

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



October 18, 2023

CONTENTS

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Holt
Hon. Mr. Fitch
Ms. Holt
Hon. Mr. Fitch
Ms. Holt
Hon. Mr. Fitch
Ms. Holt
Hon. Mr. Fitch
Ms. Holt
Hon. Mr. Fitch
Ms. Holt
Hon. Mr. Fitch
Ms. Holt
Hon. Mr. Fitch
Ms. Holt
Hon. Mr. Fitch

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

TEACHERS

Ms. Holt

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Ms. Holt

Hon. Mr. Higgs

MINISTERS

Ms. Holt

Hon. Mr. Hogan

Ms. Holt

Hon. Mr. Hogan

Hon. Mr. Hogan

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Fitch

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Fitch

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Fitch

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Fitch

Hon. Mr. Fitch

EDUCATION

Ms. Holt

Hon. Mr. Hogan

GOVERNMENT AGENDA

Ms. Holt

Hon. Mr. Higgs

SCHOOLS

Ms. Holt

Hon. Mr. Hogan

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

GASOLINE PRICES

Ms. Holt

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Ms. Holt

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Ms. Holt

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Ms. Holt

ELECTIONS

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Ms. Holt

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the one thing that is critically important to every New Brunswicker is their health and the health of their loved ones. We have the privilege and responsibility of hearing stories every day from people who are waiting and waiting to receive the care that they need, whether that is at an emergency room, at a clinic, or waiting on the waiting list for a doctor. We are here to get answers for New Brunswickers. So my first question is about leadership, responsibility, and accountability.

The government put a health plan in place in 2021. The Premier then fired a CEO, blew up the boards, put trustees in place, and started taking all the health decisions himself. Lately, we understand that the Premier has pulled out of health micromanagement because he has been distracted by some other things. So your answer will impact how I direct my next questions. New Brunswickers want to know this: Whom should we hold accountable for the state of our health care system today?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, it is a real privilege for me to stand up in the third session of the 60th Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick and take a question on health. We know how important health is for the people of New Brunswick. I would infer from the fact that we are asking health questions as opposed to throne speech questions that the opposition will support the throne speech of this government. Thank you very much. I appreciate your doing that.

Mr. Speaker, over the summer there has been a significant amount of work going on in the health care department, within the regional health authorities (RHAs), and with all the service providers here within the province. Over the next number of days during question period, I will be more than happy to update the opposition on what has been going on. Here in the province, one of the main things that I think is so important is that the RHA boards have been put back together with an additional collaboration board that is going to address all the issues that—

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is good to know that the Minister of Health is going to be the scapegoat that the Premier can blame for the lack of results in the health care system. I appreciate Mr. Fitch getting up. I would be happy to talk about the health from the speech from the throne except that there is not anything in the speech from the throne on health that responds to what New Brunswickers are looking for answers on. New Brunswickers are waiting.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Translation]

When New Brunswickers are on a waiting list for primary care, they expect and need answers. They want to know where they are on the list. Can the Premier or the Minister of Health tell us how many people are on a waiting list for primary care today?

[Original]

How many people are on the waiting list for primary care today?

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): Before I call on the minister, I will just remind you that members are called by their department or their riding, not by name.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): I would normally quip: Learn the rules or resign. However, I am not going to do that today because this is a very, very important item. Actually, it is good news, good news that the opposition does not want to hear.

We could talk about hip and knee surgeries and how that wait time has been reduced significantly over the last number of months. We could talk about cataract surgeries and how significantly those have been reduced because of the legislation that was put in place by this government on this floor. The members opposite opposed it. They opposed that we should take care of the people that had been waiting so long to get cataract surgeries.

Once again, so soon, I find myself holding the opposition accountable for what they are saying here. Mr. Speaker, even within the throne speech, there are a number of initiatives that are highlighted that show that people are getting service. We know that the work is not done, and we are going to continue to do the work so that the people continue to get service.

