

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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EDUCATION

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Education and the Attorney General said a number of things yesterday that suggest a bit of a muddling around of the situation in terms of their handling of Policy 713 and its legality. I want to quote the Minister of Education from June 9, 2023. He said, “if there is going to be a court challenge, perhaps that can be clarified.” On June 13, he said again, “I think that the court needs to rule on a number of things here.” He then said, “if it goes to the courts and the courts finally rule on it, then we will know”.

So the minister demonstrated his support for a case to be brought to the courts to clarify the validity of his own policy, which is just where we stand with the Anglophone district education councils (DECs) now. Given the Minister of Education’s support for getting the court to clarify and rule on this, will he drop his move to dissolve the Anglophone DEC?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I’d like to point out to the Leader of the Official Opposition that the case currently brought before the courts, in terms of any Charter challenge that there is, was brought by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association. You know, that’s where it started, and that’s sufficient.

I believe in parental rights. I’m going to continue to do that. I’m going to continue to harp on that. I’m going to continue to tell her that.

The DEC chose not to follow the *Education Act*, and it chose not to follow the provincial policy and respect parents. The DEC does not agree with the corrective action, and there’s a process under the *Education Act*, which is a law, that it could have followed. It would have been less cumbersome and costly than what it was doing. I understand the DEC wants independence on how it spends, but the minister is responsible for the entire education—

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

[Translation]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am going to quote something else the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development said on the subject on June 14, 2023.

[Original]

He said:

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There is no intention here to do anything untoward... The DEC's will still be in place. They will still be elected.

He said that they will have influence over what happens in the education system. Given that the Minister of Education has committed support for the DEC, why is he now moving to dissolve it?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So far, we haven't taken any action. We have simply expressed our intention to follow the established process. To get permission to ask the Court of King's Bench to dissolve the Anglophone East district education council, a request must be made to the Executive Council. So, that is not what I wanted to do, and I explained that to the district education council four months ago.

However, despite all that, the district education councils are required by the Act to spend money on educational needs. Period. There is no other provision that gives them the right to spend money on other things.

[*Original*]

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

[*Translation*]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two questions to ask. The minister insists that the Anglophone district education council doesn't support the policy, but there are other Francophone district education councils that don't support the policy either, and it is unclear to me whether the minister will try to dissolve them.

I see that the minister is not clearly saying whether he will try to dissolve the Francophone district education councils, so I would like to know if he intends to do so, because they also support the version of Policy 713 that does not violate the rights set out in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

The minister is talking about money, but I wonder why, as was suggested yesterday, he doesn't entrust this money to the Attorney General so that it is spent in the right place.

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A lot was said on the other side of the House, but I don't believe many questions were asked.



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What I said is that there is a process prescribed by the *Education Act*. What is quite clear is that, when a district education council doesn't do what it is supposed to do, and when it acts in an unauthorized way, there is a process to be followed. As I said, there is a process, and it is being followed. We are going to continue following the process until the end.

We believe in parental rights and will continue to say so until the end. I believe in them. It is the opposite for the Leader of the Opposition, who does not believe in parental rights. As for us, we will follow the process.

[Original]

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

[Translation]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): I am going to try to help the minister understand the question. Will he dissolve the Francophone district education councils?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, please, I am suggesting, as politely as possible, that the Leader of the Opposition and the other member who has something to say should read the *Education Act*. The *Education Act* clearly explains what authority which group has. There is a process in place should a district education council need to be dissolved. Nobody wants to do that, but, still, the Act must be obeyed. The district education councils must function in a way that complies with the Act. So, it is not so difficult to understand.

