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HEALTH CARE

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last night, a debate on health care was held, and thousands of New Brunswickers tuned in. I am wondering why the Premier wasn't there.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, I usually look forward to *The Red Green Show*, but the Red-Green show of last night was certainly subpar in its performance. It was almost a rerun of things that we've hashed out here in the Legislature over the past number of years.

There is a bit of a disconnect between the CUPE leadership and the CUPE frontline workers. We respect the frontline workers and all that they do, day in and day out, to help the health care system. We saw the antics of the CUPE leadership here in the gallery and out in the rotunda not too long ago. This was a CUPE-organized event. Right from the start, we told the organizers that we would not be participating in that show.

When it comes to Rogers and its airtime, I'm not sure whether they are giving it away free, but it should be counted as a political donation. I wonder whether the members opposite are going to split that donation between the Reds and the Greens.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that that answer gave a clear example of how this government treats labour relations. When there are tens of thousands of unionized workers delivering support to our health care system, critical to the needs of New Brunswickers that we're trying to meet, to have them disrespected the way that the minister just did is extremely disappointing.

We have serious challenges in our health care system. I was fortunate to meet a doctor on the weekend, as I was door-knocking in my community, who told me that he would really like to help, to get back into the system, and to provide care to New Brunswickers. He doesn't want a full slate, but he wants to serve approximately 400 patients. He was told no by this government and that he has to take a full panel of 1 200 patients or nothing. I know 400 New Brunswickers who would love to have access to that doctor's services. Can the minister explain why he isn't allowed to practice?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, once again, I said in my statement that we respect the frontline workers and the work that they do, day in and day out, trying to serve the people with the best primary care, tertiary care, preventative care, acute care, and palliative care here in New Brunswick. That is the patient-focused primary care model that we are promoting here in New Brunswick.

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We know that there are challenges. We are addressing the challenges in many, many ways, whether those challenges are due to the increased population, the aging population, or some of the population experiencing some of the most severe health problems there are. Once again, we're ready to engage in various aspects of health care. If the member opposite wants to provide the name of the individual here on the floor of the Legislature, we'll have our recruitment team reach out to see if there is some way that we can help that individual.

[Translation]

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's too bad; it is only one example. Actually, there are a number of examples of people who want to contribute to our health care system but are facing a total lack of flexibility from this government. There are nurses who want to work full time but only have part-time positions, and the government says that it can't change that.

Our system is too rigid, and the government continually lacks flexibility, even though people want to help. I will put the question another way. Will the Minister introduce a new policy to enable retired doctors and nurses to practise their profession part time?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, we saw a number of retired folks stepping up here in the past number of years, leaning in and going above and beyond. Certainly, I tip my hat to those people, and I thank them very much. We actually made it easier for retired nurses to come and help with COVID-19 injections, to help with some of the staff shortages that we have, and even to become mentors. We paid for their admin fee to come back online and be licensed. Again, we also have opportunities for retired nurses to come back and be mentors to some of the many new nurses we have in the system.

The RHAs work with the physician community in finding a suitable place for each and every one. I also know that there is an opportunity within NB Health Link for physicians who are considering retiring or working on a part-time basis. Now, Health Link is something that the members opposite have decried and said does not—

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank Mr. Speaker, people all over the province are feeling stressed out about their lack of access to health care, and that certainly applies to the people of Sussex today who are frustrated as they continue to see a reduction and an instability in their ER services. This is an ER that the Premier wanted to close just a few years ago. This is a community that was

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promised a collaborative clinic and is still waiting. Can the minister promise the people of Sussex that they will not see any further reductions in the services at their ER?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I would direct the member opposite to a release from Horizon Health from the not-too-distant past. It stabilized the emergency room services for the summertime, which had been looking a little difficult because of the shortage of health human resources here in New Brunswick. That is good news for the folks of Sussex. We have certainly lobbied the member in a very professional way to understand the difficulties we are having with respect to recruiting physicians, not just in Sussex but also throughout the province. This is not unique to New Brunswick, yet New Brunswick continues to step up. We work very hard to make it easier for physicians to practice here, and we do significant recruitment not only in the medical schools but also across international borders. Mr. Speaker, when we look at how some of the credentialing is moving more quickly to make sure that internationally trained physicians—

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is somewhat reassuring, if a little surprising, to hear the minister admit that they are having difficulties recruiting doctors. That has been clear when they cannot offer a doctor who wants to take on patients in New Brunswick the opportunity to do so. That has been clear with the way the Premier said that doctors just need to take on two or three more patients every week and then the problem would be solved. Asking doctors to do more work when they are burdened with administration and policies that keep them from delivering care to New Brunswickers is one of the things holding us back right now.

