

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



March 24, 2026

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DECORUM

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

[*Original*]

Madam Speaker, the actions of this government during question period last week were appalling. Under questioning, the Minister of Health admitted that he and the Premier were updated on eVisitNB before coming into the House to answer questions from the Health Critic, yet they did not answer but went to media on it the same day. They knew the answer but refused to provide it in the people's House.

Instead of even trying to answer the questions about the provincial veterinary service, which the government is cutting, this Premier had the Attorney General and the Minister of Public Safety stand up and provide totally irrelevant and unhinged responses to these very serious questions. This is a pattern of behaviour, as the government did the same thing just before the Christmas break.

As the leader of government, can the Premier confirm that she was the one who directed these ministers to act in this manner, which was disrespectful to this House, to our democracy, and to the people of this province whom we serve?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Our government is focused on New Brunswickers. We listen to what New Brunswickers are telling us about what they want to see from the people in this House and about the work they want to see us do. They're telling us two things very clearly. They want access to health care, so our government is focused on making sure people have virtual care today, tomorrow, and the next day. We're making sure that New Brunswickers have care in their communities, close to home, as opposed to the previous government's closing down of services in communities. Our government has been expanding access to primary care and making sure our relationships with nurses and doctors are strong so that more New Brunswickers get the care they need and deserve.

At the same time, we're working very hard to make life more affordable for New Brunswickers. I'm surprised the members opposite haven't heard the feedback that it is getting more and more expensive to live here and so we are taking 10% off people's power bills, we are putting rent caps in place, we are freezing property taxes, and we are working on the things—

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Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I'll take that as a yes, the Premier did direct the ministers to do that.

RURAL COMMUNITIES

Here's another pattern of behaviour from this Premier, Madam Speaker. When it comes to rural New Brunswick, this Premier has absolutely no respect. As the former MLA for Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, where people welcomed her with open hearts and open arms, she insulted those residents by saying, on record, that they're uneducated or unsophisticated people. She is now going after rural New Brunswick by attacking farmers with her dangerous cut to the provincial veterinary service and her heartless attempt to close rural schools. Can the Premier explain to residents of rural New Brunswick why she has such disdain and disrespect for rural New Brunswick? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I am always happy to have the opportunity to talk about the Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore riding. My family and I love the region and visit every chance we get, even though I'm now the member for Fredericton South—Silverwood.

I come from a family originally from Salisbury. In fact, I just shared a little book written by my aunt on the covered bridges of New Brunswick with the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure. My Aunt Helen had a studio, Helen's Studio, near Salisbury, where she made art. She had drawings of every covered bridge in our province.

Our government listens to people from all regions. You will notice that I travel throughout the province, I visit rural regions, and I listen to people. Our government creates solutions to meet local needs. It doesn't create one-size-fits-all solutions, but solutions that respect the diversity of New Brunswick.

[Original]

VETERINARIANS

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Madam Speaker, last week, we learned that this government wants to cut veterinary services for farmers. Because its spending is out of control, this government is going after this area that is critical to food safety in New Brunswick.

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Here are a few examples of line items found in the budget that could easily cover the cost of this service. Under the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, there is \$3 million for a strategic infrastructure fund. Under General Government, there is \$5 million for a strategic infrastructure program. It bears noting that both of those examples are line items that did not exist before. Under Regional Development Corporation, there is a Strategic Infrastructure Initiative that had a budget of \$2.5 million last year and now has a budget of \$9.5 million, for a total increase of \$7 million.

Will the Premier authorize the Minister of Agriculture to take this \$15 million we found, so that these critical services for farmers can be saved? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

Hon. M. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

We continue to engage agriculture stakeholders to better understand their concerns and to explore how the program could best support veterinarians and producers, particularly in underserved and rural areas of the province. As far as the transition is concerned, we are prioritizing working with the impacted veterinarians and their employees. Some have already expressed that they are setting up their own practices.

The private sector has already made adjustments. Two private clinics are already accepting new equine clients, and one has hired a new vet for equine services. Private practitioners interested in expanding their services have reached out to our department to collaborate. We've also had one specialty practice reach out to see where they can support large animal practices in the province.