[Original]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think it's really curious that the minister doesn't want to move to dissolve the Francophone DECs that aren't supporting his policy but is moving to dissolve the Anglophone DEC that doesn't support the policy. I'm not sure why the different treatment, but it's certainly curious. This is at a time when he could act to get rid of this whole hassle and ask the Court of Appeal, as he said in his statement, to provide clarification and to rule on whether this actually upholds the *Charter of Rights*. Why not take that to the Court of Appeal now and get rid of all the court cases and costs?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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[Original]

I have probably read the *Education Act* 10 times in the last two months just to make sure that I got it right. I thought I knew it before, and there may be some parts that I don't get quite yet. At this point, the Francophone DEC's have not taken us to court, so we haven't engaged lawyers to defend ourselves. However, they're subject to the same law. They're subject to the *Education Act*, just like everybody else. If they refuse to follow the directive of corrective action that was issued, then we're going to follow the process that's available under the *Education Act* for all the DEC's. We're not going to just pick one out. But in this particular instance, the Anglophone East DEC has brought a case to the courts, and we're obligated to defend ourselves against that.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll note that the minister didn't answer the question about bringing this to the Court of Appeal.

But he did reference the *Education Act* multiple times and mentioned that it is law, which makes me wonder whether he has read the Charter of Human Rights or his own government's law, the *Child and Youth Well-Being Act*, which, in two places, states that children's rights need to be protected, Point 6.1 and Point 7. The minister has put in place a policy that doesn't align with his own legislation. I wonder what the Minister of Social Development thinks about that.

I wonder what the Attorney General thinks about that, because the Minister of Education repeatedly references the *Education Act* while he is in contravention of the *Child and Youth Well-Being Act*.

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wasn't sure whether that was a question for me or the honourable Attorney General. We are going to continue to provide safe spaces for all our students. I've said that from the very beginning. All our students are valued, and we are going to continue to do that. Nowhere—at any time—did I say that we weren't going to do that. That's what we are going to continue to do.

However, I believe that parents have rights. Everything else that we do in education demonstrates that parents have rights. We need permission from parents to give a child a Tylenol. As I said, I think it was earlier, my son had to sign a permission slip so his daughter could go on a field trip. I believe in parental rights. I am going to continue to support parental rights. I don't understand why supporting parental rights is such a terrible thing for the Leader of the Opposition. I wish she would stand up and say what she meant when she was on that podcast in Ontario.

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[*Translation*]

HOSPITALS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont Regional Hospital was identified as a priority for infrastructure projects. Among the identified projects was the construction of a new emergency room and endoscopy rooms and new spaces for outpatient and ambulatory services.

The request for authorization was filed with the office of the Minister of Health in May 2022, and the Vitalité Health Network has set this project as its number one priority. It is a three-phase project: The first step involves the endoscopy rooms, the second step involves the former Radio-Canada office for outpatient and ambulatory services, and the final step involves building the new emergency room. You know, in 1975, the Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont Regional Hospital was built without an emergency room; it was actually added later. Mr. Speaker, there are problems with that, both for patients and health professionals, because of certain working conditions.

This is what I am asking: What is the status of the request regarding the first step? A request for \$20 million was made for the endoscopy rooms. Has the minister made a decision on that?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the question from the member opposite. I am well aware of the priority of the Vitalité Health Network. Yesterday, I had a meeting with Tom Soucy, who chairs the board of directors of the Vitalité Health Network.

[*Original*]

Well, Marco, thanks for your support. I appreciate that.

Mr. Speaker, we continue to work with Vitalité, day in and day out, to try to make those priorities a reality. We had a significant capital budget here in New Brunswick, and we continue to work with all our partners to make sure that those capital budgets are the priorities that will serve the people the best and make sure that those funds invested are the most efficient and effective use of that money. The project mentioned by the member is under consideration. There is a process for how those projects come to fruition.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, it has been two years since the request was filed with the office of the Minister of Health, and the delay in the funding of this endoscopy room project has many repercussions. The longer diagnoses are delayed, the lower the chances of surviving cancer are. Currently, 7 000 patients are on a waiting list, and, according to estimates, there are 68 cases of undiagnosed cancer. If the delay were

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consistent with the recommendations, about 50 deaths from colon cancer could be avoided. The delay also affects the recruitment and retention of health professionals and compromises our ability to improve working conditions and recruit more specialists. Also, several planned recruitments are at risk of being cancelled, and that can also affect university enrolment, since it is impossible to accommodate more medical students under the current conditions.

