

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): Mr. Speaker, I know many members of this House will agree with me that educating the next generation of New Brunswickers is one of the most important responsibilities that our provincial government holds. As a mom of three young girls who are all in primary and middle school, I agree one hundred percent. Parents and teachers across our province are deeply concerned about the state of our education system in New Brunswick today. With a shortage of teachers, unhealthy crowding, unhealthy air, and declining results in literacy and numeracy, there is much to be worried about.

So, I was struck by comments made by the Premier in his election platform. It said on page 4: “To ensure our children reach their full potential politicians must get out of the classroom”. It went on to say that we must “Have education decisions made by teachers in classrooms, not politicians in Fredericton”. The Premier clearly feels differently today, so I’d like to know what changed.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. To the Leader of the Opposition, you know, nothing’s changed, actually. We’re hoping that, throughout the process, teachers will become engaged in the outcomes and the curriculum and be part of the solution in a way that they’ve never been before, Mr. Speaker.

I think the trials and errors that have been done in the past by our government and by other governments have obviously not achieved the goal that we want to achieve. So, Mr. Speaker, at a time like never before, we need those silent voices to be heard. We need those parents and teachers to be part of the solution and engaged like they’ve never been before because New Brunswick deserves that.

It isn’t going to be about a political debate in this House. It’s going to be about classroom teachers saying: This is what works in this classroom. It’s going to be about the NBTA saying: This is what works for our members and for our employees in government. That’s where the solutions are going to come from. We need to act as facilitators. I agree with the Opposition Leader. There comes a time, and this is the time. Teachers need to take control of classrooms, and I’m all for it. Thank you.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I think it’s a bit rich that the member opposite, who has said that teachers are teaching kids to lie and who has continued to undermine the education system and cast doubt on the people who are doing some of the most important work in this province... He is undermining their work and not listening to their requests for resources, guidance counsellors, school psychologists, paper, whiteboard markers, and textbooks. A school in

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his very backyard doesn't have enough textbooks for students to take home to do their homework.

This is someone who is eliminating parents' roles in the district education councils with an *Education Act* that proposes to eliminate elected positions and who is taking the district education councils to court to eliminate parents' roles in education. I'd really like to know when this government is going to get its priorities straight in education.

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm very proud of our teachers in New Brunswick. I'm very proud of the work that they do every day. We have hard-working teachers who come to work every day, and some of them work under very difficult circumstances. They do an exceptionally fine job.

I find it a little rich that the Leader of the Opposition would talk about making something political when it was the Liberal Party that decided to move French immersion back from Grade 3 to Grade 1 because it was an election promise. It didn't want to wait to see what the Grade 3 results were. Then, when we saw the results, it seemed to have worked out pretty well.

Now, we have the Leader of the Opposition talking again about whiteboard markers. I've been waiting for a week and a half or two weeks now—I'm not sure how long it's been—to find out which two schools the Leader of the Opposition was talking about that need paper and whiteboard markers. I'd like for her to tell me that. If she doesn't want to do it here, perhaps she can do it in the rotunda. Thank you.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Education could ask members of his own caucus what schools are short of supplies such as textbooks. Maybe he could get some answers there.

I think it's interesting that he brings up French immersion when this is the government that tried to eliminate it. We have a member opposite who has decided not to re-offer because he doesn't have confidence in this government's commitment to protecting French immersion. Could the minister or the Premier commit to us today that they will not touch French immersion in their next platform?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Once again, Mr. Speaker, this is rewriting history and creating a narrative that is somewhat interesting. At no time did I try to eliminate French immersion. We were looking at a new model, one that would meet the needs of all our students so that they could all become bilingual and speak French in this officially bilingual province.

Clearly, the plan that we presented was not going to work. However, it wasn't a failure. Some people on the opposite side think that when people get upset at you, saying it's not



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going to work and it's a failure... However, we came out of that with partnerships with parents, teachers, and advocate groups. We created short-term recommendations and long-term recommendations to improve our Anglophone school system, including the instruction of French.

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

[Translation]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I completely agree with the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development when he says that the government's efforts to eliminate French immersion were a complete failure.

