

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**November 26, 2024**

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[Translation]

### BUDGET

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Good afternoon.

[Original]

Today, we're going to start off with concerns about the government and its commitments. The Liberal platform says that the government will balance the budget in every year of its mandate. In the throne speech, under "Fiscal Responsibility", the Liberals also said:

*To best serve the people of the province and provide the services they need, the government must be fiscally responsible. That is why your government will deliver a balanced budget every year of its mandate.*

Now, the Premier is pivoting with the caveat that the government should only be held accountable for balancing the books in years it is completely responsible for. That's different from what was said during the campaign, different from their platform document, and different from the throne speech. We're already seeing this pivot in action with the 10% rebate being transferred to this year's books. I will remind the government members that they committed to \$79 million in promises with a \$1-billion mistake in their accounting. How can New Brunswickers ever believe this government is going to balance the books in the next two years?

**Hon. Mr. Legacy** (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister responsible for Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): Thank you for the question from the member opposite, the Leader of the Official Opposition. We've been having this discussion for a couple of days now, and I'm kind of curious. We understand that there is a process that has happened. In the past few months, we made commitments, and now we're working through a budget process to find balance. That's the work that's involved. That puts the burden on us to find balance. We know that, in the past, the previous government would wait to see whether the budget was balanced and, if there was anything left over, it would go to the public in the form of help. That would put the burden on the public. We have chosen the latter because that's how we do things. We committed to doing what we can to help New Brunswickers. Now the burden is on us to find balance, and that is what we're going to do.

[Translation]

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

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[Original]

The definition of balance is things being in equilibrium. It's not equilibrium if the government said that it was committed to balancing the books in every one of its four years and now it is pivoting, saying, well, not in the years for which it is not fully accountable. I'm questioning that, Madam Speaker, because there seems to be a pivot here. There seems to be a caveat that has been added to this.

I reiterate that the government members committed that their promises, their commitments, were going to total \$79 million in this year. Now, because of changing the rebates—

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): You'll get your turn.

The government members committed to their rebates, and now they are going to shift at least \$24 million onto this year's books. That blows away the government's number of \$79 million. Now, that makes me question the out years, Madam Speaker. Will this government balance the books in year four of its mandate? The members could use the excuse of a partial year at the end of their government. Are they going to do that, the same as they've done in the first three weeks of their first year?

**Hon. Mr. Legacy** (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister responsible for Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Again, we see the difference between the two approaches. We have made some commitments, and we said that we are going to get them done immediately.

We campaigned on this, and New Brunswickers accepted it.

Now, if we all recall, the PC Party also had a campaign promise about cutting HST. Now, last week, I heard the Leader of the Official Opposition say this: If we were to get in, we would analyze and would decide whether we would do things after we had seen the books.

So, I wonder, if the fortunes had changed and the results were different, and the members opposite had seen a \$92-million deficit after six months and had seen different things happen, would they have backtracked on that promise, the one commitment they made during the campaign? Would they have just decided that, no, they were no longer ready to do it?

That's not how we do it. We commit to it, and we get it done.

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**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, the answer, Madam Speaker, is that we managed things well enough that we could make those decisions. These guys have backed themselves into a corner. They are already backtracking on what they said. It's pretty obvious after just a couple of question periods that, rather than accepting the responsibility of government, they're trying to push back on the past, saying: Well, you guys did this in this way. What we did is that we balanced the books so that the province is in a far better position now than it was the last time the Liberals were in.

What I'm trying to get from this government is very simple. The government members said that they were going to live up to all their commitments and that they were going to balance the books every year. Now, we are getting the pivot where they are saying that they won't. I'm saying that there is the potential that they're not going to be in power for the last part of year four. So are they also going to extend that caveat to say: Well, you know what? We can just blow the lid off financial accountability because we are not going to be there at the end of that year.

Are they going to do that as well?

