

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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[Translation]

SCHOOL BUSES

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Good afternoon. I hope the Speaker is doing well.

[Original]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the school bus mess is the very latest example of how New Brunswick schoolchildren are being let down by the Holt government's ready-fire-aim approach to governing. Last time, it was the school librarians, and the Holt government said: Don't worry. We'll get it figured out. When the government figured it out, it fired all the librarians. This time, the Transportation Minister has been trotted out to say: We won't leave your children by the side of the road. Don't worry. We'll get it figured out. Here we go again—ready, fire, aim, resulting in a big mess. What does the Premier have to say to the parents and the students who, once again, have been disappointed by her government? Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the opportunity to talk about the way that we on this side of the House tackle challenges. We are aware of the challenges that are being faced because of the buses right now. These challenges did not appear overnight. We can empathize one hundred percent with families and with students because we recognize how disruptive this can be. That's why we're partnering with the districts and with DTI to make sure that the supports are in place to ensure that kids get safely to and from school, as they should. We are on it. Thank you.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I guess that's as close to an apology as people can expect. It's not as though the ready-fire-aim approach is the only common element in the Holt government's school bus mess. There's the Skyline Acres approach to consultation, which, in other words, means there is none. Once again, the Holt government did something without consultation that was not thought through and that did not give consideration at all to what happens to the children. There may have been a time when New Brunswickers would have been surprised by this lack of simple planning by the Holt government, but, in just a year, the Premier has taught everyone to know better. Will the Premier tell us today whether there is any effort to remedy the ready-fire-aim approach to governing and failure to consult, or will she leave it up to New Brunswickers to fix it in the next election? Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

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[*Translation*]

Our government has done an incredible job over the last year with consulting and engaging New Brunswickers.

[*Original*]

Our team has been out there, engaging with municipal leaders, with leaders of the social sector, with doctors and nurse practitioners and, in the cases mentioned, with the community here, with the social services sector, and with the people around the project. We are continuing to have those conversations. Unlike the previous government, whose members thought you'd make a policy, you'd hold a consultation, and then you were done, our government is engaging with the people repeatedly, on multiple occasions. We are having one meeting and two meetings, and we are answering questions and engaging online. Then, most importantly, we are modifying our policies and modifying our programs to reflect what we've heard. We are listening. We are on the ground, and we are partnering with New Brunswickers in a way that is unrecognizable to the—

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Oh boy, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Shovels were in the ground. People had no idea what was going on in their community, and then the government had a meeting about it. We have parents who do not know what would happen if their children's bus broke down. This is a serious, serious, serious situation. We need to know. DTI has sloughed this over to the DEC's. We know there has been a \$43-million cut made by this government. Now the DEC's are going to have to pick up the slack because this government doesn't know how to manage transportation. These are kids who could be on the side of the road in the coldest times of the year. We are asking for this minister to get on her feet and assure people that, should a bus break down, these kids will be kept warm and brought to a safe place without exception. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the opportunity to reiterate how the safety of children is paramount for our government. Absolutely, we are going to be offering the supports needed if a bus breaks down. We just need to figure out the logistics, as there have been some changes to who can do what, when. We are on it, and we are offering supports. As the Premier mentioned, we are coming up with solutions with partners. We can assure families and students that the students of New Brunswick will get to and from school safely. Thank you.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I'm sorry, but the minister's assurances and empathy mean nothing to a parent when their child could be out on a bus in the cold with nobody coming to pick them up. We have massive areas in this province with no cellular service coverage. There is no way for them

