

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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CONTENTS

GROUP HOMES

Mr. D. Landry
Hon. Mrs. Shephard
Mr. D. Landry
Hon. Mrs. Shephard
Mr. D. Landry
Hon. Mrs. Shephard
Mr. D. Landry
Hon. Mrs. Shephard

MENTAL HEALTH

Mrs. Harris
Hon. Mrs. Shephard
Mrs. Harris
Hon. Mrs. Shephard
Mrs. Harris
Hon. Mrs. Shephard

BRIDGES

Mr. K. Chiasson
Hon. Mr. Gauvin
Mr. K. Chiasson
Hon. Mr. Oliver
Mr. K. Chiasson
Hon. Mr. Higgs

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

INCOME ASSISTANCE

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mrs. Shephard

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Steeves

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Austin

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Austin

Hon. Mrs. M. Wilson

Mr. Bourque

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Bourque

Hon. Mr. Holland

Mr. Bourque

Hon. Mr. Holland

[*Translation*]

GROUP HOMES

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, last week, the Auditor General released a devastating report on the state of group homes in the province. The fate of children in these group homes is particularly troubling. We understand there are problems that are complex and difficult to solve, but one of the problems that stood out is that very young children are in group homes.

The New Brunswick Child and Youth Advocate and the New Brunswick Association of Social Workers have asked that an age restriction be established immediately for children in group homes. We would agree with that. Could the Premier commit to respecting an age restriction in order to keep very young children out of group homes in New Brunswick?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really appreciate the question coming from the Leader of the Opposition.

We really appreciate the Auditor General's report, and I am very proud to say that 8 out of the 16 recommendations that the Auditor General put forward have already been implemented. They were implemented beginning when we took office, Mr. Speaker.

We began on a path of scrutinizing and implementing programs that we knew needed to be rectified. For me, it was learning that a child as young as five had utilized the youth care home system, and we, of course, recognize that this is not the preferred option. Mr. Speaker, I will also clarify that when children of a very young age are put into group homes, it is usually done in emergency situations, when other resources are not available. We are working with our foster care parents to keep it bolstered as much as we can, and we will continue to do that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Again, according to the Auditor General, young children—some who are barely three years old, Mr. Speaker—are in group homes in New Brunswick. Again, we understand that the issue is complicated, but we think prompt action is needed. How quickly can we remove children under the age of 10 from group homes?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is always the preferred option not to utilize youth care homes for young children, and it is always the preferred option to keep families together. When necessary, we have foster families, and they are tremendous assets to our province. I would work every single day to try to ensure that a young child would not have to go to a group home. I also need to point out that this report ended in 2018, so, with all due respect, these conditions happened under the previous government.

We are taking action today, Mr. Speaker, to ensure that we can try to confidently say that it is a last-resort situation. But when I have to protect a child as opposed to sending the child to an unfit home or leaving the child in an unsafe situation, we will use every resource we have and we will endeavour to ensure that we have foster parents who can take that child.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Madam Minister. Mr. Speaker, this is not a political issue. It is a very difficult issue. We know that everyone involved, from the minister's office to departmental officials and group home staff, is doing the very best to help these children, but, sometimes, it is not enough. We think the Auditor General really showed this last week. We also saw extensive media coverage that highlighted a number of problems. It will no doubt take time to solve all these problems, but some things can be done immediately. We think that taking very young children out of group homes is one of them. Will the Premier commit to following a timetable in order to achieve this?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): I think the members from the opposition would agree that keeping children safe is the highest priority that we could ever have, and that is the first and most significant priority that we have in the Department of Social Development—protecting our children.

It would always be our first choice to have families united, and then it would always be our next choice to have foster parents there to care for our children who are in need of care. We are actively pursuing more foster parents because they are one of the best resources that we have. We are also actively looking at options as to what we can do in the near future with regard to perhaps contracting professional homes that can take children with highly complex needs, to ensure their safety.



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

This is not lost on anyone, and we will endeavour to continue to improve the system and work diligently to protect our children in this province.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): This problem was not just highlighted last week. The department has known for a while that the Auditor General was considering this issue and that the findings were not good news for these children who are indeed the minister's responsibility. She is their guardian. My question to the minister is this: Does the department recognize that there is an emergency, and does it fully accept the Auditor General's findings?

