

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Good morning, Madam Speaker. I asked the Minister of Health a question several weeks ago and he couldn't answer it, Madam Speaker. I asked him how many people are on the waiting list for a doctor in our province, but he couldn't answer the question. So, I am going to ask him again today: How many people are currently on the waiting list for a doctor? Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, that's a very good question. I wonder that, in exact terms, on a daily basis myself. We trust the New Brunswick Health Council to report on this. It reported about a year ago, and we look forward to a report in the near future. We have other measures and ways of looking at that. For example, we're looking at Medicare billing arrangements. Vitalité tells us that there are so many people who have been taken off the wait list and are currently attached. It's a fluid number. We are committed to getting 14 000 off that list in the near future because of the clinics that we have opened, 11 as of yesterday. We recognize that there is significant immigration to this province. People come into the province and get put on the wait list. I cannot give you an exact number. We know that it's not where we want it to be. We are working hard on that wait list. Thank you for drawing attention to the issue here today.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. We know the list is going in the wrong direction. A few weeks ago, I asked the minister about the 10 000 more people reported in the media. His answer was, well, we got more people in the province, which was completely wrong. So, if the Minister of Health cannot accurately answer the question of how many people are on the doctor wait list, how can he say that their collaborative care clinics have already taken 14 000 off the wait list? Can we trust this number? Can we trust this government? Please give us a number that we can depend on.

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, we trust the Health Council's report the most, the report on the number of people who are not yet attached. I say "not yet". Our goals in both Horizon and Vitalité... Vitalité has promised to attach everybody by 2028. Horizon has promised to attach everybody by 2029. This is measurable. Every day, we have people calling us to say: Thank you. We've come off the wait list. We're on the NB Health Link list. We're on the new family doctors list.

To give you an exact number today, I don't think you really expect that. I am pleased to recognize that the numbers are moving in the right direction. People are coming off the list.

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They're being attached to nurse practitioners, family doctors, and collaborative care clinics, and I think that's a very good news story. Thank you.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): The minister just said that the list is fluid and he can't give a number, yet he knows how many people are coming off the wait list?

Come on, Madam Speaker. Things are not adding up here.

This is a direct quote from a government news release dated yesterday, December 9: "The clinics that have been announced this year are expected to take more than 14,000 New Brunswickers off the wait-list and connect them to accessible, team-based primary care." So, Madam Speaker, this government is telling people that this has already happened. We've heard the Premier say it. We've heard the Minister of Health say it. It's in the record books.

This is a government aspired to balance the books and failed miserably. You promised 8.24¢ off per litre of gas and failed miserably. You have consistently failed to meet any of your aspirational targets. Why should anyone believe that 14 000 number now?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the members opposite, we do listen to New Brunswickers. They're telling us that they're coming off the list. We have opened new clinics, which don't sign up 14 000 patients on the first day of operation, but they do sign up 14 000 people in the succeeding weeks and months. There's no single clinic that will deliver on the first day that we announce funding and support. The 11 clinics that we've started are signing up 14 000 people today and moving forward. The next 10 clinics that we announce will do the same, as will the next 10 clinics after that. Our goal is to get to a significant fraction of those people who are not currently attached. They will be attached, and New Brunswickers are very pleased to see us moving in that direction.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, Madam Speaker, I can inform the Minister of Health that the number his department uses is 127 000 people without a doctor as of last week.

On the floor of this House, both the Premier and the Minister of Health have stated that 14 000 is the number of people who have already come off the wait list. Their own release yesterday clearly stated that this is an expected—otherwise known as projected or aspirational—number. This is either a numbers problem or a communications problem. Can the Premier or the Minister of Health clear this up once and for all? Is 14 000 the number of people who have already come off the wait list, as they claimed, or is it the number of people who are expected to come off, as they said in their press release yesterday? Data and facts matter, at least on this side of the House, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, I'm glad he uses those words: aspirational, our hope, our goals. We want to have 127 000 people off the wait list. I think that's a laudable goal. I think that we

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started from a point where people were growing the wait list before we took over. Now, we're seeing people come off that list. The 14 000 people that we associated with these clinics are being signed up today, tomorrow, next week, and next month. The next 10 clinics will do the same. The next 10 clinics after that will do the same. We will get to a significant fraction of those 127 000 people who want help. They will get help from this government. Thank you.

