

Assemblée législative du Nouveau-Brunswick

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[Original]

HOMELESSNESS

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, New Brunswick is currently experiencing more homelessness than ever.

[Translation]

More homeless people than ever; do you like that slogan?

[Original]

It is certainly not the slogan that New Brunswickers want to see.

The last time that we were in this House, we were seeking answers for the government's lack of progress on out-of-the-cold shelters. The minister had first communicated to the media a deadline of October.

[Translation]

On October 30, the Department of Social Development communicated a new target.

[Original]

I quote: "The intent was to have these hubs open sometime between mid-October and mid-November, so we are still within that timeframe... they will be all be opening within the next few weeks"

It is November 21. None are open yet. We now hear of a third adjusted deadline of December 1. Can the minister provide to this Assembly an accounting for the delay?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I take exception to lack of action because there has been a huge amount of work related to homelessness that has been ongoing. We have been working in the homeless sector since early this summer because we could see what was going to be happening. Winter comes every year, Mr. Speaker.

Saying that the shelters or the hubs are not open is also not correct. We have our Moncton housing hub. It is called Bridge to Home. It is currently open. It is operating on reduced hours, Mr. Speaker, until December 1 when it will be open 24-7. The doors are open. The homeless are welcome. We have met that. When I was speaking about this in the House a

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few weeks ago, I also said that these are individual community-developed hubs in each of the communities. The communities had input on where it is, when it is, and what services are provided there, Mr. Speaker.

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

[Translation]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, so far, the minister has only spoken of solutions for the three biggest cities in New Brunswick. What about the small communities that are also fighting homelessness?

[Original]

Let's take the example of St. Stephen. The community has identified more than 100 people who are living precariously, with 60 to 70 of those confirmed to be living rough right now in the -6°C weather.

The community of St. Stephen and its municipal leaders have been working tirelessly to identify potential solutions. When a piece of land was brought to the province for consideration, it took weeks to get any response. Then they got their hopes up, and the community members sprang into action. They secured trailers. They readied water and sewer, only to learn from the government that it had deemed the land not suitable.

Can the minister explain the delays in assistance to St. Stephen, and why the province's land that was originally set aside for this project is now deemed unsuitable? There are 67 cold New Brunswickers depending on this answer.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am concerned with the numbers that you are using for the number of homeless in St. Stephen. I cannot quote that number, but I am going to take that piece under advisement because I want to come back and talk about that tomorrow.

We are working very closely with the town of St. Stephen. We have worked with the town on different solutions and different options for land. We continue to do so. Yes, the town had identified a piece of land that is owned by the province that it was interested in using for its shelter. It was deemed unsuitable. I am not speaking in the House as to why that piece of property was deemed unsuitable, but we continue to work with the town of St. Stephen to find the right location. We are working with the mayor and the community group. Quite conveniently, the member for that area happens to have an office beside mine, down the street. She is working very, very closely with me to try to find a solution for St.

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Stephen. Our team is on board. We are working with the mayor and council. We are on board, and we will figure this out, Mr. Speaker.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): While the government figures it out, people are sleeping in the freezing cold, so I hope that going forward we see more urgency from the member for Saint Croix and from the Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation. We hear of other communities who are working hard on their own to come up with solutions to their shelter challenges, and some have benefited from federal supports for larger shelter spaces.

[Translation]

So, I hope the provincial government will not try to block federal investments in our communities that are aimed at helping the most vulnerable.

[Original]

We understand that additional funds have been approved to purchase modular units from Newfoundland. Could the minister confirm how much money from the \$8 million committed last year has been allocated to support out-of-the-cold shelters this year? Please indicate by region and by category how it will be spent, and then also explain whether New Brunswick modular developers were considered. I know that this government loves to talk about New Brunswick procurement. So, why were New Brunswick housing firms not considered in this out-of-province purchase?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That was a lot of questions. If I answered each question individually, you would probably have a 40-minute speech on your hands, so I will try to narrow this down in the 50 seconds that I have left.

