

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



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[Original]

### HEALTH CARE

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, our Leader of the Official Opposition gave a wonderful reply to the speech from the throne. One thing he pointed out was that in a lot of important areas, including the economy and health care, the government promised to do better, but things actually got worse in the first year of the Conservative rule. We see evidence of that in health care in the north, in Campbellton. Emergency rooms, obstetrics, and surgeries have been shut down. Can the minister tell the House when this situation will be fixed?

**Hon. Mr. Flemming** (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite is correct. These are serious issues, and they are clear evidence that the health care system in New Brunswick is under strain. There is no sugarcoating it here. This is a bipartisan issue. We have shortages of staff, we have an aging population, and we have health care that is growing at 5%. The member opposite is absolutely correct, so we have to work together in a bipartisan way to make some real improvements to health care.

Now, you can have the file for four years, do nothing, and then stand up and criticize, or you can work together to solve some of these challenges. I am offering the latter. I met with three colleagues of the member opposite yesterday. We had a constructive and forward-looking meeting, and I thank them for it.

[Translation]

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, it is clear that either the minister did not actually understand the question or he does not want to answer. We do not know when the situation in Campbellton will be fixed.

In the throne speech, it was announced that the government is developing an initiative to enhance the emergency departments in Fredericton, Saint John, and Moncton and is also planning to open nurse practitioner clinics in Moncton, Saint John, and Fredericton. What initiatives is the government planning for rural areas? What is the government doing for the rest of the province? Has this government forgotten the northern regions?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Flemming** (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): The member opposite knows better than that. We have not done any such thing. We are working. Yesterday, I met with three of his colleagues. The Health Critic was noticeably absent from that meeting. The meeting was requested by the opposition. I met with the opposition people. We had a very

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good, constructive, open, and fair discussion. We realized what the problem is, and we are working toward it. New Brunswick has an HR shortage. We are running out of people.

You can stand up here and take political shots. I mean, we are fighting a fire here, and we are being criticized by an arsonist. So pick up the hose, help, or go somewhere else.

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): You know, Mr. Speaker, clearly, the Minister of Health has such a busy agenda that he cannot accept the invitation to go directly to Campbellton to talk with the people of that area. This is a shame, and he should recognize that he has to work with the people in that area also.

One of the problems with the critical situation at hospitals in rural New Brunswick, from St. Stephen to Perth-Andover to Campbellton, is a shortage of doctors. That is according to a doctor's quote in the media, not me. Mr. Speaker, to the minister, how is eliminating billing numbers going to help address this shortage, which is causing major problems in our rural hospitals? Since the arrival of this government, there have been close to a dozen new vacant positions for family doctors, and this is only in the Vitalité health authority. Doctors are leaving. What is the minister doing to solve this situation that he himself is creating?

**Hon. Mr. Flemming** (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): You know, a study of basic economics would show that billing numbers, which restrict access, do not do anything to increase capacity. Monopolies generally do not work particularly well for the people that they serve. The more people, then the more opportunity and the more ability for doctors to enter the market in New Brunswick and the better the situation will be.

In addition to that, billing numbers, in and of themselves, are not the driving force behind doctor recruitment. If a doctor does not have hospital privileges, if he does not have access to labs, if he cannot order tests, if he cannot order procedures, he cannot make a living in any event. Billing numbers are superfluous. They are a needless and unnecessary level of bureaucracy.

It amazes me that the entire New Brunswick Medical Society congratulates me for doing it and the member opposite criticizes me. He had better phone some of the doctors in this province.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, minister.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, we all know the minister has a phobia: He wants to reduce and centralize health care services in New Brunswick. Following a request made under the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, one of the health networks indicated that the documents relating to this issue were not shared.



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Did the minister give instructions not to disclose some documents relating to upcoming cuts in the health networks?

The minister has been announcing these cuts for the last year. Cuts and centralization, that is exactly what the minister keeps telling us about every year. Is it the Minister of Health who is making sure this information is not available to New Brunswickers?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Flemming** (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): The RTI requests from the member opposite are becoming legendary in the Department of Health. I think it gets one every day about this and about that. It is an absolute cottage industry looking after his RTI requests. The people there have an awful lot of better things to do than to chase their tails over another request from this person. The Act is complied with. It is the law. If someone requests information, he or she gets it.

