

May 17, 2019

[Translation]

Ambulances

Mr. D. Landry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question this morning will be for the Minister of Health. A few days ago, a young lady went to the emergency room in Saint-Quentin with her 18-month-old son, who was having a severe allergy attack. Because of a lack of paramedics in the area, it took over an hour before this lady's son could be transferred to the emergency room in Edmundston. Could the minister tell us exactly what happened, once again, in the Saint-Quentin area?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Flemming: Again, Mr. Speaker, I am not able to deal specifically with an individual case. The honourable Leader of the Opposition knows that. It was a position that his government took correctly several times as well. It is not the position of the minister to talk about a specific, individual case.

Having said that, situations like this are taken seriously by the government, and they were taken seriously by my predecessor, the member for Kent South—I know that. This is not a political issue, and I know that the honourable leader knows that as well. We are working with Ambulance New Brunswick. We are trying to improve this. New Brunswick has serious HR problems. The demand for health care is growing faster than our population. It is a significant challenge, and, hopefully, we can all work together to improve things.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: Mr. Speaker, I understand that the minister cannot talk about a specific case, but I did not ask him for specifics. I only asked him why, in this situation, people did have to wait for an hour. There was no ambulance personnel available to take this young child to the Edmundston area, where he could have obtained immediate care. This is another case of a personnel shortage.

Can we say that, when people need an ambulance, they can get it immediately? Or is this just a perception that was created by this government? I thought the problem had been fixed. From what we can see, once again, the problem has not been fixed. Can it spread to other places in New Brunswick?



[Original]

Hon. Mr. Flemming: Well, the problems with Ambulance New Brunswick are no different than what my predecessor dealt with. They are challenges and issues that revolve around HR, that revolve around access, measurable times, and things like that. If the honourable leader is suggesting that every New Brunswick citizen has an instantaneous, in the next second, ambulance in his yard, I mean, he knows full well that is neither practical nor achievable.

However, striving for excellence is something that we should be doing. It is something that we are doing. It is something that this government and I take very seriously. We will be working with Medavie on a regular basis to stay on top of issues specifically like this one. I will be following up hard on this issue. Even when the Legislature goes, I would be happy to talk in more...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister. Time, minister.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the minister for his answer, and I hope that such situations will not arise again here in the province. Unfortunately, it seems that this still happens in the Saint-Quentin area. The promises this Premier made before the election are remembered: He did indeed say that he would fix the problem caused by the shortage of ambulance personnel in the province. We insist: What happened in Saint-Quentin was, again, because there is a personnel shortage. I understand the minister; he is sincere in his answers. However, here is what I want to know.

[Original]

That problem needs to be fixed. When is he going to fix it, for once and forever?

Hon. Mr. Flemming: Again, staffing, HR recruitment, is an important thing. I want to say that I am pleased that this government extended assistance to students in private organizations to educate paramedics. We need to recruit more, educate more, and put more back into the system. This is not something that can be done overnight. It takes time to recruit and to educate, but we must be vigilant. We must stay on it. We must work hard with our people and with our paramedics' association with respect to recruiting and let people know that being a paramedic is a noble and honourable endeavour. It deals with people in an instantaneous time of need in their medical lives. Hopefully, we can grow our critical mass of young people entering this profession. Thank you. We are doing good work in this area.



[Translation]

Collective Bargaining

Mr. D. Landry: Mr. Speaker, yesterday, we had a situation here in the House that demonstrates that, in the next election, people will not be able to tell the difference between voting for the People's Alliance of New Brunswick or for the Conservative government, because, for me, it is exactly the same thing. Yesterday, there was a debate on a bill introduced in the House by the Leader of the People's Alliance of New Brunswick. A vote on Motion 36 was also supposed to take place.

