

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



June 4, 2025

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CONTRACTS

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Good morning to you.

[Original]

Madam Speaker, last Friday, the Premier, with assistance from the Finance Minister, was responding to questions about the Premier's former bosses in the Gallant Premier's Office and their connection to the present Liberal government via lobbying. Today, I would like to ask some questions about the Premier's former boss, Chief of Staff with the former Gallant government, Jordan O'Brien, and his firm's connections to the Premier and her government via training contracts, which we learned about through a right to information request.

On November 2, the Premier was sworn into office. On November 11, an email from the Premier's Office went out to all of the Holt government Cabinet ministers stating that they were to pay for media scrum training from Porter O'Brien and they were to report for this training on November 13. Will the Premier tell this House whether this was a sole-sourced contract or whether there was a competitive process? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The firm in question, Porter O'Brien, is on the standing offer list for government. As per the process at Service New Brunswick, we pulled from companies that are already preapproved and on the standing offer list for this type of work.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you again, Madam Speaker. On Friday, the Finance Minister was on his feet answering to charges that were never made. I would like to move on to him today, in the interest of radical transparency on the business of training and lobbying. According to the emailed schedule from the Premier's Office, the minister was to get his Porter O'Brien training on Wednesday, November 13 from 8 a.m. to noon. Can the minister confirm that he reported for his media training? Thank you.

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. I did do some media training. I do not have the exact dates on my calendar. I do not memorize all the meetings that I have on every half hour. I do remember going through some media training at one point. When that date was and at what time it was, I am not sure of that.

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Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): That's fine, Madam Speaker. I just asked the minister to confirm, and that's okay. I appreciate his answer.

On the lobbyist registry, we note that, on November 19, which was just a few days later, and again on November 21, a lobbyist from Porter O'Brien intended to lobby the Minister of Finance. Can the minister confirm that he met with the lobbyist? Was it the same person who gave the media training? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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, to the member opposite, I understand that he has a question, but it is very short on details. I'm not sure what the subject is. I imagine that... He said that somebody who is registered on the lobbyist registry intended to meet with me. I don't know what the subject was or what it was about.

While I'm up about last Friday, I want to clarify something around the NB Power gas station, or, as the member said, the secret gas plant that may be done in the south. I would remind the member that the RFP for that was done by NB Power much, much earlier in the year, when they were still in government. So, I don't know where the secret is. These RFPs don't just come out of the air. They are prepared well in advance. It was done during the previous government's tenure. There is no secret there. For him to just bring up these kinds of terms is incorrect.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): There are your taxpayer dollars at work, with media-inspired deflection. That's the media training right there. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

On February 13, another email went out from the Premier's Office, an email advising seven ministers of more Porter O'Brien media training. The purpose of this additional training was described by the sender as: so that we are all rowing in the same direction messaging-wise. The Finance Minister was one of the seven ministers who were summoned for this additional rowing training. Group sessions and individual sessions were mentioned. Can the Finance Minister confirm whether he got his additional training? Was it group training, or did he need individual training from Porter O'Brien to get him rowing in the right direction? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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. It's interesting that my calendar is being discussed this morning. I don't believe that I was able to make that session because I was called into an emergency meeting on some other subject. No, I was not able to attend that.

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Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Will the Premier kindly confirm the following information in the interest of radical transparency and context? In October 2014, Brian Gallant was sworn in as Premier. In March 2015, this Premier was appointed by then-Premier Gallant to serve as Chief of Business Relationships on the New Brunswick Jobs Board Secretariat and simultaneously served as senior economic development advisor to the Liberal Premier. In September 2017, that job was transferred into the Premier's Office, which redefined it as non-restricted and allowed the current Premier to run in the 2018 election. Will the Premier kindly confirm that this information is factually correct? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. There are some inconsistencies in that information. I was hired through a competitive process. A job was posted online. Multiple people applied. Knightsbridge Robertson Surette was involved as the outside search firm. Then, I was selected to be the Chief of Business Relationships for the Jobs Board Secretariat as a politically restricted civil servant working for the Clerk at the time. That was my role from March 2015 until I went out on maternity leave in fall 2017. I need to get the date of when my third daughter was born right.

