

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



March 26, 2025

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PENSIONS

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

[*Original*]

Madam Speaker, as we learned yesterday, this government has no idea what the impacts of the repeal of Bill 17 will be on our finances, our workers, our retirees, or the taxpayers. The Premier could not tell us what the impacts would be on 2 500 part-time and casual workers who currently have access to a pension. Given that the Premier doesn't know how bad the financial repercussions of switching away from shared risk are going to be, while also predicting deficits in all four years of her mandate, it's clear she's going to deal with this in one of two ways. The Premier is either going to raise taxes or cut spending. Given that we know she isn't going to cut spending, the only alternative is for her to raise taxes.

The Premier likes to say: Everything is on the table. As the official opposition, we're demanding that she take one thing off the table. Will the Premier commit to New Brunswickers that she will not increase any taxes, levies, or fees on the backs of individuals or businesses? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's unfortunate that the member opposite is taking a black-or-white approach to something that is considerably more nuanced, but I'm glad to have the opportunity to revert to the pension conversation. One of the things that I think was missed yesterday was that, at the end of the day, this is about nursing home workers and school bus drivers who deserve a reliable pension and deserve to have their voices recognized at the table.

These are people who do critical work in our society. Instead of presupposing an outcome, and instead of forcing something on them, our government is coming to the table with an open mind. We have an envelope of funds that would have covered the cost of the previous pension model, and it is there to cover the cost of a newly created pension model that we will do with school bus drivers and with nursing home workers whose voices deserve to be respected. That's what they'll get from a Holt government.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): By that answer, Madam Speaker, what I see from a Holt government is more taxes for New Brunswickers. That is the clear message. She didn't answer, once again. New Brunswickers, get ready because you're about to get taxed to death.

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HEALTH CARE

Madam Speaker, many of us met with the New Brunswick Pharmacists' Association last night. We learned directly from them how dissatisfied and disappointed they are with the cancellation of the pilot project. These individual New Brunswick business owners believed so much in this project that they invested their own money in it. This pilot project helped tens of thousands of New Brunswickers who otherwise would have wound up in an emergency room or a clinic at a much higher cost.

Those surveyed gave one hundred percent satisfaction scores for their experience. This program was working.

While the government is working out its collaborative care strategy, the thousands of New Brunswickers who take advantage of this pilot are going to be left without. The official opposition is asking the government this: Will the government reconsider its cancelling of this pilot and provide bridge funding to the program until it gets its collaborative care model fully implemented?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, I, too, was at this meeting last night. We learned a lot from the pilot. We learned that there are a significant number of New Brunswickers who do not have access to primary care. Through this pilot, six pharmacists provided access to levels of primary care for chronic diseases. We are committed to looking at how we can bring our pharmacists on board in our collaborative care clinics, probably through an interval arrangement so that these people can continue to receive care. It was a very fruitful meeting. It was understood that their interests are in the best interests of New Brunswickers. Thank you very much.

POWER RATES

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, with all due respect to the Minister of Health, Madam Speaker, I will take that as a no. They are going to be leaving tens of thousands of New Brunswickers without the bridge they need to be able to access services. This is not good. This is not good.

New Brunswickers are still struggling with the effects of increased power bills.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): The Premier will have her turn. The official opposition called for an investigation into what could be causing this. We learned at the meeting with NB Power that it would not finish its work until sometime in April. The problem this causes for ratepayers is that they cannot dispute their bill after it

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is 90 days old. Despite whatever news comes out of NB Power's investigation, it will be too late for anybody to appeal their bill. According to NB Power, this issue is about consumption. Considering that New Brunswickers may still be paying for their winter power consumption well into next fall, for the period being investigated, would the government consider directing NB Power to charge customers rates based on last year's consumption rates? The Premier said that everything is on the table. Is this an idea she considered?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you very much for the question. I think the NB Power issue has been becoming more significant for several years. Nothing has been done to improve the situation in this Crown corporation. Nothing has been done to help the people who had rate increases. Our government proposed a solution to reduce bills by 10%. That being said, the idea of changing the period of time that people have to appeal their bills is a possibility.