So, the issues are significant, Mr. Speaker. This is what I am asking the Minister of Health: Will he make a decision before it is too late?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): I will remind the member opposite that these are Cabinet decisions. There is a process. I'm surprised that he's not aware of the process, Mr. Speaker. There are members across the way who are former health ministers and ministers in the Cabinet of Brian Gallant. There are advisors from the Cabinet of Brian Gallant as well, or employees working in the Premier's Office.

Mr. Speaker, when the member opposite asks for these priorities, we look at the province overall. That's why we created the Collaboration Council.

The Collaboration Council includes Vitalité, Horizon, and the Department of Health as well, in order to, again, look at the provincial scope of how things work and where the priorities lie.

Mr. Speaker, I'm well aware of the situation with respect to surgeries. We have invested a significant amount of money in the Dumont hospital. Now, if the members opposite are saying that this is the only place that we should be investing, they should state that. It is in its process. It is going through a process, and—

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

[Translation]

HOUSING

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, while thousands of families are waiting for affordable housing, ministers are paying \$600 to \$800 a night to stay in hotel rooms. In the meantime, we learned last week that no new rent supplements would be available again this year. It is already May, and thousands of families are waiting to find out whether they will be eligible for subsidized housing.

Mr. Speaker, the government has racked up billions of dollars in surpluses over the past few years, and it is paying \$800 a night for hotel rooms. When will it announce rent

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supplements to relieve the pressure on thousands of New Brunswick families who cannot afford to pay \$800 a night for hotel rooms?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I know that the opposition is starting to ramp up its rhetoric now. There has been a significant amount of work done with respect to housing here in New Brunswick. I guess the members opposite may not have been paying attention or were distracted by other things. When we look at the direct-to-tenant rental benefit, we see that there has been a \$22-million investment—a \$22-million investment. When we look at the Rent Bank, we see that over \$550 000 in grants have been given directly to New Brunswick renters so that they can stay in their houses. Some \$8.9 million—\$8.9 million—has been used to help 5 000 New Brunswickers through rent supplements. That is significant work. Those are significant investments. That, Mr. Speaker, is the type of work that is being done. I would be more than happy to continue with this because there is more good news along this line.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, we are hearing about more and more cases of people who are without housing or will be very soon. Meanwhile, the Conservative government is being quite conservative: It is conserving money instead of ensuring that families have a roof over their heads.

The only thing the Conservatives are able to do is brag about population growth in the province; they can't brag about anything they have done to make more housing available for families. Mr. Speaker, how many other families will have to become homeless before this Conservative government decides to act?

Mr. Speaker, it is May, and the new rent supplements have not yet been provided for the new year. When will this government take action to enable families to have a roof over their heads?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, once again, the member across the way is inaccurate in his allegations against this government. We continue to supplement the rents of many, many people here in New Brunswick. That is an ongoing program. It continues. It doesn't stop when a new budget comes into place. There may be, again, some opportunities to increase that.

When I look at the number of affordable housing units being built, I see that 44 new public housing units are currently under construction in the province. I might remind the member opposite that, when the Gallant government was in place... The member opposite now

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represents this. He owns it, as his leader was part of the advisory board to Gallant. A number of former Cabinet ministers are over there too, with the same set of philosophies. They had none—no new public housing units.

Anyway, we have another 183 units in progress, either under design, construction, or contract, at 17 sites right across the province. I can go on and talk about Rising Tide, Habitat—

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, you know, the situation across the province is being looked at. I talked about rent supplements earlier; that is one thing. However, people are being told: We are sorry, but we did not get rent supplements for the 2024-25 budget. People are told to contact the 211 service. They do so and are told: Listen, we are sorry, but if you do not have access to the Internet or a computer, we will send you the forms by mail, if you are eligible. The forms are sent by mail. I am giving you an example. For requests made in February, forms are received in April, so two months later, Mr. Speaker.