What happened? The members opposite dragged their feet and filibustered. Even if the Leader of the People's Alliance had the last 10 minutes of speaking time, he could have stood up and told you that he did not have any more comments to make on his bill. He did not do so. He simply sided with the government, which did not give us enough time to vote on Motion 36. This is what I want to ask the Premier this morning: When will he resolve the issue of the nursing home workers?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, yesterday was quite interesting. You know, as motions come forward, especially on opposition day, they have a two-hour debate time. I found it very interesting because this motion was actually tabled three weeks ago and the Leader of the Liberal Party on that day ragged the puck until six o'clock and a vote could not take place. And, yesterday, there could have been a negotiation among the Liberal Party and the Green Party and the People's Alliance to bring that motion forward first. That did not happen, so, Mr. Speaker, it is a little rich to want to blame the government for what happened yesterday.

As for these negotiations, we are very willing to sit down and negotiate with CUPE, and we look forward to it, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: To follow up on my questions, I will tell you that we are not the ones bargaining with the nursing home workers. The fact remains that, yesterday, as the minister said, the three parties agreed to vote on the motion, but the Alliance leader and the Conservatives—in my opinion, there is no difference between the two parties—decided to drag their feet so that the vote did not take place. The negotiators and the nursing home employees were sitting in the gallery waiting to see how the day turned out. We, on this side of the House, and even the journalists, were sure that the vote would take place yesterday.

I am going to ask the Premier once again: What does he intend to do to settle the bargaining dispute as soon as possible in order to solve this problem once and for all?



[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: For 21 months, Mr. Speaker, the former government tabled the same conditions for negotiations that this government stepped into. Since we stepped into this role, we have enhanced the offer. We have tried to negotiate circumstances to go to binding arbitration. We have done more than the members opposite ever considered. They did not get it done, Mr. Speaker. And, three weeks ago, they could have voted on the binding arbitration motion, but they did not. They ragged the puck until six o'clock, and the day ran out, with CUPE sitting in the gallery. Mr. Speaker, I will take the hits when we have to, but, quite frankly, they have nothing to teach us.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: When the minister tells us that we have nothing to teach her, I can tell you this: During the four years the previous Conservative government was in power, from 2010 to 2014, it did not negotiate a single collective agreement. We took office, and, during the two years I was Minister of Human Resources, we negotiated and signed 18 agreements over 19 months. Now, all this government has to deal with is a collective agreement with nursing home workers, but it cannot get it done. So, when this government says it has done more than we did, I would suggest to you that it has done nothing yet to prove to me that it has done more than we did.

I ask the Premier what he plans to do so that nursing home residents—our seniors, the most vulnerable people in our society—can be confident, feel safe, and have a peaceful life. Mr. Speaker, what does the Premier intend to do to settle this dispute?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: For 21 months, the members of the former government could not close this deal and they were offering the same deal that they had been able to get every other union to accept. They stood by this offer. They stood by it. Then, when they were in opposition, they changed their minds. They think that the offer should go up by five times. That is a quaint position to be in, to be saying this: What we offered was okay, but, now that we are in opposition, we think you should go five times higher.

Mr. Speaker, our philosophical differences are extreme. I believe that. I cannot fathom why such honourable people would sit over here and say one thing and sit over there now and say something completely the opposite. They should be helping us to get this done, Mr. Speaker.

Tobacco

Mr. Horsman: Mr. Speaker, during National Police Week, we are seeing yet another cut by this government that is going to hurt the people and communities of New Brunswick. We have just learned that this government has eliminated the tobacco contraband unit.



Illicit contraband is a threat to New Brunswickers, including our young people, and our economy, and it also undermines our public health. This province loses over \$13 million per year through the sale of contraband products. The cost of the unit was under \$1 million, to save \$13 million, which makes pretty good sense. Why has this minister cancelled this program?

Hon. Mr. Urquhart: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This really surprises me because the honourable member stood up here during estimates—and I do have to say that I never got one question on my estimates—and made reference to that very issue, that the only thing that we were cutting was that. There was no further conversation or questioning on it, and we went on to talk about everything but the estimates at the time.