I do not really know where to go with this question. I have always been open and accessible to people. I mean, you can create this phony crisis of cuts and everything else, but I really do not know what it is that the member is talking about, quite frankly, because we have increased our spending in health care and we are increasing our capital budget, as you will see.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, minister.

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Certainly, this government and this minister are trying to fight a forest fire with a squirt gun, and that is the reality. He is doing nothing to make sure that we find solutions in New Brunswick. It is not for me to promote the centralization of and cuts to services. It is the minister himself who is doing it.

The population did not give the government the moral authority to make cuts in health care. If his party did not run the last election campaign on health cuts, did the People's Alliance run the last campaign on health cuts? Did the Green Party run the last election campaign on health cuts? It is for sure that we did not, so why did the minister not provide full disclosure of his party's intentions during the last election?

**Hon. Mr. Flemming** (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): It is because, quite frankly, I have better things to do than to look for something that does not exist. You talk about these mysterious cuts. One thing about a democracy is that there are public accounts. You can look at the numbers. You can look at our budget year over year. You can look at our capital budget when it comes out, year over year. A simple, basic ability in arithmetic will show you that there are not any cuts.

You can run around like Chicken Little and say that the sky is falling and that there are cuts, but there are none. Look at the amounts. Look at the budget. Look at the spending. Get your

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calculator out. To me, it is completely self-evident. You can fearmonger about all these cuts, as if I am going to be driving a D9 dozer and knocking some hospital down or something like that. It is just not the case. To answer a question that is based on...

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, minister. Time, minister.

### MINISTERS

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, we see that some serious allegations are being made against the Minister of Agriculture and his executive assistant. According to a press release, the minister and his EA confronted a road crew on Route 112 in July, getting out of their vehicle, yelling at the crew, and using foul language. There was allegedly also a physical confrontation. Mr. Speaker, we would like to give the minister an opportunity to give his side of the story to the House here this morning.

**Hon. Mr. Wetmore** (Gagetown-Petitcodiac, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, I have been told that this has been forwarded to the RCMP, so right at the time being, I will have no comment.

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, L): These are very serious allegations against the minister of the Crown and his executive assistant, reportedly now in the hands of the RCMP, as has been stated. My question for the minister, then, is: Will he consider stepping down from Cabinet until this matter is fully resolved?

**Hon. Mr. Wetmore** (Gagetown-Petitcodiac, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): This is an HR issue that has been dealt with, and I have no intention of commenting any more until this has been concluded with the RCMP.

But I would like to say that I have been an MLA and minister for approximately a year—a little over a year—and have had probably half a dozen questions from the other side of the House. So I would just like to let you know that over in the Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, we are energizing the private sector. We have successfully implemented the Canadian Agricultural Partnership to drive growth, innovation, and competitiveness in the New Brunswick agriculture sector for \$6.7 million. We have successfully implemented and met targets in our shellfish aquaculture. We have implemented and funded 60 aquaculture and fisheries projects through the AFF, and...

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, minister.

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, L): It is clear that the minister is deflecting on this very serious question. My question, then, would be for the Premier. If this minister will not do the right thing by stepping down until this matter is fully resolved, will the Premier consider removing the minister from Cabinet until it is fully resolved by the RCMP?



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**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. This issue, to my understanding, has been fully resolved. It is an HR issue. I am actually surprised that CUPE is finding this the time to bring it forward. It happened many months ago, as I understand it.

It went through the process in an HR discussion. It went through evaluation to have a full understanding of what happened and whether there were any particular infractions, and it was dealt with. I cannot speak of the particulars of that situation, but I am under the understanding that it has been fully dealt with and that all remedies have been sought and looked after.

## CANNABIS

**Mrs. F. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Sorry, Mr. Speaker.

*[Translation]*

The request for proposals regarding Cannabis NB is designed only for big businesses. In New Brunswick, who can afford to make a bid and take over the entire provincial cannabis industry, except the partnership between Irving Oil and the Couche-Tard convenience stores? What about the involvement of small businesses and businesses owned by everyday folks in New Brunswick that struggle daily to compete with big businesses like Couche-Tard and Irving Oil?