I am wondering whether the minister can extend the solutions that he described for the Sussex ER to all the other precarious ERs that aren't open 24-7 right now to ensure that those services are stabilized.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition has quipped that she is listening. Well, apparently, she hasn't been listening when it comes to the work that we are doing here in the province to help with primary care, access to primary care, and physician recruitment. There has been a net increase in the number of doctors here in New Brunswick since we took over. That is a concrete result. That is getting things done. We've stepped up international recruitment again, and, at the local level, we've worked with the current and former ministers of PETL to increase the number of seats—the number of people studying—here in the province. We've increased the seats up to 28 at the Université de Moncton, and we've repatriated 10 seats back to New Brunswick from Memorial University. It is nothing to sneeze at. This is making sure that we—

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What we're hearing in the Legislature today does not match what we are hearing on the front lines of health care in the province. We know that there are an estimated 160 000 patients in the province, over 20%, who don't have a permanent medical home where they can get their primary care.

We need a government that is actually going to address this issue. The Higgs government is not up to the task. Why should we trust it with another mandate? It has had six years, yet all we are seeing is the number ballooning to 160 000. All the government has done is onboard 2 000 or 3 000 patients to a permanent medical home.

We didn't see investments in the last budget. The government is not working with stakeholders. It whipped together an outdated primary health care plan based on numbers from three, four, or five years ago. Instead of throwing a white paper at us again, what concrete action is this government taking to ensure that everyone has access to primary care?

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

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We know that with NB Health Link having 11 offices around the province that people are receiving that primary care on a temporary basis. That's a program that has been absent in other provinces across the federation. It is a made-in-New Brunswick solution that other provinces are looking at.

The public needs to fully understand what the opposition is going to do. Is it going to shut down NB Health Link? The opposition has been saying that it's not working, but I'll tell you this, Mr. Speaker: NB Health Link has onboarded 58 000 people who otherwise would not have access to primary care here in the province.

Once again, the members of the opposition are not listening to the concrete items that we are moving forward with respecting increasing access to primary care. We have invested heavily in increasing the number of collaborative care practices across the province—

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. NB Health Link is a permanent solution to temporary care. That's what has been put in place. The government isn't putting in the effort required to get people into permanent medical homes.

We have seen this government's primary care plan. It has five initiatives listed. It has kicked the can down the road on its timelines for all the initiatives. I think the government has achieved maybe two, but three of them are still outstanding. In 2021, the government

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pledged that it would get everyone a family doctor within six months. It has missed that mark, and we're still waiting, Mr. Speaker.

Again, why should New Brunswickers put their faith in this government when the Premier won't even show up to a debate to talk about health care, the most pressing issue that this province is facing? How can this government justify continuing to miss targets in health care and not even show up to have a reasonable discussion? What specific, actionable steps will this government take to ensure that everyone has access to a family doctor?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Again, Mr. Speaker, the members know that there's a collective bargaining process. As we have seen with some of the antics in the gallery and the rotunda in the past, the CUPE leadership is not thinking about where to access primary care. Again, we have addressed that situation.

What I want to say to the member across the way is that we do have very concrete solutions and that we are investing in the province. We know that Vitalité is moving forward with its collaborative care clinic which will allow more people to see a doctor more quickly. We see that the collaborative health clinics within Horizon are being modernized. We have an opening in Lamèque that I talked about the other day. We have also expanded the role of pharmacists and the services that they can provide. NB Health Link is, again, one of the issues that we have moved forward with. I wonder whether the members opposite—

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

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. M. LeBlanc (Restigouche-Chaleur, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Health mentioned the collective bargaining process, but bargaining collectively needs to have two people at the table. Right now, the government is not there to try to make labour relations anything that is successful in our province. Labour relations are at an all-time low, even through the Minister of Labour, during debate on Motion 49 last week, said that it has never been better for labour movements in this province. The Premier refused to attend a debate because he doesn't want to deal with labour relations. That is a shame for our province.