**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm happy to try to clarify for the member opposite. Our team is committed to balanced budgets, and by balanced budgets, I don't mean a \$1-billion surplus—I mean a balance. We are going to put forward a budget and then we're going to stick to it. We are doing everything we can to achieve that balance in this fiscal year, even though the budget was set by someone else and even though the expenses for most of the year were incurred by someone else. We are still going to do everything we can to get as close to balance as possible, and I have confidence that we'll achieve that. Then we will continue to deliver balanced budgets for the rest of our mandate, and then we will hand over a forecast for a balanced budget to a potential next government in the hope that it will deliver on the path we've laid for it.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*Original*]

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. It appears that the government does not want to talk about the fact that we have apartment owners, landlords, who have made plans. Now, they have to live up to the decisions that this government is making, even though they've already followed processes and did everything that needed to be done in accordance with the law. Now, everything has been upended.

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It's easy for the government members to say: Well, we kind of didn't have all the information. They did have the information because we were predicting a worsening of the fiscal situation. They could have pivoted at any time before the election to say: Well, you know what? Maybe we have to draw back a bit.

That wasn't what the government members chose. So, Madam Speaker, I will ask this again. After three weeks in power, they said that they were going to deliver on all their promises, with balanced books, trusted leadership, and evidence-based decision-making. They have a caveat on fiscal responsibility in their first year because it's not completely their year. Are they going to do the same thing in year four?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the question. I apologize for the lack of clarity. We will prepare and table balanced budgets every year. We will do our best to achieve a balanced budget this year. In the fourth year, we will table a balanced budget. We will do our work until the election. We hope and trust that we will return to power as a government that has proven itself by keeping its promises and acting without hesitation.

We will deliver the balance New Brunswickers are asking for. People want help with affordability. That's why we have implemented a rent cap as quickly as possible. People want help paying their electricity bills. That's why we want to reduce the total on electricity bills by 10% as soon as possible. We will provide this benefit starting in January 2025. That is balanced work that respects New Brunswickers.

[*Original*]

### RENTS

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's great for government to repeat and repeat its talking points, but New Brunswickers are already feeling the effects of the decisions that this government is making.

We have landlords telling us they may not be able to make their mortgage payments because of this government's decisions.

The government is saying: Well, we want to make it so that the rental landscape has more units available. Well, when you look at it, you see that there are currently 36 000 rental units in the province. The government wants to build 30 000 by 2030. The record high was 2 645, so that means it has to build about 5 000 units per year. We've never done it. The government wants to essentially double what's available.

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When we look at the rent cap, the rising cost of development, the property taxes, the rising insurance rates, and the increasing material and labour costs, we see that this government has now curtailed revenues for landlords. What study did the new government do to research the effectiveness of rent caps and their impact on new developments?

**Hon. Mr. Hickey** (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's important to recognize what our rent cap is doing. The previous government made its rent cap retroactive. It penalized landlords who needed to balance their books. We, in collaboration with our apartment owners and operators, have come up with a plan that stabilizes the rental market while making sure we seek the balance we need. That's our intention moving forward.

We put in the rent cap, but we removed the PST from new multiunit builds. We're going hard on tackling tax reform. We're making sure balance is sought so that we can create the most competitive development market in Atlantic Canada. That's our ambition—build more homes for more New Brunswickers so that everyone has a safe, affordable place to call home while making sure there's structure and support in the rental system. Thank you.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, let's talk about retroactivity, Madam Speaker. The reality is that because of the change the government wants to make, landlords who were following the rules and had their increases done six months in advance, the way they were supposed to, are now being hit with this rent cap. All the agreements they had with their tenants are now null and void. These were increases these landlords had planned so that they could pay for investments in their apartments. They will no longer be able to make them because this government has done this.

The government wants to harp, crow, and go on about how it's getting rid of the PST from new development, but it's curtailing the landlords' ability to get revenues from their current buildings. Will this government take a look at possibly removing the PST from renovation materials as a way to try to ensure these landlords don't get hit twice, unable to pay their bills and unable to pay their increased costs because the government is curtailing their revenues? What is this government going to do to try to help landlords?

**Hon. Mr. Hickey** (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Our plan in the immediate term is to make sure we can get in line with the provinces around us that have stepped up to remove the provincial sales tax on new multiunit builds. It's getting more housing starts built faster. It's getting developers who may have been waiting because of increased costs off the sidelines.

