

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

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March 20, 2026

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BUDGET

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

[*Original*]

Madam Speaker, here is a list of words that have been used to describe this year's budget: irresponsible, outrageous, careless, reckless, thoughtless, misguided, disgraceful, appalling, a dereliction of duty, a betrayal of the public trust, senseless, and disastrous. I have seen no positive media congratulating the government on a job well done. This budget is being universally panned by anyone who understands anything about fiscal responsibility. The only people who have applauded this government have been government members themselves. On Wednesday, I asked the Finance Minister why government members did not make any midyear changes to their budget. Last year, they informed district education councils (DECs) that budgets are negotiable. With all the negative press surrounding this budget, will this government change course and start to bring our province back to fiscal balance? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I can appreciate that it's challenging for the members opposite to recognize what this budget does because none of their budgets did the same. As the member opposite mentioned, the people of New Brunswick needed to see investments in doctors, in nursing homes, in health care, and in improving access for them and their families when they need it most. That is something that the previous government did not do.

Our government has had to do the work to make the largest investment in New Brunswickers' well-being and access to care that New Brunswick has ever seen. We started that work last year, and we saw positive results because New Brunswickers' access to their primary care provider improved. They can now see their family doctors more quickly. We've added more nurses. We've added more doctors. We're adding more clinics. We're supporting technology to make sure that New Brunswickers get the care they deserve because this government cares for them.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): I think the challenge, Madam Speaker, is going to be for New Brunswickers who will have to pay this debt back. That's going to be the challenge. The \$860 million in interest payments that this government is happily paying to the bankers of Bay Street is the equivalent of \$1 000 per New Brunswicker per year that is now not going toward any services whatsoever. If it were a department, it would be the fifth largest in government for its total overall spending, and

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that is projected to grow. The change or delta in the servicing of our public debt by this government has increased by over \$300 million in a little over a year. Can the Premier or Finance Minister please explain to New Brunswickers how they are controlling their spending? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Madam Speaker, thank you very much for the question. We are certainly going through a period of uncertainty. There is economic uncertainty. In fact, this is a period of global uncertainty, given the current geopolitical situation. Our government recognizes that we are going through this kind of period.

We are investing in the health of New Brunswickers, but we are taking action in other ways, too.

We have made difficult but responsible decisions to reduce the size of the civil service by 12%. Under the former government, there was a massive increase in the number of civil servants. In fact, the civil service grew much more quickly than the population. Our government is doing what is necessary to reduce the size of the civil service. It will not be easy.

We are also making the necessary investments, because the President of the United States is imposing tariffs on our forestry industry. These are the highest tariffs affecting our province. We will invest in our forestry sector and in our mining sector with regard to critical minerals. We therefore want...

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): The only uncertainty, Madam Speaker, is the extent to which this government will miss the targets established in its budget. It has almost tripled the deficit in its previous budget. What will happen this time?

[Original]

Madam Speaker, it's widely expected that, because of this government's excessive and reckless spending, New Brunswick will experience a credit downgrade. This will be disastrous, as a credit downgrade means that there is less ability to borrow money and also that any money that is borrowed is done so at a higher rate. There is also a higher rate for other money that is already owed. My question is to the Premier. When New Brunswick's credit rating is downgraded, what will you do to rein in spending, which is solely caused by you and nobody else? Will you do what is necessary to restore the confidence of bankers and our ability to pay? 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 recognizes the



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situation that we're in. We have been listening to New Brunswickers and what they've been asking us to do. They want to see us make a difference in the cost-of-living challenges they're facing. They want to see us improve their health care. We are doing so with an eye to the bottom line. We have the best debt-to-GDP ratio east of Saskatchewan.