Mr. Speaker, we all know that there is a lot of collective bargaining happening right now, but none of it seems to be moving forward because this government is dragging its feet. As an example, there was a joint job-evaluation study that was started five years ago for health care professionals in the province. They have done their work, and nothing has been done by the government. When can we expect to see something from this government?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The member across the way was talking about collective bargaining, and we have always looked to make sure that we have a fair and reasonable settlement when we negotiate with

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a union. We have the utmost respect for the frontline workers who, day in and day out, continue to lean in with respect to providing services for the people of New Brunswick.

Mr. Speaker, when I look at the number of people in other jurisdictions without a family doctor, I see that British Columbia has about 1 million people, Alberta has about 600 000 people, and Ontario has 2.2 million people without one. These are the headlines, and you can read the stories. Unfortunately, for our friends in Nova Scotia, the list has now reached 152 000 residents. That is why we are moving to change the method of practice here within New Brunswick and providing incentives for doctors to move to that family medicine practice, which, again, is the model that the New Brunswick Medical Society is putting forward.

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

Mr. M. LeBlanc (Restigouche-Chaleur, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. When the minister talks about having the utmost respect for health care workers, does he refer to the Premier's comment saying that if nurses want a living wage, they should move to Alberta? Does he refer to nursing home workers getting an increase of a quarter as part of the negotiation that is being done? Is he talking about how the Premier won't attend a debate on television because he is afraid to face our province's health care workers? That is not having the utmost respect for the workers of our province. It is not.

Mr. Speaker, my question was simple. Health care professionals started the process for a joint job-evaluation study five years ago. They have done their work, and there is nothing coming from the government. What is the status of that right now with this government?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to speak a little bit about our relationships in working with individuals and, certainly, health care professionals to deliver the best health care in the country. The minister has talked about the challenges that are being faced nationwide. In terms of the whole practice, we need a new thought about our health care delivery. We need innovation in health care, such as the MyHealthNB app, which is helping us to know our own status and to work with professionals at any level.

What we don't need is the same old and tired philosophy. We need to address the issue that new doctors want to have about 1 500 patients. Old doctors are retiring. They had patient loads of 5 000 or maybe 6 000. That is the reality of today. I am not questioning that reality, but it is the reality.

Let's look at how we deliver primary care to the people that need it, by the people who can provide it, and for the service that is actually needed at the time. I would say very clearly that when you need service in this province and you have a critical care health need, you get it, Mr. Speaker, because the people are delivering when it is—

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

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is good to see the Premier finally stand up to speak to a question about health care. We seem to have the needs of more than 100 000 New Brunswickers being diminished and ignored. These people do not have access to primary care. The government is saying that it is bringing a primary care plan forward without engaging the very people who deliver primary care. The Premier can get up and speak loudly about the need for innovation, but the government is certainly not engaging with the people on the ground who actually have the ideas and the solutions to bring things forward.

I am wondering whether the Premier can tell us what improvements to the family medicine program we can expect to see this week.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think we should talk about what we have already seen and where we are going with this. Our own company here in this area, VeroSource Solutions, developed the MyHealthNB app. Now, over 100 000 people—maybe 150 000—are utilizing it because they can get a result on a lab test immediately, faster than doctors in many cases. They can now actually book X-rays and blood tests. The idea is that we will have a system where we can actually navigate through our health system.

Mr. Speaker, if you can't get the service here in Fredericton, maybe you can get it in Bathurst, or maybe you can get it in Miramichi. It is about utilizing our entire network, with both Vitalité and Horizon working together to deliver the best health care in this country. We can't do it in isolation. That is the reason that we have a board structure that allows us to work together on collaborative care practices. It doesn't matter whether it is in Vitalité or Horizon.