HOMELESSNESS

Ms. Conroy (Miramichi East, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I received a disturbing call yesterday from Claudine Morris, better known as "Momma" to our unhoused community. She is adored and respected for her love and compassion for people living rough. She was in tears as she spoke of a man who was in a terrible mental state, had frostbitten digits, and refused to get medical treatment or go to a shelter. She's worried that he's going to be the next one to die in the streets.

Many times, the Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation has announced that the government is going to lower homelessness by 40%. I really want to believe him, but when I hear him say that, if we just give these people a home, they will lose their reason to be on drugs, it's obvious that he's not in touch with the real issues.

This young man is in the exact kind of situation in which our compassionate care motion could save a life, yet the Holt government refuses to support it. So I'll ask this: What immediate actions is this government taking, right now, to protect the people in our province who are freezing, mentally unwell, and unable to seek help on their own? 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, through you to the member opposite, winter is one of the most challenging times in our province. I want to thank the Leader of the Official Opposition for his help last week in explaining to the public the different reasons that people don't seek out shelter and support. It is complex. Homelessness is complex.

Our government and Social Development have expanded our outreach services.

All of our out-of-the-cold shelters are operating right now, except for the one in Miramichi, where we have delays due to construction. However, we have warming centres set up right now, and we're operating our shelter space. Is it enough? I don't know that it's ever going to be enough, but we're not going to stop trying to make sure that it's enough, and we're not going to stop supporting our communities, which are now facing challenges they've never had to face before. That's why we've expanded our outreach. There's more we can do, and we're going to continue to do it. Everyone deserves the best opportunity to thrive.

Ms. Conroy (Miramichi East, PC): There are no warming shelters right now. We have one shelter that's available. There are only six beds, and they're full. Miramichi Housing

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Solutions has been doing an incredible job and incredible work for unhoused people in the past few years. It has obtained a new facility for the out-of-the-cold shelter, but it's been held up for weeks now because of fire marshal issues. Meanwhile, people are freezing outside every night. People are being brought to the shelter only to be told there is no room left. There are only six beds in there. Is your government taking any concrete steps right now to expedite the process for Miramichi Housing Solutions to resolve the fire marshal's barriers and ensure the warming shelter can be opened immediately to prevent any more harm? 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, we are doing all we can to work with the Office of the Fire Marshal. We are working with our community partners. To absolutely the very best of my knowledge... If I'm incorrect, I will find out later today. To my understanding, on Regina Street, we have a 10-bed shelter operating right now. On King George Highway, we have a warming centre, and we have a warming centre open right now through the hub as well. I'll go back and confirm with my department to make sure that is what we have open right now.

My whole team and I are going to do our very best, in partnership with New Brunswick Housing and Public Safety, to see what we can do with the fire marshal and to see what the delays are and whether there's anything we can do to speed that up right now.

I want to take this opportunity. I have a couple of seconds to thank those community partners and the municipality for the work they do. They're experiencing challenges they have never experienced before. I'm grateful for the work they do every day.

Ms. Conroy (Miramichi East, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. There are many issues and many layers. It's not as simple as one thing or another. I appreciate all the comments from the minister. To my knowledge, the one on the King George Highway is not open yet. If you can check on that, that would be fantastic.

We find that most of the homeless people are unhoused because of addiction. Most of the addictions are because of mental health or trauma, not because people don't have a home.

Government members make lots of announcements. We've heard lots of announcements in the past, but things are getting worse, as the minister says. People are being turned away at shelters. The police, paramedics... We have so many people, such as those at the John Howard Society, Jeremy's Mission, and Dining with Dignity, who are all doing their best, but people are falling through the cracks. With all these great organizations that are already doing the work and meeting the needs they can meet... They've built relationships of trust with many homeless people. What outreach is the government doing not to reinvent the wheel but to work with the organizations that already exist to help them get people off the streets right now?

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. When we stepped in, we saw the seriousness of what was happening.

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Folks are falling through the cracks. Services, community agencies, and partners are working through challenges they've never had to face before. The homelessness task force is where we have community partners. We're connecting with community partners, and we're making decisions quickly and in a coordinated effort to do all we can to make sure that folks do not fall through the cracks. It's why we brought mental health care into that space. It's why we have NB Housing. It's why we have Social Development. It's why we have municipalities there. It's why we have Public Safety. It's so that we can work together to do all we can to make sure we are coordinating our efforts.