Mr. Speaker, I know the minister partly answered the question earlier, but I would like her to tell us more about the Auditor General's findings.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): I am very proud that 8 of the 16 recommendations were completed before the Auditor General even tabled her report. That is because, when I went into the department, I had initiatives undertaken immediately to work on kinship and to work on the child protection Act. Those were things that we had to do. Children in our care are the priority, and while the system is not perfect, we will endeavour every single day to make it better. We will self-assess, and we will continue to make it better.

If children at a young age have to go into the care of a youth group home for a very short time, many efforts are made to ensure that they are with children of a similar age. There are many reasons that a child could be put into a group home. For example, there could be a severe disability.

This is not a cookie-cutter approach. There will never be a cookie-cutter approach, and we will endeavour to find permanent homes for all our children. That is the real solution to this problem. Thank you.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): We on this side of the House are very proud to work on a lot of those initiatives, and we are certainly aware that when the minister decides to make something a priority, action happens.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Mr. Speaker, it is not every day in this House that we can work together to do the right thing for the people of New Brunswick, but I think all parties accomplished that on the last opposition day, when a motion from the official opposition regarding a mental health advocate passed with amendments that we all agreed on. Paul Ouellet, a longtime advocate for mental health in New Brunswick who has three siblings living with mental illness, told CBC: “A mental health advocate is going to be, for every person in this province, a great, great help.”

My question for the minister is this: When can we expect to see this person hired?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Again, I am very proud to stand and talk about mental health. I so appreciate my colleague the Minister of Health inviting me to the mental health table, because it really shows the resolve that we have to work together and to have our departments work together in order to make things happen.

I know and understand that this motion was passed just three business days ago, so we are certainly going to endeavour to make it happen, to look at the resources that we have, and to look at the resources that we need. I cannot put a timeline on that. We are going to work diligently with the Department of Health and see what we can do to implement this as soon as possible, using the resources that we already have. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Again, on this side of the House, we have certainly had wonderful working relationships within departments. It was stated many times that they had never seen such great collaboration from department to department as when we were in power.

Again, I can state that when the Premier and the minister decide to make something a priority, it will happen. Look at all the cuts that we have seen.

I think, again, that a case can be made that this is an urgent matter that should not have to wait until the next budget to be put in place. Everyone agrees that help is urgently needed. More than a month ago, the minister spoke to the media after a round table on mental health and said that people with mental health issues do not know where to go. If we wait until the next budget, it could be another year before such a person is in place. We have immediate and growing issues with things such as homelessness, suicide, and drug addiction. My question to this minister is: Why are you going to wait?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I so love the attention that the opposition members give to issues when they are sitting on the other side of the House. This is an important, important issue, and mental health could not be more important or more timely for us to talk about. We have taken it very seriously, and we have put many initiatives in place to move the needle on mental health services. This was

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

passed three business days ago, and with all due respect, I never saw the opposition members—ever—in their government make something like this happen, especially when the opposition brought it forward.

I have made a commitment that this will not fall off the radar and we will diligently move forward, but I will not give a timeline that I cannot commit to today. This was a great initiative from both sides of the House, and we welcome that collaboration. I look forward to bringing more updates to you at a later time.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): The only timeline that we have seen you follow is when you have your great big set of scissors out and you can cut. There is such an enjoyment when you do that. Now, with all those cuts that you made, you constantly say that there will be no new money put in, no new resources used to help those people who need our help. The Minister of Health should understand that, because his department is a mess.

As I said, when we passed the motion, I thought that it was one of those good moments in the House when we came together regardless of political affiliation. We did the right thing with this motion. That said, the motion is nonbinding. We understand that, which is why we cannot let it drop here into the lap of this minister and this Premier. Will the Premier or the minister give his or her word that the department will have a mental health advocate in place before the end of this budget cycle?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Again, with all due respect, we do not owe a timeline to the opposition on this motion. We have a tremendous amount of respect for what happened last Thursday, and I am really grateful for that collaboration and for the working relationship that came from it. I hope that we see it in other areas, because we have a lot of work to do.

On this side of the House, we take mental health very seriously. I am so grateful to have the opportunity to work with the Minister of Health on this file, and we will not let this fall off the radar. But there is work to do on it. There is a little bit of research. We have to look at the best approach to this. Maybe it is not just one advocate. I do not know. I am thinking out loud here. Maybe it is a regional advocate so that we can help people all through the province in a timely fashion. Mr. Speaker, we have some work to do, and we are going to do it.

Oral Questions

[*Translation*]

BRIDGES

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, over the weekend, the Deputy Premier turned to social media to announce that a new bridge between Shippagan and Lamèque and Miscou Islands would be announced today during the Capital Budget speech. Since the announcement has already been made, we assume the minister can freely answer questions about it.

