

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): Good morning, Madam Speaker. It's good to see you again this morning.

[Original]

Madam Speaker, this morning, all around New Brunswick, parents loaded their youngsters onto school buses, and older children climbed aboard on their own. None of them were sure what might happen should that school bus break down. All they knew was that a replacement bus would not be sent. No other plan has been communicated by the Holt government. We only know that the government won't send a replacement bus. Maybe you'll wind up many miles and a half hour or 45 minutes from home and have no idea what the plan is if a bus breaks down.

Will the Premier commit that, when these youngsters and older students are climbing aboard a school bus on Monday, they and their parents won't have the same uncertainty? Will she get it fixed this weekend? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I'd like to start by saying that the safety and security of every student in this province is placed first and foremost in every department. That being said, a school bus breaking down is not something that happens every day. It is a rare occasion. However, if that rare occasion should occur, we will do what is necessary to ensure that the children are picked up in a timely fashion. Thank you.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): I have a simple question for the Premier. Will this get fixed this weekend or not? Yes or no. Thank you.

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Once again, the safety and security of every student in this province are important to this government. Once again, school buses do not break down every day. As a matter of fact, unless the opposition has other facts, I don't believe a school bus has broken down on the side of the road yet this year. However, should that unlikely event occur, we will do what is necessary to ensure that the children are picked up in a timely fashion. Thank you.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Madam Speaker, when Monday comes, will the plan have been clearly communicated? Yes or no. In fairness to the Premier, I should have added an "I don't know" option. Maybe she could answer with one of these three responses: Yes, no, or I don't know. Will this be done on Monday? Yes, no, or I don't know. How will the government answer that? Thank you.

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Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): I'm really not sure whether the member understood the last answer I gave, Madam Speaker, so I'm going to repeat it.

The safety and security of each and every student in this province is primordial. It is the most important thing to this government. It is paramount. Now, school buses do not break down on the side of the road often. It is a rare occasion. Madam Speaker, again, I cannot point to one instance this year where a school bus has broken down on the side of the road. However, I will repeat that, should that rare occasion occur, we will do what is necessary to ensure that those children are picked up in a timely fashion. Thank you.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Who is picking up the students? How long will it take? What's the plan? None of this information is available to parents, Madam Speaker. This is about having a plan because these kids... It does happen. Buses break down. It does happen.

We know that an email expressing that this was going to happen was sent within the Department of Education in early October. That means that the government knew in September, because the okay for this person to send that email would have gone through the system. Now, we have revealed that the government has known about this for months—months.

Now, we're heading into the cold time. This is about making sure these kids are covered if a breakdown occurs. There's no cell reception, and radio reception is spotty. We want to make sure that these kids are looked after. All we are asking is for the government members to say that they have a plan and that this will be fixed by Monday. It has been months, and there's no plan, Madam Speaker. Talk to New Brunswickers and tell them you have a plan. Be real with them. Thank you.

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for this opportunity to talk about how important the safety of our students is to this government. I'm really happy to share that there was a very productive meeting between DTI and the Department of Education to come up with a specific plan to deal with the bus issue. We'll be happy to communicate this plan with you shortly, as soon as it is specific.

However, we've known about this issue since the Auditor General's report of June 2024. We've known about this for a long time. It didn't appear overnight. We are working on a specific plan to provide support to families during this difficult time. We recognize that this is disruptive. We're working on it. Thank you.

FUEL PRICES

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Madam Speaker, let's talk about the direction that New Brunswick is heading in. We have a wait list for health care that is increasing. Unemployment rates are increasing. The cost of living is increasing.

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Our debt and deficit are increasing. Homelessness is increasing. These are hard facts that are indisputable. Now we discover that the Holt government is backing off on the relief at the pumps that they promised. To the Premier, between November 30 and December 1, will the price at the pump drop by 8¢ per litre as promised, yes or no? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Madam Speaker, I just think that New Brunswickers should not overpay for any component of the price of gasoline. I think members from this side of the House believe that, and I would actually suggest that members on the other side of the House suggest that as well.