We have been working cooperatively not only with the business community but also with municipalities and stakeholder groups to provide the right solutions for the homelessness issue in each community. In our major cities, we have developed inreach and outreach teams that will also be providing services to communities in rural New Brunswick to help with their issues related to homelessness. We are thinking outside the box and working on our feet to find solutions in areas such as Miramichi and St. Stephen, and we are making decisions every day about how we can best provide shelter for individuals who are experiencing homelessness. Each week, we adapt as we learn new things. As an example, we were talking about the piece of property that was not suitable. Mr. Speaker, these are individual solutions for individual communities.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I will simplify the question. The commitment last year was \$8 million. The

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government indicated \$2 million for last year, and we believe that, of that, \$1.6 million was spent. How much is budgeted for this year?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I will take it under advisement as to exactly what the financial distribution is. We are providing solutions on the ground to each individual community. There are issues related to security and getting our teams in place to have 24-hour service in these locations. We have inreach teams and outreach teams. We are working with our own teams in the Department of Social Development, the Department of Justice and Public Safety, and the Department of Health. We are providing mental health and addiction training. We are providing housing assistance. We are providing social work assistance to people. We are getting their IDs so that they have the possibility of getting the different benefits that they need.

Mr. Speaker, we are working in the communities. We have inreach and outreach teams. We are providing services based on what each individual community needs, so what is happening in Moncton can be different than what is happening in Fredericton or Saint John. We will continue to work collaboratively together with each community individually to provide them with the services that they need. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, a coroner's inquest into the death of Lexi Daken, who died by suicide after waiting for over eight hours in an emergency room, recently made recommendations that focus on better mental health education for emergency services personnel and on providing more information to the public about mental health resources.

The Child and Youth Advocate for the province believes that, while those recommendations are a step in the right direction, they are not enough to fix the system. He emphasizes three areas that need improvement: inadequate communication between departments, insufficient mental health professionals, and the transformation of pilot programs into integrated systems where people know where to seek help.

Now, the first issue that the advocate requires follow-up on is better collaboration and coordination between departments. I know that this is something that has been talked about since my father did his report in 2009, over 14 years ago. Why is there a lack of progress from this government on increasing collaboration between departments when it comes to integrated mental health services?

Hon. S. Wilson (Moncton Southwest, Minister responsible for Women's Equality; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, I am a mother and a grandmother, and I cannot imagine dealing with the tragedy that the Daken

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family has had to deal with. This is a very tragic situation, one that we take very seriously. Certainly, with the recommendations that have come forward, I want to thank the inquiry and the coroner for this work, because it is very important. We are looking at each and every one of those recommendations so that we can do better and prevent this from ever happening again. Thank you.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, while we recognize that some changes have been made, critics, advocates, and stakeholders in this sector continue to question the government's progress on the file. Issues persist over the long-awaited residential treatment centre, and there are criticisms that emergency services are not the solution and that more resources for community mental health services are needed.

Last year, the Child and Youth Advocate found serious deficiencies with regard to planning and long-term strategizing in several key areas, such as human resource recruitment, community partnerships, First Nations services, and primary care in mental health. Following the coroner's inquest into the death of Lexi Daken, the advocate again made comments around the shortages of health care professionals in the mental health sector. I know that we have a vague commitment or mention in the speech from the throne about 51 funded mental health positions in ERs, but again, how many of those funded positions are filled, and what concrete steps is this government taking to—

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

Hon. S. Wilson (Moncton Southwest, Minister responsible for Women's Equality; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, there have been a number of things done. I started listing them off here last week, telling the opposition that there has been a lot of work done. For example, 70% or 80% of people are now being seen much quicker than they were before. Work continues on creating a facility where we have a recovery centre. This stuff does not happen overnight. But I will tell the opposition members that, if they want to have a sit-down in my office anytime, I will bring them up to speed on all the work that we are doing. Certainly, in a minute, I do not have the time to tell you all the great things that are going on.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, well, she used up 40 seconds, and she had 60 seconds. She could have given us a little bit more. I know that they like to rattle off different programs that they have done, but I will come back to the recommendations that the Child and Youth Advocate made over a year ago. I am waiting for a follow-up, as I know that he is working on a progress report. Another recommendation was about these various pilot projects that this government likes to announce by going around the province doing ribbon cuttings. What is it doing to focus on a universal care system for mental health? The Child and Youth Advocate is recommending that we stop putting band-aid pilot projects out there and that we look at what is working and make those things province-wide in an accessible system for mental health care in the province. So what is the minister responsible for mental health doing? Can she provide specific details on initiatives to turn

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these pilot projects, these different initiatives that they are talking about, into province-wide funded programs?

Hon. S. Wilson (Moncton Southwest, Minister responsible for Women's Equality; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services, PC): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite knows that we have been working. We have been working hard on creating a facility for that. As I mentioned earlier, what I discovered in the few months that I have been in this role is that we do not have a proper recovery centre where we can send people who want to get out of their addictions, who want to improve their lives and lead productive, happy lives. To do that, if we do not have the recovery centre, we cannot put people back on the street and hope that they are going to improve, because they will not. They need to have mental health services that will help them to deal with what drove them to addiction in the first place. So we are working on a recovery centre.