Between 2017 and 2018, the previous government committed to investing \$350 000 in design data collection, surveying, and geotechnical and hydraulic studies. Will this government simply make the same announcement we have already made, or will we see shovels in the ground during the next construction season?

Hon. Mr. Gauvin (Shippagan-Lamèque-Miscou, Deputy Premier, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Thank you very much for the applause. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased. Immediately following the Capital Budget speech, I will have the opportunity to give an interview to the various media in the rotunda, and I will answer all questions at that time. My smile is as wide today as it was last week.

I am very pleased to note the presence of the Lamèque and Shippagan Mayors. Armand Caron and Sylvain Paulin have also just arrived. They are members of the bridge committee. I very much look forward to that interview. As we would say in English:

[*Original*]

Stay tuned.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

[*Original*]

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, how did the Minister of Transportation decide which projects would go ahead and which would not this year? Are we talking about asset management and recommendations from the department, or does it involve last-minute negotiations with government MLAs and ministers who say: Give me my new bridge or else. Is it politics first and proper asset management gets kicked to the side?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Hon. Mr. Oliver (Kings Centre, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, I would be glad to answer that question. As the members opposite know, asset management is very much part of how we make decisions in the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure. This year is no different. We have to look at the assets that are required, and we make decisions based on that.

As far as the bridges and the infrastructure that we will be working on are concerned, I will take my lead from previous ministers of Transportation and Infrastructure and wait until the budget has been declared. I will have my say tomorrow. Thank you very much.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, it is funny that the members opposite talk about asset management. Last year, they cut and slashed without even considering asset management. This year, they are going to follow the list.

In the past, members of all sides of the House have spoken about how important it is to follow asset management when it comes to our infrastructure, including highways, bridges, and buildings. If we do not invest in roads and buildings in a timely manner, they will cost taxpayers a lot more down the road. Last year, the government cancelled a number of investments that needed to be made, pushing costs onto future governments. Are we going to see more of that in today's capital budget?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to talk a little bit about what asset management means. It means looking after what you have so that you know you will have it in the future. It does not mean that you invent a project and build something that you do not need. That has been the difference in opinions.

When we talk about what we have been doing in this past year in terms of asset management, in terms of evaluating what we need to spend money on... You bet that is where we are putting our resources. We are putting them into ensuring that the infrastructure we need in all parts of this lovely province is there for the future. But, no, that would not be the plan across the hall. The plan would be to spend money on whatever you can, raise taxes, and just build it—just build it, and they will come.

The discussions that I have had with the Prime Minister and the discussions for infrastructure funding are around infrastructure projects that we need. We need to ensure that we can have those projects for the future in every part of our community. That is our focus, Mr. Speaker.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

INCOME ASSISTANCE

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, today it is impossible for people to live on outdated income assistance rates when their minuscule buying power has been consumed by inflation. For the past nine years, the income for singles has been stuck at just \$537 per month. Imagine trying to live on that. It is impossible. Adjusted for inflation today, this should be \$626.

Today is the UN's Human Rights Day. Signatories of the UN Declaration on Human Rights, such as Canada, are supposed to guarantee an adequate standard of living so that everyone can afford the very basics of food, clothing, housing, and transportation. My question is: Will the Minister of Finance build the necessary funding into next year's budget to ensure that income assistance rates are adjusted to reflect the loss of purchasing power to inflation since 2010 for single people and 2014 for families and the disabled? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really appreciate the member opposite's question because it is not a lot of money. We know that. I was proud that in the David Alward government, we doubled the amount that individual recipients received. The member is right that nothing has happened since then. When the members across were in government, they never increased it. While I cannot commit to a budgetary line item yet, as we are exploring those budgetary items now, I certainly will commit that it is a conversation that will be at the table. We have talked about social development reform—social assistance reform—in our platform, and so it will be a discussion. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, I will be tabling a bill soon to amend the *Family Income Security Act*. The bill, if passed, would, in future, require the minister to review social assistance rates annually to account for increases in the cost of living, including housing, transportation, clothing, and so on. At the moment, though, nobody receiving social assistance can actually afford those essentials of life. Raising their income to account for the erosion of buying power caused by inflation would be a huge help.

