

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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SCHOOLS

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the temperature of the Policy 713 debate has risen to a worrying level. We all have a role to play in denouncing hate and misinformation and in modeling respectful debate and disagreement with the spirit of love thy neighbour that should be at the forefront. When I heard of the increase in bullying that happened at a school in Saint John last week, I was reminded of our shared responsibility to communicate with care and with love.

[Translation]

We are going to refer to an unbiased and responsible voice, the Child and Youth Advocate, who described the review of Policy 713 as an incoherent and discriminatory process.

[Original]

He says that it is shoddy and will not survive a court challenge. That sounds expensive, time-consuming, and as though it would have a chilling effect on our province's efforts in critical health recruitment, teacher retention, and economic development. Can the Premier explain how he drafted a policy that will not survive a court challenge?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Leader of the Official Opposition for the question. A lot of stuff is rolled up in there in terms of... It reminded me of Justin Trudeau and what he said on the weekend about love, which I guess is part of where the opposition is going.

I read and heard what the Child and Youth Advocate had to say. On its face, you know, that is his opinion. I do not agree with that. I am going to stand here and defend parents' rights nonstop while we protect our LGBTQ+ community in our schools, the same way as we honoured the community—the greater community—and diversity in our society today when we raised the pride flag outside. I think that it is important to note that we are not trying to do anything to anybody other than to protect the rights of parents. Thank you.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member opposite referenced that he did not think that the Child and Youth Advocate was right when the advocate laid out a clear, prima facie discriminatory issue with this policy. He also mentioned that he got advice from other lawyers on this. So can you tell us what the estimated legal cost is for the court challenge that you are walking into?

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Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you again, through you, Mr. Speaker, to the Leader of the Official Opposition. I am unaware of any court challenge at this point in time. I am aware of the opinion of the Child and Youth Advocate, who, at the same time, happens to be a lawyer. Opinions are just that. They are opinions.

I think that the court needs to rule on a number of things here. I think that the court needs to rule on whether or not teachers should be forced to keep things secret from the parents of the children who are ages 5 to 15, because when we are looking at this, that is what we are talking about—5-year-olds.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Okay, they are ages 4 to 15.

This is an extremely important question. You know, if it goes to the courts and the courts finally rule on it, then we will know what the parents' rights are, we will know what the teachers' obligations are, and we will get to move forward from this point on.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To clarify, the minister has put forward a proposal, a policy, with which he is unclear as to how the courts would rule, and he is asking the questions to the courts now, after the policy has been drafted. Is that what I am to understand?

Hon. Mr. Flemming, K.C. (Rothesay, Minister of Justice, Attorney General, PC): Lawyers, courts, and rulings are something that I know a little bit about. I also know that when any lawyer tells you what a court will do, you should probably get a new lawyer, because there are facts, there is evidence, there is admissibility, there are the arguments of cases, and there is jurisprudence. There are many, many, many, many, many factors that go into this. I always find that with anybody who would stand up to say glibly and off the cuff what a court would do, my advice would be to get a new lawyer.

EDUCATION

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, on May 17, I asked the Premier this: Given our passion for the parents' right to have a say in the education of their children, will he be directing the Education Minister to revise Bill 46 to ensure that parents and communities have an actual say in education governance?

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[Translation]

Friday, the member for Fundy—The Isles—Saint John West described the same contradictions as ironic.

[Original]

The minister told us at the time that the original thought was to remove the DEC's altogether and to remove the parent school support committees. We saw that the parents from the PSSCs were consulted, and their strong recommendation to leave Policy 713 as is was ignored. Mr. Premier, why are you centralizing power away from parents and into your hands?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, we are trying to find a way to have our educational system improved in a recognized fashion so that we see better results. I see some of the actions that go on within the Francophone system and the role that the AEFNB plays in all of that. I had discussions about that years ago with the member for Campbellton-Dalhousie. There is a model there in terms of its oversight, but not necessarily the structure. That works for it, but it does not seem to work for the Anglophone system.

