

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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[Translation]

HOMELESSNESS

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

[Original]

Madam Speaker, during the media scrum yesterday, I mentioned to journalists that I want to ask the government for an update on the progress that the coroner's office is making in keeping track of the deaths of homeless people in our province. This is an issue for coroner's offices across the country. I am aware that some work has been done at the coroner's office here in our province to try to correct the situation. Can the Minister of Public Safety update the House on the progress of the changes required to the coroner's office so that we can get more accurate information about homeless deaths in our province? 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, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the Leader of the Official Opposition for the question. I thank him for the sincerity with which he asked the question, because this is a very serious subject. Honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, all deaths that occur in the province are addressed the same way, no matter what the person's social class is. Our coroners have to handle between 1 500 and 2 000 cases per year. So, that is a huge number.

When there is an autopsy in a case of addiction, a pathologist intervenes immediately. There are between 1 500 and 2 000 cases, which is a lot of people. There are so many cases that sometimes we have to call on pathologists from outside the province. We would like to have more pathologists in the province. They not only have to deal with deaths, but also give diagnoses to living people.

Each time, the work has to be restarted, which takes months. We would all like the work to be done more quickly, but that is the situation right now. If you want more information...

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. We read yesterday, or today, that there had been four deaths in Saint John. The news was announced by nonprofit organizations well acquainted with the reality on the ground. I ask the minister: What is missing in the communication between nonprofit organizations and the Office of the Chief Coroner?

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[Original]

What is the part that's missing? I recognize that the minister talked about the coroner's office and all the medical pieces that have to be involved in that. However, it's the reporting that seems to be an issue. Again, every coroner's office across the country is struggling with this. Can the minister help us with that chain, starting with the nonprofits being able to identify this? However, there's a part that's missing between that and the coroner actually reporting it. 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, Madam Speaker. The situation has been very difficult for years. These situations arise when the cold weather comes. Unfortunately, these things happen.

Again, I want to repeat that, no matter who has died or what their social class is, the same process is followed. Therefore, we always try to do our best to communicate, depending on the means we have available.

I want to tell the Leader of the Official Opposition again that we need pathologists to speed up the work. As I mentioned in my first answer, sometimes we call on pathologists outside the province.

As you mentioned, every province is facing the same problem right now. So, this is work we want to improve. We want to improve it, but, again, adding workers will help us when we have them. Again, our hearts are broken each time we hear about a tragedy like this. Thank you for the question.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the minister's answer.

[Original]

Madam Speaker, yesterday, I asked the minister responsible for housing this question, and he refused to answer, so I'd like to ask the Minister of Social Development, whose purview this ultimately falls under. Last night and early this morning, New Brunswickers experienced 30°C weather with the windchill. Those are devastating temperatures for anyone, let alone someone sleeping on the street. So, I will ask this again: How many people has your task force on homelessness saved from these conditions? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, thank you for the question. Yes, the temperatures are devastating. All the out-of-the-cold shelters are open across the province right now, except for Bathurst and Miramichi. There are warming centres set up in those places right now. I do want to take this moment, Madam Speaker, to thank the community partners, all the departments that

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are working so hard, and the municipalities and RSCs that are recognizing the need in their communities. They're coming together and doing outreach to meet folks where they are, encouraging them, finding the resources that they need, and getting them into these spaces to stay warm. I want to say thank you. I want to make sure that does not get lost in the conversations in this House today.

As I said, the warming centres in Bathurst and Miramichi are open. Next week, as soon as I have an update on when those shelters will open, I will share it with the House. Thank you.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, and I thank the minister for her recognition of the folks who work every day. This actually dovetails with my next question, because we know that many of the shelters only accept folks who are sober. We fully understand the reasons for that. It is for the safety of the shelter users and the safety of the people who work there. We also know that many people are not comfortable going to shelters due to experiences they've had, such as negative interactions with other shelter users that make them unable to be under the same roof. That leaves a large population of people who just absolutely will not utilize these services. They're choosing to stay out in the cold.