[*Original*]

I appreciate the suggestion to look at the 90-day dispute term and see whether we can extend it so that it covers the period from when the bills experienced spikes to after the tabling of the NB Power report. I think that is absolutely something we can look at.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's always about affordability and making sure that New Brunswickers can afford their power bills. That's why we are heading in this direction.

I want to turn to some comments that were made in the media yesterday. I'm speaking specifically about the Minister of Social Development and her comments to the media about the consideration and conversation around the service providers for the Chimo Helpline. What we take exception with is the minister's statement that "the 'majority' of CHIMO calls were related to loneliness, and that there are a variety of hotlines available in the province to meet specific needs."

Does the minister not realize that people who suffer from mental illnesses can also be lonely? We find the minister's comments appalling, insensitive, and dismissive toward those with mental health challenges. Will she rise in the House and apologize for her comments yesterday?

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Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Madam Speaker, through you, to the member opposite, it's unfortunate that my words came out the way they did, if they were perceived that way. Loneliness is a very real challenge for so many New Brunswickers. The decision to not renew the funding for Chimo was based on the report it had provided us, which noted that the majority of its calls were about loneliness. We have other opportunities and other services, supports, and programs in place to support the ever-changing needs of New Brunswickers. We have 211 NB. We have the mental health and addictions support program as well. This decision was made in consideration of and in conversation with the service provider. It was not taken lightly. Thank you.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): Madam Speaker, when I first took on this role, I had the opportunity to meet with the Finance Minister and discuss the immense responsibility our province bears in maintaining a vast and diverse network of roads—over 15 000 km. These roads are essential for economic growth and for ensuring the safe and timely movement of goods and services. Yet, every year, we hear from frustrated residents and emergency responders about worsening road conditions. Whether it is potholes or eroding shoulders, the state of our infrastructure is becoming a point of concern. These issues not only impact the daily lives of those who rely on our roads but also have a direct effect on the safety of emergency response teams who need clear and reliable routes to save lives.

Rather than taking a proactive approach to address these concerns before they become a crisis, this government has chosen a different path, one that will deepen the problem in the years to come. That is why I must ask: Why, of all things to cut in this budget, has the government decided to slash highway funding by 12% and road maintenance by 8% year-over-year?

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Thank you very much for the question. I'm going to repeat what my predecessor said. Every morning, I wake up to 16 000 km of roads, blah, blah, blah. I would like to remind the member opposite that I have yet to experience a paving season. So, what I have inherited is six years of neglect on the roads of New Brunswick.

One of the first moves that the previous government made when they came into power was to cut the provincial road budget for the roads that are within municipalities, the municipal designated highway budget, from \$25 million to \$10 million. Now, it has inched back up, but what it is today is what it was when the previous government took power. We need

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more now. Their neglect has left me with a mess to clean up, and I can tell you that I am doing my best with the funds we have to clean up the mess that they left.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): Madam Speaker, on February 18, I received an email from a citizen, Jennifer Paxton, about the dangerous road conditions on Route 10. As a newcomer in the region and an essential worker at the Moncton Hospital, she was trying to understand why the roads in her community weren't properly maintained during the winter.

In fact, there was an accident the next day in the exact location that Ms. Paxton had pointed out. The incident could have been avoided if proper winter maintenance had been done. The problem is not an isolated case; people often raise similar concerns throughout the province with respect to dangerous driving conditions aggravated by variable road maintenance. How can the government justify a 2.8% year-over-year reduction in this crucial budget item when the safety of drivers, essential workers, and first responders is at risk?

[*Original*]

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Thank you very much for the question. As it pertains to winter maintenance, this is done on a rotation. Roads are done starting with the main arteries, and then we go out to the feeders and so on and so forth until we get to the back roads. Now, as it pertains to people calling, of course, we do get calls from people whose roads are not being plowed in the time frame that they would like to see. However, we do have that four-hour rotation, meaning that, if the plow passes your house, it'll be four hours before it makes its way back.

We do our best to maintain the roads up to a certain standard, and that standard is well published. I don't know what else I can say. The roads are maintained to a standard that is acceptable and that has been established. It's been there. Again, I inherited that standard, and that is the standard that we're using.