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I hope that the Minister of Health will answer this specific question because New Brunswickers are concerned about primary care. Every day we speak to parents that are calling, trying to get an appointment, wondering where they are on the Patient Connect list, hearing that they might get put on Health Link, waiting to hear, finding themselves on Health Link, and still not having a primary care provider. They want to know where they are in the line and how long the wait is going to continue. Could the Minister of Health please answer for New Brunswickers how many of them are waiting for primary care? Not hip and knee surgeries. Not cataract surgeries. How many are waiting to get access to the basic care that their families need?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, thank you very much. Again, Mr. Speaker, there is more good news when it comes to people waiting for primary care. We

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

know that there is more work to be done. The population of New Brunswick has grown by almost 100 000 people. Some 100 000 people require education, doctors, nurses, and primary care. Yes, we know that there are going to be people that are concerned about their health care, and we are reacting to that.

Back in the summer of 2022, 74 000 people were on the wait list for primary care, for a physician. Mr. Speaker, because of our work with Health Link, because of the people that have registered, there are 41 700 patients registered for NB Health Link. Clinics have been established in Moncton, Dieppe, Dalhousie, Fredericton, Woodstock, Miramichi, and Bathurst. We are continuing to do the work. Right now, the good news is that there are only 20 000 people on that wait list, and we are going to continue to work for them.

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will just check the math. You said that it was 74 000 people with 41 700 on Health Link. To me that leaves 33 000 people that are still on Patient Connect. So it is unfortunate to hear you say that it is good news that there is more work to be done and that there are 100 000 people arriving here. I think we are going to add them to that Patient Connect list.

But let's talk about Health Link. How many people have successfully moved from Health Link to permanent primary care?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, I love the opposition. They are going to, again, look at a number or something said and spin it or take it in a different direction. If they receive information that is good news, they will say, yeah but. They will want something else. They will want something different. When we talk about the good news, the number of people who have been moved off this list, again, this list is changing all the time because we have new people coming off. People are dropping off for various reasons, because they have found a permanent home. Again, we can look at the work that has been done in the various communities that I have talked about here, and we know that those clinics are going to continue. It is not the final number. You know, because the opposition always either takes a number out of context or changes the tone of it, I will take that under advisement. I am sure that they are going to take that number and use it—

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): I am happy to help the Minister of Health with the numbers if he does not have them at his fingertips. I believe that it was at public accounts that the Department of Health said that about 2 000 people have actually received primary care and have come off of this two-phase waiting list, Patient Connect to Health Link. So, that is 2 000 New Brunswickers out

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

of 74 000. We would like to know what your plan is. We appreciate that there was a health care plan that had deadlines and targets.

[Translation]

There was one particular item that told us that, in September 2022, you were going to eliminate the waiting list. After that, everything was revised.

[Original]

It was revised again, and revised again. I think the latest target that you put forward was June of this past year, but New Brunswickers want to know: What are you doing to eliminate the list of 72 000 people who are sitting on Patient Connect and Health Link and waiting for primary care in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Again, Mr. Speaker, if the member opposite had a number, why did the member opposite not put that number forward as opposed to trying to politicize and weaponize it here on the floor of the Legislature? That is what the opposition is all about, Mr. Speaker. Trying to cause despair in the population of New Brunswick when it comes to the work that is being done in health care. We know that there is more work to be done, and that is why we are recruiting physicians, RNs, and other health care workers all the time. That is not just here in the province, where we have increased the number of seats for RNs and for the medical doctor practices. We have increased the residency seats. Mr. Speaker, the list goes on and on and on about what we are doing to provide primary care to the people here in New Brunswick. We know that Health Link is a temporary measure, and it is unfortunate that everyone does not get that. But as a matter of fact, Mr. Speaker, we continue to work—

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that there was some information about recruitment in the speech from the throne. I think that it was 20 doctors over a year. So given the current waiting list, it looks as though, if we are recruiting 20 doctors per year, assuming no more population growth, it will take about three years from now until you successfully achieve your commitment to eliminate the waiting list.