There have been a number of great initiatives, such as Planet Youth for prevention in four different communities in this province. There is the one-step program. We have the Mental Health Helpline now. There have been a lot of initiatives—

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

HEALTH

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, last week the Minister of Finance gave his fiscal and economic update for Q2. In a bit of a twist, he is now forecasting a year-end surplus that is much closer to what had originally been presented in the spring. This is despite the fact that results at the end of the second quarter still gave us no change. We have a second-quarter surplus of \$17.8 million above what had been budgeted for the first six months of the year. This is because revenues are still higher and expenses are still lower than anticipated. For the year-end, the extra surplus announced in Q1 will wither away in the last six months of this year. The minister says that the main reason for the adjustment is in the Department of Health, which will now be \$160 million over budget at year-end.

Can the minister tell us what new health initiatives will be invested in during the last six months of the year to cause this change?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): To the member opposite, thank you for the question. Do you know what? It is hard to figure out the opposition. It is hard to figure out the opposition, Mr. Speaker. Do opposition members want a surplus, or do they want a deficit? Do they actually want us to save money and look forward to the future, or do they want us to spend it all now? When we are closer to what we had already predicted, I would think that they would be happy with that, but they are not. That is not their way. They cannot be happy for New Brunswickers. They cannot be happy with the fact that New Brunswickers are leading a better life now than they ever did during the time of Brian Gallant.

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(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): They cannot get over the fact that here is a Premier who led them through a worldwide pandemic and a terrible economic crisis before that. Do you know what? We have brought this province back to where it should have been. We are taking care of New Brunswickers. We are taking care of the budget, and we will continue to do so. We do the work, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, maybe what the opposition wants are answers.

In the minister's message last week, he said that because of a brighter revenue outlook, the government is going to increase the budget in health care. That is a very proactive message. In his notes, it says that the budget is increasing by \$162 million mainly because there are higher operating and personnel costs. That is a very reactive message. What exactly is happening here? Is the government taking a proactive approach to health care, or is it just paying the bills of somebody who has already spent the money?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, in the whole management of the financial system, if you look back over the past five years, you will see that we have spent more money in health care than at any time in history, particularly in the past couple of years. The affordability measures that are being put in place are a direct result of federal policies that are creating altogether higher costs for New Brunswickers. We have to mitigate poor policies. Really, the root cause is what we have seen in Ottawa.

Mr. Speaker, on health care, look at the spending. What is going to change health care at the end of the day? It is by getting better results for taxpayers' dollars. The solution cannot be about how much more money we can spend and think that that is a credit. The solution is this: How much more can we get for our taxpayers' hard-earned dollars? That has been the focus from the beginning.

Now we are in a position to spend more money because we are not spending \$80 million per year on interest, which was going to banks. We are putting that into the services that are being provided. Services are getting better in hip and knee surgeries and in cataract surgeries. Mr. Speaker, things are improving.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, that was an interesting answer. I still have not heard about any new initiatives in health care that will be done in the next six

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months in order to spend money. Right now, the Department of Health's budget is at budget. It is fine. It just has to be spent in the next six months.

What we do know is that this minister and Premier have always identified themselves as cautious managers and responsible stewards of the budget. What we are seeing is that they are now just victims of circumstances and of whatever events are happening. If they are real managers, what are the tactics? Otherwise, what seems to be happening is that they are just being managed by the situation. Are you managers, or are you being managed?

What I would like to know... We know that they have not been very good at projecting revenues. Is this the beginning of our starting to see their inability to project or manage expenses as well?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to answer that question. The member opposite said that he has not seen any new initiatives, and he asked what initiatives are going to be taken in the next six months. Well, Mr. Speaker, we have done a number of things. There are new initiatives that are making the people of New Brunswick better off when it comes to their health care.

I am going to give you one. I will start off. We expanded the Insulin Pump Program to people beyond age 25. People beyond age 25 can now apply for an insulin pump, and that is a game changer for so many people, Mr. Speaker. That is not the only thing. When members were in committee trying to look for some questions, we announced the continuous glucose monitoring program. We announced that. That is going to make lives better for 5 000 New Brunswickers who are insulin dependent. That is concrete.