I did not serve in a joint capacity as—I don't know what you said—senior economic development advisor. I was solely working as a politically restricted civil servant right through to the period of going out on maternity leave. That's when my contract was transferred so that, upon return from maternity leave, I would be a political person and would lose my job. I essentially gave up my job in 2017 to get engaged in politics.

[Translation]

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

[Original]

The question was about the fact that it was transferred to a non-restricted job. Will the Premier advise the House of who signed off on that transfer? Did the Chief of Staff sign off on that transfer? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I can go back and check the details. I believe there was a negotiation between the Clerk and the Chief of Staff because I was giving up my politically protected position to move over to a maternity leave and to move to a more vulnerable politically exposed position. I believe it was the Clerk and the Chief of Staff, but I'd have to check to see who signed the document and how that went down some seven or eight years ago.

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Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): I appreciate that, Madam Speaker. Perhaps the Premier can go on record telling us who the Chief of Staff was at that time. Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): I believe the Chief of Staff at the time was Jordan O'Brien. When I returned from maternity leave in October 2018, after the provincial election, I spent one month in the Premier's Office working on some relationships with the federal government when Jordan O'Brien was the Chief of Staff.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. On the summons, the Premier does not appear to have reported to Porter O'Brien for training. Are we to assume that the Premier felt she didn't need any training, or did she get her Porter O'Brien training in a private session? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you. I wasn't included in the media training from Porter O'Brien.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Will the Premier please tell the House whether any of her ministers have been summoned by Porter O'Brien for a third round of rowing-in-the-right-direction training since February? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): I'd have to go away and check that. We have some ministers who have been engaged in different media training with different professionals from a number of firms, so I would have to check and see whether there was a third instance of Porter O'Brien being involved with specific people past the February date.

PERSONS WITH A DISABILITY

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. We in the Conservative caucus believe in the dignity of personal responsibility, in the sanctity of the family unit, and in removing barriers that prevent New Brunswickers from building stable, independent lives. Under this government's continued enforcement of the household income policy, individuals with disabilities who receive social assistance are penalized and effectively forced to choose between maintaining their benefits and moving in with a partner.

Minister of Social Development, how can the government justify a policy that punishes people with disabilities for forming relationships or seeking emotional and financial support within a household, especially when advocates have made it abundantly clear that this policy undermines both independence and inclusion? More specifically, when will the department finally commit to reforming or eliminating this outdated and discriminatory

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policy so that disabled New Brunswickers can live with the same freedoms and choices as everyone else in this province?

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, thank you so much for raising this issue. As the member opposite knows, this is part of my mandate. From the minute we walked in, this was something we started on right away. The member opposite pointed out that groups and individuals have been coming to us and saying: This isn't right. Why has it been this way for so long? We couldn't agree more. That's why we hit the ground running. Right now, we are speaking to our community partners and our partners, folks with lived experience. We are going through the jurisdictional scans right now to see what the best path forward is. We are working with our partners to do that. Thank you again to the member opposite. I look forward to being able to share what the next steps will look like as we move into the fall.

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, PC): Thank you very much for the answer to the question, minister. Your department claims to support inclusion and dignity for persons with disabilities, yet this policy directly disincentivizes stable partnerships and penalizes those who try to build a life together. Can you point to a single instance where the government has reviewed the household income policy in consultation with the disability community? If so, why have the consistent calls for reform been ignored?

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, through you to the member opposite. I wish I could answer why it has been disregarded. It's been disregarded for many years. That's why we are stepping in now. We really want to make sure that we get this right for folks. They should not be penalized. Folks should be able to grow, thrive, and succeed together in ways that work best for them. Right now, we are meeting with our community partners on a regular basis to find the best path forward. We are bringing our community folks together so that they aren't penalized for trying to thrive and live their best lives. Thank you for the question, through you, Madam Speaker, to the member opposite.