The question around operators needing to make changes and investments in their properties is an important one. That's why we've put in a ceiling at 9% outside of the rent cap to make sure the necessary renovations to units are being done while making sure people still have the stability and predictability they need in their rents. That's why we're taking this on. That's why we're taking it on the way we are, because, for us, it comes down

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to balance. We're not being retroactive as we saw happen with previous rent caps. We're being balanced, and we're working with all parties to make sure we can come up with the best housing landscape in Atlantic Canada.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The reality here is that we have landlords who are facing rising costs through the spectrum. Now this government is taking away... These are the people who actually provide housing for New Brunswickers. For them to continue to be able to do that, they need money to invest not only in their current properties but also in new properties. All I'm suggesting here with this PST change on the renovations is to try to help landlords continue to be able to make these residences liveable for people, but when you curtail their revenues, they can't do that. Now you're talking about increased expenses but a reduced ability to cover those increased costs.

What we're looking at here is landlords who are not going to be able to reinvest. They're not going to be able to build because of the restrictions that we're seeing from this government. What is the government going to do in terms of property tax relief to help these property owners be able to invest in new properties?

*[Translation]*

**Hon. Mr. Kennedy** (Quispamsis, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for Service New Brunswick, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I am very pleased to rise for the first time in the House as the member for Quispamsis and as the Minister of Local Government and Minister responsible for Service New Brunswick.

*[Original]*

Obviously, we have made commitments in our election platform to have fiscal reform and an overhaul of the property tax assessment system in the province. We are going to be meeting with our stakeholders. Those discussions have already begun. We will be working in 2025 to ensure that there are changes and improvements in place for the 2026 municipal tax year. Of course, as you know, Madam Speaker, the fiscal year for the province is April 1 until March 31, but it's the calendar year for municipalities. We are committed to doing that and to ensuring that the system is fair, equitable, and easily understood for all New Brunswickers.

## ADDICTION SERVICES

**Mr. Weir** (Riverview, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise today during National Addictions Awareness Week. In my role as critic to the Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services, I have found it disquieting that addiction was only mentioned once in both the Liberal platform and the minister's mandate letter. It was nice to see mental health mentioned more than 16 times, but I found the one mention of addiction



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worrisome. I hope it's just an oversight. We have stakeholders with empty therapeutic beds due to a lack of timely access to detox facilities. My question to the minister, through you, Madam Speaker, is this: Will he make a commitment today to fund the needed amount of additional detox beds in the province? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. McKee, K.C.** (Moncton Centre, Minister of Justice; Attorney General; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services; L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the question. As it was for my colleague, this is my first time getting to stand here in question period and answer a question on mental health, which is something that is near and dear to my heart. I'm honoured to have been given the roles that I've been given, in both Justice and Mental Health. For me, they're things that go hand in hand, working to ensure that people get the services that they need when they need them and not criminalizing those who need care.

One of our commitments has been increasing access to treatment beds across this province. Since the former government, there's been a process under way to add 50 additional beds. We are working aggressively to build on that to ensure that everyone who needs access will get it when they need it, at that time, because we cannot wait. There are people now on the wait list for voluntary treatment. We are working aggressively. Our platform was committed to it. I'm looking forward to getting to work on this important file.

**Mr. Weir** (Riverview, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the minister for his response. The minister failed to mention addiction in his first speech. I understand that. I too struggled with some nervousness.

We can't get to an increase in therapeutic beds without an increase in detox beds. I'll go back to my question that I asked. I understand that the therapeutic beds are terribly important. From listening to various stakeholders involved, we all know that we are in dire need of these therapeutic beds. If we want to have any chance of stemming the tide of addiction in our communities, both these therapeutic beds and the detox beds need to be available. The people who are struggling with addiction need these facilities until they are ready for the next stage in their recovery. My question to the minister is this: Will you commit to facilitating both the detox beds and the therapeutic recovery beds in the province? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Mr. McKee, K.C.** (Moncton Centre, Minister of Justice; Attorney General; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services; L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member again for the follow-up question. As I said, in our platform, we were very committed to both addictions and mental health services. We had a very aggressive plan for mental health and addictions. We want to put mental health workers in community care clinics, we want to increase the number of training seats for psychologists and psychiatrists, and we want to create a mental health court across the province, expanded from the Saint John area. Those are things that I'm committed to working on.