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): Madam Speaker, the residents of Butternut Valley have endured years of hardship and economic stagnation due to the ongoing challenges surrounding bridge infrastructure. These longstanding issues have not only impeded the daily lives of citizens but have also hindered emergency response times and stifled the region's economic potential. Take, for example, the bailey bridge on Macdonald Road, the sole crossing over the Canaan River between Youngs Cove and Havelock. It continues to be a major bottleneck, restricting emergency services such as fire response and preventing any meaningful economic expansion.

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Additionally, the washed-out covered bridge that once stood at Cherryvale remains a glaring symbol of the neglect faced by this region. This is a matter of public safety and economic development.

Madam Speaker, when will this government commit to a definitive timeline for addressing the safe and efficient delivery of critical services and allowing this municipality to build a sustainable economic future?

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Madam Speaker, it just blows my mind that these people are bringing up all these issues. These issues have been around for the whole time they were in government. They never did squat to address any of these issues. Now, here I am. I took over this position in October.

(Interjection.)

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): It was November. I am sorry. All those bridge issues should have been dealt with by the previous government, but it left them for us to pick up. Again, we are going to clean up its mess. That is what we always do.

Mr. Oliver (Kings Centre, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I guess the ball is now in your court.

As we have already acknowledged, New Brunswick has more than 31 000 km of roads, and this winter was a bad one for all of them. There has been freezing and thawing, and we know that is terrible for roads, but great for growing potholes. Keeping up repairs on our roads is a never-ending process. It takes a lot of time and it takes a lot of money. It takes more money every year. The cost of roadwork has been climbing—just as everything else has been. That is why I find it puzzling to read in the DTI budget that the Holt government has cut funding for road maintenance by 8%. My first question for the minister is this: Do these funding cuts indicate that fewer roads or bridges will be repaired this year?

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Absolutely not. Primordial for us is the safety of the roads that the people of New Brunswick drive on. If we need to spend more money to repair the roads, we will spend the money as needed to make sure that the roads are safe. There will be no change in the service or in the level of repairs that our roads will undergo this summer.

Mr. Oliver (Kings Centre, PC): Madam Speaker, I am sure that the minister fought hard to avoid cutting any funding for roadwork, but, in the end, it is the Premier who has the final say in these things. I say that because I do not want the minister to think we blame him for cutting the budget for fixing roads. This funding cut is just one of the many reckless cuts

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that I have spoken of and that we have seen from the Holt government. It cut funding for mental health emergency care, it cut funding for pharmacy clinics for folks with asthma, diabetes, and other chronic diseases, and it cut funding for tourism promotion as well. In my riding, we see fewer tourists travelling on the roads that tourists normally use. With an 8% cut in the maintenance budget, what roads will be maintained? You can't do more with less.

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Madam Speaker, as I said in my previous answer, we will maintain the roads to ensure that they are safe for the travelling public of New Brunswick, and we will make sure that those roads are maintained to the standard that New Brunswickers expect. I can tell you that I have inherited a whole lot of roads that are in terrible shape. The previous government spent nothing on those roads. We will make sure the job gets done.

Ms. Conroy (Miramichi East, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would like to address the issue that is on every mind in Miramichi. It is, again, the Centennial Bridge. We were told publicly that the bridge deck would be started this year, with full bridge closure. Then we were told that the work was not going to happen and that contracts were cancelled, but the secondary road still could not be completed before the bridge was closed. We know that our bridge has to be done sooner rather than later and that we can only patch it up for so long, and we already know that the secondary route is in the plans. We have been working on the file for the past few years, finally getting it back on the table after it had been shelved for a couple of decades. There is no big announcement there. People need to plan, especially for work. Minister, can you please tell us the timeline for when the deck will be replaced and when the secondary route will be started? Thank you.

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Absolutely, Madam Speaker. I can explain exactly what is going to happen. This summer, there will be no closure. We will do work underneath the bridge to replace the bearings and work on the piers to make sure that they are ready. Next summer and the summer after that, there will be a full closure of the bridge in order to replace the deck surface.

As for the alternate route, I am in consultations with the Mayor and council of Miramichi. We have weekly calls. We are going to work to identify the best path forward for the alternate route.