In our engagement with the financial markets, we saw the opportunity to get access to the capital that New Brunswickers deserve at a time when every government budget across the country, from coast to coast to coast, Conservative and NDP alike, is wrestling with the same challenges. Our government chose to put New Brunswickers first and to support families having challenges making ends meet. Our government is making sure that kids have breakfast and lunch in schools, that housing in this province is more affordable, and that New Brunswickers are supported in a way that keeps an eye on our fiscal future and keeps us in a great position nationally to access the funds we need.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): We have a Finance Minister with no money and a Premier with no credibility when she speaks like that. She is completely disconnected, has no credibility whatsoever, and is sinking fast.

VETERINARIANS

Madam Speaker, the Holt government has tried to put out, at every opportunity, that it is the most radically transparent government this province has ever seen. The government members promised to consult New Brunswickers on matters that affect them and promised that they would be part of the decision-making process.

My question is for the Premier. Can she please tell the House the consultation process she went through to notify provincial veterinarians and farmers that this service would be cut? Can she provide dates for when those consultations took place? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Contrary to what the member for Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills said yesterday, we made a difficult decision. We made a difficult decision to transform veterinary services, which, frankly, should have been done a long time ago, Madam Speaker.

When the service was established about 50 years ago, horses were certainly used in farming. They helped work the land and so on. That's no longer the case today. We see that only 27% of services provided by veterinarians are to care for farm animals. The others are for pets. That's why we must adopt a viable and sustainable model. The current model is not. We have a responsibility to New Brunswick taxpayers to spend their money

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sustainably. We will do that while supporting the agricultural industry. I promise you that, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. This government's actual record on consultation speaks for itself. There was no consultation with the residents of Skyline Acres. There was no consultation with First Nations on systemic racism. There was no consultation with First Nations on the gas-powered jet engine power plant in Tantramar. There was no consultation with students on the closure and privatization of universities. There was no consultation on the treatment centre in the Kingston Peninsula. This is the true record of the Holt government.

Since the government members did not consult with provincial veterinarians or farmers on this file, one can only assume they have this all figured out. Can the Premier tell this House how many provincial veterinarians are going to stay on in private practice? Please tell them now, since you didn't share your plan when you fired them minutes before the budget fell. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. We heard that one of the reasons we have not attracted large animal vets is that we have a government-funded model. We received calls from people outside the province who said: We wanted to come to New Brunswick, but we went to Nova Scotia because we do not want to compete with the public service.

Over the past couple of days, we've had many calls from private vets who are going to set up their practices across the province. They will now open up. They see that they can supply their services within this model. This is what we're going to support, and we are going to support the transition of our veterinarians to the private model. It will be just like the rest of Canada, except Newfoundland. This service will not stop tomorrow. It's there, and it will continue. We're going to make sure that our farmers have veterinary services across the province.

[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, Madam Speaker, if everybody else is doing it, let's go do the same thing. Let's not talk to people. Let's not consult. Let's not make sure that we do it the right way and that things are going to work out well for the people who we, as a government, are impacting. No, that would never occur to the members opposite.

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Madam Speaker, this decision boils down to one single thing: a government in panic mode looking to cut something to make it appear that it is saving money. In its scramble to save \$4 million, this government is willing to jeopardize food safety for our people in New Brunswick because it can't balance a budget. After blowing their own budget out of the water to the tune of \$1.4 billion, how can the Premier guarantee that this cut is not going to jeopardize food security in this province? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. We have been communicating and meeting with all the major agricultural associations in the province. We have been sitting down with them. Of course, it's a shock. I've been there as a farmer. I can't remember which government it was, but it cut the lab service for tissue and soil analysis. I was quite shocked at the time, but I will tell you this. I think it was about 15 years ago. Today, I know it was a good move because that service is now precise, timely, and the best thing we have. Before that, we had inaccurate results. I know this is a shock, but we will make it better. That's my role. I want to make it better for all farmers in New Brunswick and make sure that coverage will be there for them. We'll accompany them if they want to transition to the private sector. We'll make sure there is coverage throughout the province for all animals. We are...