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

EDUCATION

Ms. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, along with my colleagues and people across the province, I was shocked and horrified to hear the news this morning that some of our teachers are being armed with Kevlar to protect themselves in schools and in the classroom. Just two weeks ago, the New Brunswick Teachers' Association came out with heartbreaking tales of the violence taking place in our schools. I cannot help but think that so much of this violence is fueled by the minister's harmful words. Months ago, this government committed to providing additional support for inclusion in the classroom. I would like to ask the Minister of Education how the province is recruiting behavioural and inclusion specialists to help teachers in the classrooms now.

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. I take great offense to the suggestion that I have somehow contributed to the violence in the classrooms. You know, we want classrooms and schools that are safe. We work hard to

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make that happen every day. Classroom composition is not a new issue. I have been talking about classroom composition since before we started the consultations on French immersion. That is one of the issues that we have, classroom composition in the prime system, primarily on the Anglophone side, but we also have classroom composition issues on the Francophone side. What we have done is that we have increased the number of behaviour intervention mentors that we have in our school system. We can track the positive outcomes of these mentors through the reduction in adverse behaviours that are registered in PowerSchool. We are going to continue to focus on safe schools. Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs—Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to say to government members that we know that our education system is losing its resources. In these conditions, it is not surprising that teachers are choosing other careers or provinces. We lack teachers, and we are asking those we have to do work that they are neither trained nor equipped to do.

Inclusion in the classroom is a human right and requires adequate resources. I would like the minister to give me more details. I would particularly like him to tell me to what extent the use of Kevlar equipment in the education system has increased over the past year. How much does this protective equipment cost the district and the department? Furthermore, why is this money being used to buy protective equipment instead of to hire well-trained, qualified professionals?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is really important to recruit and retain teachers and other staff in our school system. We continue to aim for the full team we need in our schools for inclusion and teaching French, mathematics, English, and every other subject.

It is true that, over the past few years, some people have had access to equipment that is essential for their safety. That is the work of the school districts. I am holding discussions with school districts now to see how and why this Kevlar equipment is used in the system; I want to know if there are other measures we could take in this regard.

[Original]

PROPERTY TAX

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, a CBC article published yesterday quoted Saint John's Chief Financial Commissioner Kevin Fudge saying that Saint John residents will have to shoulder 100% of the city's property tax revenue increase. This is because of provincial regulations that prevent municipalities from setting industrial property tax rates higher than 1.7 times the residential rate. This rule forces the municipalities that lower residential taxes to offset rapidly rising assessment rates to also lower property tax rates for large industrial sites. When Local Governance Reform began, it was promised that local

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governments would be given greater autonomy, but the necessary resources and tools have not followed the additional responsibilities. Will the Minister of Local Government remove this restriction that is preventing the city of Saint John from raising the tax revenues from industry, which it needs to do to fund vital public services?

Hon. G. Savoie (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Going back to the Local Governance Reform process, we made it clear that we would go through a structural reform, which is what we are doing right now. After that, we would embark on a financial reform. That is to say that back in 2018, Saint John was asking for tax reform. That is a situation that we have embarked upon, and that is going to be rolled into the financial reform that we are going to embark on in 2024.

When you look at what is happening in the market... Residential properties have seen the most growth in assessment compared to heavy industrial properties. You are seeing that the market has been stagnant or at least not as aggressive as the residential markets in terms of the increase. That is why you are seeing a little bit of difference there. The city of Saint John experienced the highest heavy industrial growth at \$4.98 million, so there is—

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

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, for years, Liberal and Conservative governments have talked about fixing Saint John's financial issues without taking any action to fix the root problem. Enough is enough. It is time to give the city of Saint John the power that it needs to ensure that all property owners are taxed fairly. Saint John residents are increasingly subsidizing lower property taxes for large corporations. Since 2020, Saint John residents have to pay 35% more in property taxes when heavy industry has been paying only 6% more. Once again, successive governments are leaving everyday New Brunswickers to foot the bill so that heavy industry can continue to pay less than its fair share. Will the Minister of Local Government end heavy industry's free ride and give the city of Saint John the power that it needs to ensure that all property owners are taxed fairly? If not, maybe he could tell us who is scratching his back.

Hon. G. Savoie (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that is a bit of the narrative today. I think that this is the third time that somebody on this side of the House has had to get up and say: I take great offense to that. There is absolutely no need for the members opposite, especially the member opposite... He knows better. He knows what our jobs are in this House. Now, it is one thing to hold a minister to account, but it is quite another to insinuate that something is being done that is beyond the pale. That is not the case here at all, Mr. Speaker, and I do take great offense to that.