That is a reality in New Brunswick. Then, people take the form, look at it, and fill it out. They have to provide information that they need to look up on the Internet. Mr. Speaker, when the most vulnerable people are looked after, the most vulnerable people are looked after.

Mr. Speaker, when we try to help the most vulnerable people, we have to truly help them. Today, New Brunswickers who need help cannot speak directly to a government official in person. When will this problem be solved once and for all to help New Brunswickers who need help?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, well, well. The righteousness and the rhetoric from the opposite side are just reeking today. It's terrible, Mr. Speaker.

I mentioned \$22 million was invested in direct rental subsidies here in the province. That is cash that is going directly into the pockets of the people of New Brunswick to help them survive. We've increased the number of different initiatives across this province to help people cope. To speak directly to the rent supplement, we know there's a waiting line. There was a waiting line when he was courted by the Gallant government to run for politics. Mr. Speaker, when the Gallant government was in, it had a poor and dismal track record when it came to rent supplements and increasing them.

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We have worked with the federal government on our New Brunswick housing program. We have increased the number of opportunities for people to live. When we look at our partners such as Habitat for Humanity with 10 new homes and Rising Tide—

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

[*Translation*]

AGRICULTURE

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am worried about the safety, security, and increasing cost of our food imports. The vast majority of our food products are imported from far away, and that should not be the case. According to the Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, 60% of the farmland in New Brunswick is no longer in production. That is land that could be cultivated by young people to provide us with local food and reduce our dependence on imports.

For that to become a reality, initiatives are necessary to eliminate the obstacles preventing young people from establishing small farms and accessing the market. What is the Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries doing to encourage young people to have a career in agriculture and support them?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Well, I'm thrilled to be able to stand and answer the member opposite's question, Mr. Speaker. The Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries is working very hard to bring new entrants into the realm of agriculture. In fact, in the past year, we have brought 35 new entrants into the program. We're working with Education. We're working with young farmers' groups. I'm meeting with young farmers' associations to talk about how we can improve access. We're also looking at revamping the Farm Land Identification Program (FLIP) and taking land that is lying fallow and not in use and at creating partnerships so that young people can have greater access to that. We're working hard with young farmers on the ground to gain access to land. That's ongoing work. Thank you.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, when you think about it, it's remarkable that no one in the government, no department and no civil servant, has the mandate to ensure we have a secure and affordable food supply in this province. It's why my colleague from Kent North has repeatedly advocated for the Premier to expand the Department of Agriculture's mandate to include our food supply. The regions where we source most of our food are experiencing ongoing and relentless droughts driven by, of course, the burning of the oil and gas extracted from the earth. A recent study predicts the severe drought in the Western United States will continue through 2030, driving food prices sky-high. Since the Department of Agriculture has no mandate to ensure an

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affordable and secure food supply for New Brunswickers, will the Premier explain how exactly he will achieve a secure food supply for New Brunswickers in the future?

Hon. Ms. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, drought is not our only enemy. If you talk to the producers of major crops or of any crop within the province, they will say we had too much water last year. We acknowledge that climate change is a challenge for all farmers with all commodities. It's something we are working on by creating programs such as the Resilient Agricultural Landscape Program (RALP). We are using funds through the Sustainable Canadian Agriculture Partnership (Sustainable CAP) and are looking at environmental practices. We're trying to create greener technologies. The department is working daily with participants and stakeholders to make sure it's supporting them in combating climate change challenges.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, we actually can't live without food. We know that. Our health is significantly influenced by the quality, safety, and types of food that we eat. With the stability of our climate unraveling as we pump more gas and mine more bitumen to burn, there is an urgent need to make New Brunswick more self-sufficient in food. In order to safeguard New Brunswickers against the consequences of global heating and warming oceans, local food security must become a priority for us. It is not.