[Original]

But you'll note that he didn't answer the question. Parents in New Brunswick want to be reassured that this government will not touch French immersion. Can the Premier and the minister give us that commitment today?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Again, Mr. Speaker, it is another... I do not know how to say this correctly. I never talked about eliminating the French immersion program. I never suggested that. What I said was that the current program does not work and does not enable students to succeed and achieve the results French immersion is meant to produce.

We have held consultations that have kept us well informed, and we have come to a point where a committee was established to consider French language learning and teaching, both with regard to immersion and the core English program. We have also tried to improve the classrooms in the core English program and...

[Original]

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I think it is quite a straightforward question. The parents of New Brunswick are going to be wondering what the minister is hiding if he can't clearly answer whether French immersion has a future in New Brunswick under his government.

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am not hiding anything. I am not hiding the names of the two schools that are

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short on supplies. I met with superintendents yesterday, and none of them said anything like that to me or that they needed paper or whiteboard markers. I am not the one hiding information.

I never said that we were going to eliminate French immersion. We are going to work to improve it because we want all our children to be bilingual in New Brunswick. We are a bilingual province.

We continue to invest in New Brunswick and in education. We believe that parents have an important role to play with their children and that children deserve to be safe in schools. The former government, when the Leader of the Opposition was in the Premier's Office, cut \$3.3 million for training and classroom management support for inclusion and diverse learning—

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Clearly, we are not going to get a straight answer from the minister on this, so I am going to move on to something that is critical in our education system.

There was a commitment made by this government that it was going to achieve 85% of the Grade 2 literacy target by 2022 by putting teachers back in control in the classroom. That target has not been met. Improving the literacy of New Brunswick students is so important. There is strong, new curriculum in place, but the work can't end there. Can the minister tell New Brunswick parents why, six years later, he hasn't delivered on his promise? What is he doing to address literacy results today?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Gee whiz, Mr. Speaker. I welcome the Leader of the Opposition to New Brunswick because clearly, she hasn't paid attention to what we are doing. We did have COVID-19, which had a negative impact on education in the province. We are working hard at that.

I believe that children need to read at grade level by the end of Grade 2, and that is what we are working hard on. We have the science of reading. We are currently doing an audit on the practice of literacy in the classrooms in New Brunswick to ensure that teachers have not forgotten about the best practices that came with balanced literacy, such as guided reading, guided writing, and things like that. We have also returned literacy and numeracy mentors to the schools of our province—to the elementary schools—so that they can take small groups of students or individual students and work with them so that they are reading at grade level, which is extremely important.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If the Minister of Education were in touch with the teachers on the ground in the classrooms of New Brunswick, he would understand the administrative

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burden that they are facing in implementing the new literacy curriculum and, specifically, the EGLA assessment process. It is intense. It is detailed. It requires one-on-one time between a teacher and a student, which challenges teachers' ability to reach every other student in the classroom. It is part of the reason that they continue to ask for more resources, for the teacher vacancies that we have to be filled, and for hands and adults to be provided in the classroom that will help every student achieve the literacy results that we want.

I would like to hear from the minister. When can he expect to listen to these teachers, provide them with the resources they want, and see New Brunswick students achieve their Grade 2 literacy target?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Again, Mr. Speaker, great question. I am waiting to hear what two schools she is talking about when it comes to the resources that are missing. I am waiting to hear what she meant about parents' rights when she was on that podcast in Ontario.

We are working hard on education in New Brunswick. Our teachers are working extremely hard to have students reading at grade level and to have students learning on a regular basis. Under this former government, let's see. What did it do?

There were 21 district school support teachers for diverse learning that were cut. The former government got rid of the bookmobile. There was \$1.5 million for classroom supplies that was eliminated.

Mr. Speaker, we're working hard to provide all the resources that teachers need to deliver quality education. We'll continue to do that.

[Translation]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, if the minister were working really hard to give New Brunswick teachers resources, perhaps there would not be as many vacant positions in schools, and perhaps there would not be too little paper and too few textbooks for our students. I would like to know when all the positions in our schools will be filled.