I'm grateful to the member opposite. At any opportunity that you would like to reach out or when any member in this room would like to reach out to share what is happening in their community, please do. Together, we will make a difference.

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Week after week, I hear the housing minister talk about homelessness in our cities. It makes me wonder who is looking out for the smaller regions, where the problem may not see the same high numbers but where the lives at risk are equally precious. There are big issues in Saint John, Moncton, and Fredericton—no question about it. However, tucked in the woods and under bridges, there are hidden encampments and people sleeping in vehicles in Sussex and in many of the rural ridings of the MLAs in this House. As this government attempts to get a grip on the higher numbers of people and the more public and obvious problems in our city cores, we cannot continue to ignore rural regions.

To the minister of housing: What are you doing to ensure that people outside of cities are not freezing to death? This is not just a city problem, and it feels as though the bigger picture is being ignored.

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. We've seen this crisis grip every community in the province. This is not my first time standing in this House and saying that our rural communities are feeling the impact of the housing and homelessness crisis. It is having a massive impact on every community, but we are building. We are making sure that every community in the province that has a need is getting support from our government. We are making sure that we are unlocking new non-profit developments, whether they be in bridge housing, transitional housing, or permanent affordable housing. We are making sure that, for the first time in 40 years, we are building public housing in communities that have not had any. We are making sure that we deliver on housing like never before, particularly in the face of a previous government that did not get a single unit of public housing constructed. We are doing it, and we are doing it with urgency. We are making sure that every community is protected in this crisis in the long term.

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The only ribbons the minister has cut have been ours.

In my riding, there is nowhere safe to warm up and nowhere to sleep. This weekend, a teenage girl who has faced unimaginable trauma since childhood told me she spent the

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night tucked under a bank ATM until she was kicked out at 4 a.m. I left her with the coat off my back, a pocket full of gum and candy I had in the bottom of my purse, along with my constituency office address and phone number. That is all I had to offer. I haven't stopped thinking about her since. She is even younger than my own children, just a kid, and other than the library to clean up, the Civic Centre to shower, and the Salvation Army or Sharing Club for food, she has no place to go.

How do people like her fall through the cracks? In rural regions where there are no warming centres or shelters for sleep, will the minister work with communities to arrange and fund temporary housing, perhaps in local hotels, until spring, when things warm up?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

We will work with every community that sees a need, and we will make sure that we support them however we can in order to unlock more housing in this province than we ever have before.

The members opposite want to talk about the situations in their ridings. They should reflect on the six-year, 210% increase in homelessness that happened under their watch. While New Brunswickers were out in the cold, the members of the former government sat on surpluses and got nothing built, not a single door of public housing—

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Not a single door of new government-constructed public housing was built under the former government's watch. We made sure we delivered. We are going to hit our target this year. We're going to hit it next year. We're going to continue doing it in a way this province has never seen before. We're going to deliver public housing. Those members didn't, so it took us to do it.

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Minister, these rural communities with part-time mayors and councillors have limited services, resources, and money, yet they are expected to address a crisis that they cannot manage alone. They are in over their heads, and they don't know what the solutions are or how to get there.

Meanwhile, citizens want to know that there is help and hope, especially in these freezing temperatures, for the unhoused people with whom they share the community. People just can't stand to see them suffering, maybe more so in a small town like mine where every face is seen and every heartbreaking story is felt.

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In Sussex, a new non-profit is trying desperately to help. It has taken its idea for small sleeping pods to council. However, there is no evidence that the pods are safe or that they will keep people warm in these temperatures.

Since the minister is just killing it over there, has he had any meaningful conversations with my municipal council about people sleeping out in the cold and the ways that he can offer support so the community is not left to shoulder this burden alone?

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. We are in the grips of this crisis, which did not appear overnight. We've known this. We've been here. We know that we've gotten here thanks to decades of underfunding and under-supporting a housing stock that has created not only cracks but also massive gaps that people are falling through. We are making sure that we respond to this crisis.