Madam Speaker, we understand how hard this is on our—

[Translation]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. We still haven't gotten an answer.

[Original]

Madam Speaker, last week, the Minister of Agriculture stated in this House that New Brunswick is one of only two provinces that provide provincially funded veterinary services. That statement would be correct if the minister were only speaking about veterinarians. However, the reality is that every single other province in Canada has provincially run labs. This province will be the only province in the country with completely private labs. Could the minister please clarify this and put that horse back in the

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barn? Or will he continue his wild horse ride to cut veterinary services for farmers in this province?

[*Translation*]

Hon. M. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

We are continuing our support for agriculture in this province. Here are a few stats. There is \$2 million in new money for our agricultural growth strategy for the province. There is \$750 000 in new money for local food and beverages, \$1.5 million for the strategic investment fund, and \$8.5 million for the Sustainable Canadian Agriculture Partnership. This is a total of over \$7.6 million per year in provincial support for agriculture, not including the business risk management program that protects farmers in the event of drought or other issues as we saw last summer nor all the technical services that we provide. We are going to support our farmers and our producers. We will make sure that the transition of veterinarians will make things better.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, there's another example of a strategic program initiative in one of the budget line items. I would say that the farmers in this province and food safety are pretty strategic, Madam Speaker.

As usual, we need to dig a little deeper when it comes to dealing with comments made by this Premier and her ministers. The Minister of Agriculture is on record stating that 75% of veterinary services go to non-commercial livestock issues and 25% go to farmers. Context matters, Madam Speaker. Are the numbers the minister provided just for veterinary calls or just for laboratory services? Did the government members lump vet calls and lab services together to provide their narrative? Does a vet call for one horse equal one call? That would make sense, but does one vet call for 300 dairy cattle also count as one call? What percentage of veterinary calls are for commercial livestock, and how is that calculated? What percentage of lab services are for commercial livestock?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. We have already had many conversations with our food production associations, and, although they are disappointed with the decision, they are prepared to work with us. As recently as this morning, Madam Speaker, I received a

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message from the Agricultural Alliance of New Brunswick, which represents over 80% of New Brunswick producers. I received a one-line message:

[Original]

How can we help with that?

[Translation]

This tells me that producers are prepared, that they are concerned, but that they are prepared to work with us. I'm sure that, with their help and the help of all other stakeholders, we will be in a better position when the transition is complete. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): This government is trying to make New Brunswickers believe that all provincial vets are simply going to switch over to the private sector. We all know that the government did not consult with veterinarians on this at all. Vets were told two hours before the budget dropped that they have one year of employment left. How can this government guarantee that the vets who are on the chopping block will not find work elsewhere? We already have a shortage of large animal vets, and this will make things worse.

These vets are professionally trained, but they are not necessarily entrepreneurs. What is this government's plan to assist provincial vets who have no entrepreneurial experience in switching their careers from being only a vet to being a vet and a business owner? Do the government members think that the vets can do the same work they do today while doing all the administrative, logistical, and financial work needed to get a business off the ground? Tell us your plan.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Madam Speaker, we are maintaining the chief veterinarian position to continue working with the NBSPCA, the animal protection agency, and to ensure continued monitoring of concerns related to disease and well-being of animals throughout the province. Madam Speaker, we know some regions of New Brunswick have difficulty accessing services.

However, there are all sorts of things, like innovation in the private sector, that provide alternatives to access services like telemedicine. We have also provided for a year of support and monitoring to see what needs arise. There are many preventative measures that animal owners can also take to prevent emergencies and reduce the pressure on emergency veterinary services. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

BRIDGES

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'd like to take this opportunity to raise an issue that is affecting hundreds of residents of Grand Lake. The Newcastle Centre bridge has been a cornerstone of that community for over 70 years. It has allowed residents and visitors alike to travel to and from neighbouring areas and has allowed farmers and small business owners to continue their day-to-day work. Due to its deteriorating condition, in March of last year, we were informed by DTI that the bridge would close and that three options would be considered: replace the existing bridge with a single-lane modular bridge, build a new two-lane bridge, or decommission the bridge and use a detour as an alternate route. To my dismay and the dismay of the municipality and the local residents, it appears that the minister has decided to decommission the bridge and has opted for a detour. Does the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure realize the social impact this will have on residents, farmers, and businesses?

