

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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[Original]

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On October 1, I asked the Minister of Health about the collaborative primary care clinics that we have been advocating for for years and that we saw in the speech from the throne a year ago. There was a commitment to four, with one of those being in Fredericton. So, the announcement this week . . . I think that the minister mentioned on November 1 that this Fredericton collaborative care clinic would be in the Brookside Mall and would be open in six months. So, the news this week had me pause and say, Is this urgent care clinic the collaborative primary care clinic that the minister was talking about, or is he actually going to deliver to the people of Fredericton a home for their permanent primary care services? Could you clarify, minister?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, when I made the announcement at the urgent treatment centre in the Brookside Mall, I was clear in my remarks that there would also be a collaborative care clinic in that mall. That work is continuing. It is continuing, and, of course, that involves recruitment, a letter of intent with the Brookside Mall, and architectural work for the space to make sure it is efficient and effective.

That is not the only work that is being done in the Fredericton area. As you know, Mr. Speaker, the centre just down the road here is taking calls and taking patients, and, of course, there is that urgent care treatment centre. Again, yesterday, I was accused that it was going to be an empty clinic.

Well, we went over there, and it was fully staffed. It had all the equipment that was needed. Mr. Speaker, it had serviced almost 60 people by noon. That is getting the work done.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am wondering whether the minister can confirm two things. We learned from the people who went over to the clinic that they had to wait for hours and hours and hours. Multiple families turned around and went home because they could not get service at that clinic. Could you confirm when it will be fully staffed and when it will be open full-time?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, on a recommendation from the Attorney General, it was suggested that I ask for the names of the people who left, why they left, and what their ailments were. The clinic, the centre across the way—

(Interjections.)

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

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Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): It is for urgent care, Mr. Speaker—urgent care. It is done on a first-come-first-serve basis. It is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Monday and Wednesday. As the recruitment continues and as the management of the ER continues, that will be open further. Again, it is up to the RHAs to manage those types of decisions.

Mr. Speaker, I do want to give a shout-out to Dr. Pulchan, who is the head of the ER. He was actually over there at the opening and decided to put his scrubs on and go help the people. Those are the types of individuals who are making this health care system work, not the disparaging remarks that are made by the members across—

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

AIR QUALITY

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, New Brunswickers care about clean air. We have seen that time and time again. This House successfully and unanimously passed a motion to improve the *Clean Air Act* in New Brunswick and to make sure that we are monitoring, reporting on, and improving clean air in the buildings that the government is responsible for. Unfortunately, yesterday the government members voted against improving clean air for seniors in long-term care facilities. But I want to focus on what they agreed to support, which is clean air in schools.

We have a school just down the way, George Street Middle School, that was deemed to have levels of CO₂ too high for the students and teachers there. It exceeded the 1 500 ppm mark, but this government said that this school is not on the list for ventilation upgrades because at some point, the school will be replaced. There is no plan to replace that school, so a new school is at least three years away. Is this government telling the students and teachers at George Street Middle School, and those students' parents, that they have to stay and study in a school without clean air for the next three years?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): It is a pleasure to rise and talk about this important issue that we have in our schools—clean air—and our continuing commitment to the health and safety of our students in the province.

We do measure the CO₂ levels in our schools. In 2022-23, we tested 35 schools that have regular occupancy during the winter. Of those schools, 29 of them had peak readings above 1 500 ppm. George Street Middle School had the highest peak reading, which was at 3 418 ppm. However, that is still well below the WorkSafeNB guidance of 5 000 ppm. I am not quite sure where the evidence is that this is a crisis because it is not.

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The other part of that is that we do not build schools overnight. We announce them, and it takes three to five years to build a school, Mr. Speaker.

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

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Mr. Speaker, every morning we wake up to 18 000 km of highway, 5 500 bridges and large culverts, 401 government-owned buildings, 4 200 fleet vehicles, and a hard-working staff at DTI.

Now that we have that out of the way, there seems to be a bit of action around the new justice building downtown. I contacted the department to get some information, but unfortunately there seems to be a gag order in the department as half of my emails have been completely ignored. I have been told that the others were forwarded to the minister's office.