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to know that their child is out there in the cold. We want to hear a clear plan. We want to hear that the government members have a solution. This is happening on their watch. They have to fix it. The DEC's are trying to accommodate and adjust because of the decisions of this Transportation Minister. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we want to hear, today, not assurances and not empathy but that the government has this regulated, that our kids who, tomorrow, could be in the north when it's -10°C or in the south when it's -5°C... It could be cold. It could be wet. It could be snowing. We need to know whether they will have a safe way back. Yes, or no?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Mr. Deputy Speaker, yes. Yes, we have a clear plan as to how we're going to make this happen. At this point, we are dealing with shortages of mechanics and bus drivers. These did not appear overnight. These people have been without a fair and competitive deal for years. We are very proud that we negotiated very competitive collective agreements with both of those sectors, with CUPE 1190 and CUPE 1253. Mechanics and bus drivers are now receiving fair and competitive wages. That is key to retention, and when the people in our system are happy and well supported, then we can recruit others. How's that for a specific plan?

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Well, I don't know where the Minister of Education has been for the past year, but she's been the Minister of Education for the past year. The Minister of DTI has been the minister for the past year. Why haven't the logistics for this been figured out yet? Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank the opposition member for giving me the opportunity to explain why it took us a year to act. It's because we did it with our partners, listening to them and working with them.

It's a bit different from the other government's approach. We don't start with preconceived solutions or ones we impose on our partners. We work with them, which takes a little bit more time, but we will go further together. We came up with a good solution. We recognize that there are flaws right now and that the situation isn't perfect. We're working very hard on the file, and we will get the matter resolved. The way of doing things just changed. Give us a minute. Thank you.

[Original]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Mr. Deputy Speaker, she did not presuppose the outcome? You have to plan for an emergency, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You have to plan for the possible eventuality that a bus could break down in very inclement

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weather and that children could be left on the side of the road. Rather than trying to assign blame, take responsibility. Tell parents and reassure them that you have a plan today.

If a bus breaks down today, what will this minister do to make sure these kids get home safely? Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the member opposite, thank you for the opportunity to reiterate how we empathize with families and students right now. We recognize that this is disruptive. We are working very hard on it with our partners.

We've already negotiated fair and competitive wages. That will help with retention and recruitment. We are looking to see what resources the districts need to be able to send somebody out to get the exchange buses in a situation where we have shortages in both of those key areas. We are on it. The safety of the children is paramount for us, and we will get there. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

HOMELESSNESS

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, PC): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I'm sure parents all over New Brunswick are reassured.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to compare the number of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness in October 2024 to the number in October 2025. In Fredericton, last year, there were 179 individuals, and today there are 346. In Saint John, there were 218, and now there are 437. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have Moncton, which, in 2024, had 387 individuals, and, this October, that number exploded to 827.

This government campaigned on affordability and reducing homelessness. I'd like to know this: With the numbers more than doubling in our major cities, how can the government possibly claim that its approach is working?

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Those numbers aren't correct. The Human Development Council reports two different numbers. The first number is the number of people who have experienced homelessness at least once in the past month, and the other number is the chronic homelessness number. I believe, with respect to chronic homelessness, right now in Fredericton, the number is somewhere around 200. Saint John is around the same, and Moncton is quite a bit higher than that. I don't have those numbers directly in front of me, but those aren't the chronic homelessness numbers.

It's not to say that we don't continue to be in a crisis. We know that we need to make sure we build sustainable supports in communities to deal with this crisis. For six years, we had a 210% increase in the number of homeless people in our communities. The train has been

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speeding in the opposite direction for years. It's our job to build a set of tracks in the opposite direction with a solid foundation to get us out of this crisis. Thank you.

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, PC): Thank you for those statistics. I appreciate that.

In the Holt government's 2025 throne speech, we heard the Lieutenant-Governor read that "As of September 2024, 1,050 individuals were deemed chronically homeless, which means they were homeless for more than six months during the last year" and that this "government is taking action to cut that number by 40 per cent by 2028, to 621". When the Holt government announced the homelessness strategy in September, we learned that it had already moved that goal from 2028 to 2029. It said, "A new provincial homelessness task force has been announced with a core goal of reducing New Brunswick's homeless population by 40 per cent by 2029".

