

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



December 8, 2022

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HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The number of COVID-19 deaths in the province is increasing each week, RSV infections are spreading, and serious cases of the flu are on the rise. Actually, across Canada, flu deaths are on the rise at historical levels. We have said it before, and I will say it again: Members of the public need the best up-to-date information available to make decisions to protect themselves and their families.

It is fair to say that updates from Public Health are not what they once were, and that would be an understatement. So why is it that we have to continuously beg this government and the Minister of Health to allow Public Health to come out and give public updates? Actually, when they do allow that, it is a private media briefing—that is it, Mr. Speaker. It is not responsible government. We are in the home stretch here. We are going to break for Christmas, when we disperse and gather with our families, so is there a plan for Public Health to provide more regular updates and advice?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for that question. I appreciate it.

We are also concerned with the number of issues floating around, with viruses, COVID-19, and sickness within the RHAs. But, again, the members across the way want to have political interference with the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, which is an organization that is independent from government. They want to politically interfere with and direct the Chief Medical Officer. Now, it was not too long ago that they were saying that this government is interfering with the Chief Medical Officer. They cannot have it both ways, Mr. Speaker. They say one thing on one end and another thing on the other, just as they have one song in the north, one song in the south, one song from the balcony, and another song from the front line.

To the member for Victoria-La Vallée, when we talk about the progress under the five pillars of our health care, we are making headway, and I will talk about that...

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister likes to say that we should not question the operations of Public Health because it is an independent body, but never before have we seen this level of political interference in the decision-making of Public Health that we have seen since this government took power. There has been a complete loss of trust in Public Health with its handling of these so-called viruses that are going through the schools—ripping through our classrooms. The government lifted restrictions in early March, and we have learned that was not based on evidence. It was based on pressure from the convoy protest.

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We are in a critical situation in which the spread of viruses and other illnesses is impacting our ability to deliver health and education services. So when will Public Health go public with a strategy to help reduce the spread of infections? And when will we see concrete recommendations, advice, and safety protocols communicated to the public?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Again, Mr. Speaker, the member opposite has to be clear. Would that not be political interference? He makes reference to political interference that has occurred. I would challenge him to name those times and dates, swear an affidavit, and make a complaint to the official commissioner's office.

Mr. Speaker, this is a serious matter. We take it seriously, and so does the Chief Medical Officer. And I will tell you this, just as an example of the information and the number of times that the Chief Medical Officer has to answer questions for the public: Between Monday and Wednesday, one media outlet had 12 separate requests, amounting to 69 different, individual questions. In the debate I had yesterday, the other leader of the Liberal Party was saying that it takes months to get answers. Mr. Speaker, there may be an outlier that requires a significant amount of research and information analysis, but on a daily basis, we answer questions and they answer questions...

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister talks about the time Public Health spends answering questions, which prevents it from holding press conferences. However, if regular press conferences were held, perhaps the public and the media would not need to ask endless questions.

Mr. Speaker, the total absence of Public Health places all of the burden on parents. We see the number of absent students increasing. We see the number of absent teachers increasing. What is this government doing to manage this crisis? Will it provide us with a plan? Have the details on absences in schools been provided to Public Health? Mr. Speaker, the time has come for this government and Public Health to have a plan to tell us how they will manage the absenteeism crisis and the spread of viruses in classrooms and in schools.

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, quite frankly, I do not understand why, after two years of pandemic, it would still be necessary to tell people how to protect themselves. On the other hand, it is the hardest part of the year in schools. Our teachers are working so hard. It is the time of year when teachers do not have many days off. There are probably illnesses spreading in schools, as usual.

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We are working to solve this problem, and, yesterday, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development had a meeting with school districts and the NBTA to discuss what we can do to address and solve this problem.

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I have a special thought for the friends and family members of the individual who died yesterday in the emergency room at the Edmundston Regional Hospital.

Mr. Speaker, over the last few years, we have asked a lot of our health professionals. This has been the case year after year, and not only because of the pandemic. In many cases, emergency room wait times exceed 20 hours. Many ambulances wait to offload patients so they can get into emergency rooms.

Mr. Speaker, let's look at what happened a few months ago at the Dr. Everett Chalmers Hospital here in Fredericton. We believed it was an isolated case and that it would be the last time it would happen. Yet, health professionals had warned us to be careful because there would certainly be other cases.

Mr. Speaker, one death is one too many. Can the Minister of Health tell us what his plan is to permanently resolve the situation?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, thank you.

[Translation]

Thank you very much to the member opposite for his question.