[Original]

When will we eliminate the educational vacancies for school psychologists and teachers in schools in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Oh, Mr. Speaker. The former Minister of Education in the Gallant government talked about the shortage of educational psychologists in the school system. That hasn't really improved

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since then. We continue to do what we can to improve that. We're going to continue to search for them.

However, the College of Psychologists made a change so that, in order to work in that capacity, you need to have a Ph.D. in psychology. Well, in a meeting with the College of Psychologists, it told me that there are two students, one at the University of New Brunswick and one at McGill University who are currently enrolled in that Ph.D. program. You know, Mr. Speaker, if they want to come to New Brunswick and work in our schools, we would gladly hire them today because that's what we need. Thank you.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I have to say that the Minister of Education is failing to inspire confidence in New Brunswick parents when he says: We're doing what we can. Maybe there are two people we could hire.

Well, we don't have enough school psychologists and we haven't had enough for the past six years. His actions and his words... Well, actions don't exist. His words certainly don't convince me that this government is doing everything it can to address this critical shortage. Our students and their success are the most important things that we could be investing in, and this government refuses to acknowledge the realities in the classroom.

I'd like to know whether the minister could tell us when every school psychologist position is forecast to be filled.

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to point out that the Minister of Finance's son is enrolled in a Ph.D. program for child psychology. I want to thank him, and I want to thank both of them for that.

We recognize that there's a shortfall and a shortcoming in that area within our education system. We've gone forward and trained resource and method teachers to try to fill in part of that gap. To a large extent, they do psychoeducational assessments. We would even hire psychometrists if we could find any. It's nice that the Leader of the Opposition wants to say: When are you going to do that? However, it's pretty difficult to find them when they don't exist.

We recruit far and wide. We recruit internationally for teachers. We are going to continue to do that. We're recruiting for child psychologists. We're recruiting for bus drivers. We're recruiting for EAs. We're recruiting for everything. In all the trades, we are recruiting. This is no different from anything else.

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[*Translation*]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have heard that the government has failed in its efforts regarding French immersion. It failed in its efforts to recruit psychologists for our schools.

[*Original*]

It's really frustrating to hear the minister acknowledge that there's a problem, but he can't speak to specific actions taken to fix it. He can't provide a commitment to parents on what is going to happen with French immersion. He talks nicely about a partnership with parents, yet this is the person who is trying to dissolve the Anglophone East DEC. This is the person who threatened to dissolve the Francophone DECs. These are the places where parents are elected to bring the voice of parents into our education governance. He tried to do it in an *Education Act* that we haven't seen again. In his next platform, will the Minister of Education commit to ensuring that there are elected parents on active and supported DECs across the province?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, when we form the next government, I will happily commit to having parents elected and having a full and robust role in education in New Brunswick because that's what we will do. That's what they will have.

You know, failure is only a failure if you repeat it. If you learn from it, it's not a failure and you move forward. What do we do when we're looking at the difference between Conservatives and Liberals—the Trudeau, Leader of the Opposition, friendship Liberals—who have amassed \$1-trillion worth of debt?

We're fiscally responsible, Mr. Speaker. We believe in moving forward and paying as we go. We've paid down \$2 billion on our debt for yesterday's programs as opposed to having the Prime Minister flown in and—

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

CROWN PROSECUTORS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Another deeply concerning area—another failure, if you want to call it that—is the current justice system. We're seeing Crown prosecutors and family court Crown counsel warning of a crisis due to a significant labour shortage and retention challenges, issues that they have repeatedly brought up to government. The shortage of prosecutors is resulting in cases being delayed and, in some instances, cases being dropped altogether. While the government has created new positions, many remain unfilled, placing further strain on the justice system. The ongoing difficulties in recruitment and retention highlight the urgent need for a collaborative effort

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to address these challenges. It's crucial for the government to work closely with the association to resolve these issues and restore confidence in the justice system.