Having said that, I decided to cut that section. It was because when I took over the department, I looked at all the pros and cons of every section. I could have left it the very same way and just continued on and picked up my paycheque, but I did not. I felt that that section had to be put in other sections to be moved forward and that we could better attack the problems by increasing in other sections.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Horsman: I think that it is a terrible answer for the safety of all New Brunswickers, Mr. Speaker. Contraband products in New Brunswick are mainly controlled by organized crime. The RCMP has noted that over 175 organized gangs are associated with the sale of illegal tobacco. Revenues from the sale of illegal tobacco are often funnelled through criminals, who use this money to finance their illegal activities, which include guns, drugs, and human smuggling. Yes, Mr. Speaker, New Brunswick is open for business all right—open for criminal business.

The rest of Canada was looking to New Brunswick as a role model. This was the best contraband unit in the country. Ontario was looking at New Brunswick to make sure it modelled after that. It is incredible that we just throw it away. I know, Mr. Speaker, that they just do not care about the safety of New Brunswickers. What was the reason this time? Please do not keep telling me that it is about saving money because it is clearly not the reason.

Hon. Mr. Urquhart: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That would indicate that all other policing agencies are not doing their jobs. I am very surprised.

When I looked at it, I said: What did they accomplish? Usually, the people who were at that were the runners. The runners were being stopped for contraband, which was done by very professional, good work on their part. The runners were receiving some very healthy fines for doing that, but the problem was that they had no money to pay their fines. So what did they do? The fines were either on the books, or they went to jail and sat there. During the time that they spent in jail, no money was received by the department. The department is continuing to receive it. The guy that they paid \$50 to do a run for them is sitting in jail for three months, which we are paying for. I just did not feel that it was the best resource for my finances at the time.



[Translation]

Wellness

Mr. K. Chiasson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We learned this week that the Conservative government has eliminated the Regional Wellness Grant Program. It is very disappointing, since this program supported community wellness initiatives that helped keep people healthy and resilient. Municipalities and community organizations benefited from this program to implement successful and beneficial initiatives by promoting healthy eating, mental fitness, physical activity, and tobacco-free living. Having worked at the community level myself, I can assure you that the return on investment is real and that we are never mistaken when we invest in the well-being of New Brunswickers.

So, I ask the minister of Social Development to tell us the exact amount that was cut and to explain to us the reasoning behind eliminating the Regional Wellness Grant Program.

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, wellness is... The Department of Healthy and Inclusive Communities was a department that I led from 2012 to 2014, and I take and took great pride in it. It is not easy to make cuts like these. The fact of the matter is that we have to ensure that we can provide the basics for the people of New Brunswick. We have to be able to provide senior care. We have to be able to provide child protection services. We have to be able to provide social assistance.

Mr. Speaker, the fact is that this government left this department in disarray, and I am sorry that we have had to make some decisions. The fact of the matter is that many of these programs can be picked up in the community and we are going to support them as much as we can. Mr. Speaker, there are decisions that have to be made. That was one of the them.

[Translation]

Mr. K. Chiasson: Mr. Speaker, I did not get an exact answer to my question. However, this type of answer makes it obvious that the Conservative government does not recognize the importance of prevention initiatives.

The minister responsible for this file sees this money as an expenditure and not as an investment. So, at the risk of repeating myself, the Regional Wellness Grant Program enabled the different community stakeholders to organize initiatives and theme days to encourage New Brunswickers to live healthy lives.

So, I am asking the Minister of Social Development this again: What was the exact amount for the Regional Wellness Grant Program, and why did she decide to eliminate this program that is so important for our communities?



[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, the Regional Wellness Grant Program was \$240 000, and it is not a lot of money. But the wellness department was a lot of programs without measurables. We know that we can deliver services and messages to the community in less expensive ways now. There is social media. There is community health. There are all kinds of ways to do this, Mr. Speaker, without sending money out the door. The Liberal philosophy is to throw more money at it—throw money at it, and something must come of it. Heaven knows if we do not know what comes of it. We had to make a decision. We made the decision.