This government said: Well, we're going to get some transition housing going. It's been a year, so I'd like to ask the Premier this: What are you doing to make sure that there are no New Brunswickers falling through the cracks and sleeping on the streets in -30°C temperatures? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Madam Speaker, again, I thank the member for the question and for the opportunity to have this conversation on the floor of the people's House. It is so important that the public understand that there are some folks who, for a variety of reasons, are not able or choose not to... They don't go to the shelters that are available to them. I go back to my previous answer. We are so grateful for the community partners that we are supporting. They are able to go out and do research.

I encourage every member of this House to check in with your constituency assistants and have them check in with community partners to see what is going on in your communities. Our community partners do need support. Right now, we have outreach workers going out. A lot of folks in the community know where people are staying. Whether they're in tents, in encampments, or on their own, our community partners know who most of these people are, and they're going to them with some essentials and necessities. We have some other incredible citizens who are going out to support people as well.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. These are problems that the government said it had answers to. People voted for this government because the members said they had answers on many other issues, but clearly, they have not met the mark. Premier, you have now had a year. You've done nothing except make announcements and add layers to a system that is clearly not working. You're the government. You're the Premier of this province. This is your

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responsibility, and New Brunswickers are looking to you, as their Premier, to show some leadership on this issue. This is not just another file. These are people's lives, and you cannot afford to fail them any longer. You say that you are data-driven, but your minister responsible won't answer. So, what's the data? How many people has your task force taken in from the cold? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'll answer the question again to make sure that it is clear to this House that we are responding with the urgency that communities are expecting us to. We are making sure that our task force ensures that the capacity in communities is met, whether it be by shelters, by our out-of-the-cold supports, or by our warming centres in communities.

We also recognize that a big part of the task force's vision is to make sure that we can execute at every level of the housing continuum, that we can develop quality bridge housing in communities, and that we are consistently living up to our targets on our transitional units in communities and delivering them faster than we ever have before. That's our commitment. It's to make sure that there are more options than just shelters. We know that our out-of-the-cold solutions in communities are ensuring that we can deal with the crisis we are in right now. However, we need to be looking long-term so we can come up with the actual solutions that will get us out of this crisis.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Perhaps someday the minister responsible will figure out that his talking points are not helpful. People need action now. This government has had a year, and it's not getting it done.

FUEL PRICES

Madam Speaker, I believe I asked this question on Wednesday, but the Premier didn't get up on her feet to answer it, so I will try again.

The New Brunswick Energy and Utilities Board (EUB) is an independent, quasi-judicial tribunal that regulates petroleum prices in New Brunswick. It is governed by Acts of the Legislature. Should the EUB be unable to provide a formula that meets the government's objectives, there are two possibilities that the government could choose. It could take away the EUB's authority to regulate prices, which would deregulate fuel prices and expose New Brunswickers to potentially wildly fluctuating prices, or the EUB's governing legislation could be amended to achieve the government's objectives.

Be radically transparent with New Brunswickers. If, in February, the EUB does not come up with a solution that is acceptable to government, which option will it be? Which one will you choose? New Brunswickers deserve to know. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I share the member opposite's concern with respect to how New

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Brunswickers are struggling from an affordability perspective. I think the honourable member might agree that New Brunswickers should not pay a penny more for their transportation fuels than regulation warrants. I think the honourable member should agree with that, as opposed to defending a formula for which all indications are that New Brunswickers have been overcharged, particularly in years one and two and likely now in the context of year three.

The onus is always on the sector to prove its cost of operations. Let's let the EUB do its work. I would suggest, though, Madam Speaker, that there are provisions for this under sections 62 and 63 of the *Energy and Utilities Board Act*, and that there is no need to wait 90 days to have this particular hearing. We would encourage more agility from the EUB.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): So much for transparency, Madam Speaker. The Liberals had a year. They said it was going to be immediate. They said that it would be done with the stroke of a pen. They made legislative changes that made absolutely no difference, so the minister is just going off his talking points and adding nothing to the conversation that would assure New Brunswickers that they're actually going to get it right this time and live up to the promise they made.

