

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, we have never seen such a centralization of power as we have under this government, and it does not seem to be serving us very well. The Premier wants to unilaterally control all aspects of government. If you do not agree with him, you are removed, and it is a “my way or the highway” attitude. Never before have we seen such a high turnover of high-ranking public servants as we have under this government, since it took office in 2018.

In health care, the Premier removed the CEO of Horizon and fired the boards in July, after there was a death in an ER. Now, it is almost six months later, and we are not seeing improvements. We are repeatedly seeing the same tragedies over and over again, and we are now seeing that the health reform plan targets will be delayed by months and years. So I want to know whether the Premier can advise as to how his action of centralizing power has improved the delivery of health care.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. Yesterday, the member opposite stood in this House and put out rumours on the floor of the Legislature. The members opposite and the leader treated them and tweeted them as if they were factual. I am going to clear the rumours and tell you the facts here today.

Through the Department of Health—and verified by Horizon and Vitalité—since December 1, there have been zero pediatric Code Blues for children under the age of 3. Since December 1, there have been zero pediatric deaths in the hospitals for children under the age of 3. So this means that there were zero pediatric deaths for children under the age of 3 due to RSV or influenza-like illnesses.

Mr. Speaker, if the opposition members want to help, they should stop spreading rumours and innuendos here on the floor of the Legislature and then putting them out to the public and retweeting them. These are the facts. This is what is getting done.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, while I thank the minister for bringing forward the information that we asked for, we are not trying to spread rumours.

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): We see information circulating on the streets and circulating on social media, so as the official opposition, we get to ask questions of the government. I brought forward those questions, and he did his

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job in answering them. Thank you for putting that issue to bed. If there have been no deaths, that is good news.

But there are still issues that are not being resolved, and this Premier has centralized power in his office. He fired the boards and he fired the Horizon CEO in July. We are still seeing the same issues repeat themselves over and over again.

They are normalizing those statistics. They do not want to release statistics of ER deaths, and they are saying that it is normal to see deaths in emergency rooms. But I think it is important that we have that data available. I want to know whether the Premier can stand up today and tell us how centralizing power in his office has improved health care in the province.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, thank you again. The member opposite acknowledged that it was a rumour, but when the leader from above talks about the tweet and treats it as fact by saying “This is deeply disturbing and wholly heartbreaking”, it is as if it were fact. But this was a rumour, so it is unfortunate that the members opposite continue to perpetuate these rumours when there are, in fact, good things going on. We know that there is a lot more work to do, and we are prepared to do that work.

Let me tell you about some of the changes that have occurred in the emergency rooms here in the last little bit since the unfortunate events occurred. There are now two triage nurses in the emergency rooms. There are patient-monitoring individuals in the emergency rooms. The RN rotation is now trying to accommodate for peak hours in the emergency rooms. There are social workers there, which avoids some social admissions in the emergency rooms. Here in Fredericton, there is a diversion clinic that is taking Levels 4 and 5 to the clinic rather than to the emergency room. And there is weekend discharge happening right now.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister is quick to take his talking points and give us the different initiatives that have been put in place, but obviously, that is not working. Can he tell us when he implemented these changes, because there was a death in Edmundston last week and a death in Moncton the week before that? This issue caused an uproar in July, which caused the Premier to make a power grab and place all the health care decisions in his office, by removing the CEO and removing the boards. Can the minister tell us when these initiatives were put in place and what data they want to present to show that they are working? Can he do that instead of just standing up as a PR stuntman for the Department of Health and the Premier? Can he tell us when those initiatives were put in place and how they help New Brunswickers gain access to health care through emergency departments?

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate that the leader here on the floor has not taken the direction from the leader above to not make personal attacks. I understand that the leader above wants to improve the decorum here on the floor, but the member opposite just went with a personal attack.