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Madam Speaker, instead of representing the best interests of our farmers, the Minister of Agriculture sure put the cart before the horse this week. He really did, and he just admitted it. The farmers who produce our food and the doctors who treat the animals that feed us feel blindsided, and it's no wonder. Between Christmas and a year from now, farmers need to have a phone number on speed-dial for someone they know will respond at all hours of the night when they're facing a struggling animal in breech labour or sick with infection and need to know the cost. Minister, without any prior conversation, you told farmers to swallow this pill of cancelling the large animal vet service they have known and appreciated for 50 years. Please tell us this: Is there a price list for the private service you say they now have to use? What can farmers expect to pay, or do you even know? Why should farmers believe they won't be left paying more for less access?

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Right now, there is coverage in all remote areas. It was there even before the transition. I want to make it better. We're already hearing from across the province and even from outside it. Veterinarians want to set up shop and deliver the service. We're going to follow them. We have equipment. They can set up their own mobile clinics. We'll also support their travel. If the veterinarian is outside the area and the farmers have to go outside, we will support their mileage and travel. We're going to follow this. It's a three-year period, and we're going to follow this with our producers. We'll make sure this service is sustainable, but better. It's going to be better before we're done in three years. I can guarantee you that.

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[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*Original*]

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. We'll remember that. I think these are conversations that should have happened before the decision was made the other day. Farmers and provincial vets learned two hours before the budget was released this week that this critical service they rely on was being cut. The show of disrespect is overwhelming to them, and, by the flood of emails MLAs are receiving, farmers and provincial vets have the support of thousands of New Brunswickers.

This government has bitten the hand that feeds us, Madam Speaker. I live in the dairy capital of the Maritimes, and I know farmers. I can say with certainty that you have messed with the wrong sector. On this side of the House, we at least know where our food comes from. No, Premier, the answer is not Sobeys. The government needs to be reminded that the province extends beyond our cities and that, in these rural communities, farmers and vets work tirelessly for the health and well-being of the animals that feed us. When farmers have to pay more, the cost of our basket of food climbs higher. Minister, does the government have any idea what this will mean for our grocery bills, or did you do any—

Hon. Mr. McKee, K.C. (Moncton Centre, Minister of Justice; Attorney General; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services; L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The minister has said very clearly that we are a government that is going to make difficult decisions, and this is one of them. We're looking at what the government should be in the business of doing and what it should not be doing, and this is an area we thought we could transfer to the private sector. There will be a smooth transition over the next three years. There will be no gap in service. There will be no gap in quality.

HEALTH CARE

I want to come back to health care, though, Madam Speaker. The Leader of the Official Opposition doesn't want to take responsibility. I've been here. I've seen the opposition members' record over the past several years. They took money from the federal government and didn't invest it where they were supposed to.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. McKee, K.C. (Moncton Centre, Minister of Justice; Attorney General; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services; L): We are making generational investments in health care with \$170 million—

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(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. McKee, K.C. (Moncton Centre, Minister of Justice; Attorney General; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services; L): We are making generational investments in health care. We are putting New Brunswickers' health care first, Madam Speaker, and we are very proud of it.

VETERINARIANS

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Madam Speaker, how dare this government disrespect farmers and veterinarians this way. This was disrespectful. What did the minister say in media interviews yesterday? He said: We're not paying for dogs and cats. Why are we paying for horses and goats? Even if the horses and goats don't matter, how about the 2 700 calls for dairy and beef cows, which our department says provincial vets respond to every year? These animals produce our food, and we all prefer that they be healthy.

The minister said he was part of a protest a couple of decades ago, when the idea of cancelling vet services was floated. We know the demands on farmers, from the costs of feed and the impacts of climate change to our province's need to be self-sufficient when it comes to growing our own food. Supporting farmers has never been more important. Minister, what makes our veterinarians and that support for farmers any less important today than it was when you stood holding a placard 26 years ago?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, Minister of Public Safety; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, L): The Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries answered the question five times. The service existed yesterday, it exists today, and it will exist tomorrow. I heard the word "accountability". That makes me happy, because the former Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture...