The cost of compliance with the Clean Fuel Regulations should be based on what the cost of compliance actually is and nothing more—nothing more. In order to do that appropriately, evidence needs to be presented before the EUB. The EUB can test that in an open forum. That is how the cost of compliance should be determined. So if those savings are 6¢ per litre or 4¢ per litre or whatever, then let the EUB do the work. Thank you.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Let me try to simplify things a little bit for the Premier so that she can actually answer this time. She promised 4¢ per litre off the price at the pump immediately after being elected. Here's a little hint: 14 months later is not immediately. Then, she doubled down a year later and guaranteed an 8¢ per litre reduction.

What will you have to say to the people of New Brunswick when they do not see 8¢ per litre come off the price at the pumps due to your change? Will you have your communications group craft an apology then? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Our government is laser-focused on making life more affordable for New Brunswickers. Unfortunately, because of the loophole that the members opposite—the Conservatives—put in place when they were in power, New Brunswickers overpaid for gas for months and months and months. That will not happen on our watch.

We have removed the cost of carbon adjustor from the formula. We have directed the EUB accordingly. The cost of carbon adjustor is currently valued at 8¢ per litre, so 8¢ per litre will come off the price at the pumps on December 1.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): As the then Leader of the Official Opposition, Madam Speaker, the now Premier was opposed to any portion—0¢ per litre—of the cost of the Clean Fuel Regulations being passed down to the consumer. Now she has flip-flopped and feels it is okay for consumers to pay. This is something she has cried against far and wide for the past two years.

She is replacing the cost of carbon adjustor with the Holt tax, giving no relief to New Brunswick. Premier, please explain yourself. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm surprised that the member opposite doesn't understand how this system works, given that the former government worked hard to craft this loophole to pass this cost on to consumers.

The EUB has a very clear mandate: Ensure the lowest possible price with a secure supply. It does that with margins. It does that by setting a maximum price. This government found a loophole to add a cost that would benefit its friends. Our government is interested in the lowest cost for New Brunswickers. We've taken it off. The EUB will do its job. It is as simple as that. We don't want New Brunswickers to have to pay a penny more than the millions of dollars that they already overpaid under the previous government.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Oh, my heavens, Madam Speaker. The government members promised a change immediately. The cost doubled under them, and they did nothing. My heavens. The Premier made a hasty announcement on October 30 to say that 8.24¢ per litre was going to come off the price of gas on December 1. When in October did she learn that the formula was being changed and that there would be no savings at the pump for New Brunswickers? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I do not know why the member opposite wants to defend a formula that we know has caused New Brunswickers to overpay for the price of gas for three years. Why is he so attached to a formula as opposed to following a simple regulatory practice wherein the onus is on the applicant to prove its cost?

We know, as a point of fact, that 8¢ per litre was too high at the initial setting. I should know. I was actually there in that process, forced to implement poor legislation and the loophole when the carbon adjustor was put in place the first time. It should've just followed normal regulatory practice where the onus is on the applicant. The applicant proves its costs, and it is entitled to recover only the cost of compliance and nothing more.

SCHOOL BUSES

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Districts were informed in early October—with no consultation, by the way—that mechanics will no longer deliver spare buses when buses are broken down and stranded. I can only surmise about when the upper echelons of government knew about this predicament.

All this morning, we've heard that students will be dealt with in a timely fashion, and the specifics... Well, this could go down and happen today. What is the plan for getting students to their destinations on time if no spare bus is being delivered to them because mechanics can't deliver one and no spare drivers exist? Who's going to tell Tommy's mom that he can't make his four o'clock doctor's appointment that has been booked for three months because he's now on a broken-down bus on a rural road in New Brunswick waiting for a mechanic, a tow truck, or maybe an Uber?

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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 say that we recognize this is a disruption. We recognize that it's a disruption for families and for students, and that's why we are working very hard. It is a priority for us to figure out how we're going to get children safely to and from school, because safety, as my colleague has said, is paramount.