Mr. Speaker, there are significant initiatives that have happened since the summer started. I had one, just at the first of this week, in a statement: an additional 360 knee replacements will be done in the Upper River Valley Hospital. Access to surgery is part of our plan, and we are reducing the wait line and the wait time of people who are waiting for knee surgery. And, Mr. Speaker, the opposition stood against Bill 3, which is, again, reducing the wait time and wait line for cataract surgery. That will free up space in the operating rooms, which will then be available for knee, hip, and cancer surgeries. That is action. That is getting the results. That is not just...

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

EDUCATION

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, it is not just in health care that we have seen the Premier make the power grab where he has his “my way or the highway” attitude or where he rejects data and science or where he puts in place around him only those people who will not push back against his misguided ideas. He has created a toxic work environment in the Department of Education, where high-ranking officials are leaving because they cannot put up with this Premier’s hyperinflated ego, his irrational determination to impose his will, and his thinking that he knows more than the experts about education.

We have a lot at stake in our education right now, and since he entered politics, this Premier has had a pet project to get rid of French immersion. He is not listening to the experts. We will hear today what they are doing with respect to the French immersion program, but we know that it is removing what has worked for so many years. Why not make that program better? Why is the Premier putting educational outcomes at risk to impose his misguided will, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We do not have any misguided will in the Department of Education. We are working hard every day to make education better for our students. We have a number of pilot programs currently occurring in the province. We have a number of Language Learning Opportunity (LLO) sites. One that we have talked about frequently is Maplehurst, and I am so proud of what they do in that school, proud of...

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You know, we have high school reform underway. That is being piloted in the province. We have incubation sites for Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which is being piloted in the province. We have Building Blocks of Reading Continuum. That is being piloted in the province. We are not sitting back. We are looking at education. We are looking at the data, and we are looking at the reforms that will help education. We also want to move education forward. We also want to move the French second language ability of our students forward so that we can have a truly bilingual province where we can all communicate with one another and receive services in our language of choice. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

GOVERNMENT

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, another example of the Premier's obvious strategy to exert total control and impose his will, while trying to disguise it, is to set up secretariats under his control. Whether it is in relation to energy or official languages, he is appointing his friends and people close to him, whom he can then control. He is a Premier who wants to control everything at all costs, but who also tries to avoid taking responsibility for the decisions made, using trustees in the health networks or the Official Languages Secretariat as shields. Whether it is about unpopular decisions or deteriorating health care, he tries to separate himself from decisions while having full control. If the Premier opts for secretariats to manage various files, is he prepared to allow a committee of the Legislative Assembly to study and develop mandates for the secretariats?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I do not think there has been any doubt about my inability or lack of initiative to make decisions. I think that we have done a lot of that in the past few years. The province is doing well because of our collective efforts in making decisions that matter, in making decisions that drive the province forward, and in making decisions that have resulted in the rest of the country looking at New Brunswick for the first time. People are moving here, investing here, living here, and bringing their families here. When have we last seen that?

I appreciate that the member opposite wants to criticize, Mr. Speaker, but the reality is that the province has never been in a better state. We have challenges because of it. We have challenges that we need to work on together. One is in relation to ours being a bilingual province. Let's all be bilingual in a bilingual province—not just a select few, but all. What would be wrong with that? Why would the opposition want to maintain the status quo? Why would the opposition want to ignore 70% of the Anglophone kids in our province? It baffles me. It really does.

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NURSING HOMES

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I had a conversation this morning with my family members about this. This is going to be a very straight-out question to the minister. Are you aware that the drug Xanax is considered to be very addictive, and are you aware that this medication is sometimes given free of charge and without a prescription in some nursing homes in the province?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I guess that I can say, no, I am not specifically aware of the information that the member is giving me, but I will certainly take the information that he has put to me today with regard to a drug being given without a prescription and look into it.

[Translation]

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, and that would make me happy. As we know, we cannot discuss specific cases here. I would be pleased to have a discussion on this with the minister. If she would like, I could even put her in touch with the people involved.

