

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**November 1, 2023**

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[Original]

### HEALTH CARE

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, it is that time of year. It is cold and flu season. We hear in this House, and everywhere, sniffles, coughs, sneezes, strained breathing, and worse. Unfortunately, more than 70 000 New Brunswickers do not have access to primary care, a family doctor or nurse practitioner, to get care for this season's ailments.

New Brunswickers are concerned about this. Last year, the minister committed to what we and doctors and nurses and patients have been asking for, and that is community collaborative care. He committed to four locations. We heard more, as my colleague just mentioned, but he specifically committed to Fredericton, Charlotte County, Dalhousie, and Sussex. Residents of those communities want to know what is happening because they have yet to see tangible progress on these critical health care centres. I am hoping that we can start with Fredericton. Could the minister please update the people of the capital region on the status of integrated community care here?

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I understand that people are concerned about primary care. The member opposite talked about 74 000 still on the wait list. Well, again, Mr. Speaker, we have made significant progress. We are taking a number of those people without primary care off that list and putting them on NB Health Link so that they can have access to primary care through a number of clinics throughout the province.

Again, I know that those numbers are hard for the opposition to comprehend because we have made significant, significant inroads in reducing that list down to only 20 000 here in the province. That is progress, Mr. Speaker. It may not be in the exact form that the members across the way want, but we have clinics where NB Health Link can take appointments and see people with those sniffles, coughs, and even more severe situations and more severe health care problems. So, progress is being made. The opposition does not want to admit it.

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The question was specifically about the commitment to build integrated community care in Fredericton. Could you update us on the progress of the Fredericton clinic, minister?

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. When we get down to the specifics of some of the things that have been done in Fredericton, again, I point to the success of the NB Health Link and some of the clinics that have been opened up there to increase access to primary care.

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You can see that a number of threes and fours are in the clinic across from the Victory Meat Market, which is now accessible not just for walk-ins but also for appointments through 811 and through Health Link. That is progress. That is taking people out of the emergency room, which is a very, very important aspect in treating people where they need it. I know that the members opposite may be a little testy today because they all got passed over for the Senate. They may not be as upset as Victor and Roger.

Again, that is where we continue to work and to hire new doctors, recruit new nurses, and increase the number of points of access in various locations right across the province.

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister has not provided any specifics about the location of the new integrated care clinic, its progress, and its commitment to community developers and to committees with the community, I am going to interpret that nothing has happened in Fredericton, so let's move on to Charlotte County. I was visiting the people of St. Stephen a few weeks ago and had seen them last summer as well as last winter, and they are very keen to see the progress on the promised clinic in St. Stephen. Could the minister update the people of St. Stephen on what is happening with their committed integrated clinic?

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much again. If the member opposite would just take a drive around Fredericton, she would see that we are doing work on the Brookside Mall to have a clinic there. We expect that to open within the next six months or so.

Mr. Speaker, this goes to a bigger, I guess, governance model in New Brunswick when we look at how decisions are made on a provincial basis right across the province. The members opposite seem to not want to have that collaboration. We formed a collaboration committee between the two regional health authorities so that people could look at a provincial-wide scope. We see the members opposite talking about their own specific ridings, and that is fine. I understand that. That is how they get elected. Maybe they are expecting an election or something. But the fact of the matter is that the work continues to go on.

[Translation]

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I think we will be here a long time if it takes three questions to get one answer regarding the situation in Fredericton. I do not know why the minister could not give us this information in his first response. We are now talking about the situation in St. Stephen, and I think that community will find itself in a Liberal riding in the future; that is not the case right now.

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[Original]

Could you please tell the residents of Charlotte County this? It is not the Brookside Mall, so what is the location and what are the plans for the St. Stephen integrated clinic?

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Once again, Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question from the opposition. Again, work continues in all aspects and all areas of the province. When I look at the number of integrated primary care models, I see that there is one being worked on in Edmundston, Lac Baker, and Rivière-Verte—one to service that area. That is under Vitalité. There are a number in Dieppe that are coming forward. Let's look at Shippagan, Lamèque, and Inkerman again. I have been to some of these locations where they are taking patients. They are having appointments and that primary care is being provided. That was not being looked at when the Leader of the Opposition was advising Gallant.