Mr. Speaker, this is innovation—innovation in health care—to deliver the best health care service, not the same old thing. How do we spend lots of money in health care? There's \$1 billion more per year than we were—

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's interesting to hear the Premier talk about collaboration and reference health councils and a private-sector company and not talk about the people who are delivering care in this province. That's the problem with this government's approach. It continues to ignore the nurses, the nurse practitioners, the paramedics, the physiotherapists, and the family doctors who want to be a part of the solution.

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But all this Premier can focus on is two health authority CEOs, deciding which one he likes on any given day and which one he wants to get rid of, and he is not actually engaging with the people who are delivering care in the system. That's why we're not able to recruit them here to reduce the number of people waiting for primary care in New Brunswick. That list grows and grows. I would like to know what innovation the Premier is going to deliver to get that list down.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, we see the tired old Liberal Party with the same solutions that it has always promoted.

We know that every person in a hospital setting, every person in a clinical setting, and every person delivering health care is doing the best job they possibly can. But the nuance, the difference, right now is that our whole focus is on a patient-first strategy. That means we will do what it takes to help patients get service wherever they need it. The Leader of the Opposition may not be able to understand the nuance of what that means. It means patients deserve to get the tests and results they need in this province, where we can deliver them, and that does mean innovation and collaboration between our two health authorities.

Maybe she doesn't want to address that. Maybe she wants to keep that separate, but thinking about health care differently from everybody who serves it is how we get there. When we talk about a patient-first strategy, Mr. Speaker, patients don't care whether it's in the Vitalité system or in the Horizon system. They just want better health care. We can deliver it, but not with the same old, same old.

NB POWER

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bill 46, *An Act to Amend the Electricity Act*, is before the House. It will enable NB Power to sell a power plant or a financial stake in a power plant that it currently owns. When the Graham Liberal government tried to sell NB Power's power plants the last time, there was overwhelming public opposition and a concerted campaign by the Conservative official opposition of the day to stop the sale. These are public assets owned by our public utility. Can the minister responsible for NB Power explain what advantage he sees to ratepayers to have these publicly owned power plants privatized or partially privatized?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development; Minister of Indigenous Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, let's do a little bit of a history lesson about NB Power and possible sales and conversations that have taken place. Yes, indeed, that controversial subject happened about 13 or 14 years ago. I remember it well. It was a project that was embarked upon, very top-down driven by the province, imposing on the utility to do something to sell the utility.

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This is in response to the utility coming to government and saying: This is what we need to expand partnerships so that we can perform at a much higher level. That is comparing apples and oranges. There is no comparison between the two, and to do so is rather disingenuous. Instead of forcing political mandates upon the utility, what we are doing and what we have done for six years is to say this: Tell us what you need to perform at a high level.

We have shown over and over again that the utility has been giving us the roadmap to get its results. This is no different, and the province will benefit because of it.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, Bill 46 explicitly requires a sale or partial sale of a power plant to be considered “prudent” and the costs and expenses incurred to be considered “prudent and necessary”. This means there can be no oversight of these sales by the Energy and Utilities Board to determine whether they are in the economic interests of New Brunswickers, because the law says the expenditures are prudent and necessary whether they actually are or not.

Oversight of NB Power’s financial transactions by the EUB, NB Power’s economic regulator, is essential to protect the economic interests of New Brunswickers. Why has the minister responsible for NB Power introduced a bill that will shield the sale of our power plants or a portion of those power plants from review and approval by the Energy and Utilities Board?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development; Minister of Indigenous Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, it’s easy to answer that question, because we’re not. We absolutely are not shielding any of these operations from the EUB.

If the member opposite talked a little bit about the process that the utility goes through, he would mention that it goes in front of the EUB to discuss the financial implications of what it has done to afford it the ability to get a rate increase. If the utility is not operating in a financially prudent fashion, as the member opposite mentions, it will not get approved for the rate increase. There are checks, balances, and accountability woven into this system to ensure that the EUB’s oversight is still there, maintained, and required to approve any rate increase that would come forward as a result of the utility’s asking.

You know, I would really like for us to look at something that can move the utility forward, uncouple it from political interference, and benefit New Brunswick. How about we do that for a change?