When I think of the role that the NBTA could play, it could be significant, Mr. Speaker, but it does not seem to be one that it chooses to play or wants to be involved in. The point is, we are trying to find a way that our system can continue to improve. We have people moving away from our system. Recent statistics show that in New Brunswick, we have one of the lowest acceptance rates... Or I should say that parents are concerned about where our English system is going. What does that tell you? Something has to change.

If we can get through second reading on this, we will go into economic policy and we will have all kinds of debate on Bill 46.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I completely agree that something has to change.

The minister is referencing the NBTA when he is presenting a bill that removes its ability to grieve properly, yet he is asking it to take on responsibilities related to governance. He describes a successful Francophone governance system but has put forward a bill that changes the Anglophone governance system to be further from the Francophone system.

There was a different governance model presented and briefed to this Cabinet and caucus. What happened to that original governance model?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Leader of the Official Opposition

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for the question. When I first came to the department, there was a bill that talked about removing the district education councils altogether. It talked about creating a family of schools, where there would be some representation from that family of schools. It talked about some kinds of provincial boards. It seemed very convoluted and ended up in the same place. The goal of that education proposal during that time was to remove the superintendents from the control of the district education councils—actually, it was to remove the district education councils altogether—and have them report to the department.

If we can get this through second reading and to economic policy, we could talk about all the fine points in the bill. I encourage the members opposite to do that. Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Premier...

[Original]

His power grab in education has created chaos for teachers, students, parents, and the inclusion community.

[Translation]

The *Education Act*, just like the revised Policy 713, was drafted hastily.

[Original]

We have seen *Education Act* changes rushed faster than this government can process a property tax appeal. We have seen *Education Act* changes rushed faster than this province can process a Residential Tenancies Tribunal rate hike application. We have seen education changes that have moved faster than the province can process a Medicare application.

[Translation]

This bill was put together hastily. What is the rush?

[Original]

The Premier does not care. This amounts to an attack on democracy, and the Premier is pushing his agenda through at all costs. Why the rush?

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that the Leader of the Opposition is not keeping up because the other points that she raised are moving very quickly. I will particularly reference the one on Medicare and how quickly... It is now down to one or two weeks. It is certainly well under 30 days. That is better than six months or wherever it was before. Maybe she should keep track of what is being improved and what is going on.

Mr. Speaker, this has been on the docket for a long time, this whole structure. It was on the docket before, when we first came in, in 2018, and again in 2020. And then, in 2021, there was the recognition that nothing was happening. There was no real plan to fix this system and have it actually perform in a way that would get results for kids. So how long do we let that go?

Then it turned into another explosive issue. Rather than have a good, open discussion on the challenges that we have, we turn it into an explosive media event. Mr. Speaker, we want to get into economic policy and have a very frank discussion on the real issues. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

NURSES

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the efforts of the Health Minister on the nurse shortage have yet to address the crucial issue of retention. The government must acknowledge the feelings among nurses of being unappreciated and the growing risk of burnout that many face. Retaining the existing workforce is paramount. Other jurisdictions are providing better working conditions and wages. While neighbouring provinces offer retention bonuses that this government refuses to match, the Premier's stance that money will not fix everything lacks tangible action. It is imperative that this government take concrete steps to address these concerns about working conditions.

The approach to combat nursing shortages and related problems should focus on strategies aimed at retaining the current workforce and fostering supportive workplace environments, strategies such as reducing workloads, promoting safe and healthy workplaces, prioritizing nurses' mental health, and targeting retention strategies. Can the minister point to specific actions that his government has taken to tackle the retention of nurses and the exodus of nurses from the workforce?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity to answer this question. As a matter of fact, there are a number of initiatives that have gone toward easing burnout in the workplace. The Premier and I have met with frontline workers many, many times to hear their concerns and to hear about what would make things better.