The fact of the matter is that we have reduced the number of people who are without a family doctor. That is a fact, Mr. Speaker, and if the members opposite do not want to acknowledge that, that is fine. We know that care—

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

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wonder whether I should be directing the questions to the member for Saint Croix so that she, as the Minister responsible for Seniors, would have the opportunity to let her residents know what is happening, because every time we ask about Charlotte County, I get answers for other places. So this time, I am going to try this.

The next commitment from last year's speech from the throne was for an integrated care clinic in Sussex. Could you tell us what is happening with that clinic, minister?

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much. Again, Mr. Speaker, there is a lot of discussion going on in regions right across the province. When we look at access to primary care, we know that things are happening in Sussex. I visited an NPs clinic, which was new and, again, was providing access to primary care. It is in conjunction with the hospital, and more work is to be done there as well.

Mr. Speaker, when we look at a number of the jurisdictions that we have right across the province, we see that we are actually increasing the number of doctors who are available for people to see. We are actually increasing the number of NPs who are available for people to see. We are actually increasing the number of RNs who are available to work in the various hospitals around the province. And we are not satisfied with that. We are going to continue to recruit, whether it is international recruitment or whether it is creating seats here in New Brunswick to increase the number of RNs who are available—

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

[*Translation*]

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

[*Original*]

I very much appreciate the specific answer of the nurse practitioner clinic set up in Sussex in partnership with the hospital. Could the minister tell us how many people combined came off the Patient Connect NB and NB Health Link wait lists to receive services from that clinic?

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, the member across the way knows that a list of the number of people who go to a doctor is not something that the minister would have in front of him or would be able to call from knowledge. That is basically in some of the guidelines for questions that are set out in the rules of the Legislature. I can quote the section or send it over to the member opposite. I do not know whether the members opposite are, again, just trying to dig down into some of the local areas because they want to use that as part of their election platform as they hope for an election. But the fact of the matter is, whether or not there is an election, we are going to continue to do the work to make sure that people have access to primary care here in the province. That work will continue.

I think that the members opposite should be very clear as to whether they are going to regress back to a governance form that was used under the Gallant government, a regression so that there would be no more collaboration. It would not be province-wide.

[*Translation*]

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

[*Original*]

I will remind the minister that the four areas we are looking at are commitments that his government made to advancing the model of care that everyone wants. I have covered three. We will try the last one. We got some progress on Fredericton, no answer for Charlotte County, and a bit of information on Sussex.



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[Translation]

The town of Dalhousie was the fourth place where you promised a collaborative clinic. So, Mr. Minister, how is the project in Dalhousie coming along?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Again, Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question from the member opposite. We have that province-wide approach to a number of clinics, whether it is in terms of primary care, integrated practices, expansion of Horizon clinics, or individual practitioners, and that is why we are encouraging getting this in place. We have a number of other doctors who we are talking to in order to have those clinics opened up. We are more than happy to continue to recruit doctors, nurses, and LPNs.

We have increased the number of seats. We have increased the number of seats for RNs here in the province, and we have increased the international component in trying to get internationally trained and educated people to come to New Brunswick to provide services to the people whom we serve day in and day out. The members across the way are just self-serving, but we are serving the people of New Brunswick.

## AUDITOR GENERAL'S REPORT

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Tomorrow, we will have the chance to have the Chief Medical Officer of Health at the public accounts committee to face questions in response to the Auditor General's report on the COVID-19 pandemic. One finding of the AG was that the Chief Medical Officer of Health was all the way at the bottom of the decision-making hierarchy. There was Cabinet, the COVID-19 Cabinet, the COVID-19 core, the deputy ministers, the assistant deputy ministers, the Health Emergency Operations Centre, and then there she is, number seven, the Chief Medical Officer of Health.

I would like to know why the Chief Medical Officer of Health, who was regularly seen briefing the media and was often portrayed as a key figure in the government's pandemic response, was placed at the bottom of the decision-making hierarchy according to the AG's report. And how can the public trust that the decisions made were founded and were backed up by the Chief Medical Officer of Health and her office when she held a seemingly subordinate role in the decision-making process?