Madam Speaker, in the media, the Premier has been saying that New Brunswickers are being overcharged at the pump, as the minister just said. It sounds to me as though the government members are accusing someone in the supply chain. On Wednesday, I asked whether the Premier would get on her feet and identify whomever she is accusing of overcharging New Brunswickers. I would like to hear this from the Premier. Who in the supply chain is she accusing of overcharging New Brunswickers? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Madam Speaker, I am going to make one assertion, if I may, on whom I blame. The subsection of the statute that brought in the carbon adjustor in the first place circumvented good regulatory practice. It put the onus on the EUB to come forward with the temporary formula that we are now looking at. All indications are that this formula has been overcharging New Brunswickers. Who is to blame? It's the previous government for bringing in this subsection in the first place and circumventing a good, standard regulatory practice. Let's make sure that only the cost of operation is covered and that New Brunswickers don't pay a penny more.

Now, having said that, other jurisdictions across the country pay for the cost of compliance with the *Clean Fuel Regulations* (CFR). We have to do it in a regulatory fashion.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. You know, you can't make this stuff up. We have a Premier who, during her campaign, promised 4¢ per litre off the price of gas. She got elected. She doubled down on the 4¢ per litre then added another 4¢ per litre to make 8¢ per litre. Now she's going to save 8¢ per litre. She has said this multiple times here in the Legislature.

Again, we have the Minister of Natural Resources, who once sat on the EUB, who actually contradicted his own Premier and said: We don't know how much is going to be saved—1¢

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per litre, 2¢ per litre, or 3¢ per litre. Now, the government members are all blaming the EUB. They're blaming gas stations. They're blaming the refinery. They're blaming the opposition. They have all these excuses.

I'm just curious. I've asked this before. Can the Premier just be honest with New Brunswickers and tell them that the government members made a promise they could not deliver on? If the government members really want to reduce the price of gas, they have the option to do it.

[Translation]

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

[Original]

I want to point out something to everyone in this House and everyone in New Brunswick who is listening. Our team has been trying to undo the damage that the cost of carbon adjustor has had on New Brunswickers. I want to quote the member opposite who was just speaking. He said:

whether the gas is \$1.58 per litre or \$1.54 per litre, nobody's life is going to change... Oh, it's 4¢ per litre. But nobody's life is being changed by that.

He thinks it's okay to charge New Brunswickers 4¢ per litre. He thinks New Brunswickers aren't out there checking every penny, looking at every expense in their households, and trying to figure out ways to get by. He thinks 4¢ per litre doesn't matter. No wonder the members opposite aren't working with us to try to get rid of these unnecessary costs for New Brunswickers. He doesn't understand that 4¢ per litre does matter to New Brunswickers. Our government is trying to fight for New Brunswickers' affordability against the Conservatives, who are working in the opposite direction.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): There's nothing better than a Liberal cherry-picking quotes out of context and taking things to mean whatever she wants them to mean. Let me also make clear what I said, which is that there is no sense in saving 4¢ per litre if you have to drive another 100 km to get gas because all the gas stations closed. Yes, that's context.

The Premier again blames everybody and looks to everybody else for solutions. We provided solutions. We put in the adjustor for that very reason—to ensure gas stations stayed open so New Brunswickers could fill their gas tanks. The Minister of Natural Resources has repeatedly been on the record saying New Brunswickers could save 1¢ per litre, 2¢ per litre, or 3¢ per litre. The Premier has repeatedly been on the record saying New Brunswickers could save 8¢ per litre. Now the government members are pointing to February, blaming the EUB, and expecting something from it that they, themselves, can deliver on. Are you going to take off 8¢ per litre, or are you not going to take off 8¢ per litre?