The Minister of Finance has said that the government is intending to present a budget with a surplus of \$120 million, Mr. Speaker. Given the desperate needs of those living on social assistance, surely, the minister can supply the Minister of Social Development with the \$19 million from his surplus to ease the burden of life for people living on social assistance. It is not their choice, Mr. Speaker. They have no choice. This is how they earn their income. Will the Minister of Finance commit to this, or will he play Scrooge this Christmas?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the leader of the party opposite for his question.



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

What I will commit to is stopping this intergenerational theft that we have. What I will commit to is budgeting for the next generation and not for the next election. What I will commit to is trying to drive a surplus to get down our debt. Our debt, when we think of all the zeros... Instead of \$14 billion, let's make it \$1 400. Let's say that it is \$1 400 on a Visa bill. So when we have an \$88-million deficit, it is like paying \$8.80 on a \$1 400 Visa bill.

We are not flush with cash, but we are absolutely doing what we can to help those in the most need here in New Brunswick. What I can tell you is that we are trying to protect the future of all our programs, be it education, health, or social development—all of them. But we have to do it without going bankrupt, and that is the fact of the matter.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): My question is regarding the tens of millions of dollars handed out to the New Brunswick naval shipyard in Caraquet. Both red and blue governments have delivered over \$29 million—tax dollars—to this failed project, with no follow-up to know how many jobs were created or what the benefit was to taxpayers. As a matter of fact, in 2015, Opportunities New Brunswick announced \$3.8 million in tax dollars for the creation of 77 jobs. Can the Minister of Economic Development please tell me approximately how many of those 77 people are currently employed at the naval shipyard for the total of \$29 million invested to date?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Yes, I can speak to that boondoggle. It was a situation in which we did not participate back in the finance days of the previous Alward government. There was no investment from Groupe Océan, but that did not matter to the previous Liberal government because it dumped \$50 million into the project. Now, there were various components. There was a barge to be built. Groupe Océan did not put a dime into any of this, actually.

Then, Groupe Océan said: I do have another project if you would like to pay for it. Lo and behold, the previous government said: Sure, we will pay for it. What would you like to build? Well, Groupe Océan would like to build a shipyard. It would like to build a floating drydock. What was it going to do with that drydock? It was going to sail it off to Quebec, tie it up there, and use it against us—use it as competition.

There is nothing happening in that shipyard now because there was no long-term plan. There was no order book, and there never was one intended, because the company was never held accountable for the money it was spending on the taxpayers' dime. What do we own now? We own \$13 million worth of a floating drydock that is sitting up in Quebec and competing with our shipyard in Bas-Caraquet. Unacceptable, Mr. Speaker.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): I appreciate the chance, I guess, to dish it on the Liberals, and believe me, they own a lot of it. But when it comes to corporate handouts, red and blue are not much different. As a matter of fact, we can see the over \$6 million that was given to a big corporate interest in Moncton to set up jobs there.

I guess my question goes back to the fact that we have no analytical data on the jobs that remain after the tax dollars are handed out. More often than not, we see companies come in, sign the paper, cut the ribbon, get the money, and in a couple of years, they are off to Quebec or somewhere else to create jobs.

My question is again for the Minister of Economic Development or the Premier. What does this government plan to do to get true analytical data on the effects of corporate welfare and on whether it actually produces the amount of money that taxpayers dole out for this nonsense every single year?

Hon. Mrs. M. Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, PC): Well, I thank the member opposite for the question. I really appreciate that because it gives us an opportunity to again revisit the fact that in the next 10 years, we are going to be short 120 000 workers due to retirements here in New Brunswick.

I just want to mention that Economic Development is Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, the Finance Department, and Education. We all work together. One of the plans, of course, is the Population Growth Strategy, where we are going to increase immigration by 7 500 people annually by 2024, and this is one of the ways that we are going to do it. This government is very careful about how we partner with companies. A lot of homework is done to make sure that this is going to work.

HCL, out of Moncton, is a global technology firm that recently opened. It is a good example of a sound investment. It will pay dividends for years to come. It is win-win. These jobs will generate an estimated \$7 million dollars in direct taxes over the next six years, which will more than pay back what ONB is investing to support this company getting established in New Brunswick. And I am sure...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Before I ask my question, I cannot help but think that it is quite rich to hear the Premier talk about the shipyard in Bas-Caraquet when it was the Alward government, when he was the Minister of Finance, that went all in on that project. We just followed through.