[Translation]

I hope the Minister of Health can confirm to us that this is his goal, because, right now, there is a three-year wait for people and their families who want to get access to primary care here in New Brunswick.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, again, Mr. Speaker, we know that in the throne speech were the gains we are seeing across the professionals, with a net increase of 100 doctors since 2018. The member across the way is trying to paint a picture that may not be as accurate as it could be or should be in the province. We know that there is more work to be done. And that is why, within the Department of Health, we have created the Health Human Resources Division. Those people are recruiting internationally. They are going out and recruiting RNs and health care workers.

When you look at the barriers that we have removed for internationally trained nurses to come here to New Brunswick and have their credentials recognized, you can look back at what the Gallant government did to remove those barriers. Let me just take a minute to read the list of the Gallant government accomplishments: Oh, there are none.

Mr. Speaker, when we look at the number of internationally trained nurses and doctors that have come here—

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

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

[Translation]

I am happy that the Minister of Health is talking about nurses, because that is something that was missing in the throne speech. I appreciate that the member of the third party in the House mentioned that there is no retention plan.

[Original]

You are talking about recruiting more people. But if you are losing them out the back end, then your recruitment efforts will be in vain. We are competing desperately with the provinces around us to retain our valued nurses and nurse practitioners. Can the minister please reassure the House and New Brunswickers? What action is being taken on a retention plan for the nurses of New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, there are negotiations that are commencing. There is a contract with the RNs within the province. We hope to have a very fruitful discussion during those contract negotiations. We hope that some of the discussions that we have had already—the Premier, me, and the Minister of Finance—on what can be done will make sure that there is a reasonable and acceptable agreement that would include not only retention issues but also some of the other issues

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

that are concerns of the union. We met with the union as well to try to hear some of the concerns of the frontline workers.

We are, again, trying to make sure that people have a safe and welcoming environment where they can thrive. When you see the enrollment numbers and the students that have come forward, there are also a number of people who are realizing that New Brunswick is a great place to work.

I am not alone. I had my FPT meetings last week. Everyone is concerned about health care workers and recruitment—

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

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

[Translation]

I have two questions for the minister on this. How many students are there in the Beal University program?

[Original]

How many people are enrolled in the Beal University program for September? Could you tell us when you anticipate the negotiations with the RNs to be completed?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Beal University is a unique opportunity where the first year can be done online. I believe that there are about 80 or 81 students. Maybe the member has a specific number that they want to share with the House here today. Again, the interest in that program was significant which, again, shows that people are willing to step up to help the health care system.

Now, there are also renovations being done down in Sackville, where some of those students can go and take their second year here in the province. So, that is innovative. That is really something that is creative, Mr. Speaker.

When the member opposite talks about the various aspects of recruitment and retention, we continue to work with the union and the association. We are so pleased that the association has helped us recognize the credentials of some of those internationally trained nurses. The union said, We want more people. We are producing more people.

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

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Translation]

TEACHERS

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

[Original]

I am deeply concerned about the state of our education system. Teachers, students, and staff have experienced so much turmoil over this past year. They are striving to deliver quality education while being undermined by their government.

Premier Higgs, you were interviewed at the protest of September 20 and stated that teachers are teaching kids to lie. Can you confirm today that this is what you believe of our teachers? Or will you apologize for that statement?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I did attend, here in front of the Legislature, a rally, a children's march, that was very peaceful. It was not a protest, Mr. Speaker. There was nobody protesting on this lawn. So, I was part of that. I did talk to a lot of very concerned parents who want a role in their child's future. This whole thing is about: What is the role that parents should play? This is for their children up to age 16, in particular. It is interesting that we even have a debate on this topic because parents have always been key to their children's future and key to helping children make their decisions. They have been key, Mr. Speaker, in relation to the continuity that exists in their homes.