The members opposite want to talk about how they have compassion for the communities they're representing that are dealing with this crisis, but they should've stood up in this House when they were on this side, made sure they got off the \$700-million surplus, and supported the people who were desperate. If they want to act like housing leaders now, then they should've done something when they had the chance. We are doing it. We are making sure that we deliver public housing like never before, and we will meet our targets so that we can do that.

[Translation]

SENIORS

Ms. Mitton (Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, providing quality care to all New Brunswick seniors is particularly important to me. For many years, we have been asking for an increase in the number of care hours provided to nursing home residents.

In his report titled *What We All Want*, the Child, Youth and Senior Advocate recommended that, by the end of the year, the number of care hours should go up to four hours. The Holt government stated that it would increase the number of care hours provided by an undetermined number and that its goal was to do that by 2030, meaning in five years. Would the Minister responsible for Seniors tell us the number of care hours that the government is really aiming for and confirm to us if the year 2030 really is the target?

[Original]

Hon. Ms. Boudreau (Champdoré-Irishtown, Minister responsible for Seniors; Minister responsible for Women's Equality, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for this question. It's always a pleasure for me to speak about the work the government of New Brunswick is doing for our seniors.

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[Translation]

With respect to the question that I was asked, we are in fact currently working on the file. We are in talks with various partners and the other departments that are working to resolve the situation. We are committed to increasing the number of care hours provided to our seniors. We are working on the file. As soon as we make progress on this, we will inform you. Thank you very much. Thank you for the question.

[Original]

Ms. Mitton (Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, we need details about hours of care and when we will see them. Five years is too long to wait.

A couple of weeks ago, I met with partners for seniors in long-term care, a partnership between service providers and seniors advocacy groups. They are calling on the government to create a stand-alone department of seniors with a focus, direction, and mandate to fix this issue. This means a minister with staff and a budget to act urgently and to prioritize the needs of seniors. We need dedicated leadership and policy development. Will the Premier give this essential issue the attention it deserves by establishing a stand-alone department of seniors with staff, a budget, and a mandate to address this issue?

Hon. Ms. Boudreau (Champdoré-Irishtown, Minister responsible for Seniors; Minister responsible for Women's Equality, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

Thank you to the opposition member for her question. We understand the question. What is important to us... We are very, very aware of the whole reality of our seniors. I had the opportunity to travel throughout New Brunswick, visit many nursing homes, and meet with different groups that work with our seniors to provide them with the best care in the best possible places.

With respect to creating a department, what matters to us is that the work gets done. We're working closely with various departments, including the Department of Health and the Department of Social Development, with which I am working directly. Our seniors are our priority. They are the ones who are really important to the government of New Brunswick. We will continue to work to meet their needs and those of their families.

[Original]

Ms. Mitton (Tantramar, G): What's important to me and, more importantly, what's important to seniors, is that we also see action, that we see work getting done. However, it isn't happening. What I was asking was whether the Premier will give the Minister responsible for Seniors the tools she needs in order to do the job and make it clear who is in charge. The Holt government can take urgent action now while it works on longer-term plans.

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For over a month now, I have asked multiple times whether the government will present an initial, short-term, urgent action plan on alternate level of care (ALC) patients by this Friday.

This was a recommendation from the Seniors' Advocate in his March 2024 report, *What We All Want*. We are going on two years now. His recent follow-up report identified that no action has been taken.

I will ask this question one more time before we adjourn until March. Will the Minister responsible for Seniors bring a clear, costed action plan to the Legislature by Friday? If not, then when will she do so?

[Translation]

Hon. Ms. Boudreau (Champdoré-Irishtown, Minister responsible for Seniors, Minister responsible for Women's Equality, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I again thank the opposition member. We see that she cares deeply about our seniors' well-being. We in the government of New Brunswick also care deeply.

With respect to the long-term care plan, we're working closely with all our partners. The situation is not new. We have been trying to find solutions together for several years now. However, I can tell you that our government is sincerely very committed to this file. We have meetings about the file almost every week.

As I said the last time I rose to answer a question, we will communicate the data as soon as possible. Nothing is confidential. The work is being done in full transparency and under shared leadership. We need partners who will work with us to provide the best possible care. Various partners need to be at the table to make the decisions together so that our seniors get the best possible care, in the best possible environment, and as soon as possible. The file is of great concern to us as a government.