Now, we've done multiple things to make sure we retain mechanics and bus drivers within our system. We've recently negotiated successful collective agreements with both groups, something that hadn't happened in the past. Those salaries had been stagnant for years, and now mechanics and bus drivers are getting fair and competitive wages. That's going to do wonders for retention and, eventually, recruitment. Now, we've had productive meetings between DTI and Education, and we're coming up with a specific plan that we will share as soon as we possibly can.

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development lauds and magnifies her love for data. Well, here's some sobering data. Of the buses in the ASD-S district, 90% have over 300 000 km. DTI once replaced buses after 10 years, and that is now being stretched to 15 to 20 years, increasing the likelihood of breakdowns and safety issues. With mechanics unable to drive buses, even small roadside fixes require a tow, and the average cost in the city is about \$300.

DTI hours do not align with bus operation hours. DTI is 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Many drivers begin routes at 6:30 a.m. or 7 a.m. Depending on the event or situation, drivers may be on the road later than DTI's hours of operation.

This is my question to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development: Will EECD and DTI do an immediate comprehensive review of the school bus fleet? What will happen if a bus breaks down with students on board before DTI opens or after it closes? What will happen with after-school trips and sports trips?

[Translation]

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I thank the member opposite for giving me the opportunity to talk about the importance that we, at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, place on safety and to again talk about the very productive meetings we had with the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure to reach a specific and concrete solution.

Right now, I don't really want to talk about all the possible scenarios in a hypothetical universe. I would rather, as the member opposite mentioned, work with concrete evidence. Here is the concrete evidence: Yesterday, we had a meeting with the unions. We are working on a specific solution. We are also working very hard on recruiting and retaining mechanics and bus drivers. We signed a fair and equitable collective agreement this year. We are very...

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[Original]

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I was talking to a guy at Home Hardware the other day, a bus driver. He told me that he knew a bus driver whose bus broke down mid-route, and the driver had to wait until another driver finished a run and became available to take over the route. That second driver then had to drive the original driver to DTI to pick up a replacement bus. Of course, he added that this delays routes, strands children, and creates unneeded safety risks. He also added that rural bus drivers have ongoing concerns about radios and phones and that 75% to 80% of buses in rural areas are operating in what are known as radio dead zones with no way to connect to dispatch during an emergency situation or breakdown.

My question is for the Minister of Education. At what stage are the conversations between the department and the Vehicle Management Agency regarding how this change, in practice, is a major concern for parents, grandparents, guardians, and districts? Let's just face it: Everybody on this side wants to see the wheels on the bus go round and round.

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the question. We are having productive discussions right now. We are working to find specific solutions to support families and students to make sure students get to and from school safely. It's paramount. It's a priority for us. We are going to share our specific solutions very soon. Thank you.

FINANCE

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): New Brunswickers are watching a government that has completely lost control of its finances. The Holt Liberals want the public to believe that the crisis is simply the result of economic pressures, but the numbers tell a far more troubling story. Revenue is down by \$213 million. That is a serious concern on its own, yet, somehow, this government has managed to turn the shortfall into a staggering \$834-million deficit. That doesn't happen by accident. That happens when a government spends without discipline, manages without foresight, and governs without respect for taxpayers, who fund every decision made in this Chamber.

Rather than course correcting, the Premier continues to assure New Brunswickers that everything is under control while the province drifts deeper into financial instability. How does a \$213-million drop in revenue turn into an \$834-million deficit? What does this say about the government's ability to manage the finances of our province?

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. Thanks to the member opposite for giving me a chance to get up. I think we can really start to see some differences between the previous government and the current government. If I could, I'll borrow the member's example of advent calendars. Let's take one example. When we were elected to government, we

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immediately gave over 10 000 nurses a \$10 000 bonus, and, this year, we gave them \$5 000.

Let's compare that to the previous government. Let's go down memory lane. Around the time of COVID-19, the federal government sent \$2 000 to give to the nurses for the hard work they did during COVID-19. The Higgs government decided to give them \$500 and take the other \$1 500 and put it into General Revenue to increase its surplus. That's the difference between a government that is laser-focused on the bottom line for its benefit and a government that is laser-focused on New Brunswickers and what they need.