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We have looked at things like scheduling. We have looked at things like vacation and workers being able to take vacation when they want. Looking at salaries overall, we have increased the salary line in this budget by, I believe, \$29 million. It is a significant increase in the amount of compensation that is paid to nurses, but it is more than that. It is having a safe and secure workplace. That is why we have continued to increase the number of new hires. We have seen Horizon hire between 500 and 600 new RNs this year. That is Horizon alone. Those are tangible improvements. Those are significant improvements. We want the opposition to recognize that.

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister talks about recruitment initiatives, but there has been no concrete action to retain nurses currently in positions who are leaving the province. We have suggested ways to resolve issues, for example, by reducing excessive workloads, promoting safe and healthy workplaces, providing mental health support, and implementing targeted retention initiatives. Mr. Speaker, I am talking about this today because the government has not dealt with this issue.

We know that a survey conducted last year indicated that 94% of nurses suffer from symptoms of burnout, and 45% suffer from severe burnout, a 29% increase compared to pre-pandemic numbers. So, given these concerns, the government must act. Effective strategies must be implemented to retain nurses and foster positive work environments. So, what specific action has this government taken to meet this challenge and provide the necessary support...

[Original]

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

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I know that this government has worked very hard with the RHAs, which hire the nurses and provide a safe environment, which they want to improve. We have heard from the frontline workers about how they want to have their shifts fully staffed. Again, that is why we have gone on significant hiring trips to places such as the Philippines. We have expedited the international nursing education pathway to becoming credentialed. As a matter of fact, there was an announcement last week, I believe, that we are now actually paying to have internationally trained workers credentialed here in New Brunswick. That is going to be the relief that was asked for by the RNs working at the RHAs right now. That relief is coming. We are seeing it. We are seeing the graduates. We increased the number of seats to... What is it? I believe we increased it to 185 seats here in New Brunswick. That is the help that is on the way. That help is arriving as soon as we can get it.

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CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, with all the chaos that has once again been manufactured by this Premier and his Minister of Education in our school system, what should not be lost in all the noise is that our teachers are still without a negotiated contract. As if it is not enough to deal with a burdensome workload and the complicated social issues that are thrust upon them by a government seemingly blind to the impact that it may have on those involved, teachers have to do it while being disrespected in their compensation. We have a desperate shortage of resources in our school system. Does the Minister of Finance not feel that achieving progress in negotiations as soon as possible will help to improve an already urgent situation?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Yes, absolutely, we have problems with retention in that area as well. The population is growing, new schools are being built, and the teachers' contract is being worked on. I am happy to say that, last weekend, the conciliation team met. As a matter of fact, it met, and I had a staff member say that she was emailed at 1:33 a.m. The team was still meeting at 1:33 a.m. on Saturday night. I guess that would be Sunday morning.

I got another email and call at midnight on Sunday. These are the kinds of people that we have working on the conciliation situation with the teachers. I am not just saying that we are there alone. The teachers are being represented there as well. There are more talks coming up before the end of June, and we are hoping for a really positive end to this story and hoping that our teachers will be back with a new contract. And we will go from there. Thank you.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian economy is still red-hot. Just recently, we have seen the central bank raise rates again to try to cool it off. This will most likely translate into more large surpluses for this government. Knowing that paying our teachers what they deserve will not put in peril the Premier's single-minded agenda to hoard surpluses, knowing that the central bankers have already been satisfied by the Minister of Finance, and knowing that the credit agencies have given him his much-desired vindication, cannot the Minister of Finance now envision the possibility of being proactive by investing in our educational resources at their just value? Since some people are up until midnight and one o'clock in the morning on the weekends, can we not close this negotiation now and allow the teachers to focus on what will likely be a very difficult year ahead?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and once again, thank you to the member opposite for the question. The process is the process. We are certainly not going to be doing any negotiating here in the House. Here on the floor of the House, we do not negotiate. We have a conciliation board whose members are negotiating and working hard.

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Let's not just go past that comment about the surplus. We have a couple of comments about the surplus too. Keep in mind that the surplus allowed us, as well, to give some freedom on personal income tax deductions, provincial property tax reductions, and social assistance reform initiatives. I am going to keep going. It also allowed us freedom on increasing the minimum wage, on the Emergency Fuel and Food Benefit—we did that twice—on the funding of food banks, and on the funding of emergency shelters. That is what the surplus does. That is what good budgeting does. We are planning for the future, not just for now but for the future. And that is what this government does. That is what this government does.

