bus system. They were keen to look at how they could offset the cost of public transportation.

There is no violation of constitutional rights, and there will not be any violation of constitutional rights. We will continue to build our province with two linguistic groups that are helping to ensure the economic viability and the cultural future of our province. Everything else is only a consideration of what we can do to continue to grow and to thrive economically and to survive in every community in this province. Mr. Speaker, if the group across the aisle is afraid to look at options on how we not only maintain our constitutional obligations but also foster growth in our province, that is a real shame.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since the Premier is bringing up cities and municipalities, I am wondering if the Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform is aware of that. Did the Premier consult municipalities, or was it all done in secret once again? What is going on with that? Besides, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, who is responsible for the education of our children, must understand the concept of duality, I hope, unlike the Premier.

I would like to know, Mr. Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, what your position is on private bilingual school buses. Yesterday, it did sound like you would agree with that concept. So, I am going to give you the opportunity to rise and publicly say whether you are for or against private bilingual school buses.

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the question...

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): The reason I stood up here is because these questions were asked: Were the municipalities aware of this? Also, what were the discussions? Mr. Speaker, I had conversations directly with the Cities Association of New Brunswick, probably a year or two years ago. We discussed what the options and the benefits for the cities were, and transportation was one of them, because they were looking at greater viability and greater capacity within their systems to serve more citizens in their communities and in their cities.

Once again, it is a conversation where you do not put boxes around your thoughts. You do not put walls around your thoughts. You say: How do we manage and go forward together in the best interests of the community while—and I reiterate—at the same time ensuring that all constitutional rights and obligations are protected? There is no room to wriggle around that. It is a constitutional right that we are not only proud of but also part of, and we continue to be so.

GOVERNMENT FINANCES

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Minister of Finance. Earlier this fall, the Minister of Energy Development announced the mini-split or the heat pump program for \$30 million. Earlier this week, the Minister of Finance, in one of his answers to me, talked about a \$400-million mini-split and insulation program. That is a difference of \$370 million. Can the minister explain the difference?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for the question. I appreciate that from the member opposite. The program has always been a significant one, and we had a certain amount of money approved for it, knowing full well that it was going to be a significant program. I stood in the rotunda yesterday and spoke with the media. I confirmed very directly that we will ensure that the government of New Brunswick will be there to make sure that this program rolls out and is funded accordingly.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): We have built the capacity within the contractor network. We have supply that is available, and the government will be there to fund this to ensure that every New Brunswicker who qualifies and needs it will benefit from this program and will be served by it.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, I was asking the Minister of Finance a question about his Q2 report of earlier this week. There is a program that was announced for \$30 million for mini-splits, and in his answer, he talked about a \$400-million program. There has been no announcement of a \$400-million program. Can we get some details on what this is? I will read right from his answer: “How about \$400 million for mini-splits and insulation? How about that? How about that?” Well, Mr. Speaker, how about it? What the heck is it?

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): How about that? There you go.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. As my colleague said, we will qualify people appropriately. New Brunswickers who qualify will absolutely get it. That is the bottom line. If you qualify in New Brunswick, you are going to get it. That is what this province needs, and that is what this government does—it lives up to its promises.

There is also a need to help people with oil. There is also a need to help people with food. The food and fuel benefit, I can tell you, will be coming back and will be a very similar program to what we had this past spring. We are looking at different ways to help New Brunswickers right now.

We are looking at different ways to help New Brunswickers in the future as well. It is not just about now. If we go to a recession—please, Lord, let us not—it is expected that it could go on for a while. Even *Acadie Nouvelle* said that our surplus could be what sees us through the upcoming recession.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, \$30 million was announced, and \$370 million is apparently left for insulation. That is 38 300 000 bundles of pink fibreglass. I hope he called Home Depot to reserve it because that is a lot of fibreglass.

When I asked the question, it was about the \$167 million in cost overruns in the department. Did the minister answer me about what the cost overruns were with a program that has not even been announced yet? I am trying to find out what was the spending on new programs in the first two quarters, and he is talking about an imaginary

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program that we are going to find out about someday. That is not an answer. Let's get back to the original question: What original programs did government bring out of that \$167 million, and how much of that was for cost overruns? How much?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, this is unbelievable. I do not understand the question from the member opposite.