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): The other day, I asked a simple, reasonable question: What does this government plan to do in 2026-27 to clean up the fiscal mess it has created? Instead of getting an answer, we saw deflection and finger pointing in yet another attempt to blame the very government that left this government with the financial strength it is now burning through.

Need I remind the members opposite—let's go down memory lane—that in addition to handing them the keys to a stable, well-managed economy, our previous government invested record amounts in health care year after year? It created the tenant rent aid program they currently use, tied minimum wage increases to the Consumer Price Index, and delivered \$40 million in direct support to low-income families through the emergency food and fuel benefit. That is memory lane. We made responsible decisions while still protecting the most vulnerable. Will the Holt government finally tell New Brunswickers what it plans to do in 2026-27 to fix the financial mess it created? What are you doing to raise taxes to cover the revenue shortfall you keep blaming for your own failures?

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): Let's pick another advent calendar square. Let's go to NB Power's HST. When the members opposite were in government, the Higgs government mandated NB Power to, by 2027, bring its debt to 80% in the debt-to-equity ratio. There wasn't any kind of thought to it—they just put it out. They realized they made a mistake, so Mr. Higgs extended it to 2029. That caused NB Power to ask for a 20% hike on New Brunswickers' bills. That's right. Our bills are higher by 20% because NB Power was mandated by the previous government to do that. Then we in opposition realized that and asked twice, through motions, to remove the PST portion of the HST—twice. They rebuked it and said they were going to study it. Nothing was done. Nothing was done.

This is another example of government taking care of New Brunswickers as opposed to taking care of the bottom line. Please give me another follow-up question.

[Translation]

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): In all the crises related to the deficit, one thing keeps coming back: This government's numbers just don't hold up. No case shows this more clearly than the ongoing saga of the \$50 million in HST revenue that is still missing. This \$50 million isn't a rounding error, but funds that could strengthen our

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hospitals and support our essential services. Now, the Minister of Finance based his budget on funds that have never been guaranteed. Instead of planning responsibility according to the needs of the province, he hoped that the money would appear.

Given the size of the deficit and the ongoing uncertainty, when does this government plan to add the missing \$50 million to its balance sheet? Will it be in the third quarter or the fourth, or will it just be money that is lost and will never be recovered? Thank you.

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 Premier already mentioned, an agreement will be announced very soon. You will be very satisfied with the answer; have no fear.

Let's continue to talk about our agenda. Let's talk about housing. What a great announcement the previous government made: \$100 million would be invested in affordable housing. It was \$100 million, but in the first year, \$1 million was supposed to be spent. In the second year, \$33 million was supposed to be spent, but by the third quarter, not even \$5 million had been spent. Where was the money? It was part of the surplus. No door had been opened; nothing had been built.

We have eliminated the provincial portion of the HST on new construction of rental housing because developers from Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island told us that they were cancelling their projects in New Brunswick and going to work elsewhere. We took office and acted quickly. Housing is now being built.

[Original]

ELECTRICITY NO-DISCONNECT POLICY

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Anyone who has been watching question period over the past few days has been hearing lots from government members about things they don't know. We have the Minister of Natural Resources repeatedly claiming that the cost of carbon adjustor is being removed. We don't know how much savings there will be—2¢, 4¢, or 1¢. I don't know. He doesn't know. The EUB doesn't know. Apparently, the Premier knows, because she keeps saying 8¢ per litre. We have a Finance Minister who obviously doesn't realize that, when this opposition was in government, we had six years of balanced books, lower taxes, and record investments. They don't know that. Let's see if the Minister of Energy, who also wears the hat of Minister of Finance, knows this: Does NB Power cut off people for non-payment during the winter months?

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): I'm glad the member opposite brought that question up. They seem to be creating quite a storm with this. Let's give some details about how NB Power works. It's

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being brought up unfairly. There is a committee for vulnerable people that NB Power is working on right now to get some solutions. It's not like NB Power is cutting off power right off the bat. Over a 90-day period, its staff try to contact people, averaging seven times. Before cutting off power, they go and knock on doors. They want to communicate with people. As long as New Brunswickers are communicating with them, they will find a way to get them through.