Here is more information on the subject: We have also learned that this medication should not be used over a long term, but only on a temporary basis. Is the minister aware that this medication is currently being used for very long periods, creating serious addictions? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, we know that our nursing homes are private entities. However, the care and concern for all the residents fall to the Department of Social Development, and I take the concerns of the member opposite very seriously. I would be happy to sit down with him one-on-one to understand the information that he has and to check into it. Of course, we cannot speak of specific details, but I hear the concerns of what the member is saying. I take it very seriously. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Again, I repeat that I would be pleased to have this conversation. It is just that, when we realize that this medication, which is being administered, is not on the list of medication administered to residents, it raises big concerns. My last question is this: Can the minister tell the House whether her department currently has—currently has—a system in place to assess the adverse effects this

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medication could have when administered with other medications prescribed to residents?
Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, residents in nursing homes are under the care of an attending physician. I hear what the member is saying. Do I know about specific cases? No. Certainly, if a family is experiencing something such as this, I would hope that the family would reach out to us. Aside from that, if the member can bring me information, I am happy to address it. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

LABOUR

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the current labour crisis is everywhere, whether it be in health, education, private businesses, or nursing homes; the crisis is affecting the entire province. Currently, it is hard to have a family physician or a primary health care professional. It is hard for people to find housing; it is hard to find a place to live, affordable or not. There are problems in the education system. The government wants to take services away from the public, and there is a shortage of professionals.

With this entire situation, it is clear right now why one would wonder how people can leave another area, province, or country to come and work here in New Brunswick. Mr. Speaker, do the Premier and his government have a plan to ensure that people who want to come to New Brunswick have access to an effective health care system, housing, and the education services they deserve after deciding to come and work here in New Brunswick?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is certainly no secret that there are a lot of challenges faced by a population that is growing faster than it has in its history, since Confederation. There is no question that labour is an issue right across this country. I see it in the meetings with my colleagues all over Canada. There is certainly a challenge. What does that mean for all of us? It means that we have to do things differently, smartly, and innovatively. We cannot keep complaining and doing the same old thing and hoping that it will get better. It applies right across the board. I mean, it is not in any one sector. To the member opposite's point, it is universal in every sector.

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The challenge for us is in accepting change. The challenge for us is to say: You know what? What is the big, important... Is health care number one in this province? Well, then, let's figure out how we work together to give the best health care. If education is number two in this province, then let's figure out how we work together to give better education. People are not available to fill the needs that we have across the country, let alone in New Brunswick. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier and his government have been in office for four years. They are still wondering what they should be doing to solve problems regarding the labour shortage in New Brunswick. I think that, after four years, if they still do not know, it is high time that they left so that others can take their place.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, seniors have been telling us about the challenges they are ready to take on to help solve the labour problem for several years now. Some retired seniors are ready to come work for 5, 10, 15, or 20 hours to help. One of the barriers they mention is that they do not want to lose what they have. They do not want to lose the services they currently have because they have worked one or two hours too many. Mr. Speaker, we know that our retirees can be part of the solution. Does the Premier have a plan to ensure that our retirees and our seniors who want to contribute have the opportunity to do so without negatively impacting the programs they enjoy now?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I thank the member opposite for the question. He brings up a very valid point with respect to trying to engage seniors across this province to be part of the workforce solutions.

In fact, I was in his hometown in the Madawaska region not very long ago. The chamber of commerce in that region, with support from our department, came up with a program to get seniors back to work. Maybe they want to work one day or two days per week or a few hours here and there. In that regard, there has been great success at the golf course in Madawaska, which is right in the member opposite's region. That program was so successful—it blew away all the targets in that region—that we took it province-wide, and we are getting results across the province.

[Translation]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister is talking about the services that are being provided. As for me, I am asking what programs will no longer be available for our retired seniors if they want to go to work. What programs will

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no longer be available to these people if they earn one dollar too much? That is the question. However, you know, Mr. Speaker, in general, when speaking with the Conservatives, there are no plans. Retention and recruitment are essential if services are to be provided in the province.