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Newcastle Creek #1 Bridge has actually been serving the community for over a hundred years.

I get it—we are all creatures of habit. When I drive here from my hotel in the morning, if I have to take a detour, it puts me off because I'm used to doing it the same way all the time. I'm sure the residents of the area are experiencing this. Obviously, I understand that there are some concerns about the proposal for the alternate route for this bridge.

What we're trying to do is create a connection that will be reliable year-round. In recent years, the old bridge was prone to flooding on the approaches. Simply slapping a new bridge in there does not address this flooding, and it comes at a significant cost. I don't have much time to say it, but what we propose is an alternate route on Cedar Street.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Madam Speaker, as a fiscal conservative, I fully appreciate the department looking for the most cost-effective way to deliver services, including roads, to the public, but that's why I struggle with the decision by this minister. Is the minister aware that the recommended detour involves building approximately 5 km of new road through the woods in a geographical mining area?

We have, from DTI, the bare minimum of \$5 million to build that new road, and the department doesn't even know what it's getting into—just ask the locals. The reality is that this detour is not a cost-effective measure. Madam Speaker, is the minister aware that building a new bridge will actually save taxpayers money over the course of the bridge's

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life? Would the minister not agree that infrastructure projects should incorporate the best fiscal solutions over the long-term life of an asset, not just on a short-term spreadsheet?

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Madam Speaker, thank you, and thank you to the member opposite. As I was saying, the proposed route will be on what is called Cedar Street, but part of it will be a new alignment that will get around the areas where the geotechnical work does not support it. We're doing that work now. We're actually doing that geotechnical work to verify the soil conditions to make sure that a road can actually be supported where we're going and where we want to go. What we propose is a two-lane chip seal-grade road. We're proposing a pretty decent alternative.

When we look at the actual bridge... Again, just putting a bridge there doesn't actually address the issue of flooding on the approaches. We're looking at an increased cost to put the bridge there, which doesn't even address the spring flooding and the situation on the approaches. In order to do that, Madam Speaker, much more work would be required.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Madam Speaker, our numbers show us something different. We see that, indeed, building this new bridge over the long-term life of that asset is actually cheaper than building this new road, where the minister doesn't even know what he is getting into.

I know the Minister of DTI has a lot of irons in the fire. There are thousands of kilometres of roads and bridges throughout the province. I get the workload and the decisions that have to be made by him and the department. However, you cannot step over a dollar to pick up a dime, and that is exactly what this minister and this department are doing.

Madam Speaker, I think there has to be an off-ramp—excuse the pun—for the minister. I believe that, when he looks at the long-term fiscal asset of this bridge, he will agree—or he should agree—that, indeed, it is cheaper to simply put the road in, even with the on- and off-ramps and the flooding season throughout that area. It can be done. It's been done before. The members opposite are not reinventing the wheel. Madam Speaker, will this minister, please, just do the right thing and have some common sense and decency? Will he build the bridge for less taxpayers' money, build better social cohesion for residents, and get the bridge done? Will he do it?

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and thank you again to the member opposite. What we have to do in these situations is try to make sure that we retain connectivity. We want to build a route that will ensure people connectivity year-round—not only in the winter or the summer but also through the spring. What we are looking at is a realignment of Cedar Street that will provide a reliable

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connection year-round. It will be a two-lane chip sealed bridge, as opposed to a one-lane bridge.

Madam Speaker, correcting the problem of the approaches would add more money to that project, which is already more expensive. So, the decision was made to approach this with realignment, which, over the long term, will be a better deal. It will be more fiscally responsible to do so. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

VETERINARIANS

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Madam Speaker, provincial vets have been fired, and farmers have been left to worry about who will answer the call when their animals are sick. Like us on this side of the House, they would bet the farm that the province won't be ready to start the radical transition to provincial vet services by the end of the year.