This is what I would like to know: What about the small business sector? Why have we not had the opportunity to give small businesses the chance to bid for the distribution and sale of cannabis?

*[Original]*

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Sorry, I am battling a cold here.

Do you know what? As the members across and, in particular, the former Finance Minister would know, the rules, let's say, on selling beer are this thick. The rules on selling marijuana are this thick. This is not a corporation—this is not a business interest—that just anybody off the street can run. It is something that is multiple layers of government. It is a hard business to run. You have to have experience in dealing with cannabis. E-commerce—you have to have experience in dealing with e-commerce.

We cannot have the government wholesaling it and doing the e-commerce part as well, which would happen if we were into the private sector—fully into the private sector. Saskatchewan is in that now, and it is not working out smoothly for it because it has 36 or

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39 different people in different shops. This is a business that takes government regulation, but this is a business that takes a master franchisee that...

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, minister.

*[Translation]*

**Mrs. F. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. OrganiGram, a business that employs 750 people right here in New Brunswick, has publicly expressed serious concerns regarding the creation of a private sector monopoly on the entire cannabis industry in the province. Will the partnership between Irving Oil and Couche-Tard decide which cannabis producers are able to sell their products in New Brunswick?

*[Original]*

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. The RFP process looks at this through a holistic sort of process. It is due on and continues until January 10.

As the members opposite would know, this is a huge business, and it is very hard just to take over piecemeal. This is a business that needs experience. This is a business that needs help from various levels of government, obviously, but this is a business that, overall, has to protect the population. The government, in turn, will be doing the protection of the population as well. As you know, this is a business that just cannot be run by mom-and-pop shops. This is a business... You guys set up the model, and you know that the business plan was flawed from the beginning—\$60 per square foot in rent, big stores, sole-sourced stores. It is just crazy.

*[Translation]*

**Mrs. F. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

*[Original]*

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Wow—I am so very surprised to hear that from the minister. The mom-and-pop shops have no business in New Brunswick. They cannot do business in New Brunswick. Wow—that is a way to encourage and energize the private sector, is it not?

I heard from the Minister of Health that monopoly does not usually work very well. If it does not work very well in the health sector, why does it work in the private sector or public sector?



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In a Canadian Press article dated November 14, 2019, the Grand Lake MLA and Leader of the People's Alliance also expressed an opinion that the privatization of cannabis should be achieved through "an open market rather than just one operator". Clearly, the Premier is not even taking the advice of his closest ally. Why will the Premier not listen to the chorus of voices that are urging him not to establish a private monopoly...

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Your time is up.

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite. No, we certainly... Mom-and-pop shops absolutely have their place in the economy and in business in New Brunswick. Mom-and-pop shops are small businesses and are the bread and butter of our economy. But do you know what? This is not the business for a mom-and-pop shop to get into. We are not going to entrust the safety of New Brunswickers and their health to mom-and-pop shops in this instance. This is a different model altogether.

They set up a model with \$60 per square foot—up to \$60 per square foot—in leases for 15 years. They were locked in for 15 years. They set up a model with sole-sourced buildings with the most expensive fixtures and fit-ups that you can have in buildings. They set up a model that was just unsustainable. Their goal, apparently, was not to make money. Congratulations, that goal was well met. In the first six months, we lost almost \$12 million. In the next fiscal, we are going to lose probably another \$10 million. Do you know what? We are righting the ship. We are taking care of...

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Guitard): The time is over, minister.

## HEALTH CARE

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was saddened to hear about the extreme emergency measures that we are taking in Campbellton in regard to health care. I think that everybody in this room, as well as the Minister of Health, knows that health care is very much in a crisis mode, when wait times are 8, 10, or 12 hours at emergency rooms in clinics or hospitals.