[Original]

It is hard to understand. Maybe I do understand that the member opposite is standing there criticizing and questioning a department, a utility, and a Finance Minister, who is coming forward and saying that the province of New Brunswick will deliver on a program that is going to provide for 35 000 homes in New Brunswick. Am I hearing the member opposite criticizing and complaining about that? We understood from the beginning that this was something that we would start with, move forward, evolve, and see through to the end to make sure that it would bring the desired results to New Brunswickers.

I spoke about this yesterday at length when I said that we have to start looking at the end result and asking whether we are going to get there. Let's work together. We know that there are costs associated with delivering, and we are willing to deliver the goods, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

TRANSPORTATION OF SCHOOLCHILDREN

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Since the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development has not had the chance to rise, I am going to ask him my question directly. My question is about the bilingual school bus file.

Clearly, section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* protects the right to duality and instruction in French. Then the Beaulac decision from the Supreme Court goes even further and states that this section must be given an open interpretation to protect educational environments around all this.

So, my question for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is this: Since you are the one responsible for protecting duality in education, do you agree with the idea of having bilingual school buses in this province?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is personally offensive to me that, this morning, it has been said



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that we are committing cultural genocide against Acadians. I cannot believe what I am hearing. I will always defend the linguistic rights that are protected by the Canadian Constitution and the *Constitution Act, 1867*—always. So, this idea of looking at what is going to happen in the cities where, I believe, everybody takes the bus is not something that is different. However, we are not going to look at the bilingual bus issue; it is a thing of the past. I can trace my family history back to 1755, to the expulsion of the Acadians. Thank you.

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): What an answer, Mr. Speaker. Yet, during a private discussion with the minister yesterday, he told me that it was a very good idea to have bilingual school buses. I was not the only member sitting next to him. So, he can say whatever he wants today, but he said during a private discussion that it was an excellent idea. In fact, he said that it was a wonderful idea.

Now, with respect to children who will have to take the minister's bilingual school buses, in a city or elsewhere, will the minister ensure that all school bus drivers will be bilingual to accommodate children? Are you telling us that you will guarantee us that all school bus drivers in Fredericton, Saint John, and Moncton will be bilingual? Are you telling us that you want to dismiss the unilingual drivers?

[Original]

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

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The discussions you are referring to were never private, obviously. I thought the member opposite was joking. I was not serious. It is not that there is no control over bus drivers in cities. What can be controlled is the transportation system of schoolchildren who take the bus in our province. So, there will be no bilingual buses. Did we not discuss this at some point? Personally, I have no intention of discussing it. As I said last night to the president of the Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick, I am prepared to protect the rights.

[Original]

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

NB POWER

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development put on quite the show for us during question period. There is no need for substance when you have mastered the art of skating on thin



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ice. A very simple question was asked about why the government of New Brunswick would loan NB Power a total of \$200 million. Is NB Power using the mystery money for infrastructure projects, or is it using the mystery money to cover operational costs? It is obviously not using it to buy \$200-million worth of heat pumps and insulation. I ask the minister once again, Why did the government of New Brunswick loan NB Power \$200 million?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, this is an exact example of what I addressed in a conversation I had on the floor of this Legislature last night when I was talking about attempts to pull at strings to create a narrative that does not tell the facts, does not reflect reality, and tries to paint a skewed picture. If the member opposite had even a cursory knowledge of the way that the Crown corporation operates within the Department of Energy and within the scope of government, he would realize that short-term, it was... He quoted the legislation yesterday that allows the back-and-forth exchange that happens on a transactional and annual basis and has taken place during periods of time.