Ms. Conroy (Miramichi East, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the minister. I want to thank the department as well for its continued work. I did hear that there will be public meetings, and that is very much appreciated by all in the community. Over the past few years, we've had many meetings with the previous ministers, the city, and the department. I know they're doing their best to try to get this done as quickly and as

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painlessly as possible. We were also told that the northern route could not be completed in time, before the bridge work is completed.

I've been getting calls about the member's grandiose statement last week. It sort of sounded as though the new announcement, where the bridge was going to be done and the new route was going to be started, said everything was all sorted out and mighty peachy. However, some people are left more confused. Have the plans changed since I last asked questions in the House? When can we see these projects, the bridge and the alternate route, completed? Are full closures of the bridge still expected, or will these be partial closures? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Madam Speaker, as I said in my previous answer, there will not be a closure this summer. We will be working under the bridge to get that work done. As for the alternate route, the previous government's own report that it had funded indicated that it would be, at the very best, a three-year project. We are in consultations with the mayor and council. Again, we have weekly conference calls with them. We're in consultations with them to determine the best path forward.

Madam Speaker, I really understand and empathize with the people of Miramichi. There has been a lot of uncertainty around this file, and we're trying to give them the certainty that they want. That is why we will be holding some public meetings—to inform the public on exactly what is going on and stop the rumour mill from churning. Thank you.

Ms. Conroy (Miramichi East, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the minister. It doesn't really sound as though there's any new news from the government. Besides more delays and the contract cancellation, it's what we've been told before. We can get into all that and the costs during main estimates next month, including how the funding that's been cut from DTI's maintenance budget will affect these projects as well.

My final question is about the possible bridge closures and the chaos they will cause. Besides the road work that was already done by our government in the past couple of years, we have had past closures and accidents on both bridges. This causes traffic to come to a complete halt. Can the minister tell us some of the measures in place, especially for emergency and first responders, that will alleviate these pressures and the complete gridlock that the potential closures will have on the side of the city? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Yes, Madam Speaker. Again, I can really empathize with the people of Miramichi and the uncertainty that's surrounding this file. DTI, as a department, has invested over \$11 million in improvements to try to create a more

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seamless traffic flow and make sure that things run as smoothly as possible. Now, the previous government, through DTI, did do a lot of that work.

(Interjections.)

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): I'm not sure which minister it was, but they did some of that work for sure.

Madam Speaker, we're doing everything we can to mitigate what's going to be a little bit of traffic gridlock. We're working with the community to determine what exactly needs to be done and what extra measures, as far as public safety goes, can be taken to make sure that everything works as seamlessly as possible.

[*Translation*]

NB POWER

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

Madam Speaker, the Premier said that her government is looking at different options for what to do with NB Power. The options need to be examined in the light of day, in a public forum that engages both experts and the public in a discussion about the role and structure of the people's power company.

When politicians have tried to right the good ship NB Power in the past, they hatched their plans behind closed doors: Bernard Lord in 2003, Shawn Graham in 2009, and David Alward in 2017. This approach failed miserably. Look at where we are today. Will the Premier establish a select committee of this Legislature on NB Power in order to hold public hearings that will engage experts and the public in a discussion about what needs to be done with NB Power to ensure and conserve our common good for the 21st century?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. I one hundred percent agree that this is something that needs to be done in a public forum. We have ignored the issues at NB Power for far too long. At this point, the status quo is no longer an option.

We need an external review that involves, as the member said, experts and members of the public. Our government has been working on that plan to identify the people to lead it, the advisory committees and New Brunswickers involved, and the timeline. We are looking forward to sharing all that information about what this external, public, transparent, and



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engaging review of NB Power will look like and how this Legislative Assembly as well as New Brunswickers everywhere can participate in what the future of the utility will be.