Mr. Speaker, we do believe in the small nuclear reactor market. It does hold great potential for this project in terms of both economic development and providing cleaner energy. We in this province do have a long history with nuclear power, and we have a lot of expertise.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

The minister also said that we have the resources, the personnel, and the HR to compete at a global level, and we agree with that. But my question is this: Why would we partner with Ontario and Saskatchewan on this when they would be interested in taking jobs from New Brunswick to their own provinces?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, we can go along and clarify things, but I would ask the member opposite to go back and check his records. I am very familiar with the project in Bas-Caraquet, and I know that there was a joint sharing arrangement that was not accepted and that we therefore did not pursue any further. It was his government that came in place and said: We do not need a joint sharing arrangement. I am very confident in that, Mr. Speaker, so maybe he wants to check the facts.

Nevertheless, on the SMRs, this technology provides cheap power from a nonemitting source and is a very different technology than what exists in the CANDU reactors. You know, a statement was made in a recent documentary about the power in all the renewables that we have right now. We are saying that if we had all the batteries in one place, such as in Tokyo, it would run the city for four days. So we can talk about wind and solar and all this stuff, but the fact is, we need massive generation capabilities that will not be provided under current technology.

In terms of dealing with Saskatchewan, it has a need, as 46% of its power is coal. Saskatchewan wants it. It supplies uranium, Mr. Speaker. There is a technology in Ontario that we want to work with to help expand our knowledge here.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, I do invite the Premier to recheck the facts regarding the naval centre in Bas-Caraquet.

Also, when it comes to the SMRs, the Premier said it best. Yes, of course Ontario wants that technology. That is why it partnered with us, and that is what we are afraid of. Again, yesterday and today, one of our leading economists pointed out in a CBC story that Ontario in particular has a history of hoarding research development and manufacturing when it comes to federal research. Are we not letting the fox in the henhouse here, Mr. Speaker?

While our Premier seems concerned with issues facing the Alberta government, I do not think that Doug Ford has a lot of interest in creating jobs here in New Brunswick. We, as the Liberal Party, want to see jobs created in New Brunswick, and we had a competitive advantage here. Why are we giving that advantage away to Ontario and Saskatchewan, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to stand here and talk to that because less than 48 hours ago, we stood on the ground in Saint John to celebrate a New Brunswick company that is going to pioneer this technology. When it comes to being a leader, we have the ability to be not

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

only a Canadian leader but also a world leader. This company exists. It has employees, and now it is looking to expand in New Brunswick because the Higgs-led government has the guts to stand up and say that we want to ensure that this has a home and is developed.

We have a generation's worth of history with Point Lepreau that has proven that this is a natural fit. We are not looking at competing with other areas because they realize that we are an equal player in this.

And for the first time, we have a situation where instead of workers leaving New Brunswick and winding up in Alberta... When we develop this, we will have the opportunity to bring workers back here to New Brunswick and to be a leader when it comes to developing an economy that is sustainable. It is going to lead us into an economy where not only are we working on our own emissions but also helping the world.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Well, I am happy to say, Mr. Speaker, that, yes, not only do we agree with the minister but also we, as the previous government, invested over \$10 million in this technology. So, yes, absolutely, this started way before this government. We pioneered this, and we are fully on board. That is why we are fearful of this action of partnering with other provinces. We had a leading edge, and now, we are basically just saying: Equal partners, okay. New Brunswick and Ontario—equal partners? As much as I love Ontario, it is bigger, and it has a lot of industry. We had a chance to keep an industry and to pioneer it at a global level here in New Brunswick—something that started in New Brunswick.

Also, my next question has to do with some federal innovation funding on this. It has not come our way. We have not heard anything about federal funding, so I would like to ask the minister whether he has heard that federal funding is on hand for this project. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I wonder whether the member opposite had a chance to review and to watch the news as we rolled out that MOU—to watch the news as we stood and made a groundbreaking announcement yesterday in Saint John.

You know, I have heard the leader of the Green Party say: How dare New Brunswick think it can compete on a global stage. I think differently. I have heard other people say: Well, maybe we should worry about Ontario. I think that the time is over for that type of defeatist thinking and it is time for us to stand united. I know there are people all over this House who would agree that New Brunswick can punch way above its weight. We can be a world leader, and if you watched the news and you looked at that MOU, you would see that Premier Blaine Higgs sat in the middle of the table and we were the tip of the spear.

We are the company that put money into it and that has people on the ground, and we are leading this initiative. The rest of the country will have to follow us. And the rest of the



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

world will have to watch as we not only generate the revenue and benefit from that but also contribute significantly to the reduction of global emissions. Win, win, win.