I will ask a very specific question: Can the minister please tell me whether the tender for the management of this project has been awarded?

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Flemming, K.C. (Rothesay, Minister of Justice, Attorney General, PC): Please. I am well familiar with what is going on at the justice building. It is an issue to do with the supply chain and things of that nature.

The tender went out. The tender came in at almost \$25 million over the DTI-estimated amounts, and only one person tendered. Everybody else—all the usual suspects—has a lot of work, and they simply did not tender. The one company that did tender said, If you want us to do it, here it is. I am not prepared to be taken over a barrel by a Toronto construction company for \$25 million. I am not prepared to do it. I cannot justify that, and I will not.

Having said that, the building will proceed. We are working on DTI project-managing the building itself. Stay tuned for more, because it is going to be one of the finest justice buildings in Canada.

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La Vallée, L): So, was there or was there not an RFP put out for the management of this building? DTI is going to manage it itself now. That is what I understand.

Mr. Speaker, the original plan for a justice building called for a transformation and addition to the existing Centennial Building at a cost of \$76 million. If completed, it would have

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become a revenue generator for the province, as the government departments that were renting from outside landlords could have moved in and saved rental costs to the province.

The current plan, at another location, was estimated at \$60 million, but we need to add \$13 million in cancellation fees paid on the previous project. Now, the project is \$73 million. The tender came back at \$93 million. Under the management model, what is now the estimated cost?

Hon. Mr. Flemming, K.C. (Rothesay, Minister of Justice, Attorney General, PC): Project management, if you know anything about it, is where the project manager subs out all the various types of trades. Those costs are being put together now. We all know that there are supply chain costs and escalating costs. We are working diligently to make sure that New Brunswick and the people of the province get the best value for their money that they can.

As I said, we have got this proposal in. We have got this tender in. I am not going to be held to ransom by some Toronto construction company for \$25 million. I am not doing it. I am not prepared to do it. Nor would anyone over there be held for ransom—no sensible person would.

So, when something such as this happens, what do you do? You regroup. You reassess. You look at all the trades and, if not the trades, anything else. We will put together a package. This will be an outstanding building, and I am confident that it will be done properly.

HEALTH

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): Mr. Speaker, Health Region 5 in the Restigouche area is the only region that does not have a fully functional obstetrics unit. This was supposed to be a temporary closure three years ago.

[Translation]

This is unacceptable; it should be possible to give birth at the Campbellton Regional Hospital.

[Original]

With the winter approaching, travelling time on winter roads is a dangerous situation. Will the minister and his officials meet with Vitalité and, once and for all, find a solution to have obstetrics reopened in Campbellton full-time?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have no trouble meeting with Vitalité. We meet with Vitalité on a regular basis to talk about the various issues not only in the zone that you mentioned but also in all the zones right across the province.

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Our department has actually gone forward with a human resources department, which is now assisting the RHAs in recruiting doctors. Mr. Speaker, that was not done before. We are helping the RHAs to focus. We are helping them to find doctors and recruit them here. We have had success in the past year, and we are continuing to have success.

Pointed specifics, such as the one regarding obstetrics in Campbellton, are still on the radar. Recruiting an obstetrician to move there is one of the items that we continue to talk about, but we are recruiting toward having a number of different specialists within the province. That is why we are looking at some international missions to recruit doctors.

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister has been traveling the province opening cataract surgery clinics while he has one health region where there is no cataract surgery available whatsoever. The Campbellton Regional Hospital has the equipment to do that surgery. I again ask the minister to meet with Vitalité. Get it done—get it done. You can do it. I have faith in you. Get it done. Open the cataract surgery unit at the Campbellton Regional Hospital. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the vote of faith that the member opposite has put in me. I appreciate that. The fact of the matter is that there are a lot of really smart people willing to help. That is what makes my job as Health Minister bearable and, most days, a real joy. We know that the work is not done yet. We know that we need to continue to recruit for various specialties. We need to recruit for various clinics, such as for cataracts, as was mentioned. That has been a success in Bathurst and Miramichi, and we just cut the ribbon at one in Fredericton. Yes, do not hold back. That was a good opening.