Our ultimate goal is to make sure that New Brunswickers have clean, reliable, affordable power. That is not the case today. Our government isn't going to kick that can down the road. We are tackling it. We're doing so in a way that's open and transparent and involves all New Brunswickers.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, the Premier says that everything is on the table with regard to NB Power. What should not be on the table is privatizing the people's power company. Our electric utility is a Crown corporation for a reason. It is a public utility that serves the people of New Brunswick and answers to the people of New Brunswick, not to shareholders or private owners seeking to profit from the power bills we pay. It needs to be transformed, absolutely, so that it is more responsive to the needs of New Brunswickers for energy services such as heat, light, and power for our electronic appliances and, increasingly, our transportation. For example, the cheapest source of power now, much cheaper than NB Power's power, is solar energy, so the power commission should be helping New Brunswickers to go solar. That is just one of the many things it should be doing.

Will the Premier commit to keeping NB Power as a public utility, owned by the people of the province?

[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 wholeheartedly agree that there are many things to do to transform our... I don't know the word for "utility" in the other language.

[Original]

We have to transform our public utility, but it is a public utility. The work of the review is going to be open. We are not going to eliminate any option, but we would take the opportunity to partner very seriously. The bottom line is that we need the best cost for New Brunswickers. We need our power to be reliable, responsible, and clean, so we're going to see what all the options look like. We're going to do that with experts and New Brunswickers, and then the hard work will be in choosing, together, what kind of future we want for NB Power. I don't think it's responsible to make that choice without knowing what all the different options are so that we can decide what we want our utility to be. That includes things such as how we maximize solar energy, how we engage communities in that renewable future, and how we engage New Brunswickers who want to do that in a way that works for them.

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Everything is on the table, and we're going to do this in lockstep with New Brunswickers.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, I don't know why the Premier wants to go through another battle with the people of New Brunswick over an effort to keep the public utility public. We've been down this road before with Shawn Graham, and we know where the people of the province stand. We know where the people of this province stand. They want NB Power to remain their power company. They want NB Power to remain responsible to them. They want this government to ensure that NB Power continues to function as a Crown corporation but better, in a way that requires transformation, restructuring, and having new goals and objectives that fully meet the needs of New Brunswickers in the current economy, given the technology that's available currently and the technology that will be available in the future. Why will the Premier not take privatization off the table?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I think that I'm in a very different place on this than the member opposite, because I'm not going to assume that I know what every single New Brunswicker thinks about NB Power. I certainly know what I hear them telling me right now: It needs to change; the rates can't keep going like they're going now, and the status quo cannot continue.

I would disagree with the member, since each New Brunswicker might have a very different opinion about what should be done with NB Power. We are going to have an open conversation with New Brunswickers to hear from all of them—the New Brunswickers represented by the member opposite, the New Brunswickers represented by the official opposition, and the New Brunswickers represented by members on this side. We're going to create a forum for them to share with us what they want their utility to look like and how they want to get power. We can then build a future off that.

I'm not going to assume what every New Brunswicker feels until we go out and do the work with open ears to listen to what they want and build an energy future that we can rely on.

TOURISM

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): You know, Madam Speaker, I'm shocked that, at a time when Canadians are choosing to change their U.S. travel plans to explore our provinces instead, this government is cutting over \$900 000 from tourism marketing. Our tourism sector is still recovering from COVID-19. It was devastated by COVID-19 and cannot afford less support. Operators have worked tirelessly to rebuild their businesses, and they are now going to be facing setbacks. With international tensions and tariffs affecting our key markets, New Brunswick should be ramping up promotion, not scaling back. This decision does a disservice to the industry and the small businesses that rely on



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tourism. Those operators are not happy. Minister, why are you cutting efforts to attract visitors at such a critical time? Were TIANB and our tourism operators consulted before this decision was—

[*Translation*]

Hon. Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. After seven years, this is my first question in the House. That being said, let's get back to serious matters.

The tourism industry is extremely important for New Brunswick, and we are continuing to invest in it to attract visitors from all over. There is a \$3-million campaign for Ontario and a \$2.5-million campaign for Quebec. In the Maritime provinces, we continue investing to attract visitors from France, Germany, and, of course, the United States.

The province needs a clear tourism development plan. The former government never consulted tourism operators during the six years it was in office. You talk about small businesses; that is what they are telling us, while we are developing a five-year tourism strategy. We must do so because you never had a clear plan.

Under the former government, paltry amounts were invested in the tourism sector, Madam Speaker. We are resolving the situation and developing a plan. We will continue to invest in the New Brunswick tourism industry.

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