Yes, Mr. Speaker, we know that not all homes are the best. But you cannot have a policy that just rules out all homes universally. So, I would say that there is a role for parents in kids' lives, in today's society as well as in the past. There is a role for us to be able to find a way to protect children. But I would ask the Leader of the Opposition: Where does she stand on the role of parents?

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): I remind the Premier that this is question period, Mr. Speaker, and that the questions go this way.

I think that the teachers of New Brunswick need to hear from you because the teachers have been undermined by your comments and you have made it more difficult for them to deliver for the students of New Brunswick. The teachers need to hear you acknowledge that you respect their work and that you do not believe they are teaching children in New Brunswick to lie. You are creating mistrust between parents and teachers, and you are undermining the education system. Can you reassure teachers that you will support them and that you do not believe they are teaching kids to lie?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I can see why the Leader of the Opposition would not want to state a position. She has done this on a number of issues—avoid the issues that are at hand. There will be a point in time when she has to recognize whether parents play a role in kids' future or whether they do not. There is a balance here that I am confident we can find.

Having a policy that basically puts teachers in a very difficult position between parents and kids is not right. What has been put forward by the Minister of Education is a policy that finds a path forward—a path forward so that parents are engaged. Across this country and across this province, we have seen—the Leader of the Opposition must have seen—that parents want to be engaged. Mr. Speaker, we should not be putting teachers in that role. Of course, I respect the role of teachers in the lives of our kids and certainly in the educational impact that they have. And I respect what needs to be taught in school to provide an education that allows them to be successful. So, Mr. Speaker, let's get back to the basics, and let's ensure that our teachers have the right tools to work with.

MINISTERS

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On September 20, Leo Hayes High School in Fredericton was locked down because of a student carrying a toy gun. On October 6, École secondaire Népisiguit was locked down because of a student with a BB gun. In schools all over our province, students learn hold-and-secure and lockdown protocols every year to keep them safe.

Yesterday's speech from the throne included a paragraph saying that we must "question misinformation that stokes fear, distrust, and division. We must never condone violence, intimidation, or intolerance of any form." Two days earlier, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development spread misinformation about statements saying that all parents beat their kids and he promoted violence by saying that "it's time we take back our country" and "defend ourselves". The law-abiding gun owners in my riding of Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore were appalled by these statements. What does the Premier have to say about his front bench minister's comments?

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): Order. Members, I heard the question, and I would like to hear the answer.

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Leader of the Official Opposition for the question. As usual, we are looking at what is reported and at sensationalism in headlines.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

I want to apologize to the Woodstock gun club because it took away from the wonderful announcement and the dedication of the new building in memory of Ray Tibbits, which is what that was all about. The comments that I made, and I did clarify that, if one were to read the article . . . It is very simple. We are looking at the federal Liberal-NDP coalition that wants to take guns away from law-abiding gun citizens and gun owners in our country. I do not hear anything from the other side that says anything to the contrary. Then from the Green-Liberal coalition, prior to this session starting, we heard them talking about parents and . . . I forgot.

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

(Interjections.)

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to hear from the Premier on this, please, because the comments that were made were really irresponsible. We just talked about the need to support teachers and students and to ensure safety in schools. I wonder whether this fits in with the Progressive Conservative Party that he leads.

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thank you again to the Leader of the Opposition. It is nice to be able to get on my feet to clarify what was well understood at the gun club and what I was referring to. The fact that it has been indicated by our province's Green and Liberal coalition on the other side that . . . We just do not have a system in that . . . You know, there are kids . . . I forgot about the question.

Anyway, back to . . . Society is safe.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you for the advice. We have had some unfortunate incidents in our schools, and we continue to work on those. Children, unfortunately, are trained in secure and hold and evacuation procedures because those are necessary in our schools.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health indicated that there are basically 61 700 New Brunswickers without permanent family doctors in this province. The throne speech said that this government was going to work to reduce the number of doctors working in solo practices. This has been a commitment by government after government after government going back, I think, to Bernard Lord and through Brian

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Gallant to this government. Nothing has ever come of it. The solution that we need has to be concrete and practical, and that is to ensure that nurse practitioners, registered nurses, and other allied health professionals are paid to work alongside doctors in their practices. That is a key part of this solution.