I am more than happy to meet with Vitalité and talk about the needs of the member's area. The success has been there, Mr. Speaker. Since April 1, we have had a net gain of 45 new doctors. In the past five years, we have had a net gain of 127 doctors. That is—

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

[Translation]

SMALL MODULAR REACTORS

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, last week, we found that the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development had nothing to say about funding small modular reactors, even though his department is responsible for the file.

He is passing the buck to the Minister responsible for Opportunities NB. So, could this minister explain to us whether the \$20 million in funding has all been disbursed and tell us what the conditions for the funding were?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, I am not quite sure whether he has been hearing me, but for the past five years, I have spoken quite extensively about small modular reactors (SMR). It is actually something that we are going to present centre stage at the World Nuclear Exhibition in France next week. New Brunswick is going to be front and centre as a leader on the globe as it relates to this emerging technology. It has been five years of me speaking quite extensively about this. Standing behind this technology is what has led us to the point where we are now being highlighted as a world leader. Quite frankly, I think that we would have to go back into Hansard. We could go back into the media. I have spoken quite extensively about this. I am not sure why the member opposite is saying that the minister is not willing to speak about the SMR technology.

At the end of the day, the technology for SMRs has been invested in a couple of times and on a couple of different fronts. Would the member opposite have any form of clarification about this exciting field that we here in New Brunswick are committed to?

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Clearly, the government needs a Team A to replace the Team B to answer questions. My question was clear. What about the financing? Is it done? Is the \$20 million done? What were the conditions? Also, were all the conditions met, yes or no? The question is to the Minister responsible for Opportunities New Brunswick, not the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, based on his answer at committee last week.

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, a question like that deserves the fulfillment of context. That funding agreement was embarked upon a number of years ago, and not unlike how funding agreements that were started by the former Gallant government have been fulfilled. We have seen the conditions being met. Quite frankly, we should all be proud of the fact that academia and students in New Brunswick can now go to UNB and study the engineering technology and sciences related to nuclear energy. That is very fitting considering the opportunities that field is going to present not only here in New Brunswick but also throughout the entire globe.

The funding agreement will conclude at the end of this fiscal year. We are very excited to see that we had structured that funding agreement in such a way that ensured that private sector funding exceeded government funding. This is a government that is not only open to investing but that is also protecting the province's interests. We are quite pleased with the completion of that agreement. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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[Translation]

SCHOOLS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, parents of students at École Saint-Henri wrote a letter to the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure and the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development to express their concerns about increasing crowding at the school.

As is the case for a number of other schools, École Saint-Henri has seen a significant increase in enrolment over the years. Even though this population growth problem is positive for the city, it causes problems in schools. This very serious problem at École Saint-Henri is expected to be addressed in the capital budget, so can the minister confirm whether that is in fact the case?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I have already told the member for Moncton Centre when he sent me an email, we are facing a unique problem.

Since just over two years ago, enrolment has increased by about 7 000 students, which has created challenges in terms of available spaces for these young people. So, in some places, we use portable classrooms and create new spaces as quickly as possible.

I have already been to École Saint-Henri and understand the problem there. I agree that this school needs help to create more spaces and I am sure there will be something in the capital budget. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Minister. I will be waiting for good news when the capital budget is tabled, then.

Another serious and pressing problem is the construction of a hallway leading to the portable classrooms currently being used at École Saint-Henri. There are four portable classrooms on site. The framework for the hallway has been completed, but it is empty, so the students have to go outside to get to a washroom. It is getting cold, but the construction of the hallway has not been completed. When is the construction of the hallway leading to the portable classrooms at École Saint-Henri expected to be completed?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): It is a pleasure to answer this question, because it is very important. There are many portable classrooms in our province, and, as I said, that is because of the increase in the number of students in New Brunswick. Enrolment in our schools has increased by about 7 000 over the past two years.

One of the challenges we must meet is to finish attaching these portable classrooms to our schools. We are working as hard and fast as we can to get the work done. We had to wait

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for more portable classrooms at the start of the year, so we are going to continue working to create the space we need in our schools. It will be done as quickly as possible. It is with our entrepreneurs . . .