HOUSING

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, in a recent study conducted by reputed local economist David Campbell, he noted that there is currently a shortage of 10 000 units in the New Brunswick market. This number of 10 000 units is not for the future. It is right now. It confirms with a tangible number what we have been seeing all along—that we are currently in a housing crisis.

My question for the minister is as follows: What is this government doing now to address the current shortage? Planning for the future will just not cut it. We are talking about 10 000 units now. The need is now, so what concrete measures is this government taking? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you very much for the question from the member opposite. I actually spent some time this morning talking about economics and the supply issues that we have with housing units here in New Brunswick. We are in a crisis. The wonderful thing is that we have individuals and stakeholders all over the province who are now rowing in the same direction to try to solve this problem. We had over 200 stakeholders come together to begin looking at innovative solutions for our housing crisis.

I am really pleased to let you know, Mr. Speaker, that we have over 100 possible things that we can do to help fix this housing crisis right away. I have been talking about our housing strategy, which has real things that we are going to implement immediately when it is released in two weeks' time—real things that can help the housing crisis.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): I want to revert to what the minister just said. A report is promised by the minister by the end of this month. She had also opened the door at the time to say that if she could release it earlier, she would. We were hoping that it would be done this week because, especially with the closure motion, we are planning on ending this Friday. I am asking whether it is possible for the minister to provide this report by the end of this week so that we can have a healthy debate here in the House—an open and transparent debate here in the House.

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Also, will the minister admit that the rent cap is now off the table? We are late in the game when it comes to the rent cap. I mean, the official opposition still wants the rent cap put through, but I think that the people of New Brunswick deserve a final answer so that they can plan on that. 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, and thank you to the member opposite.

I tried. I tried really hard to get this completed so that we could release it early. But it is not quite complete yet. I am sorry, to the member opposite. We are not quite there. It is a good strategy, but we are still crossing the t's and dotting the i's. I will be excited to release it in the last week of June, and I will be happy to debate back and forth about what is in the report.

Mr. Speaker, we looked at real, tangible things that this government could do to really move the bar on the housing crisis that we have currently. We looked at our strategy moving forward on how we could put real changes into our system to make a difference for all New Brunswickers. We are going to have a plan that is going to provide housing for all, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

AIR QUALITY

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, the Coastal Shell Products situation in Richibucto is also affecting business development, housing development, and the tourism industry. One business owner, Paul-André of Beaurivage, is reporting losing reservations in the cottages that he rents out. These cottages are usually full. Another business owner, Ryan, reports that he is having trouble getting the permits and financing that are needed for a housing complex near the plant because of a reluctance caused by the smell and air quality situation. This is despite a housing crisis in the region.

The Coastal Shell Products plant has had many chances to remediate the situation, and it has not. The only outcome left is for the plant to shut down and move to a more appropriate area than the downtown of a picturesque town. Will the Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business stand with the people and the potential of the region and commit to working with the community to ensure the closure and relocation of this plant?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As always, we are taking the concerns of the people of our province very seriously. We acted as soon as we became aware of the noncompliance of the facility.

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The department continues to make frequent visits to the site and investigate the odours throughout the community to determine potential impacts beyond the site. As Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, I try to help bring people together to talk about the problem.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker, for the people upstairs, there is another question that they should be asking. Their former MLA, Bertrand LeBlanc, is not here anymore, but the jobs president is here. In our questioning of leadership and judgment, we should be asking who, on September 15, 2016, gave the license and the money for Omera Shells to continue. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, this is what I want to know: What are we going to do about the situation today? Mr. Speaker, the Coastal Shell Products plant in Richibucto is located right next to a school and a daycare. Students, parents, teachers, the principal, and the school board have been complaining for years that the school is not conducive to learning or work. Despite that, the government continues to refuse to act and shut down a business that is inconveniently located for its industrial activities.