Can the Minister of Health tell me why he is not providing funding to ensure that those collaborative health care practices can occur?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise at the third session of the 60th legislature and take the first question from the Green Party. I assume the Green members are asking about health because they support the throne speech and have no questions on it, so thank you very much for that. Congratulations to the Premier on having a throne speech that has the support of both opposition parties.

Mr. Speaker, it is a serious matter when we come to primary care. When you look at the fact of the matter, you see that we have invested significantly in our budget to pay for physicians, pay for nurse practitioners, pay for RNs, and do the recruitment to hire more physicians, NPs, and RNs. That number in the budget is something that we continue to look at. We increased our health care budget to \$3.6 billion, which is \$344 million more than it was last year. That is a significant increase in health care.

[Translation]

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health does not seem to understand how unhappy New Brunswickers are with the direction of health care in the province. According to a recent survey conducted by the Canadian Medical Association, 82% of New Brunswickers are dissatisfied with the province's management of the health care system. That is the highest rate in Canada, and it is not surprising, Mr. Speaker.

I am going to try to ask the Minister of Health the question again: Why do you not provide the funding needed to enable all nurse practitioners and other health professionals to work with doctors to ensure New Brunswickers have consistent access to health care?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question, but I am trying to fully understand what the member opposite is trying to get at right now. We have nurse practitioners who are involved in health care and in providing primary health care. They work in clinics, they work alongside doctors, and they work in hospitals. They are a valuable part of the primary health care system in New Brunswick.

The fact is that we have actually increased the number of seats of nurse practitioners studying in New Brunswick. We have even made it easier for those nurse practitioners to

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

earn and learn at the same time. With the help of PETL, we have come up with an innovative way of providing nurse practitioners the ability to continue working full-time or be paid full-time. Plus, RNs can now become NPs and increase the scope of practice that they can provide to the people of New Brunswick.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the wait times in our emergency rooms continue to be, well, inhumane, while the offload delays for ambulances in Moncton continue to plague the sick and injured. I cannot tell you how many times people have shared their horror stories about waiting 12, 18, or 20 hours in an emergency room, with some leaving in frustration only to get sicker and having to return for another long wait. Neither this government nor the former Liberal government has been able to fix this problem. It is only getting worse.

Mr. Speaker, fundamentally, it is a management problem, and the centralization of management in the regional health authorities is part of this problem. It has been a failure. A practical, concrete solution would be to reestablish local authority over hospital management. Will the Minister of Health return management authority to local hospital administrators so they can work with hospital staff and actually fix the problems that plague our hospitals?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I also get concerned when I hear about people having long wait times at emergency rooms. Here are the facts: We have provided more alternatives for people, whether it is with eVisitNB, the NB Health Link, or some of the other clinics that have opened up. I could go on and on with respect to some things such as the mobile X-ray unit and having paramedics deal with people at home.

Look at the numbers. The average patient offload time last year, August 2022, at the Dr. Georges L. Dumont Hospital was in the 200-minute range. This year, August 2023, it was around the 50-minute range. The average patient offload time in August 2022 at the Moncton Hospital was 120 minutes. This year, August 2023, it was down to 55 minutes. That is significant improvement, and we are going to continue to work to improve those times with some of the initiatives—

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

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our health care system is broken. There is no doubt about it. Good doctors and good nurses are leaving their positions because their personal sacrifice to help to hold the health care system together has been unappreciated and unrecognized. Frankly, they are burned out.

The Premier has said time and time again that he is on a mission to save New Brunswick. Well, clearly, he is not on any mission whatsoever to save the New Brunswick health care system. People are waiting too long to see a doctor, and they are waiting too long in ambulances, ERs, and hospital hallways as well. Those with cancer are waiting too long for

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

lifesaving tests and surgeries, and their cancer spreads. I have heard heartbreaking stories from cancer patients who have been in exactly that terrifying position. We need concrete, practical solutions, Mr. Speaker, not the kind of band-aids that the Minister of Health has been referring to.