Yesterday, during the reply to the budget we tabled, the member spoke about the Premier's trips. She was invited by the Prime Minister of Canada to meet with heads of state and business people from another country. The former Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture took just one trip; she went to Europe. Do you know who she met with? She met with a guide on a front step.

She said that Saint John was the largest city in New Brunswick. She said that Saint John was the capital of New Brunswick. She talked about Cherry Brook Zoo. The problem with the zoo is that it closed five years ago. I am going to tell you one thing, Madam Speaker: If we

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have lessons to learn from this situation, they're not coming from the other side of the House. Thank you very much.

[Original]

CONTRACTS

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I'm not sure who's going to get up and answer this one. On Wednesday, I tried to find out from the Premier when she learned that her government was not renewing the eVisitNB contract, and she didn't get up to give an answer. I think she might have been a bit overwhelmed by the questioning of the Opposition Leader. Today, I'll ask her again.

By the way, we will find out sooner or later, through right to information requests, but, right now, our RTI requests regarding eVisitNB are being turned back because it's not a done deal. Why doesn't the Premier just stand up and tell the people of New Brunswick—tell all 300 000 users of eVisitNB—when she learned her government was not renewing the eVisitNB contract?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, thank you for the question. Today, New Brunswickers have access to virtual care. On March 31, they will have access to virtual care. On April 1, on May 1, on June 1, and on July 1, they will have access to virtual care. We know it will be provided by companies that employ New Brunswickers. It will use systems that were developed here in New Brunswick. I'm very proud of this fact. If you want to access that information through an RTI request, you will find the same information. New Brunswickers will receive care this month, next month, and the month thereafter. Thank you very much for the question.

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Madam Speaker, I'm just bursting with confidence. The Premier has promised New Brunswickers a seamless transition to service from her favourite American company, Foundever, at the end of March. She said it would be "seamless".

We can all read the calendar. That was 11 days ago, after creeping my Facebook page a few weeks ago and telling people that she had eVisitNB questions herself. The Premier later said that she had read the request for proposals and was all good and happy and ready to start pumping the health information of New Brunswickers down to Miami, the United States of America, and Foundever. But since that time, there has been, as the saying goes, radio silence. Except for now—apparently, we're going to have visits forever.

Will the Premier kindly stand up today and give us a seamless explanation of why she's fallen silent on this seamless transition that she so seamlessly promised just a few weeks ago?

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Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, the transition will be seamless, and the data will be stored in Canada. New Brunswickers rely on what we are doing here. We are using companies that are working with New Brunswick employees. This is something that we say very proudly. We are not dealing with companies based in the United States. The data is staying here. The employees are staying here. The transition will be seamless. Thank you very much.

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. According to CUSMA, the data does not have to stay in Canada.

It's looking more and more like the Premier doesn't know what's going on with her own government. She should try to stay in the loop, at least on the big files like health care. I don't think my questions are that hard to answer, unless, of course, the Premier literally does not bother to stay informed. Can the Premier—the Premier—tell us the last time she had a briefing on the eVisitNB situation?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, both the Premier and I are well informed on virtual care in New Brunswick. We've received updates as recently as an hour ago. Yes, CUSMA says that we don't have to keep the data in Canada. We are keeping the data in Canada. This is our choice: seamless virtual health care, today and tomorrow. Thank you very much.

SCHOOLS

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Question 3 of the survey given to the public during the prebudget consultations absolutely employed a push-pull tactic. I quote: "Do you agree that schools with fewer than 100 students should be consolidated with other (larger) schools, if reducing the number of these smaller schools could help fund other priorities like collaborative care clinics?"

This would imply that savings in one area will go directly toward funding another. Policy 409 is a multi-year school infrastructure survey and planning process that is done yearly. However, it is now known that 33 schools within the province are operating below one-third capacity or have fewer than 100 students and are flagged for review and potential closure.