[Original]

Obviously, this is a sad situation. On this side of the House, we certainly want to express our condolences to the patient's family and friends. Clearly, this was a tragic event for all who were involved. I know that the member opposite mentioned a number of different situations. I know that when the medical staff try to provide care but the outcomes are not as positive as they had hoped, it is traumatic for them as well.

But, Mr. Speaker, I can assure you that yesterday, I did talk with both the CEO of Vitalité and the CEO of Horizon and the trustees of Horizon and... Again, I take this seriously.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Apparently, the members opposite have something to chirp about.

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This is a serious matter, and we take it seriously. That is why I want to again express my sincere condolences to the family members involved.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, let's look at the situation: The Edmundston Regional Hospital was forced to have two waiting rooms to accommodate people. Why? Because there are currently no walk-in clinics. There is a shortage of health professionals and physicians throughout New Brunswick. Collaborative clinics have been overdue for years. As you know, these are exactly the kinds of things that should have been done over the last four years, but the government put them aside, year after year.

The only option left for people is the emergency room, no matter where they live, whether it is in the Madawaska region or elsewhere in New Brunswick, Mr. Speaker; there is just the emergency room. When exactly will the minister give us a clear human resource plan that will ensure people are treated and are not afraid of going to the emergency room for fear of family members dying there?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I mentioned earlier, one of the things that I stressed yesterday when meeting with the CEOs and the trustees is the fact that recruitment and retention are very, very high priorities. When I look at the progress that has been made on the five pillars of the health plan that was put forward a year ago, I can look to each and every one of them—access to primary health care, access to surgery, creating a connected system, access to mental health services, and supporting seniors to age in place—and break each one down and say: Here is what we are doing in each and every category.

I will use one example, the Health Link. I was in Dalhousie the other day. There is a physical office there where people can be connected to a nurse practitioner or an RN. There are actually doctors who are reaching out and saying that they can take some of those patients who are not connected with a primary caregiver. I am also hearing about people who are discovering eVisitNB for the first time. A person who has strep throat or something can call in, get a prescription, and get the health care that they need.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister can talk about his province-wide tours and take pictures in various hospital centres, but, at the end of the day, that is not what the people of the province need. They need to be reassured that they will have access to health care, where they live, in a timely manner. Currently, the government is failing to deliver. Mr. Speaker, over the past four years, we have gone through three Ministers of Health.

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Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Premier: When will he assume his responsibilities? In the end, he is the one who changed ministers one after the other. In the end, he is the one who decided to fire the boards. In the end, he is the one who decided to fire the CEOs of some networks or board chairs. When will the Premier assume his responsibilities so that people in the province have confidence that the health care system will be there for them for a long time?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Once again, I appreciate the question. The dramatics of the members opposite are probably not helping this situation, but I can tell you that when we look at the concrete actions that have occurred in the last little while, we see that Horizon has come forward and is doing almost 20 different things in emergency departments around the province. These include adding social workers, adding employees, adding patient monitors, and having better patient flowcharts to allow the people who are the sickest to be triaged and to get the service that they need. We know that the system is overloaded with sick people, and that is why we have been encouraging people to take care of themselves when they are sick so that they do not spread a virus.

Another thing that the department created recently is a new health human resource division that has a singular focus on improving recruitment, marketing, lead generation, and the retention of health care workers in New Brunswick. Mr. Speaker, we are moving day in, day out to alleviate...

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

RENTS

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, yesterday, I offered a sincere olive branch to the minister regarding giving relief to New Brunswick tenants. This morning, I learned the following from a CBC report: “An apparent misreading of housing data led Service New Brunswick Minister... to mistakenly believe new apartment construction in New Brunswick had fallen dramatically in 2022, when in fact it had increased substantially.”

Mr. Speaker, I guess this is a shocking revelation, and the minister needs to set the record straight. Why did she mislead the House with false statistics? Will she apologize to the Legislative Assembly and to the people watching for this very grave misstep?

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Member, I will ask you to retract your statement where you suggested that the minister misled the House.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): I will retract that, and I will replace it with a different...

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Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): I just ask you to retract.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Okay, I retract it.

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

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was hoping... I knew that I was going to get a question on this today. It was quite a shock to wake up to the story that I woke up to this morning.

This particular reporter reached out to my team and asked for some clarification and some data, which my team provided. I then realized that I had used the incorrect word when I was talking about the data here in the House. I said “housing starts”, which is very different from “building permits”. The numbers I provided were for building permits that were pulled. I told the reporter that I had made a mistake, and the reporter chose to write the story in the manner that he did.