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Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): I think the honourable member is trying to play the blame game. From the very, very beginning, I blamed the previous government, which circumvented good regulatory practice and inserted itself into the regulatory process. Now we're stuck with a formula, and all indications are that New Brunswickers are being overcharged. I blame the previous government, but I thank this Premier for defending affordability for New Brunswickers.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): In the past five minutes of these questions, we've heard the Minister of Natural Resources give us two explanations, both in complete contradiction. He says that the cost of carbon adjustor was bad regulation when there was good regulation, so the Liberals took out the cost of carbon adjustor. I assume that now, based on that, we have good regulation. Can the minister tell us: Are we now in a place of good regulation, or did the cost of carbon adjustor do what it needed to do to ensure gas stations stayed open? Which is it?

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): I know the honourable member actually understands public policy, but he may not understand a regulatory framework, so I'm going to explain this very clearly. The onus is always on the applicant to come forward to the EUB to prove what its costs of operation are. The EUB would assess that evidence and test it in an open forum, and these costs of operation would legitimately be allowed.

In this case, the government circumvented standard regulatory practice and tasked the EUB with the sector's work. That is bad regulation. That is the problem. We believe that only the cost of compliance to the CFR should be recovered and nothing more—not a penny more. We will defend New Brunswickers to ensure that they do not pay a penny more than they should.

NB LIQUOR

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In March of this year, the Holt government removed approximately \$4 million worth of U.S. liquor from the shelves of New Brunswick liquor stores and agency stores to protest U.S. tariffs. In October of this year, the government placed \$3.4 million worth of that stockpiled liquor in a Salisbury liquor store. The minister said it was an attempt to recoup losses. Can the Minister responsible for NB Liquor tell us how much the liquor left is worth?

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, Minister responsible for the *Regulatory Accountability and Reporting Act*, L): Thank you to the member opposite for engaging in questions around ANBL. We're really proud of the work that ANBL does to promote local products and local producers. We're excited that it's able to start working through the U.S. alcohol that was taking up space and was not allowing us to get as much local product into the marketplace as we wanted to. The Salisbury store has moved through a significant amount of that stock.

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At last check, we had under \$2 million worth of product left. Those numbers continue to drop. It's been a very productive way to move through those products. Thank you so much to the member opposite for the question.

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I heard on the news this week that the Nova Scotia government has now restocked its shelves with \$14 million of U.S. liquor that it had removed from its stores in a similar tariff protest. In that same news report, I also heard that a portion of the proceeds from the sale of that liquor—about \$200 000—would go to Nova Scotia food banks. Is New Brunswick planning to support provincial food banks in the same way?

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, Minister responsible for the *Regulatory Accountability and Reporting Act*, L): I thank the member opposite for this opportunity to talk about the work that ANBL does in collaboration with FeedNB. ANBL has an ongoing relationship with FeedNB that generates a regular flow of income that helps support New Brunswick food banks. I'm really excited that we're already ahead of the targets for fundraising this year. I look forward to hearing about the good work that ANBL employees are doing. I've heard really amazing stories from the CEO about how well that campaign is going and what an impact being able to provide food for the communities they serve has on both customers and staff. Thank you so much to the member opposite for highlighting the good work that ANBL does in the community, not just in supporting local products and local producers but also in helping people put food on their tables.

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I find it interesting that the minister says the money has been going to FeedNB and to food banks when the food bank in my community, St. Stephen, received word from the same agency that it would get no funding this year. Can the minister tell us where the money has gone from the sale of the U.S. liquor that was put back on the shelves and how much money was made? Will any of it be used to increase food bank funding? Thank you.

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, Minister responsible for the *Regulatory Accountability and Reporting Act*, L): Thank you to the member opposite for the question. I'm a bit confused by the question. I don't believe ANBL directly funds local food banks. I believe that is a process that works through the provincial organization, so I'm not sure what the operational issues with that organization are. I am really, really pleased that ANBL has taken on this ongoing work.