The question is this: When is this minister going to treat the crisis in our health care system with the urgency that the patients in this province deserve?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): It is really discouraging the way that the Green Party approaches health care.

(Interjection.)

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

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Okay, I will talk about concrete practical solutions. Let's talk about the mobile X-ray units that are now available across the province. We had a pilot project at Loch Lomond Villa in Saint John where we had one of these mobile X-ray units. The nine-month pilot project prevented almost 365 seniors being put in an ambulance and taken to the ER. Mr. Speaker, with that diversion, only 17 seniors had to go to the ER because they had fractured their wrist or another bone in their body.

We have expanded that right across New Brunswick. That is concrete, that is real, and that is getting results, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

EDUCATION

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am going to give the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development time to find his words. I am going to ask the Premier my question on education. As for our team, we believe in democracy, rights, and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. We believe in the rule of law.

[Original]

We know that before the courts is the question on the application of the *Charter of Rights*. New Brunswickers are looking for answers. They want to know whether this Premier is planning to use the notwithstanding clause if the court decision does not go in his favour.

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again to the Leader of the Official Opposition. I appreciate your question. We on this side of the House believe that parents have a key and fundamental role to play in the education of their children. They are

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

fundamental partners with our teachers and with our education system. We need them to be fully engaged. We do not believe that parents beat their kids. We believe that parents are essentially good, and you know, that is how we move forward.

It would be inappropriate to look into the future and presuppose what the court is going to decide on the current challenge before it and to speculate on what might happen in the future. I personally believe that we are on the right side of this question, that we are on the right side of this issue, and that the court will rule in our favour. We will move forward based on that. Still, we believe in the role of parents. Thank you very much.

GOVERNMENT AGENDA

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Can the minister please reassure New Brunswickers that he will not use the notwithstanding clause?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, as in many cases, we do not deal with hypothetical situations in this House. I do not presuppose a decision that is in front of the courts now and what that might yield.

However, what is very clear—what is extremely clear—not only in this province but across this country is that parents want a role with their kids, especially with those at a minor age below 16. Mr. Speaker, there is no debate on that. That is clear. There have been a lot of studies, a lot of polls, that have said that, so I am a little dismayed that basically, the Leader of the Opposition does not want to answer that basic question on whether or not she supports the role of parents.

Well, it is clear that we support the role of parents, and we are going to find a bridge and a reality here that works for teachers, works for parents, and works for students, Mr. Speaker, because not doing that would be letting down the very fabric of our society, which is built around solid families that work together for the best interest of their kids. That is the basis of what we have here in Canada and in New Brunswick.

SCHOOLS

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

I will take a moment to praise a portion of the speech from the throne that talked about the reduction in ER visits that was delivered by the government, thanks to mental health access over the phone. That was encouraging progress to see, because I spend a lot of time thinking about mental health for our young people and in schools. It is top of mind right

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

now because of what students are going through, some of which we have talked about today.

We know that there is a desperate shortage of school psychologists. Those vacancies persist. Students cannot access the mental health supports that they need. I would like to hear this from the Minister of Education: Can he confirm how many vacancies are currently in place, how many students are waiting for mental health supports, and what plan is in place to improve mental health support for our young people in schools?

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

The mental health of our students is extremely important. We take it very seriously. We know that coming out of the pandemic, in society at large and also in our schools, people are having to relearn how to interact with each other in a respectful way. Schools reflect what is going on in society.

We have a robust program in our schools, where we help our young people deal with mental health issues, whether it be by taking them to see mental health professionals or taking them to outpatients at the ER so that they can meet with someone who is more qualified than guidance counselors in our schools.