[*Original*]

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

MUNICIPALITIES

Mr. J. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister has received a copy of an important report on fiscal reform that has been mandated in the municipal reform white paper document. It has been on the minister's desk now for months. Can the minister tell us why he has not tabled the report and when it will be done?

Hon. G. Savoie (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Mr. Speaker, through you to the member opposite, thank you very much for the question. Before I begin, I do have to express my appreciation for the efforts of the member for Dieppe this morning. It is nice to know that my performance a few weeks ago, or whenever it was, here on the floor of the House has had such a lasting effect and that I am living rent-free in the opposition member's head. It is quite a bit of fun.

Look, as far as the report goes, Mr. Speaker, yes, that is something that was committed to. That process started in May of last year. It was a complex process because we wanted to make sure that we were doing it right. We wanted to make sure that the report has the right details that people are asking for—that the municipalities are asking for. Ultimately, as we went through the process, and as we found that the authors were going through the process . . . This is no fault of theirs. At the end of the day, we want to make sure that what we put out has the correct information. What we wound up doing is asking the authors to go back and redo that report. So that is what they have done.

Mr. J. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, a promised municipal summit on fiscal reform scheduled for September of this year has been postponed, with no date set. All three municipal associations are very disappointed that this promised summit did not happen. As the Union of the Municipalities of New Brunswick is holding its annual general meeting this weekend, can the minister today tell us the reason and commit to when the summit will be hosted?

Hon. G. Savoie (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Thank you very much again, Mr. Speaker, through you to the member opposite. Yes, as I was saying, we went through the process of trying to get the report done. Through no fault of the authors, the numbers were just not quite there. Nobody could have predicted the shift in numbers that we actually wound up seeing. We want to make sure that the report has accurate numbers that make sense.

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We can use that as a framework to build on for the summit and for Finance 2.0. Starting off in a place where it was based on assumptions that were incorrect did not make sense, nor did having a meeting that did not satisfy the needs of everybody that was involved. Mr. Speaker, one of the key things about reform is making sure that we do what needs to be done to help the greatest number of New Brunswickers and the greatest number of municipalities. When that report comes out, we are going to make sure that it is based on those correct numbers and deals with what people need so that we can start a factual conversation. We will then have the summit, and we will launch Finance 2.0. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, a year ago, I tabled Bill 27 to ensure that all New Brunswickers would have access to paid sick leave. It was referred to the law amendments committee, which held public hearings on the bill last February. The committee recommended to the Legislature that the bill not proceed in its current form but that the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour undertake a review of the issue of paid sick days and report back to this House.

Mr. Speaker, that was nine months ago now, and this House has received no report from the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour. We are well into the season of COVID-19, flu, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). Without paid sick leave, workers are forced to go to work carrying their viral load because they cannot afford to stay home. Can the minister explain why she has not reported her findings on paid sick leave to this House?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member opposite very much for that question. It will be taken under advisement and reported back to the House. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, a large percentage of the people who do not have access to paid sick leave are low-wage workers. The fact that they cannot stay home when they are sick means that other people will become sick. Paid sick leave clearly benefits the economy as a whole. Paid sick leave not only reduces the spread of disease in the workplace, but also the long-term costs for our health care system. Studies show that workers rarely use up all their paid sick leave. When will the minister introduce a bill to establish paid sick leave?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, again, I rise to say thank you to the member opposite for the question. Related to that subject, and to any group that is facing situations that need our attention, you can rest assured that the utmost attention is being paid. Specific to that question, this will be taken under advisement. We certainly look forward to speaking more about this in the future. Thank you very much.