In light of recent data, with over 1 600 homeless people in Fredericton, Saint John, and Moncton, does the minister sitting on the task force wish to kick the goal out by another year? Or is he going to change the number from 621?

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was able to pull up the numbers, so I will just clarify that there are 189 people in Fredericton, 570 in Moncton, and 250 in Saint John.

I will also clarify that no goal has been changed by this government. Our KPIs have been the same since they were committed to at last year's state of the province address. We are holding ourselves to those numbers. As I said before, we need to turn around a train that has been moving in the opposite direction at warp speed for a long time. We saw the action from a previous government that didn't get a single unit of public housing built within its mandate. We're making sure that we step up for New Brunswickers to deliver the housing that they expect and to deliver the response to the homelessness crisis with the urgency and decision-making ability that it deserves.

That's why we continue to announce projects across the province, and we're going to keep fighting for those folks living on the street.

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, PC): I think we are all abundantly aware that there is a problem and that it has been increasing. It kind of makes me a little uptight that we had to strike a task force to address something we already knew about, but that's the way we're going to do it, I guess.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the numbers are climbing, as the minister said. New Brunswickers deserve transparency. The task force is required to provide regular reports to Cabinet, quarterly public updates on chronic homelessness, and an annual public report. Quarterly updates means that the next update won't come until January. As we know, winter is not

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waiting for us. If it took having the Minister of Health spend 24 hours in the emergency room to understand the reality of our health care system, will the Minister of Social Development commit to spending 24 hours in a homeless encampment, much like her colleague? Perhaps she will then understand that we have a problem that needs to be solved now. The task force was established... No, I'm going to let it go at that. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I'm not going to take lessons from a government that sat on its hands while homelessness in this province increased by 210%.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Arseneault): Order.

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): I'm not going to take lessons from the members opposite when my neighbourhood and neighbourhoods like mine across the province have been massively changed by this crisis and continue to feel it to this day. We know we need to respond with the urgency New Brunswickers are expecting from us. That is why we're doing it. That's why we got \$7.4 million out the door fast enough to be able to respond for this winter with more projects in more of the communities that are asking for it—that are asking for it. It has taken our leadership to step up to make sure we got more built faster to deliver more for these desperate communities, while lacklustre leadership from a previous government offered no more public housing and no supports for communities in crisis. We're stepping up, and it means a bunch of ministers around this—

COMMUNITY CARE CLINICS

Mr. Cullins (Fredericton-York, PC): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I'd like to ask a question to the Minister of Health. This government claims to have opened eight new collaborative care clinics so far this year. My question is simple. Does the minister count the Brookside Mall clinic as one of these eight?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Yes.

Mr. Cullins (Fredericton-York, PC): Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, my constituency office is located in the Brookside Mall, so this new space that the government is moving the clinic to is most certainly not open, and the old clinic has been opened for decades. Now, I know this government has a complicated relationship with the facts, but I'd really like to know how the minister feels that the government can possibly count this as a new clinic.

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Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Mr. Deputy Speaker and to the member opposite, many of the clinics that we've spoken about recently are not new buildings built from scratch and occupied by new nurses, new doctors, and new nurse practitioners. Many of them include providing additional resources, additional physicians, and additional nurse practitioners, and the Brookside clinic does that. Now, they are moving to a different place. You could argue that's a new building. But most of the clinics we've been announcing are new in their concept of collaborative care. The agreement we had this morning with the Medical Society supports that. We are providing additional services for their overhead, human resources, nurse practitioners, and more physicians, so these are new clinics. It's like the house you bought last week. It's not a brand-new clinic, but new to you. Thank you.