So that is for building permits, and I actually have more updated information about building permits this year. I will share that if you want to ask me more questions.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): The problem with that is that when the minister is using these types of statistics—which I cannot really qualify as I would like to—to justify the scrapping of the rent cap... The issue is that when you offer these types of statistics, it puts in question everything else that the minister says. It questions her whole credibility. Did she provide other statistics that were not appropriate? It comes down to this: Is she able to do the job? If she gets...

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Listen, you can look at the report. It is all there. You can read it—I am hoping you can—and it is all there. I am hoping that she is now better enlightened on the issue of the rent cap.

Will the minister act swiftly and help those who need it the most by maintaining the rent cap for 2023? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When I entered politics, I said that I would be truthful and that I would look out for New Brunswickers, which I have done. I made a mistake, and I owned up to that mistake. I used the wrong word. The numbers were correct. The numbers were real. I now have updated numbers. The member can ask me

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about those if he wants to, and I will share them. I am not going to share them now because he did not actually ask me a question about them.

If he is calling into question whether I tell the truth in the House, that is extremely offensive. Our duty as legislators is to be in here, to tell the truth, and to do our very best for New Brunswickers. I can tell you that everybody on this side of the House is doing that, and I am pretty sure that everybody on the other side of the House is trying to do the same thing as well. To call into question whether I am telling the truth is very offensive.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): I will ask the question directly. What is this new information that the minister would like to share? This information does put into light the fact that the rent cap did its job properly in 2022 to help and to protect tenants while absolutely not impeding on new construction. It is additional proof that in these current conditions, the rent cap works. Nova Scotia knows it, and Prince Edward Island knows it—they are maintaining a rent cap. Why is New Brunswick any different? It is clear that what is proposed in Bill 25 is not enough to help those who need protection. The minister can redeem herself and this government by keeping the rent cap and presenting stronger measures to protect tenants. Will this finally get her to act as boldly and swiftly as she needs to? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Now that you have asked, I will share the updated information with you. With respect to the numbers for building permits, about six weeks ago, when I was in the House, the number was 45 building permits for two new units or above. Yesterday, later in the day, I got updated information, and the number was up to 89 building permits. We are now at 104 building permits.

I would like to say that we have had discussions here in the House and I have had them out with the press. The housing spectrum is so complicated. One number does not answer any question. I am happy to give numbers up the ying-yang, if you want numbers, but there are a lot of moving parts related to the housing spectrum. That is why this government has decided to put a minister in charge of housing so that we can look at all the pieces of it, not just at a single number. We are doing the work. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

GOVERNMENT AGENDA

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, consideration of bills progressed in committee last week. Nine bills were passed in a little over three days. Consideration of bills progressed at a good pace. However, as of the start of this week, the government has imposed a time limit because some bills that may seem controversial for the government are being debated.

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This government was elected with only 26% of the popular vote, and, according to polls, only has a 28% approval rate right now. So, my question is for the Government House Leader. Why does this government have such a strong aversion to democratic institutions and debate?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the member opposite for the question. Look, I know that the member opposite loves the protection of the democratic institutions as much as I do. The fact of the matter is that the mechanism of closure is something that is part of the rules of this House and can be used from time to time. I know that the members opposite have talked about a legislative calendar. We laid out the amount of time that was available for introduction of bills throughout this session. The session is winding down, and it is simply that there was just...

I know that the members opposite do not like to hear us talk about the previous government, but I have been in the House when we have had closure invoked on us with just a couple of days to go. We have left 12 hours of debate on everything that is left on the agenda, Mr. Speaker. We believe that is sufficient, and we want to work with the opposition to use that time as thriftily as possible to get the work done here in the House.

[Translation]

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, the minister mentioned a legislative calendar. Today is... I do not even remember the date today. It is December 8. It is December 8, and the session ends next Friday. MLAs in this province still do not know what the legislative calendar will look like for January, the rest of the winter, or the spring.

People do not just want a schedule; they want a calendar, like the ones other provinces have. So, when will the Government House Leader introduce a motion urging the Standing Committee on Procedure, Privileges and Legislative Officers to create a permanent legislative calendar? Do not blame others who did not do it. Today is December 8; let's look to the future, please.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Look, I know that the member opposite has had this conversation with the Government House Leader on a number of occasions. In fact, the member opposite and I had this conversation just a few short weeks ago. I, for one, think that it is something that we need to continue to talk about.