Mr. Speaker, last week, we had the opportunity to meet with the New Brunswick Association of Optometrists. We are the only province in the country where if you have something such as glaucoma, you can walk to an optometrist and that optometrist can diagnose the glaucoma but cannot treat it. That means that the optometrist can only refer the person to a specialist. The specialist bills Medicare, diagnoses it again as accurate, and

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treats the glaucoma. So, we are the only province that does not allow optometrists to treat it. There would be no additional expense to Medicare to do that.

My question is for Minister of Health. When will he pick this low-hanging fruit and allow optometrists to both diagnose and treat glaucoma?

**Hon. Mr. Flemming** (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you for the question. The member knows that medicine is a self-regulating organization. The Medical Society regulates the criteria for which people can practise medicine. You also know that there are a number of minor ailments that can be prescribed for, whether it is with optometrists, pharmacists, or things like that. So that involves carefully working with these organizations, exploring their scope of practice, and making sure that they can deliver the level of care for the best interest and safety of the citizenry of our province.

I am certainly open to that. I think it is a good suggestion. I am working with the Pharmacists' Association now to expand its scope of practice, and I am more than happy to do that with the optometrists as well. I have been in touch with them in that regard.

So, it is a good initiative, and it makes good sense. It relieves the system, and certainly...

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, minister.

## PARAMEDICS

**Mrs. Conroy** (Miramichi, PA): Mr. Speaker, we have been fighting long and hard over the past year to have our paramedic crisis in New Brunswick addressed. Although there have been a few small changes made to ANB, they are a Band-Aid to the real issue. Paramedics across the province are strongly showing their frustration over the current classification. Paramedics are in the same classification as I was when working as a clerk at the hospital as well as the housekeepers and others. Although we all play a very vital role in the health care system, we certainly cannot compare what I was doing as a clerk to the task of the frontline paramedics.

Paramedics train and study for years, constantly taking on new roles and new responsibilities, and they are now seeing extra-mural and palliative care patients at home. They make split-second, lifesaving decisions every day, without the consultation of doctors and specialists. We have had many meetings with the Minister of Health and the Premier, and the government has taken many steps in the last few months toward reclassifying the paramedics. My question is this: Where is the government on the process of reclassification of the paramedics in New Brunswick?

**Hon. Mr. Flemming** (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you for the question. The member is quite correct. The issue of reclassification is certainly a legitimate one. The

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paramedics have a reclassification committee, which they have put forth with their own members. I know these people. I have met with them regularly. I have listened to their point. It is very, very compelling. I think they have a very good position. They have voted almost overwhelmingly for the position that they have presented to the government. The government listened to their concerns, and we have put together an organization to meet with these people, examine their classification, and review it.

The paramedic profession has advanced from the time when they basically just drove the truck. They are now trained medical professionals. As the profession advances, so should we reexamine their classification. Good point, and we are certainly willing to work with you in that regard.

### ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G): In last fall's throne speech, the government appointed a full-time Minister of Aboriginal Affairs because "rebuilding this relationship deserves a full-time minister". I am glad to see that the government has now committed to having an all-party legislative committee work on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. But the government does not need approval of a legislative committee to implement key recommendations such as Call to Action No. 43: "We call upon federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to fully adopt and implement the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as the framework for reconciliation." Last month, the British Columbia government tabled legislation that, if passed, would make it the first Canadian province to implement UNDRIP. New Brunswick has a chance to be a leader here, Mr. Speaker. Will the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs commit to working with Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyik, and Passamaquoddy leaders to draft and table legislation to implement UNDRIP in New Brunswick during this legislative session?

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, member.

**Hon. Mr. Stewart** (Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the member opposite for the question. As you know, I travelled to New York City last year. I was at the UN for a week to meet with Indigenous peoples from across the world. I learned a lot while I was there.

What we are looking at in British Columbia is a very unique situation in Canada. It is the only province that is looking at this. So we have undertaken to do a technical review of what is happening in British Columbia with the declaration. We are trying to understand the Aboriginal treaty rights and the peace and friendship rights. We are trying to understand the entire process from a technical standpoint so that we can then make an informed decision on that process. I appreciate the question. Thank you.