Being irresponsible and having all this talk about just eliminating it, freezing it... You know, there are ways to do things, and you have... Anyway, I get upset when I hear this because it is just trying to lay blame on an organization that's trying to take care of people.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Well, that was an interesting response, Madam Speaker. Nobody is laying blame on NB Power. It's this government that sets the direction for NB Power. It is a Crown corporation. Because the Minister of Energy obviously doesn't really know what happens, let me read from NB Power's website. It says:

Our goal is to avoid the need to disconnect service to our customers, especially during the winter months. From November 1 to the end of April, we consider the impact of colder weather on heating and the impact this can have on bills.

And yet, in our offices, we get multiple calls—I'm sure the government offices get the same calls—from low-income people who are struggling to pay for groceries, mortgages, rents, car payments, and everything else that has gone up. There has been inflation caused by 10 years of federal Liberal governments, and now that we have a provincial Liberal government, we're seeing cost-of-living increases across the board. People can't do it all. Why is NB Power cutting off low-income people, some of them with children, in the winter months, when it is -20°C?

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): Well, let's take the member's example. Imagine that somebody is three or four months behind on their bills, it is now winter, and NB Power has not been able to contact them. We put in a policy that says that we will not automatically disconnect, but NB Power hasn't been able to contact this person after trying 7, 8, 9, or 10 times. Does the member really feel that, come spring, April or May, this vulnerable person, who has not been in contact, has not been working with NB Power, and has not been trying to fix the situation, is going to be in a better situation? Is that what he believes?

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): I'll tell you what people wouldn't have on April 1: cold bodies.

Listen, New Brunswick has extreme temperatures. We all know this. We all live here. It can be -20°C or -30°C with the windchill. You can cut people off in May, June, July, August, September, or October, but in the winter months... Listen, Madam Speaker, I had a family, a single mom with five kids, in my office because their power was cut off in the middle of January. That is not humane, and I believe it is up to this government to push NB Power to ensure that does not happen.

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It is clear that this minister would prefer to defend that policy and defend the fact that single moms and poor and low-income people are being cut off from heat in the wintertime rather than stand up for New Brunswickers and do whatever it takes to ensure this doesn't happen. The government members spent almost a billion dollars in deficit on Lord knows what, but they can't protect vulnerable people in the winter months. Do better, minister.

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): Madam Speaker, I would much prefer that the member opposite do exactly what we're asking: keep his constituents communicating with NB Power. We all get calls. All MLAs have done this. What happens? The minute we contact NB Power and put it back in contact with the customer, the power comes back on. That's the point. Continue to communicate. NB Power is not cutting power off to people it is talking to. If NB Power can't reach people, that is the problem. Everybody, keep telling your constituents this: Do not break the communication. That is the key. As long as there is a working relationship, NB Power will find a way to make it work.

TAXATION

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. A billion-dollar deficit represents approximately \$1 200 spent per New Brunswicker, this year alone, overbudget. At a time of rising unaffordability and increased household costs, when people are struggling to pay their rent, heat their homes, clothe their children, and feed their families, this government has increased the net debt by \$1.2 billion, adding \$1 400 of new tax burden on the backs of New Brunswickers. I repeat: We are \$1 200 per New Brunswicker overbudget, and there is \$1 400 of new tax burden for each New Brunswicker.

This government promised affordability. Will you finally commit to New Brunswickers that you will not raise any taxes during your mandate to pay for your reckless spending? I'd love to hear from the Minister of Finance on this one. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I am actually thrilled to talk about the fact that our government is not raising taxes. We are actually decreasing taxes because we took the HST off power bills, a 10% savings. That represents \$90 million that New Brunswickers didn't have to spend. We also put a rent cap in place to keep rent stable. We also froze property taxes so that New Brunswickers won't pay more in property taxes. We took the tax off multi-unit development so that developers could actually build affordable housing here. We made RSV vaccines free for seniors in this province. We provide a universal breakfast for families who are struggling to put food on the table, because our government is laser-focused on making sure that New Brunswickers can live affordably in this province. At the same time, we are investing to get them the primary health care they need.

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Madam Speaker, this is a government with heart that is serving New Brunswickers.