I know that fundraising is ahead of targets, and I can certainly speak to that. I can certainly speak to the fact that, long before an association between U.S. alcohol and trade concerns came up, ANBL was working on supporting food banks. I'm really proud of that work. That work continues. I'm not able to speak to what Nova Scotia Liquor does in its province, but I

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can say that ANBL brings dollars into this province, to the tune of \$200 million, to support health care and other priorities of New Brunswickers.

COST OF LIVING

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): A recent national poll underscores what New Brunswickers already know, which is that Canadians are exhausted from the rising cost of living and want real relief, not more government spending that fuels higher deficits. Families in our province are cutting back on groceries, postponing home repairs, and struggling to pay heating and power bills, all while watching governments promise grand projects instead of providing immediate help.

The message from the people is crystal clear: Stop spending on bureaucracy and start helping those who are just trying to get by. Across this province, seniors, students, and working families are asking the very same question: When will the government finally listen and act? They need to know. No more rhetoric. New Brunswickers need results, and they need them right now. What concrete steps will this government take to provide real, immediate financial relief to New Brunswickers struggling to make ends meet in this holiday season?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I really appreciate this question because our government has been focused on making life more affordable for New Brunswickers since before we were elected. We got to work as soon as we were elected last year. One of the very first things we did was put in place a 3% rent cap to stop the exorbitant increases in rent that New Brunswickers experienced under the previous government. Then, we took 10% off people's power bills, delivering \$90 million in savings back to New Brunswickers at a time when they needed it.

We didn't stop there. We increased the budget for direct-to-tenant subsidies so that 2 500 more families could get access to affordable housing. We froze property tax assessments, with many municipalities following suit, so that, this year, New Brunswickers in many communities all over our province would not see an increase in their property taxes. We made the RSV vaccine free for seniors over 75 and for vulnerable people. We will continue to do that work.

[Translation]

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): New Brunswickers are facing the greatest financial pressures in a generation. Groceries, housing, and gas: everything costs more. Now, people are being asked to prepare for a new power rate increase, at a time when pay cheques are already stretched to the maximum.

It's not a matter of abstract statistics, but of seniors on a fixed income who must choose between heating their home or getting care, single parents who skip a meal to pay for the power bill, and small businesses that reduce hours just to keep their doors open.

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While this government claims to understand affordability issues, its actions tell a completely different story. What concrete actions does the government plan to take to protect people against NB Power rate increases and ensure that energy, which is essential—given that the Point Lepreau Generating Station still isn't running—remains affordable for all families and businesses in 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. I'm going to answer the specific question from the opposition member, who is asking us whether we have taken action to reduce power rate increases. We are well aware that, over the past two years, we have endured an increase of almost 20% because the previous government had set a specific date to reach a ratio that was essentially invented, fake, and not evidence-based.

When we sent a mandate letter to NB Power, we eliminated the ratio and called for more natural and organized progress precisely so that increases were calculated properly. We found this option preferable to just waiting to reach a political target designed to enable the previous government to make a fuss in the House.

[Original]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Yesterday, I asked the Minister of Health about surgical services, emergency surgeries, and people staying overnight for acute care surgeries at the URVH. He kind of danced around the answer and didn't really give me a clear one. I want the minister to assure the people of my riding, the riding above mine, and the riding below mine, in that part of the province, that they're going to be able to receive emergency surgery at the Upper River Valley Hospital when they need it.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and thanks to the member opposite for the opportunity to talk about health care, because alongside making life more affordable for New Brunswickers, improving the quality of and access to health care is something our government has made a top priority. We started off by delivering the respect to nurses that they deserved with the \$10 000 retention bonus and then another \$5 000 so that our hospitals could be staffed with the nurses that the people of Woodstock desire at the URVH. We then signed a phenomenal contract with the Medical Society to make sure surgeons would be attracted to places like the Upper River Valley Hospital. We're working to make New Brunswick an attractive place for doctors. We have increased our emphasis on recruitment and how we recruit specialists to rural areas, to the Upper River Valley Hospital, to look at how we support a surgeon who is alone to become a member of a team so that we now have multiple surgeons coming to deliver health care to—

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

[*Translation*]

Question period is over.