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I do not want to speak on behalf of the Government House Leader here today, but the member opposite has my commitment that I will certainly speak with the Government House Leader about it, Mr. Speaker, and about how we can potentially put some form of calendar in place. I know that other jurisdictions across the country have done that, as the member opposite has talked to me about before, and I think that we just need to continue that conversation as we move forward.

FRENCH IMMERSION

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, social media is alive with success stories from former graduates of New Brunswick's French immersion program. Students and parents are loudly condemning this government's plan to dismantle and replace French immersion with a watered-down French-language program. These students and their parents consider this major change a threat to their desire to become bilingual. This past year, the minister put an assortment of 24 pilot programs in place at various schools. Have these 24 pilot programs been evaluated, and when can we expect the results of those evaluations?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you very much to the member opposite for the question. Yes, there are pilot programs around the province that are occurring, and they are being evaluated. They were evaluated at the end of the last school year, and they continue to be evaluated this school year.

At no time did I say that I was dismantling French immersion and the French immersion program. That came from the other side. What I talked about was improving the Anglophone school system. What I talked about was creating a system where all our students can reach a minimal level of conversational French and where our other students can continue on to reach the levels that they currently reach. We do not want this for only a small group of students. We want this for all our students because we live in a bilingual province, and that is what we want to create with our students. I do not really appreciate it being said that I want to dismantle French immersion, because that is totally incorrect.

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, we have a Grade 7 student from Moncton's Maplehurst Middle School in the gallery today with her mother and sister. Natasha Robichaud can speak firsthand about how the pilot program is failing her and other students. Natasha says that she is receiving far less French instruction and that her French vocabulary and her conversational ability are decreasing. We hear you, Natasha. French immersion is working, so why change it? Why would the minister seek to erode, with ill-conceived and ineffective pilot projects, the opportunity for students to become bilingual?

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



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be it from me to debate somebody's personal experience. I would never do that. The personal experience of one person is one's personal experience, and I would not speak negatively to that because it would be totally inappropriate on my part. I accept the fact that, for this student, that is her experience and that is her reality. That is not the report that I received regarding the majority of students. We could talk about that all day long.

The other part is this. I do not know whether the member has a crystal ball, but she is presupposing how we are moving forward in creating a system where all our students can become conversationally and functionally bilingual in order to match what we have in our province. We are a bilingual province, so I think that we should all want that. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, Léo-James Lévesque, a highly respected expert in French as a second language, indicated that the Maplehurst Middle School approach to French teaching is not supported by research, which confirms that French immersion works because it provides both intensity and exposure to French. New Brunswick is the only bilingual province in Canada, and, if there are reports on progress made by the immersion pilot programs, we would really like to receive them.

So, why is this government determined to limit the ability of Anglophones to become bilingual and have access to the opportunities to succeed that bilingualism provides?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, let's be serious. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has had pilot programs for a long time. They are not only for French, the way French is taught, or French learning. I taught a history pilot program. We made changes. That is how things are done.

Today, we are working on pilot programs to reorganize high schools. The member opposite is not talking about that, and I would like to know why she is not. What we want, on this side of the House, is for New Brunswickers to be truly bilingual and be able to at least have a conversation in French. We want a population reflective of our province, which is the only bilingual one in Canada.

[Original]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, we are facing teacher shortages and resource shortages, and we have 24 pilot programs that have not yet been evaluated. What teachers and experts are saying is that we need stability in our classrooms, but what I have heard from this minister throughout this debate is that French immersion is actually the scapegoat for addressing other issues such as class

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composition, which he talks about, and behaviour and giving more people access to French second language learning.

Those are all things we need to strive for, but I will repeat what the Premier has continuously said, that we are now a have province and that we can have it all right here in New Brunswick. But we cannot have French immersion, Mr. Speaker, and that is a shame. It is a shame that the Premier's stubbornness on this file will triumph over reason, logic, and advice from the experts. What will it take? What will it take for the minister to listen to those experts and teachers who want to put a stop to this program that the government is trying to implement in order to erase French immersion in New Brunswick?

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I do not really know where to begin. The unfortunate fact of how ill informed the opposition is regarding the changes currently happening in the education system is sad. What we are doing now is working on a politics of division—trying to create problems between our two linguistic communities.

We are not trying to do that. What we are doing and what we want is to create a program where all our students can, at a minimum, learn conversational French. We live in a bilingual province—the only bilingual province in Canada—and we want to increase the number of people in our province who are truly bilingual. You know, I think that is a pretty honourable goal, and I would like to see the opposition support that. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Question period is over.

(Interjections.)

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