[Original]

CAPITAL BUDGET

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): The government's capital budget represents the largest infrastructure plan in New Brunswick's history. While strategic investment in hospitals, schools, and housing is essential, large year-over-year increases in capital spending carry long-term fiscal risks. New Brunswick is already facing heightened financial pressures, including a rapidly growing deficit and increased borrowing requirements. As capital expenditures rise, so too will demands on the province's debt-servicing capacity. This will potentially affect the debt-to-GDP ratio, the credit outlook, and the government's flexibility to respond to future economic challenges.

What measures is this government taking to manage the associated fiscal risk, particularly regarding borrowing requirements, long-term debt-servicing costs, and the projected impact on the province's debt-to-GDP ratio compared to the 2025-26 outlook?

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Hon. Mr. McKee, K.C. (Moncton Centre, Minister of Justice; Attorney General; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services; L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. We are very pleased with the capital budget that we brought forward. It will be transformational. It's what is needed in this moment to ensure that New Brunswickers have the services they need, whether they be in health care, education, or housing. We are making those necessary investments, Madam Speaker. We are making the investments to dig ourselves out of a hole that was left by the former Conservative government. The Conservatives left us in a hole.

Yesterday, the Minister of Finance spoke about the Auditor General's report, which says that our assets are depreciating faster than the rate at which they are being replaced. Again, that's because the former government took a record number of transfers from the federal government and did not use them for their intended purposes. New Brunswickers are left to pay the price today. We are a government that has New Brunswickers at heart. They are number one, and we will deliver for them. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): From what I understand, the government doesn't have an answer. In fact, the answer is no.

In the 2025-26 budget, \$54 million was initially allocated to the RDC. Yet, in the new budget, the amount provided to the RDC is reduced to \$39 million, which is a \$15-million cut to an organization that plays a central role in regional and economic development in New Brunswick.

The RDC plans, coordinates, and carries out development initiatives, supports municipalities, and manages federal-provincial agreements. At a time when the province is experiencing a slowing of its economic momentum, an increase in budgetary pressures, and an obvious need to generate revenue and stimulate job creation, reducing the RDC budget makes no sense.

Given that the goal is to strengthen economic growth in the province, why is funding for the organization tasked with stimulating community development in New Brunswick being reduced?

Hon. Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you for the question. This is the first question we have received about the RDC. So I am very pleased to answer it. Yes, the amount, meaning the investment, has gone down, but one thing must be understood: The RDC is the only entity that can afford to advance funds in the long term.

A commitment was already made to fund major infrastructure projects, in fact, for municipalities and nonprofit organizations, but the money, the cash flow we need this year, was unveiled in the capital budget, which we are very proud of. We will continue to invest in communities.

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Actually, with respect to water and sewer projects to enable the construction of more housing, we will continue to invest in community infrastructure to ensure that life in our communities is active, healthy, and balanced.

[Original]

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): Based on the provincial government's 2025-26 capital budget, it initially planned to allocate \$293 million to Education and Early Childhood Development. However, in the newly released 2026-27 budget, that number drops to \$242 million, a \$50-million reduction from what the government had previously committed. In 2025, the province imposed substantial cuts to school district operations, removing \$43 million from the amount districts expected to receive, yet, on top of those operational reductions, the government is now making an additional \$50-million cut. These back-to-back reductions raise serious concerns about the cumulative impact on a system already adjusting to major operational strain. How does this government expect this latest reduction to affect infrastructure planning, project timelines, and service delivery in a department already under significant and growing pressure?

[Translation]

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you very much for the question. There have been many deficits in our school infrastructure. That is clear. For a number of years, investments have not been meeting needs. Even when there have been investments, projects have not been completed quickly enough.

[Original]

In the past, we saw governments promising to build schools but only getting one school built per year. We have increased the budget for education, but we have to increase our capacity to get projects done because we have been left with a deficit in our educational infrastructure that our government has had to dig out of. We are going to increase the number of schools we build each year. We're making investments to catch up and to ensure that our students and teachers have proper environments to work in. We're making investments to deliver the kind of education that our students deserve. Our government is investing in what matters to New Brunswickers. We're making record investments in their educational infrastructure, and we're actually going to get schools built for the people of New Brunswick.

[Translation]

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): Question period is over.