When you look at what we have done, at the end of the day, we have made a tax classification system. That is a change that has come out of the reform so far, but that

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financial reform is not finished yet. As a matter of fact, it has not even begun. It will begin in 2024. When you look at it, you see that we started at 1.5 times the rate of assessment. We have changed that from 1.4 to 1.7 times. That allowed for, if you want it to, heavy industrial classifications to pay 1.7—

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The previous Minister of Local Government had committed to adding more categories to our system in the property tax reforms. Can the minister tell us whether that is still underway?

Hon. G. Savoie (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That was part of my last question. That is exactly what I was talking about. We have instituted—it is already in place—a system where municipalities, entities, can have a range of tax classes. The city of Saint John is asking for greater access to those tax classes. I am saying that we are open to looking at that, though we want to make sure that it is done in the context of the financial reform that is to come.

I think that if we start trying to make commitments here on the floor of the House, that could create a problem with what we are ultimately going to wind up coming up against. We have to make sure that everything we do is done in a provincial context, not only what is going to benefit one single municipality but also what is going to benefit everyone. That is always the trick with reform, Mr. Speaker.

That is one of the reasons that we started going down this road. It is because the system was frayed. Everybody was doing things a little bit differently. Nothing was quite the same. Going through local governance reform was to give that democratic voice to people.

The financial piece is the second part that has—

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I think that the members of the municipal organizations will be really excited to hear the minister commit to financial reform in 2024 because there had been a summit to discuss this, which was canceled. There was a report published on the subject... Sorry, it was not published. There was a report on the subject provided to the government, which has not been published. The municipal reform work that this government has done risks being a disaster without financial reform coming into play. So, I am hoping that the minister can elaborate on his commitment to roll out financial reform in 2024 and on when that will be because this is an urgent issue that municipalities would like to see you address right now.

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Hon. G. Savoie (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that I need to sort of correct the record here a little bit. That financial summit was postponed, and it was postponed for a very good reason.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. G. Savoie (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Sorry. Leader of the Opposition, do you have something else that you want to say?

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): Minister and members, this is not a discussion back and forth. Speak through the Speaker. Thank you.

Hon. G. Savoie (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Sorry, I still hear you guys chirping over there. I thought that you were supposed to do politics differently. I guess that that was a sham as well.

At the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, we can look at what happened with the financial summit, okay? That was committed to. It was committed to, but what was happening was that we were seeing a difference of opinion between the different organizations about what was expected out of that. So rather than trying to produce something that was not going to give us a result that everybody wanted, we decided to step back and make sure that what we were actually putting in place was going to benefit everyone. That is how we make sure that we are doing right by New Brunswickers, Mr. Speaker. Rather than just doing what the Leader of the Opposition would have us do, we are going to do things—

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I can only imagine how New Brunswickers are feeling as they listen to this. They hear the Minister of Finance say that New Brunswickers are doing better than ever when we have more people experiencing homelessness in New Brunswick than ever before. We have more seniors waiting to get access to long-term care than ever before. We have more New Brunswickers who cannot access primary care within 48 hours than ever before. We have more household debt because New Brunswickers are struggling to make ends meet.

That is why, today, we have been asking questions about mental health services. This is an extremely challenging month when people who are struggling with the cost of living are

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feeling it and are looking for support. We have a Minister of Finance who has promised affordability measures. He even suggested that there would be tax cuts. When we had a \$1-billion surplus, it was not the time for tax cuts. Now, we have only a \$35-million surplus, and we wonder whether tax cuts are ever going to happen. What actions for affordability, such as taking Higgs' carbon tax off, will this government—

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, you know, finally, we actually have an agreement with the Leader of the Opposition. She is right. We have more people in New Brunswick than ever before—80 000 plus in the past two and a half years. We have never experienced this. People are finding New Brunswick for the first time and loving it. Does it present challenges? Absolutely. There are 7 000 more students. We were closing schools five years ago. I am sure that the Leader of the Opposition will remember that because she was there as the province was declining and in charge of the Jobs Board when the 3 500 people who were hired were government employees. That was the job-creation plan. It was not from the private sector. It was not in having more money invested in the province. It was from government money and taxpayer dollars.

So, when we have more money to spend, it is because taxes have actually gone down at the same time and we are paying less interest. There are challenges with having more people in our province. There are housing challenges. There are homeless challenges. These are good problems to have, but they are challenges, and we will meet each and every one of them, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much.

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