Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

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[*Translation*]

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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

[*Original*]

Madam Speaker, let's talk about conflicts of interest today. Former Premier Brian Gallant felt so strongly about even a perceived conflict of interest that he forced one of his members to resign over it. With this government, we have a minister responsible for housing who is a landlord to a registered nonprofit. In this House yesterday, he mentioned the $7.4 million allocated to his task force. The question I have is for the junior minister responsible for housing. Considering that your tenant is Fresh Start Services and the $7.4 million is targeted toward registered nonprofits, how much money is Fresh Start Services receiving out of this $7.4-million fund? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I want to make something clear. I live on Waterloo Street in Saint John. It is the area in the community that has been hardest hit by the housing crisis in the province. I have two flats in my home. For the past four years, I've rented one of those flats to a nonprofit operator. When I took this job, it was declared, and it was approved. That's the end of the story.

I'm going to continue to make sure that I am sticking up for my community and that I am sticking up for my riding to make sure that the people there get the services they need. With the long-term lease that I've had in this situation, it's meant that a nonprofit has had a long-term, sustainable home in my community. Thank you.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): There you have it, Madam Speaker—completely delusional. Ask any New Brunswicker—any New Brunswicker—whether they think that it would be a conflict. The answer would be yes for everybody except this minister.

Madam Speaker, this task force is nothing but a communications exercise, to this point. This junior minister promised that we would get quick action, yet we're seeing everything trending in the wrong direction. More people are unhoused. There are more homeless encampments. This junior minister promised that there would be stakeholders engaged in this task force. Mayors have asked to be engaged, but I question who else might be engaged. Is this minister adding mayors to the list of stakeholders, as they have asked? Is there anybody else by the last name of Hickey engaged in this task force?

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm not going to take lessons from

the Leader of the Opposition, surrounded by the rest of his Higgs henchmen, after six years and a 210% increase in homelessness and a crisis in our communities. I'm not going to stand in this House… We've made sure that we are stepping up for New Brunswickers with a task force to get more money into more communities to make sure that we are getting more people out of tents and into long-term, sustainable housing.

The Leader of the Opposition can continue to flail and hurl insults and untruths about our work being done our way.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): It's fine. It's fine. It's not sticking. No one is listening to him. New Brunswickers know what is actually happening. They've seen the vision. At the end of the day, we know what's happening. The junior Leader of the Opposition is just keeping his seat warm for the member for Fredericton-Grand Lake.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Zero for two, Madam Speaker. You know, he should know that when you're using somebody else's stuff, it's just not quite as effective.

Madam Speaker, this junior minister, again, is engaging in a communications exercise rather than delivering results. He is clearly failing. The numbers are going in the wrong direction. If the junior minister wants to talk about people being unhoused, then let's talk about what hard number of people this task force plans to remove from the homeless rolls this winter?

They're talking about how they're doing this and doing that. We're not seeing it. I'm going to ask the minister a numbers question, Madam Speaker, that he can't skate on. He should have some key performance indicators (KPIs) that say their target is to get X number of people off the list of homeless people this winter.

Exactly—precisely—how many people, because of your actions, are actually going to have a warm place to stay this winter? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's an important question. That's why we rolled out $7.4 million. There's a number—there's an action for you. It's $7.4 million in direct support to communities to get people out of tents.

I'll respond to the Leader of the Official Opposition by asking him a question. Under him and his government, how many public housing units were built? How many did you open? How many did you open? Not a single door, not a single doorknob.

(Interjections.)

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): Order. Please continue.

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Not a single door. Not a single unit of public housing was opened under the previous government. We made sure to do it. We did it expeditiously. We did it with our partners. That's why we're doing the exact same thing when it comes to homelessness. We initiated $7.4 million in new supports direct to communities to get people out of homelessness. It's going to make sure that people have a solution for the winter. It's going to make sure that we have an out-of-the-cold strategy moving forward.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Ah, thank you, Madam Speaker. All talk and no action. Absolutely nothing has been done.