It is true that we have a shortage of school psychologists in New Brunswick. We continue to try to recruit for that, although we do have a plan for some testing that resource and methods teachers can do.

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

[Translation]

GASOLINE PRICES

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The cost of living is an issue for New Brunswickers every day.

[Original]

The cost of living is really wearing on New Brunswickers right now. People are cutting back on the joy in their lives in order to make ends meet, and with medication costs rising, we know that people with prescriptions are feeling the pinch. People who are trying to feed growing kids are now afraid to make a trip to the grocery store.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

It has become abundantly clear that the Clean Fuel Standard has not affected mom-and-pop shops nor the industrial producer behaviour that it was designed to affect, yet New Brunswick gas prices are higher than almost every other province in the country. New Brunswickers are fed up, and they want answers. Will the Premier reverse his fuel adjuster and save New Brunswickers 7¢ per litre immediately?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am really glad to hear that. Let's go back to the root cause of the carbon tax that exists in our province. The carbon tax and the Clean Fuel Standard are adding about 20% per litre. The root cause is federal policies. You cannot fix federal policies that are having an impact on every household, every commodity, and every trip to the grocery store. On the clean fuels that we like to talk about and the made-in-New Brunswick policy—it is actually at 4¢, by the way—Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland have one as well. Why did they have the same impact? It is because we have regulated prices and the other provinces do not have regulated prices. Maybe we should understand what the pros and cons of all that are.

Let's put the facts on the table, Mr. Speaker. Every province in Atlantic Canada with regulated prices experienced the same thing when the Clean Fuel Standard Act came into being. Let's put it all out there. The bottom line is that federal policies are putting our province in trouble and putting our people in a situation where they cannot afford to live, and we are trying to put on band-aids. Let's go back to the root cause in Ottawa and with the Prime Minister.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting that a federal policy that affects all provinces is singled out here when New Brunswickers pay more for gas than any other place. You say it is 4¢ more because we have regulated prices. What is this Premier going to do to remove those 4¢ and make gas more affordable for New Brunswickers?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I cannot do it unilaterally, but the people across this country can by getting rid of Prime Minister Trudeau. That is the only answer to this. The Leader of the Opposition supports the Trudeau policy and the high cost of living in this province, and she wants a band-aid solution. Let's look seriously at the pros and cons.

In talking about how we can improve and help the economy, when I was in Europe, people said they were dismayed that no one was helping them to reduce their supply of energy and demand for energy from Russia. We will give Ukraine \$600 million, and that is great, but we are not giving Ukraine any energy to offset the buying of power, energy, crude, or gas from Russia. On the one hand, we fund the war to help Ukraine, and on the other hand, we fund the war to help Russia.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

So, what is our philosophy, Mr. Speaker? We live in a bubble. We live in a bubble in our current emissions standards here. We are 1.5% of world emissions. We could be a major player in reducing emissions. Let's look beyond our borders and have a federal government that looks that way.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): It is really disappointing to hear the Premier escape blame on this and say that he cannot do anything when he has the power today to save New Brunswickers 4¢ per litre on gas. He is choosing not to because he wants to blame Ottawa. You have the power to make a difference, and you are choosing not to by holding up your hands and pointing to someone else when you are the leader of this province and could make life more affordable for New Brunswickers.

Our team has a proposal to save New Brunswickers money. You take the provincial tax off their electricity bills. That would make a difference immediately for the New Brunswickers who are thinking about the heat they need.

Will you take action on affordability by reducing the cost of gas, reducing the cost of electricity, and delivering on the measures that were proposed a month ago, that we have not heard anything about, and that we did not see anything about in the throne speech? Please give New Brunswickers the answers they need. Tell them how you are going to make life more affordable by accepting our proposal to make electricity and gas more affordable today.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I only wish that the Leader of the Opposition would make that same passionate plea to her federal leader and ask whether he would please develop policies that do not negatively impact rural communities and Atlantic Canada disproportionately. It is the same position that her federal colleagues, the MPs in this province and in Atlantic Canada, went forward with by saying that this is disproportionately hurting Atlantic Canada. Maybe she did not get the memo on that, but I am sure that they would like to add her voice to it.