Mr. Cullins (Fredericton-York, PC): Mr. Deputy Speaker, this clinic was supposed to be open already. The government even cut the ribbon on it. It was supposed to take in 10 000 new patients. I'm surprised that my fellow Fredericton MLAs have not been more vocal about their frustrations. To the minister, when will this new clinic actually open? When will the 10 000 Frederictonians who have been waiting for primary health care be able to see a physician?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you very much for the question. No, the Brookside clinic will not take on 10 000 new people. However, there are new physicians coming to the Fredericton area. In fact, there are two physicians from Quebec who are looking at setting up in the south end of Fredericton. They will take patients, and the clinic in Brookside will take more patients. We find that Fredericton is a very attractive area and a very needy area for new health care provision. We are supporting physicians at the Noreen-Richard clinic, which is a new thing. So, no, it doesn't happen overnight, but we have already attached 13 000 patients, and that number will continue to grow. Thank you very much.

MINING

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In December 2015, the Gallant government issued an environmental impact assessment (EIA) approval for the Sisson mine. That was way back when Donald Arseneault was the minister for mines, if you can believe it. The approval was subject to 40 conditions to protect the environment, the second of which required construction to begin by 2020. Otherwise, the proposed open pit mine would have to undergo an updated environmental assessment. Why? The EIA would be out of date. This condition was not met, yet Minister Crossman of the Higgs government granted a five-year extension to 2025.

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Well, here we are in 2025. Last Friday, the Minister of Environment in the Holt government granted a second five-year extension to 2030. This EIA is so out of date that it's starting to smell, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Can the minister say how New Brunswickers can take the EIA process seriously if conditions to protect the environment are simply ignored?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I think the member opposite has misunderstood the principle of an environmental impact assessment. Every question and condition dealt with at the time is still relevant according to the new standards today. This is what we will do. We will wait for the developer's response. Once the business has met the conditions we communicated, we will deal with other potential conditions or impacts of the project. So, this is a living document. We expect that the business will at least meet the 40 conditions. That's what we are looking for. Thank you.

[Original]

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): I didn't say it was dead, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I just said it smelled bad.

The proposed Sisson open pit mine and the artificial lake for mine waste would be located on land and waters to which the Wolastoqey Nation is currently asserting Aboriginal title in the courts. Back in 2017, a statement issued by the Wolastoqey Nation said that the Liberal government of the day made the approval of their new 10-year tax agreement conditional on the chiefs signing an accommodation agreement for the mine, rather than their plan to litigate against it.

Three years later, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* became Canadian law. It enshrined the principle of free, prior, and informed consent that, presumably, is not to be coerced. In light of the Aboriginal title court case and the enactment of the UNDRIP Act in Canada, can the Premier say where this leaves the accommodation agreement on Sisson with the Wolastoqey Nation?

Hon. K. Chiasson (Tracadie, Minister of Indigenous Affairs, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The proponent knows full well that meaningful engagement and consultation with First Nations is a must if the Sisson mine project is to go forward. As you probably saw in the media yesterday, the First Nations are working with the proponent. Their main objective is to make sure that the 40 conditions that came out of that EIA are being met. There is capacity funding in place for First Nations to be onsite with the proponent. They are following it very closely. I've had a chance to speak with the chiefs and

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the Wolastoqey Nation in New Brunswick (WNNB). Again, they are very cautious with this project, but the objective is to really work together, to collaborate, and to make sure that the 40 conditions that came up in the EIA are met. Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Yesterday, we had a minister's statement from the Minister of Natural Resources in relation to Sisson Brook and the economic benefit that this project will have for New Brunswick over the span of about 15 to 20 years.

What the minister did not mention was the potential we currently have with shale gas development and the natural gas that is under our feet as we speak. This, I might add, is a benefit that would completely dwarf any Sisson mine project, which would be good in the short term and in the long term.

Can the Minister of Natural Resources once again answer to this Legislature and to the people of New Brunswick? Will this government finally lift the moratorium on natural gas so we can actually develop our resources and have a future of prosperity in this province?