POWER PLANTS

I have some questions about the natural gas plant project. This is a billion-dollar project that is engaging an American company, ProEnergy. The project is needed to provide baseload power. We all understand that. However, we found out—thanks to the local journalism that this government wants nothing to do with—that the company is using used parts. These are used jet engines, among other things. So, I have to ask this: What process was used to determine the prices paid for these used parts? Did a government member call a used jet engine junkyard to see whether they were getting an acceptable price? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Legacy (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister of Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act,* L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Yes, I guess we're recycling some news today. We are talking about recycling. It is a refurbishment of a process. NB Power went through a request for proposals, in the usual way it has always done it, to get some new generation under this gas-powered system with ProEnergy. This isn't new technology. It's being used. It's been proven. It's been done elsewhere, and it works well. This $1 billion is ProEnergy's price for its process. It's a power purchase agreement. We're going to buy the power. The member opposite knows how this works. It's been like this forever. NB Power puts out RFPs and goes with new processes all the time. This thinking that we're buying used parts is just… It's a refurbishment of a technology, and the member opposite knows what is going on.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, Madam Speaker, it's about due diligence. It's not always about the what. It's also about the how, and that's what we're trying to get at. If the government members would just explain themselves and

what's going on, people would understand better. But when you ask a question and you don't get an answer, well, that leads to more questions.

This project, Madam Speaker, seems rushed. The Minister of Environment has repeatedly said that they will not do a comprehensive environmental impact assessment. No one, including the minister, has explained the time difference between doing a determination review and doing a comprehensive review. So, I'm asking the minister this: What sort of time difference would there be to do a full review instead of a determination review for this project? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I will be pleased to answer the question from the Leader of the Official Opposition. I think it's the first question he has asked me since I became the Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

It's about two completely different processes. We figure the environmental impact assessment that is underway can be done within… The assessment for a project like this can take from six months to two years. It all depends on the number of questions needing a response. We will respond to every question meticulously. That's what we must do.

As for the other process, it will all depend on the proponent of the project. How quickly will the proponent give us answers so that we can analyze them? So, the answer to the question from the Leader of the Opposition is this: It will all depend on how quickly the proponent responds to our questions. Thank you.

[*Original*]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Do you know what? I took the time to take a look at a determination review and a comprehensive review. One flows into the other. In a determination review, it is the minister who decides if it proceeds to a comprehensive review, and this minister said: Well, I'm deciding it's not going to flow into a comprehensive review. The comprehensive review has a public-involvement requirement that is not in the determination review. It is more elaborate than what is required for a determination review.

So, Madam Speaker, if the minister is saying that he has already determined this, I'm going to ask him this: Will he cause to lay upon the table of the House all the emails, all the information, and all the judgments related to his decision in the determination review not to go through a comprehensive review so that it can be radically transparent and everybody knows the steps he actually took in order to come to this judgment? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I just want to correct what the member opposite said. The process for the current environmental impact assessment (EIA) is flexible and can be adapted to any situation. Yes, a public consultation process is part of the EIA, as it is for the in-depth model. However, there is a difference. In the first case, it's about the determination of the EIA, and, as minister, I approve it; Cabinet approves the other one. That's the difference. I can tell you that all the questions we have received on this project are on the website.

[*Original*]

The Technical Review Committee comments and the proponent responses… The report is available online for any questions that were asked. There we go.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): I appreciate the effort by the minister, Madam Speaker, but that was not what I asked for.

[*Translation*]

I asked for all the information related to his decision to do a determination review.

[*Original*]

I asked for everything connected to that—emails. I'm asking for it to be put on the table of this House, Madam Speaker. Put it on the table. Let New Brunswickers see. Be transparent. Include everything. Right here at the very bottom, it says: Minister decides that a comprehensive review is required. If it is, then you flow into the next process, but he has decided that it's not. So lay everything out—all the advice you received and all the emails back and forth, everything you have done to justify why you're not doing a comprehensive review. That's all we're asking for, Madam Speaker. We understand that baseload power is needed. Again, it's not always about the what. It's about the how. We're asking them to prove that they've done their due diligence on the how. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I will remind the member opposite that the review that is under way actually responds to all the concerns we have received from the public and First Nations as well as our own concerns as a government. The first series of questions that were asked about the project are already available online.

If the member opposite skimmed through the 48 pages in French and the 43 pages in English, he would see that we are taking this process very seriously. To date, nothing indicates that we must move forward with an in-depth review. As long as we are able to respond to all questions and comments from the public and First Nations as well as our own about a comprehensive EIA, the decision will stand. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

EDUCATION

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The province says that surveys and impersonal virtual meetings will be part of public consultations and that the new education plan will be released next spring. Consultations are happening this fall, so supposedly now. My question is for the Minister of Education. Parents and the public want to know the answer: How will the minister assure the public that consultations are inclusive and feedback will be used to shape final decisions and curriculum changes? Will the minister commit to revising the plan if significant opposition emerges during public consultations? Will the minister commit to releasing all consultation feedback publicly, including dissenting views from educators and parents?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the opportunity to talk about the education plan. Yes, we are in full-blown consultations right now. It has been a very exciting and engaging process because, through this, we've gotten responses from surveys. Thousands of people have responded to the survey. We've had in-person consultations and virtual consultations where dozens and dozens of other people have come forward to share their views on the education system. We are going to use all of that beautiful information to shape the path forward.