Mr. Speaker, given the alarming reports from the N.B. Crown Prosecutors Association about severe labour shortages and retention issues, what immediate action is the minister taking to address this crisis?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Well, you can't take immediate action on the bargaining process. The bargaining process is just that. It is a process. The government remains active in bargaining with the union—the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC)—that represents the Crown prosecutors. We know there is a shortage of Crown prosecutors, and we know this has to be worked on, so we continue to work on it in bargaining. The parties have not yet exhausted the collective bargaining process under the *Public Service Labour Relations Act*—I want to make sure I get these words exact—and the parties are not at the point where a legal strike vote can be taken. There are a number of steps to be taken, as the member would know, being a lawyer, and we are working our way through those steps and actively bargaining all the time to try to come up with a solution for both sides.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This goes beyond bargaining. Last year, it was announced to much fanfare that 30 new Crown prosecutor positions would be added. Recently, at the estimates committee, we heard there was a net gain of only 8 prosecutors. We are hearing that there are many senior lawyers working in the Crown Prosecutors Office who are leaving and being replaced by juniors. It is something that should be of serious concern. We have seen recruitment and retention plague this government across many sectors.

This goes beyond bargaining. This goes to caring for the people who work in this province and caring for the people who care for us. Considering there are over 20 vacancies right now and cases are being dropped because of them, what specific strategies are being implemented to improve recruitment and retention strategies for Crown prosecutors, and how will the department ensure that these positions are filled promptly?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): As with a number of departments throughout government, there are recruitment and retention issues. They continue, and we continue to look for new lawyers, young lawyers, and old lawyers. If you want to come to work as a Crown prosecutor, New Brunswick is your place to come. We also remain active, as I said earlier, in bargaining. It's part of the process. It's part of the process of continuing to keep the people we have while also learning to figure out how to retain people and find new people.

The parties, though, have not yet exhausted the collective bargaining agreement and the bargaining process. They will continue to do so with the Professional Institute of the Public Service. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.



[*Translation*]

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During the Main Estimates process on April 24, my colleague from Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé asked the minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation to table the list of approved projects under the Integrated Bilateral Agreement for the 2023-24 fiscal year.

We received that list a few days ago. I thank the minister for that. However, looking at the list, I see that there is a total project value of \$542 million, but only \$36.6 million of that is for projects in the northern part of the province. That means about 6.7% is being allocated to projects in the northern part of the province and 93.3% to projects in the south. Can the minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation explain this imbalance?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm glad that the team prepared the list and shared it with the opposition, as promised in main estimates. I'm sorry. I didn't do the calculations on the list, so I will take this under advisement and then come back and speak specifically to the percentages and where the funds are spent.

But, since I'm up here, why don't I take the opportunity to talk a little bit about some of the amazing work the team at the Housing Corporation is doing? I will talk about the record-setting development that is happening here in New Brunswick and about the fact that we are building public housing, which we haven't done in 40 or 50 years, Mr. Speaker. This team is starting from scratch, and we have 208 units being built this summer. That is massive. We have units that people will be moving into in June. I am very excited for that announcement.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is a bit of confusion. The question was not about the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, but rather the RDC, the Regional Development Corporation. So, I do not understand why the department... The wrong minister answered.

So, I am coming back to the RDC. This is about the Chaleur region, the Acadian Peninsula, Restigouche, Edmundston—Madawaska, Victoria-La-Vallée, the Miramichi, and even the

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greater Kent region. Currently, there is one minister in the northern part of the province. If the Caraquet arena project is excluded, only 1.7% of the total amount has been allocated to all these regions. Can the minister explain to us why there is such an imbalance in these amounts?

Hon. R. Savoie (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to answer this question. As you know, Mr. Speaker, at the Regional Development Corporation, we assess all the projects submitted across the province equitably. So, we assess projects, and their approval depends on the requests we receive.

For any given region, the assessment process depends on the source of the request. After the assessment, we very equitably distribute the funds based on which projects are approved. I also entirely trust the RDC team, which assesses every submitted project very seriously. Again, Mr. Speaker, I can assure you that the funds are distributed equitably. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

COST OF LIVING

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, it is less than four months before the election writ must be dropped and two weeks before the Legislature adjourns. I have been thinking: What can this government actually achieve in the remaining time, as its light is slowly extinguished? What about the big increase in power rates that New Brunswickers have experienced without any kind of regulatory scrutiny by the EUB?