Maybe he should ask his leader right now about how that took place when she was advising the former Premier of the province, Brian Gallant, because that is a transactional situation that happens all the time. To try to create poor political points out of that... You who are on the other side should be ashamed of yourselves.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a bit concerning that when the minister did a media scrum yesterday and a journalist asked him about the \$200 million, he answered that he did not know. In order for an Order in Council (OIC) to be signed by the Lieutenant-Governor, there are different steps to be taken: (1) your staff has to get the MEC ready, (2) the minister needs to sign the MEC before it goes to Cabinet, and (3) Cabinet needs to discuss and approve what is being brought forward. After that, it goes to the Lieutenant-Governor's Office and is signed. Are you telling me that you had no idea what this \$200 million was for? You had three occasions, minister—three occasions—to get to know why NB Power was asking for this loan. So I ask you this: Why was your answer to the journalist that you did not know what this loan was about?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, if the member opposite thinks for one second that that was a \$200-million cheque that was written for one item, then he is sorely mistaken. Now, you know, I know that the Liberals did write a \$70-million cheque for a bridge to nowhere that wound up turning into a mess, so maybe they would think that their history of writing large cheques that wound up going down a drain somewhere is commonplace. This is a situation where there is a loan that comes in and out for a variety of things. If I am standing there talking, I do not have the time to go through a list of the different components that are involved in this.

(Interjections.)



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

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): This is not one cheque that goes to say, here, I can cover the lunch bill today. Here you go. We are going to front you.

This is not a one-item thing. This is a transactional and an annual process that takes place, and I would expect that the member opposite should do more homework than that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, the shareholders of NB Power, the people of New Brunswick, deserve answers and transparency. They are supporting NB Power's \$5-billion debt and are now facing an 8.9% rate increase in their power bills. There is a \$4-billion refurbishment project for Mactaquac on the table, and to top that, NB Power management and the minister are providing multimillion-dollar preretirement packages to employees. Still, nothing has been put forward by NB Power on its vision for the future.

Did the minister know ahead of time what this loan was for, or did the Premier force the minister to sign this document, as he did with the letter for the EUB? I ask the Minister of Energy this: Why is he covering the reasons for this \$200-million loan?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, the absolute rubbish that is coming from the opposition this morning has reached an all-time low. Its members cannot get us when it comes to debating an economic policy. They cannot get us when it comes to rank-and-file questions, so then they try to go at a low level with something like this. The member opposite does or should know that the province borrows on behalf of the utility to allow the leverage for interest in a variety of factors. The province does not get down into the details of that.

Now, does the member opposite wish to look back at the series of years in which this has taken place, where it has been an out and where it has been an in? This is an annual transactional process that takes place where the province, as the shareholder, endeavours to borrow on behalf of the utility. Obviously, a lack of business knowledge, obviously, a lack of shareholder knowledge, and, obviously, a lack of governing experience are framing the questions from the member opposite, and I suggest that he does a little more research before he stands on this floor and talks about something this serious.

[*Translation*]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am going to come back with a question for the Premier. Based on his answers, he does not seem to understand language rights, or he actually knows what he is doing.

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I am going to ask him this: Is he very familiar with the meaning of subsection 16.1(1) of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which states that the English linguistic community and the French linguistic community in New Brunswick have equality of status and equal rights and privileges, including the right to distinct educational institutions and such distinct cultural institutions as are necessary for the preservation and promotion of those communities? Is he also familiar with the meaning of subsection 23(1) regarding the language of instruction, which states that citizens of Canada have the right to have their children receive instruction in their language?

What is the Premier's interpretation of language rights and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, Mr. Speaker, since he does not seem to understand them based on his answers? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, I think that I certainly do understand. I not only understand, but I am also obligated to ensure that we achieve it, foster it, and support it. We have said here that there is no threat to constitutional rights. There is no threat, and there is no substance to this ongoing dialogue that is saying that something has changed. Mr. Speaker, it has not—nothing has changed. We are waiting for the report, which they say will be out in the next few weeks. The opposition will know at that point in time: Okay, we are moving forward with items on the commissioners' recommendation.

But there is no substance whatsoever to any erosion of rights or any erosion of constitutional obligations. We will continue, as will any government that continues to be in power in this province, to foster support, and we will be obligated to the constitutional rights that we are so honoured to be part of. We in this province are unique. We are better together. Let's ensure that we stay that way.

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