Mrs. Harris: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. All we are seeing from this Alliance-Conservative alliance is cuts, cuts, cuts, and more cuts. What is happening is the devastating negative effects on New Brunswickers who need their help the most. There is not one member from that Alliance-Conservative government that appears to care. It is a combined failing government.

This week, we have heard Serge Melanson, President of the New Brunswick Medical Society, say that he is dismayed and disheartened that this government has eliminated the primary caregiver benefit. The Medical Society is urging this uncaring combined Alliance-Conservative government to reconsider cutting this very important benefit for those who provide a service that they consider to be critically important. Will the minister listen to someone who quite clearly knows what he is talking about?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: You know, Mr. Speaker, the Liberal philosophy is to throw money at something. This was a program the Liberals implemented two months before the writ fell. Two months before, they put out a program that they did have in their platform, but that they rushed out the door so that they could get just a few extra votes. It did not put them across the finish line, Mr. Speaker. We know that.

We want to be thoughtful. We know that there is nothing in this department that we can change that is not going to affect somebody. But our goal is to take the monies and to focus them in directions that help the majority of people, that help those on the ground who need services in their homes and need the supports. We put the money where we could get the biggest bang, not just for us and the taxpayer, but also for the people of New Brunswick and those who need it.

Ambulances

Mr. Austin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The media is reporting yet another problem with the ambulance system in the north, in Saint-Quentin. An 18-month-old was experiencing a severe allergic reaction, and the closest ambulance was based in Grand Falls. Mr. Speaker, the problem with the paramedic file is not just in the north but, really, through rural areas of New Brunswick.



My question is for the Health Minister. If the public was aware of how many gaps there truly are in the system across the province, they would be shocked. Is the Minister of Health willing to press Medavie to make sure that the gaps in coverage are made public so that people know where their ambulance is when they need one?

Hon. Mr. Flemming: I would like to thank the member for the question. He refers to gaps in the system, and there are indeed gaps in the system. Many of those gaps are caused by things beyond the control of the government, and many are not. There is an excessive and uncontrollable amount of sick time, which I do not quite understand. I do not know why people call in sick when they do unexpectedly, but they do. There is \$2 million spent on overtime because of called-in sick time. I have not been sick for 15 days in the last 35 years, let alone 17 days per year. We have some challenges here, Mr. Speaker, and they are real challenges. They are challenges about money and challenges about solving this from both sides.

Mr. Austin: As a follow-up to that question, I am curious as to where McEvoy's ruling is. Back when the previous government was in, it was pushing hard to try to put a stop to it, taking it to the courts. I think that when you look at the ruling by the arbitrator—big on arbitrators... The ruling on that by McEvoy was that language should not trump fast response times when it comes to paramedics getting to the scene. The question I would ask the minister is this: Where are we on the McEvoy ruling? Where is it in the courts? When can we expect some resolution to that issue?

Hon. Mrs. Anderson-Mason: I would like to thank the member opposite very much for that question. I would like to take the opportunity to respond to it. What I can confirm is that this matter is still before the courts. In fact, it is being heard on May 24. I am not going to get into the weeds because that is not something that is appropriate to be done here in the House.

However, I will say this: There is a statement that was always made by a colleague of mine, for whom I had a great deal of respect. What he used to say is this: Tough questions make good law. That is exactly why we are heading to court to deal with this, because we have some tough questions that we have to answer. We are a government that is not afraid to deal with the tough questions. Thank you.

Climate Change

Ms. Mitton: Yesterday, during question period, I asked the Premier whether he has read the executive summary for policymakers of the UN IPCC, when the Minister of Environment decided to get up and launch into a tirade. He asked me whether I have read the Climate Change Action Plan introduced by the previous government and adopted by the current government. Of course, I have read the action plan, Mr. Speaker, and of course, I support it. The minister has said that he supports it too, but I have not seen that much action to implement it yet.