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[*Translation*]

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes that access to language is an inherent right. This year, 2019, has been recognized by the United Nations as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, with the goal of raising awareness of the consequences of the endangerment of Indigenous languages across the world and the aim to publish a link between language, development, peace, and reconciliation. That hits home here in New Brunswick.

The 2016 census found that, over 15 years, there has been a 57% decline in the number of people with Wolastoqey as their mother tongue. There are only a few dozen Wolastoqey speakers remaining in the province. In order to revitalize this language as well as Mi'kmaq, we need to ensure that children are immersed in these languages at a young age. Will the Minister of Education commit to developing curriculum and training teachers to deliver it so that children can be immersed in these languages at school?

**Hon. Mr. Cardy** (Fredericton-Ouest—Hanwell, ministre de l'Éducation et du Développement de la petite enfance, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the member opposite for the question. If you look in the green paper... I really enjoyed the opportunity to chat with the members of your caucus about the contents of it, and thank you for participating in the education summit a month or so ago.

Absolutely, this is one of the elements in there. How can we work to expand opportunities so that our young First Nations folks who are in the school system are able to learn their languages? Beyond that, Mr. Speaker, we also have to make sure that we offer opportunities for all New Brunswickers to be exposed to all of our province's beautiful languages—French, English, and our First Nations languages as well. That is absolutely something that is a priority. That is why it is in that paper.

I look forward to working with you and with colleagues from all parties on how we can move ahead to make sure that something as important as language, which is ultimately the bearer of our cultures, is transmitted on to the next generation, with more and more New Brunswickers being able to converse in as many tongues as possible. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

## CANNABIS

**Mr. Harvey** (Carleton-Victoria, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I finally get a question.



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As columnist Norbert Cunningham recently pointed out, “How odd is it to “privatize” a public monopoly so it becomes a private monopoly?” Can the Premier disclose to the House the names of the companies that his government was in contact with during Project Acorn?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, what we cannot understand or disclose or find out are the names of the owners of all the leases held in the 20 companies across this province. It is one numbered company after another numbered company after another numbered company. Now, why do you think that would be? It is because the hidden gems across the hall here just wanted to distribute to their friends these long-term leases at rates that had no comparison to the market.

Our process will be very open and transparent. We will not do it in advance. That is not how you go out for an RFP. That is not how you get the best opportunity for a bid and the best value. But value we will get, Mr. Speaker. It is something that escapes the members opposite. They have proven time and time again that it does not matter. It does not matter because the philosophy is to spend money. Build a Birks jewelry store, and they will come. Well, we have 20 of those, unlike any other province in the country. Can we lose more money on this? In the current model, you bet we can, but in the future model, not a chance.

**Mr. Harvey** (Carleton-Victoria, L): Mr. Speaker, the company Couche-Tard has indicated its intention to participate in the cannabis RFP with its strategic partner, Fire and Flower. This same company is also associated with the Premier’s former employer, Irving Oil, through a partnership with its retail convenience stores. The partnership of Couche-Tard and Fire and Flower—was this one of the companies to which this government gave insider preference during the secretive talks with Project Acorn? Many New Brunswickers are wondering whether the fix is in. What is the Premier trying to hide? Will the Premier come clean with the people of New Brunswick on this issue and table the government documents and correspondence about Project Acorn in this House?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, what members really need to come clean about here is how all these leases were figured out and how we added another 7 stores when the proposal was for 13. Who brought up that proposal? Do you want to talk about insider work? That was insider work.

What I will say is that as we go through this process, not at this point in time... Because it is an independent process, we will not be overseeing it. It is a process that will have a full understanding of the competitive nature of the business that we are in with cannabis, how we can make it most profitable and most secure, and how we can protect the youth of our province.

I realize that is not a topic that is top of mind to my colleagues across the hall, but I am telling you that we will have a very open and transparent process. I will be very pleased



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that we will be able to share that and have people understand it. But you cannot do it in the middle of the process.

I know they are going to continue to throw the thing from yesterday about the shipyard at me. I love talking about that shipyard, by the way. So I was hoping to get more of a question, and anyone...

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, Premier.

Do we have unanimous consent to revert back to Introduction of Guests?

**Hon. Members:** Agreed.