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, thank you very much. I would like to welcome the students who are in the gallery here today. I remember when I did that 15 years ago. Just to explain, the members in the opposition are trying to find some issues that are very divisive, very contentious, to basically try to put this side of the government in a bad light.

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But the reality and the real facts are that this side of the House continues to work very hard day in and day out for the people here in the province. We are backed by a number of dedicated civil servants who also work very hard for the people of the province. The frontline workers, the health care workers, also work day in and day out. During COVID-19 they stepped up, leaned in, and did a great job.

The Chief Medical Officer will be at public accounts tomorrow. I would suggest that the member opposite ask some of those questions tomorrow.

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, L): We do look forward to asking the Chief Medical Officer of Health those questions. Hopefully, we will get better answers than we are getting today. We have asked the Minister of Health—I do not know—eight or nine questions now, but he has not answered one question. Maybe he should go into teaching. He can teach these students here in the province about the Westminster model of politics. Part of that is a question period when the opposition asks the government questions. According to the Premier's 2018 mandate, the government members would truthfully answer all the questions that were asked of them, but the minister has not answered one question that we have asked today.

The other issue that we will see arise tomorrow is the fact that there was this core group of deputy ministers that met about COVID-19. Apparently, they did not keep track with notes of any kind. They had no written mandate from the government. Again, how can we trust that the decisions that are being made are in the best interests of New Brunswickers when there is a lack of transparency with no recordkeeping?

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, to help the students in the gallery understand what is going on here, there is a question period. There is a reason it is called question period. It is not answer period. It is question period. Let's get out the rules. Under paragraph 41(3)(d), it shows that as a response, the minister can choose not to answer. The minister can ask the question to be stated in writing. The minister can also take the question under advisement. Those are the rules of the House. The member across the way can make comments about what is truth and what is not truth, but we are all honourable people here. We are to be taken at our word.

Mr. Speaker, when it comes to the COVID-19 council and what was going on there, we had made a coalition between the Greens, the Reds, and—

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

## INFRASTRUCTURE

**Mr. C. Chiasson** (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Well, that is certainly a lesson on how not to govern. Mr. Speaker, there is an old saying that there is never enough time to do it right but there is always enough time to do it twice. My question about "tar-gate", or more



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specifically the botched tar job on the Princess Margaret Bridge, is for the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure. The expansion joints of the bridge and the bridge itself are designed to accommodate a specific thickness of tar. In this case, a tender was awarded for \$227 298. In this tender, was there any mention of the need to accommodate these 16 expansion joints, and what was the extra cost to DTI to fix this botched tar job?

**Hon. Mr. Ames** (Carleton-York, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure to answer the question as I get to hear who my critic is. I have not heard from him, so thank you. But I have heard the concerns from people in the Fredericton area regarding the bridge. Safety is paramount. We certainly understand that.

There were some repairs that needed to be done to the Princess Margaret Bridge. What actually happened is that they went in and paved, and they did the gradual slope over the expansion joints. What happened is that they had to go back a couple of days later and make some adjustments to those. Everything is great, Mr. Speaker. The department has fixed the problem. We do the work. Thank you.

**Mr. C. Chiasson** (Victoria-La Vallée, L): I would tell the minister to be careful what he asks for, if he wants to know his critic really well. It is understandable that the bridge repairs could cause traffic delays, and the people of Fredericton have been patient. It seems that there was road work also being done on either side of the bridge by the city. This only served to exacerbate the traffic problems and further frustrate the traveling public.

(Interjections.)

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

**Mr. C. Chiasson** (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Can the minister please tell me this: Was there any discussion with the city to coordinate these types of work to minimize the effects on the citizens of Fredericton who travel to and from work on a daily basis? Can the minister provide a revised timeline and cost for the completion of this project?

**Hon. Mr. Ames** (Carleton-York, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I certainly do appreciate the question. Every morning, I wake up to 18 000 km of roads in this province. There are over 5 000 bridges in New Brunswick that we are responsible for. We have over 4 000 cars in our fleet. We do take our commitment very seriously. There was work carried out on the Princess Margaret Bridge to make things better. Thank you very much.

## GOVERNMENT SPENDING

**Mr. Legacy** (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the past few weeks, we have been talking a lot about affordability measures or the lack of them. Last winter, the Minister of Finance introduced the \$300-million New Brunswick Advantage Savings Fund.