How about this? The Minister of Finance is in charge of handing out cheques for things such as the Low-Income Seniors' Benefit and the workers' affordability benefit. Two years ago, he cut the annual \$100 rebate that was designed to help low-income New Brunswickers with their electricity costs. That was the Home Energy Assistance Program. With power bills skyrocketing, will the Minister of Finance reinstate this benefit and make it monthly—monthly—to offset the power rate increase for low-income New Brunswickers?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): When we eliminated that amount of money, Mr. Speaker, it was because you could not follow it. You could not follow who needed it. You couldn't follow who was getting it and for what purpose. We are always worried about spending the money where it needs to be spent. We are always worried about delivering it to the people who need it the most. There was no way of tracking this in that last system, and now there is.

So that is why we are doing what we are doing. The Workers Benefit is the same. It's about tracking it. It's about finding where the money is going and making sure that the New Brunswickers who need it most can actually get the money.

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That is what this government is about. It is about being fiscally sound. It is about being conservative, absolutely—conservative with spending money and making sure that it is spent in the right way and that it goes to the right people. New Brunswickers deserve that, and they get that from this government.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): It is no problem getting the HST rebate into the right hands, so I don't know what the minister's difficulty is.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker, another way to help low-income earners or people on a fixed income deal with the increase in the cost of living is to implement a guaranteed basic income, which is a solution currently being looked at by the Conservative government in Prince Edward Island. In fact, Dr. Herb Emery wrote a report for the Prince Edward Island government on the way it could practically and effectively implement a guaranteed basic income in the province, which would eliminate deep poverty.

Is the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board willing to invite Dr. Emery to present his report and recommendations on the implementation of a guaranteed basic income during a meeting of the New Brunswick provincial Cabinet?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the member opposite, do you know what? In the past, I was the person who believed in the guaranteed annual income until I saw what happened during the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), and that scared me.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): No, no, that is what scared me. When you are going to give money and people don't have to work for it, then they won't work at all. That is what we found with CERB.

But do you know what? The guaranteed annual income also comes with the other side. It is money that is given, but it is given to everybody. Then you claw back other money, so people might not get all their CPP or they might not get a white card anymore or a number of different services. That is what the guaranteed annual income is about. It is about giving you guaranteed money along the way, but you don't get all those services you used to get for free. Okay? It is just as simple as that.

As I said, I used to think, okay, this is the way to go. We will go out and do it because CPP works and OAS works. How can we not make it work that way? But you can't, unless you are planning on people not actually working. It doesn't work that way. People have to get

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out there and work as well. Otherwise, we just get a collapse, which we had, in part, because of CERB. Because of CERB, we had that, in part, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

NB POWER

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. NB Power has been granted a second consecutive rate increase of about 10%, which means that New Brunswickers' power rates are now nearly a quarter higher than they were just 15 months ago, in March 2023. That second rate increase went through without a hearing because the government hasn't appointed enough commissioners to the EUB to allow for a hearing, which means that New Brunswickers continue to pay more and wait. There are experienced, trained people available today to fill those spots.

Will the government commit to making those appointments this month so that a rate hearing can be held as soon as possible, or will its members continue to drag their feet and continue to gouge New Brunswickers until after the election to avoid the bad headline that it would create?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development; Minister of Indigenous Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, it sounds like she is not worried about after the election, but she is preparing for an election with a question that insinuates the rate increase has been set in stone. That is not the case. It has never been the case. Twice during that commentary, or that question, she said the utility has been granted something that it has not. We have put in the ability for it to begin with that rate increase, understanding that when the utility determines what that rate will actually be, if there is a variance, if there is a difference, it will be rebated to customers. That will be rebated to New Brunswickers. There is no question about that.

At the end of the day, the member opposite making statements about something that wasn't done is obviously a ploy to create some sort of favourable climate for an election. We have been working very diligently to make sure that the EUB handles a significant amount of work. We have been able to make sure we are doing it in a way that gets the best value for New Brunswickers. We will continue to do that. We won't electioneer about it; we will just do the right thing.