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, not only are there no safeguards in this bill to ensure that the sale of a power plant or part of a power plant is in the interest of the ratepayers, the bill goes further by giving Cabinet a blank cheque to exempt the transfer of power plants or the liabilities, rights, and obligations of NB Power, a subsidiary, or an affiliate to a corporation from any provincial laws or provisions of provincial laws it



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chooses to exempt them from. This could demolish any legal safeguards—any legal safeguards—that exist to protect the public interest if a private or publicly traded corporation were to take over NB Power’s power plants, power lines, or the public utility’s rights and obligations. That’s written into the bill.

The business of our public utility is the business of the people of this province, so why is the minister trying to get a bill passed that could put NB Power’s monetary deals with corporations outside the law?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development; Minister of Indigenous Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, I really appreciate an opportunity to discuss this. Today, in economic policy, we’re going to be able to dig into this at length.

What we’re talking about is a bill that provides yet another protection for New Brunswickers. What he’s speaking about is outside organizations having a role in the regulatory oversight of this. Now, if we’re talking about partnering with organizations and entities outside New Brunswick, do we want to be subject to their regulatory bodies having the decision-making process? No. We want third parties to have the ability to provide regulatory oversight recommendations so that we’re getting objective information. Whether it be this bill or whether it be the other changes we’ve made to the *Electricity Act*, we’ve made those changes in response to a utility saying: Government, you have messed with us in the past, so please allow us to do what we can do, which is run our business. We will be—

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

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier’s comments today show exactly why this government is failing in delivering two of its most critical responsibilities. He seems to think that he can focus directly on the student or the patient and go around or on top of the teachers in our system and throw them under the bus or completely ignore the nurses, doctors, and nurse practitioners who are delivering the care. He can talk about patients, but if he is not respecting and working with the people who are caring for those folks, we are not going to get the results, unless the Premier thinks that he, personally, is going to deliver education in this province or that he, personally, is going to deliver health care in this province.

We have 100 000 people who need care, and we have a group of health care professionals who are fed up with this government because it is not interested in working with them to serve New Brunswickers. When is this Premier going to show respect to the health care workers of New Brunswick?



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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, we have worked very well with health care professionals. We've certainly made major changes to the compensation model. We've done that over the past few years. I find it ironic that the Leader of the Opposition doesn't believe a patient-first strategy would be relevant when we have 850 000 patients in the province. I think it's very important to have a focus on patients and on the success of their health care.

Mr. Speaker, I can understand why the Leader of the Opposition wants to carry on about, maybe, just anything, despite what we see nationwide. It's because our province has never been in the shape it's in now with economic growth, population growth, and its ability to not go over the cliff.

Yesterday, one article from DBRS Morningstar was referenced. I met with people from DBRS Morningstar, which is another company that was providing our rating. Do you know the question they asked me? They said: We really appreciate what you've been doing, and we see the future for New Brunswick with six straight balanced budgets. They asked: What do you think, since this is an election year? What happens if the Liberals come in? I said: It'll all be off. All bets will be off. You know what's going on federally—

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

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to highlight something that the member for Miramichi said, because I appreciate the call-out to New Brunswickers to encourage them to apply for the \$300 Workers Benefit. We know that it is vastly underutilized. There is a lot of budget sitting there that New Brunswickers have not been able to access because the application process is cumbersome and rigorous.

Given that the government is trying to promote this and encourage people to use the program that it said was going to help 250 000 people, can the member opposite confirm that, given the unutilized budget, the government will extend the deadline for applications for the \$300 benefit?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the ability to provide an update on the New Brunswick Workers Benefit, which has been a success and continues to be a success. We are asking people to continue to apply up until the end of June. It is \$300. It is nicely focused in. When we were looking at this, we were thinking about how far this \$300 would go to cover any additional cost in electricity, let's say, for households. Do you know what? We thought \$300 was a good amount, and it is tax-free.

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A total of 88 000 applications have been received as of May 27, so what is that? Two days ago. Same date, a total of 63 000 applications have been approved, and over \$18 million has gone back to the people of New Brunswick. Over \$18 million has gone back to the people of New Brunswick, tax-free, to help them make ends meet. Absolutely. This government does the work.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): Thank you, members. Question period is over.