Let's get to the real problem. Yes, we will look at temporary measures, but they are temporary measures. The issue is that the fundamental philosophy of the federal government is flawed. We need to fix our energy crisis. We do not need to put it on the backs of New Brunswickers and Atlantic Canadians. We can be major players in the reduction of emissions. Let's look at the big picture. Let's look at the big solution and not be nickeling-and-diming. First, let's go after the federal government and say that we need a federal policy that works. Talk to your federal MPs who are your colleagues.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I am still frustrated by the shirking of responsibility that has just been described over there. With the tools in its hands to make life more affordable, this government is choosing not to. That is not the answer that New Brunswickers want to hear.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

ELECTIONS

The Premier continues to be indecisive about whether to call an election. He put the election wheels in motion and then got cold feet. He tried to convince his caucus, but now the six or the five seem to have won the day. In the meantime, Elections New Brunswick has done its best to keep up with the Premier's on-again, off-again mood swings. It has readied. Elections New Brunswick has booked halls and held training sessions. I am wondering what his indecision and what this instability has cost New Brunswickers. I am wondering whether the Premier can confirm for us how much Elections N.B. has spent.

[*Translation*]

How much money has Elections New Brunswick spent to prepare for elections that do not seem to be coming?

[*Original*]

What has this cost New Brunswickers?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the only real comment that I can make on that is that the Leader of the Opposition should stay ready for an election because there is no call down of preparations for this. We are going to continue. The only issue is that we do not want to lose the momentum in this province because there are so many things that are outlined, as you saw in this throne speech, that are building blocks. There is a foundational building block that is certainly driven by population increases like never before. The private sector is like never before, and engagement from the civil service in delivering results is like never before.

The last thing—the absolute last thing—that we could take a chance on is handing this over to people who just do not have a philosophy of a long-term view, but only a short-term gain. Mr. Speaker, our philosophy from the beginning is on how we can make a difference right across the board. How do we continue the momentum? We will continue—

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): We will continue on the road, looking at options and whether or not we need to have an election. Mr. Speaker, I know that I have my own challenges here internally, but we will stay—

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

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Translation]

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

[Original]

It is a fairly simple question. It is about dollars and cents, which I know you love. So, how much has Elections New Brunswick spent? I am going to guesstimate that hundreds of thousands of dollars have been lined up to be wasted. New Brunswickers have run out of patience with the Premier's games, which he continues here today. New Brunswickers want answers and stability from their government.

We have a speech from the throne that was a look in the rearview mirror, rehashing announcements that we heard a year ago and have seen no progress on. The one that stands out the most to me is about the 380 affordable units that was in the speech from the throne in 2022. The commitment was to develop them in four years. We saw the same promise in the same speech—380 units in 4 years. Nothing has happened in the last year. We have a speech from the throne that is not a vision for the future or a vision for the long term. Will the Premier confirm clearly, once and for all, for all New Brunswickers: What is the date of the next election?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Do you know what? Mr. Speaker, the biggest concern that New Brunswickers would have, could have, or should have would be handing the government over to this group across the hall, because that is where the dollars disappear, that is where the taxes increase, and that is where the waste starts—where the absolute waste starts. Talking about the ideas in the throne speech—

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Of our commitments that were made, 73% are done. They are completed, Mr. Speaker. With respect to the items that we are talking about, look at the schedule. Look at the schedule. The rent bank—due January 1. That was the schedule from the beginning. Look through here on the number of nurses that have been hired. There are 425 new nurses. We are making progress in that way. We are reducing the number of travel nurses because we are gaining in our employment stats in the health field. The reason you do a recap is because when you look at the actual results, you have results to talk about. The reason the Liberals never do a recap is because there is nothing to talk about.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

The foundation is built. We are moving, in directions, in all categories. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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