As has been mentioned over the last few months and years, in terms of health, the other provinces have clearly shown that we must be active. The other provinces are active and proactive, but, in the meantime, the Conservatives in this province are asleep at the wheel. When is the Conservative government going to come up with a concrete plan that makes recruitment and retention in the health sector a priority? When?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): You know, I would hate to get up every day and see the world from the perspective of the Liberal members where the glass is always half empty.

The members opposite want to talk about the labour force and about making sure that we are meeting some of our labour market demands. It was a Liberal government that cut the seats at Memorial University a number of years ago, and I was proud to be part of a government that brought those seats back a number of years ago. And I was also proud to be part of a government, years later, that actually repatriated those seats and brought them back to New Brunswick, to Dalhousie Medicine.

Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? They can sit there and whine and complain all they want about the glass being half empty. I showed the member opposite a great project in his hometown, in his home region, that has had great success. You know, they can talk all they want about the glass being half empty, but do you know what? Over here, we are working hard to fill up the glass.

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, it is also that government that is exporting these positions to Maine, in the United States. That is nothing to brag about.

We recognize the benefit associated with the new heat pump program, which was a welcome announcement, I must admit—half full sometimes. But the reality is that it will not be available this winter for many New Brunswickers who need help now. I am thinking specifically about New Brunswickers who rent their homes and do not have the ability to install heat pumps to defray costs.

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[*Translation*]

What is the minister going to tell a single mother with two children and a very modest income who has to rent an apartment? Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island have developed programs to help people there.

My question is very specific: Under what financial assistance program can this New Brunswick mother apply to receive that assistance? How can this mother absorb inflation costs that particularly affect our most vulnerable people? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am going to tell the member opposite what I would say to a single mother or to somebody in a tough situation.

But, first, I am going to tell the member opposite that while you folks sit over there and creatively try to come up with questions to criticize what this government is doing, we, as a caucus and as a Cabinet, sit and go through every possible opportunity that we have to redirect funds back into the pockets of New Brunswickers, because we understand the struggles that they are having. We have come forward with over \$1-billion worth of spending in various forms of relief for New Brunswickers. We realize that one wallet has to bear the expense, and as a government, we are looking to create ways that we can divert funds and make life easier for New Brunswickers. You never talk about that. You never talk about the holistic spread of government, about how we are filling that glass. You are poking holes in the bottom of it. We are choosing to find ways to plug those holes and bring relief to New Brunswickers.

It is a serious subject, and we would tell single mothers or anybody that is having an issue...

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

[*Translation*]

EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, when people are sick, they have to choose between their health and their paycheque, because they have to make ends meet. This also means that, even when they are sick, they sometimes have to go to work or send their children to school or daycare to keep their household afloat. It is a challenge not only for their wellbeing, but also for public health, because that facilitates the spread of viruses.

A report from the government of British Columbia revealed that paid sick leave offers many benefits, including reducing absenteeism and facilitating recruitment and retention. This



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afternoon, will the Premier support Bill 27 so that all New Brunswickers have access to paid sick leave?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the member opposite for the question. I actually look forward to having the conversation this afternoon. There is an ongoing conversation across the country around paid sick leave.

The member opposite is quite right. In terms of the way that things have changed with respect to the spreading of viruses and the fact that we have very recently come through a global pandemic, if we expect people to stay at home, we have to start thinking outside the box.

We are taking a look at the legislation that the opposition has proposed. I look forward to having that conversation this afternoon. It is a very timely discussion, and it is one that we need to have. I would encourage the members of the Green Party to have that conversation throughout the afternoon, both on the floor and off to the side, because I do think that it is a very timely discussion. It is happening at our federal-provincial-territorial meetings across the country, and I know that other jurisdictions are certainly looking in this direction as well.