Yesterday, the New Brunswick Equestrian Association said that the proposed nine-month timeline is dangerously unrealistic. Farmers say they were told yesterday by the Premier in St. Stephen that provincial vets who've been fired will be given the truck and equipment they need to begin their own private mobile clinics at no cost. Is this true? How many of our provincial veterinarians are taking the province up on this offer? Is this deal only for provincial vets who got their walking papers, or is it also extended to existing vets and small animal clinics looking to expand to include a large animal practice?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The transition from provincial veterinary medical services to a more sustainable and modern system will take place over a three-year period. During this transition, there will be constant communication with our stakeholders, like the Agricultural Alliance of New Brunswick, which represents most farmers in the province, as well as with our dairy producers and poultry, pork, and livestock producers.

[Original]

We are also confident that equine and companion animals will continue to have access to veterinarians across the province, as private vets will no longer be competing with the public sector.

Madam Speaker, we are making sure that the three years will be the time needed to consult and continue sitting down with stakeholders across the province. We want to make sure that they are heard and that we fine-tune this to make sure we land at a better—

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Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Thank you. We would still love to know about the commitment made yesterday.

One newer provincial vet I spoke to on the weekend said they never imagined graduating college to then be saddled with running a business, with billings, scheduling calls, and ordering supplies. There is certainly a business side to this, and when you work alone as a vet without backup, you could work 24-7.

In the past week, the minister said his department has been talking with provincial and private vets, business owners, as well as farmers and the organizations that represent them. These are all conversations that should have happened beforehand. Yet, before having the answers, the minister said last week that he guarantees service will be better when he is done with these cuts. Despite there being so much up in the air, things literally feel like a chicken must when its head is cut off. Minister, do you guarantee you will not remove provincial vet services in jurisdictions, especially remote areas, that are unable to respond to the demand until you have service in place, even if your timeline—

Hon. K. Chiasson (Tracadie, Minister of Indigenous Affairs, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Do you know what? If public sector vets were strictly servicing the bovine and farmer industry, we wouldn't be having this conversation today. It would be a very different conversation. The reality, as the minister has highlighted a few times, is that our public vets service hobby horses more than 75% of the time. We are confident that private sector vets can and should occupy this space. Just to highlight that and give you an example, just a few days after the announcement was made, a private vet clinic from Saint-Antoine hired a veterinarian in the Caraquet region to service large animals in the northeast. That is actually very good news.

Madam Speaker, the phase-out plan is strong and solid. The department and the minister will ensure a smooth transition. Thank you.

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. You can insult the farmers, but they know what they're up against. We can't deny that.

The minister said he rallied as a young farmer 26 years ago, when provincial vet services were on the chopping block. He's had a change of heart now that he's sitting in a government that doesn't know how to control its spending. He should understand, though, the stress that thousands of farmers are feeling right now.

We've talked a lot about the vets, but the closure of the provincial lab takes the anxiety to a whole new level. The minister said that most of the other provinces have already privatized vet services. But do you know what they didn't do? They didn't privatize the lab. That means those provinces still maintain a tight handle on the diagnoses made on farms, and they monitor and treat disease outbreaks.



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The Registrar of the New Brunswick Veterinary Medical Association said that losing the expertise the lab offers places New Brunswick below standard because every province has a provincial lab. This is important. Will the minister reconsider and keep our accredited—

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Let's hear directly from veterinarian services in communities. This one is from my region, from Loch Lomond Veterinary Hospital, which released a statement the other day that reads as follows: Our practice is well prepared to support additional equine care needs and help ease this transition for the community. We currently have four veterinarians providing equine services and are excited to be welcoming a new local graduate to our team this spring. Furthermore, we are actively exploring additional hiring opportunities to ensure continued growth and stability.

This is from Loch Lomond Veterinary Hospital. It covers St. Stephen to Moncton and all the way north to Fredericton.