Are we looking to see dissenting views? Absolutely. That's how we have meaningful discussions and move forward. We are absolutely going to consider all of the different viewpoints as we develop this education plan that we are going to release in the spring.

Thank you.

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. On the K-to-12 restructuring, I just have some practical questions for the Minister of Education. Will school closures or consolidations be part of the plan, and, if so, what criteria will be used to determine them? How is the department going to address transportation challenges that may arise from school realignment or regionalization if that happens? Is there a contingency plan if the restructuring fails to deliver improved outcomes or worsens teacher shortages?

[*Translation*]

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. At this stage in the process, I would rather not answer hypothetical questions. We are collecting the real data. We are collecting real information. We will contact the many people who want to communicate their vision for education to us. Then, based on the findings from the consultations that are under way, we will do what needs to be done. However, at this stage in the process, I don't really want to talk about hypothetical and, in my opinion, really catastrophic scenarios. We will talk about them in due course. Thank you.

[*Original*]

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I will move away from the hypothetical and into the real. According to the NBTA press release last week about recruitment and retention:

Teachers are struggling to believe it is truly a priority for government when we are still waiting. Every day that passes impacts student learning and the future of our education system.

My question to the Minister of Education is this: How will the K-to-12 restructuring plan address the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers given the projected retirement of at least 1 200 to 1 400 educators in the next five years? What assurances can the minister provide that there will be enough certified teachers to deliver the new curriculum and structural changes that have been proposed? Can the minister explain how the restructuring plan will reduce the complexity and workload that have been cited by the NBTA as factors affecting teacher attrition?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the opportunity to talk about how important retention and recruitment are to our government. It's true that we look forward to sharing our strategy. It will come out very soon. However, in the meantime, we've already taken action to favour retention.

Going back to the press release from the NBTA, I'm very excited to see that four pillars have been identified. The NBTA is asking for additional time. Well, the PD pilot does that. The second pillar is on professional learning. The PD pilot also does that. The third pillar asks for "Promoting Respect for the Profession and Public Education" on revaluing the teaching profession. We are launching a promotional video that will do just that. As we wait, we've already moved to action.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Well, maybe we can do a little bit of work this afternoon to help New Brunswickers pay their bills, since that's something that matters to a lot of people

As we go into wintertime, so many are dependent on very expensive baseboard heating or electric furnaces. There needs to be a clear plan to replace all these baseboards and inefficient heating systems with heat pumps, which would provide more than double the amount of heat for the same amount of electricity. What a bargain. If only there were a program with clear dates to ensure that would happen. It's key to helping New Brunswickers afford to heat their homes as our power rates continue to increase.

The federal budget that was just released did not renew the greener homes program, so the financial support for doing this is gone. New Brunswick needs to step up with its own investments in energy efficiency programs. This is how the Minister of Energy can help. Will he establish a multiyear plan for the capital budget to convert the—

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Legacy (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister of Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act,* L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. As the member opposite knows, right now, New Brunswick has quite a significant energy efficiency program. Over $100 million has been allocated to implementing federal programs. We know that the federal government has just eliminated the program. We are actually considering replacing it. We are considering, as the member opposite has often asked, establishing a solar energy program. That will be announced very soon. We are working on it, and the program will enable us to do exactly what the member mentioned. It will help New Brunswickers reduce their consumption. That is a big problem.

We often talk about power bills. They are the rate times the consumption. We already know that our rates are quite reasonable compared to rates in effect elsewhere in Canada, but we must make a lot more effort regarding consumption. We will continue to move forward on that. Thank you.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, heat pumps and insulation should be considered capital investments, as energy infrastructure. This is simply infrastructure that is integrated into houses and rental properties. I am aware that there is a systemic prejudice against investments to reduce energy demand compared to investments in new supply sources. That is a mistake.

A considerable reduction in energy demand would mean significant amounts could be saved that would otherwise have been spent on generating energy and would considerably

reduce home heating costs. This is the most economical decarbonization approach. Will the minister implement a plan to quickly convert heating systems to heat pumps?

Hon. Mr. Legacy (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister of Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act,* L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I think the member is asking us to put this investment in the capital budget. That is an interesting idea. We know that, right now, NB Power is managing the program. So, money must be allocated to the program through NB Power's operating budget for things the Crown corporation is responsible for, or it must be done through its program.