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, it is not the first time that we have brought this type of legislation to the floor. I am glad to hear that there may be a glimmer of hope. Maybe the government will consider supporting our bill and making sure that it becomes law, because this is a matter of better rights for workers and better public health policy. It is long overdue. It was important before the pandemic, and the pandemic made it clear.

The advice from Public Health is to stay home when you are sick, but it is difficult, if not impossible, for people to do that if they do not have paid sick leave and if they are struggling to make ends meet. There are so many viruses going around now, from RSV to flu to COVID-19. The Premier even pointed out on radio this morning that he dealt with a bout of the flu that left him sick for two weeks. Will the Premier stand up for New Brunswickers and New Brunswick workers, and will he stand up for public health and guarantee that all New Brunswickers will have access to paid sick days?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I indicated a few minutes ago with respect to viruses and pandemics, quite frankly, a lot of things have changed coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. More people than ever before work at home. We are going to have to look at how we maybe can rethink some of our labour laws around that in terms of other



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protections above and beyond the type of protection that the member opposite is talking about here.

Once again, I will reiterate what I said. I look forward to the conversation today. It will not end with the conversation today. I ask that we have a couple of other conversations off to the side in terms of looking at this specific bill and deciding whether or not it is the bill that we need for what is being considered or whether there are other aspects that we could look at as well. Thank you.

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, we had quite a show there from the Minister of Natural Resources. Boy, he does know how to spin. You know, he gave a beautiful one-minute speech on how they care, but he did not mention one single, concrete action that this government has taken to help a single mother of two kids. I am sure that the single mother really enjoyed the minister's answer, because it was a whole bunch of bull crap, Mr. Speaker. He did not say anything—anything—at all.

So I will ask the question again. Let's not ask that minister. Let's ask anybody in government. Let's ask somebody who can give a real answer. What programs are available to a single mother of two kids who really needs that help, who is really seeing the effects of inflation and seeing that no help is coming? In Nova Scotia, every family that makes \$85 000 or less is going to receive a cheque for \$1 000 at the end of this year. What is this government doing?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, let's have a conversation. Let's have a conversation about facts. It bothers me that this question period started with the Leader of the Opposition going on rumours. The minister clarified with facts, but that is still not enough. Then the member from the Bouctouche area stood up and tried to create scenarios around which we actually have put initiatives together.

From the energy perspective, for people who do not own their home, there are still areas and avenues where single parents can get efficiency products that will go into their home and have an impact. Above and beyond that, the Minister of Finance stood here and conveyed a long list of initiatives where we have taken revenue and redirected it back into the province. That is not a rumour. That is not a joke. That is not something that you sweep under the rug. That is something that you celebrate as a government that is standing up and saying: We get it. We understand. And we are going to take a number of initiatives to put those funds back into New Brunswick. That is real, not a rumour.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, again, not a single concrete action—nada. The master of spin is at it again.

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I will give some concrete information here. On January 9, 2022, the Premier canceled a \$100 home energy rebate program that was assisting over 33 000 low-income families, including those who rent apartments. On September 28, 2022, the minister announced a heat pump program, but people who rent apartments do not qualify. That is not rumour—that is fact. In this coming April, the EUB will decide on a potentially historic NB Power rate increase request. That is not rumour—that is fact. The Premier recently removed the rent cap—that is also fact—that protected people living in rental properties from sharp rent increases.

Mr. Speaker, low-income families and seniors are left helpless and vulnerable while the Premier provides sizeable tax benefits to the wealthiest New Brunswickers. That is also a fact. What is government going to do to protect the vulnerable? We need concrete actions.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): That was quite theatrical, Mr. Speaker. You know, we have never—never—not recognized that we have New Brunswickers who are struggling. We have worked very hard in our mandate so far to ensure that we are putting in real programs—programs that have substantive impacts for those who are not only low-income but also the working poor. You know, that is why tax relief is so important. When he speaks about the removal of a benefit... We actually just gave more than that benefit back to the same population.

Mr. Speaker, the opposition stands, talks, and puts out information that is so disjointed that it is not even believable. We will continue.

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