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The interest generated from this fund was to have been made available to New Brunswickers to help them with different programs. As of Q1, and actually with every other update, no money has been allocated and nothing has been done with this program. Can the minister give us an update on the status of this fund and indicate exactly where he is going with it?

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you for the question, and thank you for the opportunity to speak on this once again. You are talking about our Advantage Fund. Yes, our Advantage Fund is working out fine, thank you. You mentioned the affordability measures, and they are working out fine as well.

Let's take a look at what has happened since the Gallant days—the debacle that was the Gallant days. Since we took office, the annual deficit has been steadily decreasing. We have eliminated a \$900-million deficit. The net debt in 2023 is \$12.9 billion compared to \$14.3 billion when we took over from the Gallant government.

Service of the Public Debt is currently \$535 million. It was \$667 million, so it is \$132 million less than it was in 2018. Economic impact, other than during the pandemic, is up. The GDP is up. We are looking at about 1% this year. Consensus has it at about 1.2%.

**Mr. Legacy** (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Let's look back to when the announcement was made, Mr. Speaker. The cynic in me would say that it was also at the time when the minister had to explain an \$800-million surplus that was well above what was anticipated. The optimist in me would say that maybe he was creating a new fund that would give us access to some funds that may not fit into other programs.

The problem with going back to Gallant is. . . Let's go back to a couple of months ago. There is \$13 million that has been allocated in the budget. Not one penny has been announced yet. How do we access these funds? What is the structure around this? What are the parameters whereby New Brunswickers can get access to this \$13 million? Absolutely nothing has been mentioned yet. Can the minister clarify how New Brunswickers can access this \$13 million?

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Well, one of the things you can do to access that money is to take advantage of the energy savings that you get through heat pumps. The heat pump program is using that money. That is where the money is going—to help the environment and to help New Brunswickers. That is what we are doing. To save energy is what we are after here, Mr. Speaker. If the members opposite are looking for some examples of where the money is going, that is a really good one right there. If you are getting a mini-split or a heat pump by way of the NB Power program and the NRED program, then that is the money.

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### LOCAL GOVERNMENT

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I said yesterday in my member's statement, I am worried about the direction this government is taking with its Local Governance Reform. We are getting further and further away from a renewed democracy that is closer to the people and their communities, despite what was explained to New Brunswickers while it was happening. What we are hearing about and seeing is an even more centralized local governance system where municipalities have an inherited responsibility without the powers or the resources needed to enact local solutions to local realities. What we are hearing is that the regional service commissions are on the brink of becoming a centralized tentacle of the provincial government—a fourth level of bureaucracy.

The good news is that it is not too late to change course. So, can the minister please explain to us who exactly holds the decision-making at the regional service commission level—his department or our local elected governments?

*[Translation]*

**Hon. G. Savoie** (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Thank you very much for the question, Mr. Speaker. I am always grateful to be given the opportunity to have a debate here on the floor of the House.

*[Original]*

So, Mr. Speaker, the member opposite asked a question around local governance reform. The good news is that we actually undertook this reform. You know, New Brunswick was in a position where individual municipalities and individual communities were struggling. But now, thanks to local governance reform, they have an opportunity under the new structure that we put in place to make sure that they have success.

It takes time to put a structure in place, Mr. Speaker, and we have done that structural reform. It continues, but at the end of the day, we need to make sure that people have an opportunity for their voices to be heard through this structural reform. We need to make sure that the needs of their communities are well understood so that we can make decisions on the structure that will allow for those things to take place. We are doing that work every day, Mr. Speaker. It continues. We are just going to have to continue working in the best—

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Bill Oliver): Thank you, minister.

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[Translation]

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G): The minister speaks as though the reform were concluded, but that is far from being the case. In fact, it is extremely far from being the case. The government tabled a bill yesterday to remove the word “reform” from the title of the department, even if, evidently, the reform is not concluded. The municipalities say that it is not concluded, and the RSCs say the same thing. The government may have taken its foot off the gas, said that it has done what it had to do, and thanked everyone. However, that is not the reality on the ground.