We know what a budget would look like under the opposition. Opposition members made it clear they want to cut universities and cut the Regional Development Corporation.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): They want a levy on electricity bills to make it more expensive to live in this province. We saw what their leadership did. It grew the public service—

FREE VOTE

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, in the Canadian democratic system, the legislative branch of government is designed to have authority over the making of laws. However, across successive governments, the executive branch in New Brunswick, that is, the Premier and Cabinet, has seen this as its purview, using its majorities to routinely defeat private members' bills and amendments to government bills, whatever their merit. Typically, government members are subject to strict party discipline to ensure they vote according to the party line rather than conscience or constituents. However, in many Legislatures in this country, free votes are the norm for private bills and motions.

On Thursday, I will bring forward Bill 23, *An Act Respecting the Right to a Healthy Environment*, for second reading. Will the Premier permit a free vote for her members so they can vote according to the interests of their constituents and their consciences?



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[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the opposition member for the question. I think that, in the process of Bill 23 as it was tabled...

First of all, I want to sincerely thank everyone who has contributed to the growth, over the past two years, since I have been the minister responsible for the environment portfolio... I can tell you that discussions have been honest, straightforward, and direct concerning both air and water.

I would say that, as part of the legislative process and the debate to come this week, we will continue to debate this issue. I hope that the arguments that will be presented will enable my colleagues, both on our side and the opposition side, to make an informed decision. Based on what will come out of the discussion, we will make our decision when the time comes. Thank you.

[*Original*]

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, the executive branch's position on Bill 23 has become evident, for example, in a letter the Minister of Environment sent me this morning. He just repeated much of what was in that letter. The Premier and Cabinet seem unwilling to entrench the right to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment in law. Instead, they are focused solely on updating the conventional environmental laws already on the books, which regulate conduct and authorize government enforcement. This leaves citizens to simply complain when a regulation has been misapplied or ignored. By entrenching environmental rights in law, Bill 23 would empower citizens to ensure their health and the health of ecosystems are protected rather than hoping the government's management of environmentally risky behaviour will do so, as it has failed to do on many occasions in the past. Madam Speaker, why won't the Premier permit her members to vote for this bill. Why is she forbidding them?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Different arguments will be heard this week when we debate the bill at second reading.

The question that the member opposite has asked today is complex. At the same time, I hope he will listen to the answer he gets from us. We are currently looking at everything we have received from stakeholders over the past two years. In the past two years, we have been very transparent about consulting and listening to the members opposite, among

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other people, on the Standing Committee on Climate Change and Environmental Stewardship, of which the member opposite was a member.

Right now, I can just tell you that we are looking at everything. The intention of Bill 23 makes sense. It's just a matter of democracy. This measure causes a legal problem for us, and we will debate it next Thursday.

[*Original*]

BUDGET

Mr. Monahan (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): This budget reveals a troubling shift in priorities that should concern every New Brunswicker. While overall government spending is increasing by 5.1%, the cost of servicing the public debt is rising at more than 3 times that rate, at 16.2%. That's not a minor imbalance. It's a clear warning of a government that is losing control of its fiscal direction. Instead, more and more taxpayer dollars are being diverted to interest payments, effectively paying for past decisions rather than building a bright future. This government is trying to justify a budget while debt costs accelerate at an alarming pace and critical services lag behind. What assurance can the minister provide that this pattern will not continue and further erode the province's ability to invest in the very services and opportunities New Brunswickers depend on?

Hon. Mr. Kennedy (Quispamsis, Minister of Local Government; Minister responsible for Service New Brunswick, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. This weekend, New Brunswickers were shocked and chagrined by a social media post from the member for Miramichi East, who said: I'm honestly way more afraid of Carney than I ever was of Trump. Can you imagine? I'm honestly way more afraid of Carney than I ever was of Trump.

Is it the position of the Progressive Conservative Party of New Brunswick, under the interim leadership of the member for Saint John East, that we should be less afraid of President Trump amid his anti-Canada and anti-New Brunswick policies? Is she less afraid of his idea of making us the 51st state? Is she less afraid of the punishing tariffs and trade wars and the impact they have on our softwood lumber industry? It is beyond belief that a member of this House could take such a position. Perhaps she thought New Brunswickers wouldn't notice, because she appears to have since deleted it. One thing is certain, Madam Speaker: you can take the member out of the People's Alliance, but you can't take the People's Alliance out of the member.

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