[Translation]

FLOODS

Ms. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My constituents whose properties sustained substantial damage during the flood on June 29 are still waiting for answers from the government regarding their claims under the Disaster Financial Assistance Program. A number of people have had their claims denied without knowing why or receiving a detailed explanation. There is no deadline, and, apparently, the assessment process could last several months more. It is not long until Christmas, and many people are worried after having waited for months. Mr. Speaker, I am asking the Minister of Public Safety to give the House an update on the status of the claims submitted by the people affected by the flash flood in Madawaska on June 29. Thank you.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Minister of Public Safety, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question. When the disaster happened, I know that I and the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure toured the whole area up there. I know that there was a bridge that was completely taken out. It was remarkable how quickly DTI got on that to remediate that situation. We also toured the areas of the flood and the residences that were affected. It is always a tragedy when natural disasters strike.

I can tell you that our department has worked very diligently to ensure that money is paid out—in advance in a lot of cases—to ensure that these people, businesses, and municipalities are able to recoup and rebuild. However, with that said, there is a Disaster Financial Assistance (DFA) process. We do that so that there is no fraud, so that it is clear, and so that the rules and eligibility requirements are met. We are not going to thwart that process. It is a process that we have to go through to protect the taxpayer as well as those that are affected by these issues. We are continuing to work on that, and we should have an answer soon. Thank you.

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[Translation]

SCHOOLS

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am going to ask the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development another question, because I think parents of students at George Street Middle School here in Fredericton are not really satisfied with his answers concerning CO₂ levels in the school.

[Original]

I think that all of us have learned over the past number of years what levels of CO₂ are appropriate, based on the pandemic. We have seen the Public Health Agency of Canada set guidance. We have seen the U.S. association for heating engineers set guidance that differs from WorkSafeNB. So I think that WorkSafeNB should be updating its levels.

The parents of the students at George Street Middle School met this week and are deeply concerned about this, and I do not think that they will be satisfied to hear from the minister that their students are expected to stay in a building with high CO₂ levels for the next—I believe that he said—three to five years. Can the minister confirm what he is doing to ensure that the students of George Street Middle School are safe?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To clarify what I said—and the member opposite is welcome to go back to Hansard—I said that it takes three to five years to build a new school. I did not say that it will take three to five years to build a school to replace George Street Middle School.

We continue to do air quality testing in the province. We continue to replace the ventilation systems and to upgrade the ventilation systems in the province. Certainly, we do not like to see any schools that have more than 1 500 ppm in the air that the students have to breathe day in, day out. However, WorkSafeNB has set the level at 5 000 ppm for when it is a danger to somebody's health. That is our WorkSafeNB, and we respect what it is doing. However, we do have a multiyear plan that continues to upgrade and replace the ventilation systems in the schools in our province. Thank you.

GOVERNMENT FINANCES

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the past five years, New Brunswickers have suffered under this Premier's knee-jerk, rash, and, in his words, "data my ass" decision-making.

Millions more have been spent on a justice building that could have been built by now, millions more have been spent on a New Brunswick museum that could have been built by

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now, more than \$2 million has been spent on an unjustified dismissal case, millions of dollars have been spent on lawyers to do his Indigenous relations for him, and millions have been spent on his election indecision. This Premier's "my way or the highway, Father knows best" model of decision-making is costing New Brunswickers their health, their education system, and their homes, and it is costing us our reputation as a province. Will the Premier deliver to New Brunswickers an accounting of the cost of his indecision?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, we do an accounting every day, and we do one every year. It is better in this province than it has ever been.

We just heard it right there from the Leader of the Opposition. She said: They could have spent millions more on this, millions more on that, and millions more on something else. Do you know what the Liberals would have had? Millions more in debt—billions more in debt—because that is what they do best. They spend taxpayers' dollars, raise taxes, and have billions more in debt.

We are in a better financial position than we have ever been, which allows us to now afford those projects without more debt, and, in fact, while managing our debt. Now, I know that this is a totally foreign concept to the members opposite—totally foreign. They just do not get that you can actually manage your expenses, reduce taxes, get better service, and, yes, at the same time, bring people who have never been to New Brunswick here in droves. Yes, we have challenges because of our population growth, but is it not something? There are 7 000 more students, when two or three years ago, during the Leader of the Opposition's time in the government, we were closing schools—closing schools.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): Question period is over. I will remind the members that I previously ruled on the "data" statement, and I said that I would not like to hear that phrase being used in the House, so I will caution the members this time. Thank you. Moving on.