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What's most important, to address the question, is addictions. We need to increase access to treatment beds, whether it's detox... We need to have detox facilities so that people can go into treatment fully detoxed. They go hand in hand. We need to look at the big picture. There was a plan for therapeutic beds on the table at one point, and then it was off. We're working toward 50 additional beds, and we are going to work aggressively to build capacity so that everyone who needs access can get it when they want it.

### TUITION

**Mr. Cullins** (Fredericton-York, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm proud to rise today as part of His Majesty's loyal opposition and to ask a question on behalf of the people of New Brunswick, particularly postsecondary students. I welcome the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour to our first sharing of information, and I hope postsecondary students can count on us to do good work.

Madam Speaker, I was glad to see that one of the 100 promises made in the Liberal platform was to continue what we started for postsecondary students, which was no interest on student loans. One thing I did not see in the platform was any reference to tuition. We all remember when the last Liberal government, featuring this Premier, made changes to tuition. To the minister, are there any tuition changes planned?

**Hon. Ms. Townsend** (Rothesay, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour; Minister responsible for the Research and Productivity Council; Minister responsible for the *Regulatory Accountability and Reporting Act*, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you, member opposite, for the question. I really appreciate it. I am thrilled to be here and to rise for my very first time. I understand I am what is known as a "new new", not only a new minister but also a new member of the Legislature. My portfolio is massive. It's very extensive, and my mandate letter is just as extensive.

You asked about what we're doing for students. Yes, we do intend to continue with interest-free student loans. Concerning tuition, that is something we do not control. Colleges and universities are independent, and they will make that determination. Of course, they have many—

**Madam Speaker** (Hon. Ms. Landry): Time, minister.

[*Translation*]

### SUICIDES

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Our mental health system is not meeting New Brunswickers' needs, as *Acadie Nouvelle* is reporting today.

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According to the most recent Annual Report of the Chief Coroner, in 2021, the average suicide rate in the province was 11.9 suicides per 100 000 people. That is a failure, Madam Speaker. In the Restigouche region, the rate is 22.5 suicides per 100 000 people. In the Miramichi region, the rate is 19.6. In the Woodstock region, the rate is 18.7. In 2020, Edmundston was at the peak, with a rate of 33.9 suicides per 100 000 people.

My question is for the Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services. Will he create walk-in mental health clinics?

**Hon. Mr. McKee, K.C.** (Moncton Centre, Minister of Justice; Attorney General; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I also thank the third party leader. The Department of Health is aware of the high suicide rates throughout the province and especially in the northern regions. What I understand is that the health networks are working with the Department of Health and stakeholders to put initiatives in place to provide better access to mental health services.

As I pointed out earlier, we have a vigorous plan in our platform to increase mental health services. We have talked about placing mental health professionals in community health centres so that they can work with primary care providers.

We are also talking about other services like treatment beds for people who need them to solve addiction or mental health problems, which often go hand in hand. We are working very hard on this file because we take it very seriously. We will continue to move forward on New Brunswickers' priorities.

*[Original]*

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, that's just unacceptable. The current situation is deplorable. Hospital emergency departments are neither equipped nor designed to deal with those experiencing a mental health emergency unless it is a psychotic break. People are treated inconsistently when they present at the ER, where medical staff are experts in emergency medicine, not mental illnesses. Should the patient be admitted, there is no appropriate transition back into the community in all too many cases.

As our high rates of suicide demonstrate, the system is failing New Brunswickers. People experiencing a mental health crisis have no appropriate place to seek help. Every police department in this province will attest to that. The police don't know where to take them. They want to be able to take people suffering from mental illnesses who need help to the appropriate place, but it doesn't exist yet. Will the minister responsible for mental health establish a network of 24-7 mental health walk-in clinics with acute care beds to accommodate those who are admitted to a hospital when a psychiatric ward is unavailable or inappropriate?

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**Hon. Mr. McKee, K.C.** (Moncton Centre, Minister of Justice; Attorney General; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services; L): Yes, thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the leader of the third party for the question. It's a very important question. We need to ensure that people who need the help can get access to it when they want it. We know that services have been lacking over the past several years, and I'm looking forward to working very hard in this portfolio. I've been getting briefed on a number of initiatives over the past three weeks. I'm meeting with stakeholders and meeting with the RHAs to discuss what their priorities are and what the priorities of various communities are. We are going to work together taking a full, transparent, and collaborative approach to ensure that New Brunswickers are getting the services that they need.