My questions are for the Minister of Education: How long have you and your department been contemplating the closure of small schools with fewer than 100 students as a way to cut your budget? And did you approve of Question 3 in the prebudget consultation survey?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the member opposite, Policy 409 has existed since 1998. It's at the point that we decided we should be looking at schools that have fewer than



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100 students or are at less than 30% capacity. It's been part of the policy for years and years. This year, we decided to have a dialogue with New Brunswickers about this because school infrastructure is so important, and we need to be using these spaces as efficiently as possible. Thank you.

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Well, both the Minister of Education and the Premier have stated that the government's discussion of school closures has simply been meant to draw attention to the existing Policy 409, which needs to be followed more closely. Let's just be forthcoming. The policy may be written as neutral, but its criteria—enrollment thresholds, facility condition, program breadth, and transportation efficiency—structurally **disadvantage** rural communities where low enrollment is a geographic reality, not a sign of school failure.

My question is for the minister. Section 5.4 of the policy states: "EECD recognizes schools are integral to the promotion and preservation of the local culture and community, especially in rural areas." Does the department hold firm to that? If so, why is it that the majority of the published 33 schools being targeted for closure are rural schools?

[Translation]

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, during our discussions with New Brunswickers, we recognized the importance of urban and rural schools. We heard again and again that schools are the heart of communities. We recognize this reality. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development recognizes it, and we, as a government, also recognize it.

We are currently managing specific challenges with respect to school infrastructure. Some schools are overcrowded, while the number of students is declining in others. These are two very different realities. That's why these important discussions are necessary.

We will work with the district education councils because they are closer to communities. That's exactly what we are trying to do right now. We want to consolidate so that valuable school infrastructure is used in the best way possible. Thank you very much.

[Original]

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. A couple of weeks ago, the Premier was quoted as saying: "New money for health care means you got to find it somewhere". In the same article, the president of the NBTA is quoted as saying: "Health care is certainly a priority in the province but to me, this isn't about education or health. It's about education and health. The two are so closely tied together."

When referring to the public budget consultation survey, it is clear that the government wants to create a division in the province between urban and rural areas. You've got the Premier saying one thing and the president of the teachers' union saying another. When the



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minister was asked a direct question about how 10% would be cut from the budget, she was evasive and reluctant to answer. My question to the Minister of Education is this: Where are the cuts going to take place? Is there a silver bullet that we don't know about?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite. I couldn't agree more with the president of the NBTA. It's about health and education. That's exactly why we're doing generational investment in health and continuing to invest in education. Thank you.

BUDGET

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): How can this government justify a budget in which the fastest growing line item is not health care, not education, nor support for vulnerable New Brunswickers, but rather the cost of servicing its own debt?

The numbers are clear and deeply concerning. Debt servicing costs are rising by 16.2%. This is more than double the increases in health and social development and more than 10 times higher than what we see in departments like Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour. This means that, while families struggle to access care and services, this government is prioritizing payments to lenders over investments in people. Even more troubling, debt servicing has now climbed to become the fifth largest expenditure in the province, overtaking critical areas that directly impact economic growth and workforce development.

At what point does this government admit that its spending decisions are no longer sustainable and that it is actively undermining the long-term prosperity of New Brunswickers?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. What our government has put forward is a people-first budget that recognizes the need for investment in health care, makes difficult decisions about the efficiency of our services and what we deliver, and looks to the future with investment and the kind of growth that will help New Brunswickers with jobs that pay the bills and the kind of economic activity that we want to see to make this sustainable.

This question period started with some headlines that were shared. I would like to share a few that the members opposite have missed. We had the New Brunswick Medical Society say that they have been underfunded for many years, and they think this budget will go a long way toward getting us up to par. We had the president of the nurses' union say: We haven't seen this kind of commitment to health care in many years; we were the lowest paid in Canada, and now we're competitive.



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We had the Friends of the Moncton Hospital say that these investments in key areas such as access will alleviate pressure within the system. The Coalition for Seniors and Nursing Home Residents' Rights says that this is "going to be positive and show the work of the community".