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, PC): Madam Speaker, the minister alluded to looking at jurisdictional scans. Have other provinces across Canada modernized or softened income policies to ensure that people with disabilities are not punished for their living arrangements? You talked about working with stakeholders. Can you give me any specific evidence of what the department is relying on to continue enforcing this outdated model? Can you commit today to launching a full, transparent review of the household income policy within the year?

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Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, through you to the member opposite. As I said earlier, we are going through a very extensive jurisdictional scan now. That is going on. We are working with our community partners to find the best path forward that works for them. Nothing About Us Without Us is what we are applying to this. That's what we apply to all our policies.

I believe the question the member opposite asked was about whether I can commit to an in-depth... I've lost the wording.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): It was "transparent review". Madam Speaker, we will share the information that we gather. We will share it with our community partners, and then we will share that with our partners. Thank you.

SMALL BUSINESSES

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): Some 8 in 10 small business owners in New Brunswick are urging the provincial government to provide tax relief in order to sustain ongoing operations. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business is calling for a reduction in the small business tax rate from 2.5% to 1.5%, matching Prince Edward Island, and for an increase in the small business tax threshold to \$700 000. These measures are crucial for the survival and growth of small businesses, which are the backbone of our very economy.

Small business owners are facing unprecedented challenges, and they need support to continue contributing to our communities and creating jobs. The government must listen to their voices and take action to provide the necessary relief. Will the Minister responsible for Opportunities NB commit to making these changes in the upcoming fiscal year to support our small business owners and ensure their continued success?

Hon. Mr. Randall (Fredericton North, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business; Minister responsible for NB Liquor and Cannabis NB, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite. We at Opportunities New Brunswick are certainly working to better support New Brunswick businesses. Certainly, we have a number of programs. In partnership with the Department of Finance, we are also exploring ways to update the small business investor tax credit. That work is ongoing.

We are busy working with small businesses and businesses across this province, engaging them to find out what their needs are. What do they need from government? What I'm hearing from businesses across this province is that the support they're getting from

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Opportunities New Brunswick to address the challenges that existed after six years of the opposition members being in power is actually the support that they need. I'm hearing about how New Brunswick businesses are engaging with their partners at Opportunities New Brunswick and how important that is. I'm hearing about how important it is to this province to find new export markets and new markets outside the province. We are working hard for small businesses, Madam Speaker, and I do appreciate the question from the other side of the House.

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): Small business owners in this province have faced mounting financial pressures for years, long before the tariff wars and the previous government. While global forces have made things worse, the real crisis stems from long-ignored structural issues, a chronic skilled labour shortage, limited access to capital, soaring insurance premiums, and the rising costs of wages and electricity. Worse still is the relentless rise in property taxes, now an unsustainable burden, especially in urban and semi-urban areas.

Small businesses feel abandoned, forced to carry a disproportionate share of the fiscal load without adequate support from policy-makers. This is more than a financial issue; it's a political failure. If we don't act, we risk losing the very backbone of our economy. Small businesses deserve better. Will the Minister responsible for Opportunities NB commit to a serious strategy, starting with reducing the provincial portion of the property tax to zero, in line with our Atlantic neighbours?

Hon. Mr. Randall (Fredericton North, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business; Minister responsible for NB Liquor and Cannabis NB, L): I really thank the member opposite for the question, Madam Speaker. He's right. I, as a small business owner, did feel abandoned, and that's why I'm standing in this House today. There were six years of abandonment of small business issues. I do hear consistent questions from the opposite side of the House about issues that should have already been addressed. We have been in office for six months, Madam Speaker. We cannot undo six years of neglect within six months. We are working hard at Opportunities New Brunswick to support small businesses. We are working on a new economic development plan. I'm working with my colleagues in government to better support New Brunswick businesses, and we will, in fact, be driving forward a strong plan for this province that will include small business.