That being said, parents and students from École Soleil Levant have sent me 134 letters and drawings so that I can hand deliver them to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. With their permission, that is what I am going to do shortly. What these elementary school students are asking for is not complicated: They want outdoor recess, because, this very day, they have to stay inside the school. They want air quality that does not give them headaches or stomach aches while they are at school and an environment that does not cause asthma attacks.

Will the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development commit to working with the community to shut down and move this plant to...

[*Original*]

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

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This social issue is not easy to deal with. I went through the same thing with a hog farm in Kent County. So, Mr. Speaker, we are prepared to work together. I have certainly met with the Kent Clean Air Action Committee.

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The problems the member for Kent North has just told us about raise valid questions. The Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, and I are ready to work on this. Mr. Speaker, this is a very interesting file. The people of Kent County want to find a solution. We are certainly going to find a solution. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I find it unfortunate that, when we have a great group of people here who want answers, the member opposite is playing politics and does not have clear or specific information to bring to the table. So, he should answer their questions and not try to make this a partisan matter. I am disappointed by that.

[Original]

I want to go back to something that the Premier said. The last report that we had from government was that, in March, the Medicare application wait time was a month and a half—six weeks—which is longer than it took the government to draft the *Education Act* changes. Could the Premier confirm the actual wait time for a Medicare application today?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): The only person playing politics here is you, honourable Leader of the Opposition.

[Original]

For the past couple of weeks, she has been talking about leadership. I, too, question leadership. I question judgment. So, in 2016, where was that person making that decision for the people upstairs? That is my question. Again, a lot of people...

[Translation]

Yes, I am asking difficult questions, but opposition members do not want to talk about them.

[Original]

It is like the carbon tax. We all know that was not a good decision to make. What happened in 2016 that the people are here in this room today? That is what people want to know. What were they thinking in 2016? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would encourage the member opposite to do his homework. I

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would encourage him to answer the question that the member asked about what the government is doing for the community that is suffering under the work of Coastal Shell Products. What is the minister doing to address these people's concerns?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, as I said, we are meeting with people. There is a plant in an area where people are suffering from problems it has caused. We have to work on this and find a balance here in New Brunswick. Mr. Thompson indicated today that there was another file about which I had not heard. I will certainly talk to him about it and work on it.

The people of Kent County certainly have good reasons to make demands; we do not disagree on that. The only person playing politics here is the Leader of the Opposition. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

GOVERNMENT

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

The Premier's power grab—his centralization of health governance, his centralization of education governance, and now his power over local governments—has created chaos in Cabinet. New Brunswick is experiencing damaging political instability, and the whole country is now watching. What we have is unstable leadership. We have lawsuits from employees, human rights defenders, and First Nations. We have questions of Cabinet solidarity. It makes for a terrible business investment climate. It has a chilling effect on our attempts to attract people here. Mr. Lamrock's words are echoing with me. This is all being done without care.

[Translation]

The Premier does not take into account our opinions or the points of view of experts.

[Original]

He does not care about anyone's point of view but his own and certainly not those of everyday New Brunswickers. Mr. Premier, why are you acting against your platform? How do you propose to rectify this instability of government?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, taking on difficult issues and having them held up to discussion,

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especially in this House, is very difficult. That is fair enough. But the province is doing really well. Investment is doing really well.

You know, on this particular topic, Policy 713, I think that the Leader of the Opposition should look at the policy that Stephen McNeil's Liberal government in Nova Scotia put forward a few years ago. Look and compare that policy to what we are actually putting forward today. There is more than one similarity, especially on the issue of how parents are going to be involved. There is a nuance on age, on 12 versus 16, but I would suggest that the Leader of the Opposition should look at that. The Leader of the Liberal Party in Nova Scotia put forward a policy to help protect parents. It is really sad that neither Trudeau nor the Leader of the Opposition here has any concern about the rights of parents in raising their children. We do think differently on this side of the House. Yes, there are differences in opinions, but parents matter.

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