The problem with putting the investment in the capital budget is amortization. When we give someone a heat pump, it belongs to them. So, there is no amortization. In general, the capital budget includes investments that we are making in government assets that are amortized over time and that we retain. Funds for current programs or programs that we could create in the future should therefore remain in the operating budget. Thank you.

[*Original*]

SMALL BUSINESSES

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): Thank you. Yesterday, I asked a question in French, and the Minister of Local Government, who stood up, didn't answer my question. He was totally off-topic. So, today, I'm taking the liberty of asking the question in English so that it's clearly understood by the other side.

In the heart of downtown Moncton, merchants united under the group Enough is Enough are sounding the alarm. They speak not of a few isolated thefts but of a steady rise in crime, broken windows, graffiti, fights, and customers avoiding shopping streets and a growing bill of millions in added costs for security, insurance premiums, and lost revenue.

I want to know: What concrete financial measure is the government putting in place now to ensure that our businesses can cover their increased costs for security, insurance, and lost income? Let's support the vitality of our downtown core. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, Minister of Public Safety; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, L): Thank you very much for the question, Madam Speaker. That is a very good and very important question. A month ago, I travelled around the province to talk about public safety issues everywhere. I met with the heads of the 12 RSCs. We realized that the situation was urgent everywhere we went. Public safety goes beyond politics. It is about people's lives, not just their physical safety, but also feeling safe.

We are having conversations with the leaders of all the municipalities we met with. We want to see what is in our toolbox that could be used to try to improve the situation.

Conversations will continue, and we will not stop. Our goal is to completely eliminate this kind of situation. The work isn't easy, it is important, and we take it very seriously. Conversations about this are ongoing with all stakeholders, and we will find a solution together because that is the way work should be done. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): So, Madam Speaker, across Atlantic Canada, the Retail Council is sounding the alarm. Retail crime is no longer petty theft. It's organized, deliberate, and deeply corrosive to our sense of safety. In communities large and small, store owners are living in fear, employees are facing unsafe working conditions, and repeat offenders are exploiting a justice system that too often functions on a catch-and-release basis. We've heard from business owners who say that criminals and people with addictions are walking into stores, stealing with impunity, and walking right back out, knowing that there are few consequences. This isn't just a policing issue, Madam Speaker. This is a matter of restoring public confidence and law and order.

I ask the Minister of Finance: What concrete steps is this government taking to address these issues to ensure that New Brunswickers, workers and business owners alike, continue to support our financial backbone but not to our detriment? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, Minister of Public Safety; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, L): Once again, thank you very much for the question. There are indeed problematic situations. We are not trying to avoid our responsibilities. These situations arise throughout New Brunswick, in every municipality that I visited. They happen everywhere. Various concrete actions have been taken, including my meeting with the Retail Council of Canada last week to talk about the issue. That is the goal of consultations—to get information from the public.

A few weeks ago, the Minister of Justice and I went to Alberta. One of the things that all voters asked for—they all asked for the same thing—was stricter bail. We got that from the federal government. All of the provinces were united, since they are all facing the same types of situations.

We announced this week that a unit to combat sexual violence and human trafficking would be established. There are other situations that arise everywhere. We are taking concrete actions that have never been taken before and that will help New Brunswickers. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

HOUSING

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. You know, we do work in this House every day, and that work can either help you or harm you. Credibility is something that, once you lose it, you don't get back.

Earlier, the junior minister responsible for housing made a statement that the former government opened zero new housing units. On June 28, 2024, there was an article from Moncton that said 8 new units were opening as part of a 40-unit partnership with Rising Tide Community Initiatives over the next year. Here we have proof that the minister says one thing, but the reality is something quite different.

I'd like to give the minister an opportunity to try to regain some amount of credibility. Maybe he can retract what he said and say: Oops. Do you know what? I made a mistake. The former government did something that I wasn't aware of, even though I should have been aware of it. That's because I'm a junior minister.

Will he get up and do the right thing?

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I'm happy to offer clarity on how many new units the previous government brought to the market because it's pretty straightforward. It was none for years—for years.

Let's recognize how housing gets built. I'll tell you. For years, governments have funded non-profits through our Affordable Rental Housing Program.

They always have, and that's why we have Rising Tide. When was the last time we built public housing? This year. It took 30 years. It took 30 years.

Rising Tide is not public housing. Come on. Come on. I'm not going to take a lesson from a previous government that didn't know housing and didn't deliver for the province, and I'm not going to take a lesson from a junior Leader of the Opposition who's just seat-warming for the next one.

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