To the minister's point, we are, in fact, freezing assessments. This is an important step forward for small business. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Yesterday, we learned that the Holt government has cancelled the Teladoc pilot program at hospitals in Sussex

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and St. Stephen. Both of those hospitals happen to be in ridings that elected Progressive Conservative MLAs, but I'm sure that is just a coincidence, because coincidences happen all the time in Liberal politics. I'm just as sure it's a coincidence that the minister cancelled the pilot with five full months left before the planned end date in October. It is equally coincidental that the Health Minister would not go out and speak to the media yesterday.

Here is another sure coincidence. According to the lobbyist registry, the minister was lobbied by the New Brunswick Medical Society in April. Will the minister tell us whether this meeting was about cancelling Teladoc?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, first, I would like to thank the member from Carleton North for inviting me again. I will turn up in your community. We are working on a collaborative care clinic in your town.

Yes, I meet with the Medical Society on a fairly regular basis, given the nature of my portfolio. No, the Teladoc contracts have not been cancelled outright. These were pilots. We learned some valuable things from the pilots. We will be expanding their role in another way that allows us to give better care to the citizens of Charlotte County and the Sussex area. It just happens to be that these are communities in need of primary care. I'm glad to help them out. I don't differentiate between areas with red stripes and areas with blue stripes, and I suspect most of your members would acknowledge that. Thank you very much.

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The minister is on record as saying that the Teladoc pilot did not add one hour to hospital ER hours. Before, he got very precise and claimed that it did not add one minute. With that sort of precision, the minister must have some very detailed data. Will the minister tell the House who provided the data? Was it the New Brunswick Medical Society, which has opposed this program from the very beginning? Will the minister table this data in the House?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, it didn't add a minute, it didn't add a second, and it didn't add a month. The whole purpose of the pilot was to increase the number of hours available to our ER departments. It turns out that Teladoc would only work in a community if a physician were near enough to the hospital to be able to provide care on an emergency basis. That did not exist in Sussex. We are working with Teladoc to see whether it might be able to extend care in locations where there is a primary care person or an ER doctor within a reasonable distance of the hospital or the facility. I have explained the reason that no additional hours were added. I hope that addresses the member's questions. Thank you.

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PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

Ms. Mitton (Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, today is Clean Air Day. To mark this day, Moncton, Fredericton, and Saint John are offering free public transit because public transportation helps to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

Recently, the leader of the third party and I took a VIA Rail train from Moncton to Sackville. There is no commuter rail in New Brunswick, so the closest thing we have is VIA's regional rail between Campbellton and Sackville, which runs three times per week in each direction. What is supposed to be a 30-minute drive by car took over 2 hours. This is embarrassing, Madam Speaker. We need better inter-regional train and bus service in New Brunswick. The problem is that nobody is in charge. Will the Premier appoint a minister responsible for public transportation to work with VIA, Maritime Bus, and other stakeholders to improve regional public transportation in the province?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. As I've said in this House before, we will not be creating a minister for public transportation. It's an important file that's being worked on by a number of government departments that represent communities, including Local Government, RDC, Opportunities New Brunswick, and the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure. We have a great team of ministers here, but we're not going to create a new ministry for each point raised.

[Translation]

Ms. Mitton (Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, successive governments haven't taken action on public transportation because no one is responsible for it. New Brunswickers' lack of access to reliable and affordable public transportation between regions is a failure of successive governments.

Therefore, there is no one at the table to negotiate the repair of the railway line between Campbellton and Moncton so that trains can travel more quickly than cars to connect the northern and southern parts of the province. In addition, no one is responsible for implementing affordable intercity bus service like the \$2 service between regions on Prince Edward Island.

Without necessarily creating a department, will the Premier appoint a minister responsible for improving interregional transportation?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I think this question is similar in part to the one I just answered.

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We will not create a department or appoint a minister responsible for something that a team is already working on. I think that the government must avoid working in silos right now. Instead, working together on the ground with municipalities is what must be done. At the provincial level, the RDC is supporting our work. Work must also be done at the federal level to ensure that the components of the railway network are well placed across the country. We will continue the teamwork with communities and people on the ground to move this forward.