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. A couple of things came from the question from the member opposite. My friend opposite flagged what the economic potential might be with respect to the Sisson mine. I didn't have sufficient time to celebrate the fact that we have other opportunities in the province in terms of the Mount Pleasant mine and in Lake George. Mount Pleasant has indium. It helps your cellphone. You and I can text each other that way. In Lake George, we have opportunities with antimony. In the Bathurst Mining Camp, we're going to see some activity with respect to copper and zinc. I think the honourable member has signalled that he would need to see about four or five opportunities of the same nature as the Sisson mine in order to actually move the dial. Those are the four or five that we will see starting to have activity within the next 18 months.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I may not have been clear on my question, so let me be a little clearer. Right now, in this province, we have natural gas under our feet that would get a projected revenue of up to \$20 billion plus in economic benefits to the province. It would bring our young people from Alberta and out West back home to have well-paying jobs. It would create a stable electricity market because NB Power could then utilize the natural gas that we actually have here and that we wouldn't have to import at a higher cost. The benefits of natural gas development in this province would absolutely revolutionize New Brunswick. It would chart a path and a vision forward that would make us the envy of Canada, so I will ask this very directly. The MP Wayne Long has told this government to start fracking. The federal government is talking

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about nation-building projects. There's no greater one than natural gas. Will you lift the moratorium on natural gas? Yes, or no?

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I would like to see support on both sides of this aisle for a pipeline that would go from Quebec to Fredericton. It would bring the assurance of gas supply to this marketplace, and that would unlock \$3 billion in new private-sector investment. It would also potentially engage Repsol for another investment of \$5 billion with respect to liquefaction.

Now, in order to make that happen, we need to make sure that we have gas in place within the next four or five years. The reason for that is that there is a fair amount of gas coming online in the Gulf Coast. Qatar could always ramp up capacity as well. Even if we had social licence to develop our natural gas here in New Brunswick, which we don't, and even if we had a supply chain to actually develop our natural gas in New Brunswick, we could not do that within a four- or five-year time frame.

Mr. Deputy Speaker : I don't have you on my list, but go ahead.

SCHOOL BUSES

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I happen to know a little bit about buses and protocol. It usually goes like this. The driver will call the transportation manager, who contacts the shop supervisor, who sends a mechanic, who determines whether a tow truck is needed. My question to the Minister of Education is this: Is a bus driver now responsible for managing students on the bus for an indefinite period of time while students are sitting and waiting or possibly stranded on the side of the road until someone comes to fix the issue or a tow truck arrives? Do bus drivers know about this new job description? If the department is not delivering, is unable to deliver, or won't deliver a spare bus, is it going to deliver blankets, porta-potties, and a pizza?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Mr. Deputy Speaker, we recognize that this is disruptive to families, students, and student learning.

That's why we're prioritizing finding concrete, specific solutions to provide the support needed at the district level so that we can navigate the shortages of mechanics and bus drivers that we are experiencing. These shortages did not appear overnight. For years, these people were not given a fair and competitive deal. They have one now, and that's wonderful. We are focusing really hard on retention, making sure that they have the tools and supports they need to be happy in their jobs so that we can recruit more people. That's our plan, and that's what we're going to do. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I don't know why we keep talking about partnering, because a superintendent has said publicly that there has been no consultation. And I don't know why we keep talking about shortages, because this concerns the Vehicle Management Agency (VMA), which was pointed out by CUPE 1190. I'm not convinced that there is a shortage. I'm convinced that there is an issue in that the mechanics aren't able to deliver the buses. I'm asking the Minister of Education this: How long has the minister been aware of this? Is the department having any discussions with the VMA? This is a major concern, especially for parents and districts.

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have been aware of this issue since the Auditor General's report pointing out that the buses have been in disrepair for years and that the bus drivers and mechanics have been without a fair and competitive deal for years. This report came out before we took power, so this issue has not appeared overnight. We're looking to fix it in the most constructive, collaborative way possible. Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Arseneault): This concludes question period. We'll move on to the next item of business.