When it comes to mental health and addiction services, I'm fully committed to listening to each and every community in this province about what their needs are and making sure that everyone gets access to the services they need when they want it. That's number one.

### AIR QUALITY

**Ms. S. Wilson** (Albert-Riverview, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In the Liberal government's platform and the Minister of Environment's mandate letter, there is a commitment to update the *Clean Air Act* and *Clean Water Act*. Madam Speaker, I believe we can all agree that New Brunswickers deserve modern air filtration and cooling systems in provincial schools, hospitals, long-term care homes, and public buildings. Can the minister tell us whether there has been an assessment made of all the buildings and what this cost will be?

[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. LePage** (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. First of all, I would like to thank the member opposite for her question. However, if she had done her work, she would know that the *Clean Air Act* falls under the Department of Environment and encompasses everything affecting outdoor air.

Everything concerning indoor air and any related issue falls under the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, WorkSafe NB, or the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure. So, I ask the member opposite to do her work and prepare good questions. Thank you.

[Original]

**Ms. S. Wilson** (Albert-Riverview, PC): Well, well, well, Madam Speaker. We're off to a good start here this morning.

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In the Liberal member's mandate letter, it clearly boasts that "Our government will require that all new schools, hospitals, long-term care homes, and other public buildings have modern air filtration, heating, and cooling systems". Madam Speaker, here is another promise of this government that could be considered redundant because this is how new buildings are all required to be built.

But as far as upgrading existing buildings goes, can the minister explain to the House why the Liberal platform costing said that clean air promises would not impact the budget? Is that because the government doesn't actually intend to spend it in the budget? I will remind the minister that this was in his mandate letter.

**Hon. C. Chiasson** (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure for me to get up to answer my first question in the Legislature as well. I've been waiting 10 years for this. Actually, if the truth be known... We know it's important that there is clean air. We know it's very important that people in our public buildings, schools, and office buildings around town breathe clean air. We know that's important. That was actually part of my mandate letter.

To that end, I've instructed staff at the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure (DTI) to do an assessment of all the buildings, including schools and other public buildings, to find out just where our air quality is so that we can draw a baseline. From there, we can build a plan for how we are going to reach a standard that is going to be more than what we have. As it pertains to new builds, we're, of course, going to meet the ASHRAE 241 standard. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

## PAY EQUITY

**Ms. Scott-Wallace** (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I want to welcome the Minister responsible for Women's Equality to her first question. I hope that we will accomplish great things for the women of New Brunswick.

This new Liberal government has promised to pass legislation to ensure pay equity in the private sector. Flash back to when this new Liberal Premier was in the Premier's Office with the Gallant government. A CBC headline in August 2018 read: "Pay equity promise not kept, Liberals admit".

The Liberals already have a record, and it's not good, Madam Speaker. Will the Minister responsible for Women's Equality confirm for this House that their promise, if kept, will mimic legislation in Ontario and Quebec? Even if they should keep this promise, the legislation they would be mimicking only applies to businesses with 10 or more employees. We know that, in New Brunswick, 75% to 80% of businesses are small businesses. Madam Speaker—

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[*Translation*]

**Hon. Ms. Holt** (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you very much to the member opposite for this question. I wanted to rise because this is a subject that is really important to me.

[*Original*]

I think that pay equity is something that is critically important. It is something that we've debated in this House, which I know the opposition voted against at the time. It is something that the previous Liberal government advanced as the first government to put in place pay equity for the public sector and, with that advancement, made huge strides for public servants in New Brunswick. We are very much looking forward to working with the coalition to implement pay equity that is going to extend to the private sector and to making sure that no one is paid unfairly on the basis of their gender and that people get equal pay for work of equal value. That is something that every New Brunswicker deserves. I really look forward to the support of every member of this House to ensure that everyone in New Brunswick has access to equitable pay.

[*Translation*]

The Holt government will be proud to take the necessary action to put pay equity in place. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker** (Hon. Ms. Landry): Question period is over.