[Original]

Ms. Mitton (Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, we don't want a new department, but there needs to be someone in government who is in charge. If everybody's in charge, then no one is really in charge. No one is leading this. Public transportation is very important for affordability, accessibility, air quality, climate action, and more. As Ted Bartlett of Transport Action Atlantic said on CBC's info a.m. this morning, train service in New Brunswick is "a national embarrassment".

If the Premier wants to talk about nation-building projects and interprovincial collaboration that would bring our regions together, improving public transportation in the Maritimes would be a great start. Just imagine regional public transportation that conveniently connects the Maritime Provinces.

Will this Premier, who is currently the Chair of the Council of Atlantic Premiers, commit to putting regional public transportation on the agenda for the next meeting?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The member opposite is right. We do want to talk about nation-building projects. As Chair of the Atlantic Premiers group, I engage with those people about their priorities, with the federal government about its priorities, and with New Brunswickers about their priorities. That's why I am really excited that New Brunswick's interests featured so prominently at the meeting in Saskatchewan this week.

The priorities of the federal government and the strengths of New Brunswick can tackle the creation of a strong and resilient energy system to make sure we can deliver affordable and competitive rates to New Brunswickers. That's something they tell me is a priority. That's something we are working on, the federal government is working on, and our colleagues in the Atlantic Provinces are working on.

We talked about trade infrastructure to help us strengthen our economy to make sure we can grow the kinds of jobs that New Brunswickers want. I was thrilled to see our ports featuring prominently in that. We talked about net new nuclear, an area in which New Brunswick leads, and how it can support the development of this economy and our jobs.

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We talked about critical minerals. New Brunswick is absolutely leading on nation-building projects, and I am very proud to represent this province.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): I want to follow up on the last question to the Minister of Health. The CEO of Horizon Health, Margaret Melanson, said that at the two hospitals in question, Teladoc had served 656 patients, which represented about 20% of the ER visits. I am a little confused as to why the CEO has different data than the minister has, where she is saying 20% of the people who went there were served by Teladoc, and he is saying that not one minute was added. Not one second is what I believe he said in his previous answer.

I would just like to know why there is a discrepancy between the two of them. Did they both get the same media training from Porter O'Brien?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, we have the same data—not one hour more of ER physician coverage. Many people were seen within the hours of coverage that were at CTAS level 4 or 5. Those are people who should be cared for in the community. We are working very hard to increase the collaborative care clinic activities in Charlotte County and the Sussex area, as well as in many other areas around the province, including Carleton North. We are not discrepant in our data. There are two different questions here. How many more hours? How many more people within the hours that are available? Thank you for the question.

LOBBYISTS

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): I would like to drill down a little bit more on this government's connection with Porter O'Brien and the work that has been done with this organization. I have some figures that show quite a bit of investment from Porter O'Brien in this government and in the Premier's leadership bid. We know, through our previous questions, that there has been a lot of lobbying done by this organization, so I would like to know from the Premier... She talked about the contract she had with Porter O'Brien. I believe she revealed in the media that it was \$6 000 per month for the duration of that contract. There have also been at least 10 ministers we know of who received training at \$1 800 per person, if I recall.

I would like to know what the total spend has been on Porter O'Brien from her government up to this point. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): I want to take the opportunity to point out how important the lobbyist registry is. I think our government's efforts toward transparency are on display here. This

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is information... It was actually a previous Liberal government that created the lobbyist registry so that this information would be available to New Brunswickers. The previous government didn't do anything with it. It didn't strengthen it or improve it. In fact, the former minister, Brian Macdonald, couldn't get himself organized to put himself on it, even though he was advancing a CHL contract in the previous government.

We recognize the lobbyist registry has issues. I am happy to find out the tally as requested. We can go to the folks in Finance and figure out what that number is. That shouldn't be a problem.

But I think the point here is that it's great this information is available. We make it available to everyone. We are going to strengthen that registry, because it's no secret who we're meeting with or what we're doing to advance the interests of New Brunswickers, build this province, and help build Canada in the ways that New Brunswickers are asking us to. This is something the previous government didn't do.

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): Question period has expired.

(Interjections.)

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): Question period has expired.