Because of our geography, we will not face the severe threats to agriculture that are already causing crop failures and reducing yields in places elsewhere in North America and around the world that currently supply most of the food that we consume. We have to plan in order to feed ourselves into the future. Again, I ask the Premier what his plan is to ensure that we can feed ourselves into the future.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the Leader of the Green Party for the question. Looking at the big picture of affordability and at how we can manage climate change to provide better outcomes for our farmers and agricultural businesses... First, it comes from an economy that is thriving. When I talk about the development of gas, everybody gets all excited about it. When you look across to Europe and to China and see what is happening for emissions with two coal plants being built a week, 1 100 running, and 270 in Europe... For every one of those we could shut down, we would reduce world emissions by 50% per coal plant.

Mr. Speaker, my point in all that is that it is an \$8-billion enterprise for this province. If we want to address affordability, which the federal government has dumped on us, and the inability of anyone being able to afford to live and work in our country because of the cost of living, we have an opportunity here in New Brunswick to do a whole lot more. We can have a positive impact on climate change, and we can have the economy do what we must for our people here.



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SCHOOLS

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the past month, I have had the privilege to talk to a lot of teachers in New Brunswick about what is happening in the education system. I have heard the challenges that they are facing with a lack of resources and a lack of colleagues there to support the education of New Brunswick's next generation. Two particular instances stood out that I want to flag today.

On April 23, we heard one school stating that it was out of paper and did not have the funds to put in another order. The school was asking teachers and the community not to make any more copies or to provide paper to the school. On April 30, parents of Grade 3 kids in New Brunswick received a notice that the school was out of whiteboard markers and that it was unable to get more before the end of the school year. The school was asking parents to provide their children with whiteboard markers to help with the rest of their education.

While the minister wastes time and money in court and pretends to care about parents, parents want their schools funded.

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

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am not sure what the question is there because I didn't hear one.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): To the chirping gallery across, I will assure them that I will provide an answer.

It seems to me that we are in a new budget year, so I am not quite sure why we would have these issues that the Leader of the Opposition refers to. If she has the names of those two schools, I would be happy to receive them, look into it, and talk to the districts to see what the problem is and why they can't get money to buy paper or whiteboard markers. A lot of schools today don't use whiteboard markers because they have SMART Boards, and you don't need a whiteboard marker on a SMART Board. If you use one, you ruin it.

The funds are there.

(Interjections.)

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

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Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): We are working closely with many, many partners on our long-term recommendations. We just started that at the first of the week in Harvey on PBIS.

(Interjections.)

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): It sounds to me as though the Minister of Education hasn't been in a school lately because he would see how whiteboard markers are being used by students at their desks with their whiteboard tablets.

(Interjections.)

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): It is in many schools. This is pervasive.

EXPENSES

Mr. Speaker, I need to follow up on one of the Premier's answers from yesterday. I was questioning the misuse of taxpayer dollars for his minister's expenses. He stated that he wasn't sure what that information was and that there maybe needed to be more research done. That is what he said. I trust that he has now gotten that research and has learned that the member for Carleton-Victoria, on September 29, attended the Premier's dinner and expensed her hotel room to the people of New Brunswick. It is the same minister who upgraded a flight to a seafood party in Norway to the tune of \$8 700. It is the same minister who spent more than \$3 000 on hotels for a five-night party in Boston.

The Premier said that he would review this policy. That is not good enough.

Will the Premier put a stop to this extravagance and have the member for Carleton-Victoria pay back—

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Ms. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, the sleuthing being done by the member of the opposition has been inadequate at best. If she had examined the figure that she keeps quoting, this \$8 500, she would have seen that it was for two distinct trips. One was to Barcelona, where we were



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examining the European market, and the other was to Norway, where we were advocating for aquaculture. I've done my own little forensic accounting in the interim and have found out that the previous Liberal Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries actually spent approximately \$8 000 more annually than the current minister. That is accounting for inflation as well.

Let's just go on while I have a minute or two. Southwest New Brunswick is the birthplace of aquaculture, and we—

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Ms. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Quiet! It's my turn. I challenge any member of the opposition to keep up with me on these trade missions. I've asked you to reach out to the stakeholders I represent and consult with them to see whether they don't think we're getting return for their money.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): Order, please. I believe that is time.

(Interjections.)

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