Science says that our current targets are inadequate, and that is why the youth are in the streets, begging our governments to take this climate emergency and their futures seriously. Clinging to the sunset industries of oil and gas is outdated and deadly. We need to take advantage of sunrise industries and build a better economy quickly. This is arguably the biggest crisis that New Brunswick has ever faced.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to know whether the Premier has received a full briefing on climate breakdown from his Climate Change Secretariat.

Hon. Mr. Carr: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. They are valid questions. I think that everybody in this Legislature understands that we all take climate change seriously. What the member opposite seems to be stuck on is that everything has to happen today or yesterday or the day before, Mr. Speaker. We all know that, in the real world, governments do not work that fast.

However, we have put a priority on the Climate Change Action Plan, obviously. We have put a priority on lowering our emissions. That is not a priority that just started today. That is not a priority that started yesterday. This is something that the province of New Brunswick, with many successive governments, has been addressing over time, with the reduction of coal and by moving into wind energy and other renewables.

Mr. Speaker, the member opposite keeps going on about how everything has to happen today. We can very clearly say that we have been working toward our goals and we will continue to work toward those goals.

Ms. Mitton: Mr. Speaker, the science demands that action be taken today and that a lot of action be taken very quickly. I heard the Minister of Environment speak yesterday about 30, 40, or 50 years. We do not have that time. We have about 10 years to turn things around. I am not in the habit of giving out gold stars for incremental action.

To go back to the Climate Change Action Plan, since we want to talk about that, on page 13, Action Item 46 commits the government to “Work to have 2,500 electric vehicles on the road in New Brunswick by 2020 and 20,000 by 2030”. We see only 200 EVs on the road in New Brunswick right now, Mr. Speaker. The government could help those who want to purchase EVs by implementing Action Item 47, an electric vehicle strategy. I want to know what the Premier’s plan is to implement an electric vehicle strategy to help the province reach its goal of 2 500 electric vehicles by next year and 20 000 by 2030.

Hon. Mr. Carr: Mr. Speaker, the member opposite and I had this discussion about electric vehicles one day last year, I believe, on the political panel up at CBC. At that time, she truly believed that every senior in rural New Brunswick should buy an electric vehicle. I clearly asked her this: Where do you think those people will get that money, because they cannot afford an electric vehicle? Electric vehicles are very expensive.



The member well knows that, Mr. Speaker, so before we make a really rash decision and force people to have electric vehicles without being able to afford them... It is a lofty idea, and I get it. However, right now, we have more charging stations in the province than we have electric vehicles. If the member opposite is driving an electric vehicle today, I would be glad to know about it, and I would be more than happy to go for a drive with her in her electric vehicle, Mr. Speaker.

Collective Bargaining

Mr. Kenny: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Whenever there is a strike or a lockout in the province, it always has a dramatic impact on families, on workers, and on businesses. The key to resolving this is open dialogue and communication.

Mr. Speaker, you, the member for Campbellton-Dalhousie, the Leader of the Opposition, the member for Restigouche West, and I have been in discussions with the government to look at the issues facing the Belledune smelter. We have been hearing from constituents who are concerned about the strike/lockout at the smelter in Belledune, which is a major employer in the region, with over 280 people affected. People are concerned, and I share those concerns.

My question is to the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour. Can you give the House an update today on what government is doing to help resolve these issues? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Holder: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, I share those concerns as well. I want to thank the member from Bathurst for the question. He and I have been in constant contact on this issue for a number of weeks now. What I can tell you is that we have put mediation services in place. In fact, we have actually doubled those mediation efforts over the past few weeks as well. I can also tell you that it is our understanding that talks have taken a break, but are scheduled to resume over the next few days. We remain optimistic that a settlement can be reached.

In my role as Minister of Labour, I take collective bargaining very seriously. I take the role of neutrality very seriously, as I have said many times before in this House. However, we are certainly all hands on deck in our department, and I would tell the members opposite that our door is open. We can continue to give you those ongoing briefings as we move forward.