What we hear is that the government is imposing its agenda on RSCs with regard to financial conditions. So, Mr. Speaker, I am going to ask my question again and give the minister another chance to explain himself clearly by answering the question. Can the minister explain to us who exactly makes the decisions regarding the regional service commissions? Is it his department or the local governments?

[Original]

**Hon. G. Savoie** (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Well, thank you again for the question, Mr. Speaker, through you to the member opposite. We went through reform, and I understand the member’s point. The reform is still ongoing, but we have the legislative structures in place. That is why that piece was brought in yesterday. It is just to answer that part of it. At the end of the day, the structural reform is in place. The pieces are in place.

The idea here was to make sure that these regional service commissions have the ability to address the needs of their entire region. Some of these regional service commissions have large municipalities within them. They have large partners that they can work with. Other regional structures do not have large municipalities within them, so they are going to have to work a little bit differently, Mr. Speaker. But we are striving toward and working toward making sure that every single one of those municipalities, rural districts, and local governments have success under these regional service commissions so that, ultimately, everybody succeeds when we work together.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Bill Oliver): Thank you, minister.

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G) : What we are hearing on the ground is exactly this. They do not have that ability. The minister is saying: We want them to have that ability. We have changed the structure so that they have this ability. They do not have that ability. They have the responsibility of making these changes, but they do not have the power or the resources to make the changes that they want to make.

The minister and the people working in his department do not know what the problems are in Bathurst, in Edmundston, or in St. Stephen. They are in offices here in Fredericton,

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and they have centralized this decision-making. They are imposing their own agenda on the regional service commissions. So, my last question, since I am not getting an answer from the minister, is: Why does he not trust democratically elected local government officials? Why do you not trust them?

**Hon. G. Savoie** (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I always enjoy a little bit of theatre here in the House.

The reality is that I have met with mayors to hear exactly what is going on in their communities. I have met with councillors to understand exactly what is going on in their communities. I have met with members of the municipal associations who are the advocates for all those people in those communities, all those councillors, and all those mayors.

Mr. Speaker, we have worked very well with the municipal associations to make sure that we are understanding what the needs are.

You know, the very important thing throughout this, Mr. Speaker, is that, well, we had to put a structure in place to be able to make a change; it had been 60 years. That was far too long for us to have been going the way we were going, so we had to make a change. Now that we have that change in place, we have a responsibility to make sure that we are listening to people and their concerns around how this structural reform continues. That is an important part. As for making sure that we are on the same page and having those dialogues, I am having those dialogues with the municipal associations and the people who are involved.

## SENIORS

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the health of New Brunswickers keeps me up at night. Their access to primary care and their access to preventative care are things that we feel are exceptionally important and key responsibilities of this government. The health of my own kids kept me up last night as we have one kid home from school today, and certainly, the health of my 82-year-old dad keeps me up at night.

In this season of respiratory illness, cold, flu, and more serious things, I am thinking about the seniors in our population. I know that the Minister responsible for Seniors is excited about her new portfolio and cares deeply about it. We have a number of recommendations of things that need to happen in long-term care in order to improve our ability to maintain the health of our most vulnerable. I would like the Minister responsible for Seniors to let us know this: What plans are in place to help ensure the long-term health and the preventative health of this important population of senior New Brunswickers?



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**Hon. G. Savoie** (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Mr. Speaker, this is the last question of the day, so I am going to take the time. . . The Leader of the Opposition likes to do a bit of a recap of what she sees and hears in question period every day, and I would like to do my own recap of the performance of the previous government versus the performance of this one, so I am going to take a minute to do that.

Let's go to the Liberal record from when the Leader of the Opposition was on the bus. Let's talk about \$1 billion added to our debt. Let's talk about a rise in HST that impacted all New Brunswickers, including the most vulnerable. Let's talk about an increase in interest payments on our debt due to a decrease in our credit rating. Let's talk about qualified financial audits. Let's talk about the Liberals' punishing seniors' asset grab, which we stopped, Mr. Speaker. Let's talk about their punishing and disastrous Strategic Program Review, led by some of the Atcon Six. Let's talk about the assessment scandal known as Fast Track.

That is their record, but let's talk about the work that we are doing. We are moving New Brunswick ahead, and we are going to keep it going. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.