

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



December 13, 2019

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### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

**Mr. D. Landry** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, we received great news from Ottawa. I know you think I am going to talk about Andrew Scheer's resignation, but that is not the case.

The news I am talking about is the appointment of the MP for Madawaska—Restigouche, René Arseneault, as Parliamentary Secretary. The good news is that he is responsible for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency file. I know we have a minister responsible for economic development, even though we have not seen much economic development under this government.

We think the minister should meet with Mr. Arseneault as soon as possible. Can she specify in the House which files, if any, she would like to discuss with the MP responsible for ACOA?

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I certainly do agree with the Leader of the Opposition. This is good news for New Brunswick to have a New Brunswick-based individual involved and responsible for the ACOA file, so I will certainly encourage the minister to meet with him as soon as possible because there are big issues that we want to get on with and it is nice to have a homegrown individual being part of it. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. D. Landry** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Premier. I hope this will be done as quickly as possible, please.

Speaking of economic files, we know that the holiday season is difficult for the hundreds of people who will lose their jobs with Glencore, in northern New Brunswick. We know that a transition adjustment committee has been set up, in part to help identify new economic opportunities for the region. Can the Premier tell us which ministers are part of this committee, whether a minister has attended a committee meeting, and what new economic development opportunities the committee has discussed?

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[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. In relation to this activity in the north and in trying to recover from the devastating news of the smelter, primarily, we have been working with Glencore. I mean, the committee is local, and, as you know, it is chaired by the CEO of the port of Belledune.

To date, there have been a number of meetings focused on what regional activities can be enhanced. Even recently, there has been talk about going forward with bringing more people to the area, even in the off seasons, through tourism, as just bringing things back. There are other kinds of opportunities that are out there, but it is too early to put them on the table. I guess there is encouragement. I mean, we have had discussions, not only with Glencore on its move as it transitions out, but also with some other people who are interested in transitioning in. Today, two ministers are primarily involved with this and working with the chamber of commerce there and working closely with Denis Caron, who is leading that charge, because we want local input and local influence for a long-term solution. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

**Mr. D. Landry** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, Maritime Iron proposed a pig iron facility in Belledune. We think this would be good for northern New Brunswick and the rest of the province. Can the Premier tell us if this file is moving forward?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Can I say that it is progressing? It has been on the table for a long time. We are enhancing all aspects of understanding: Is that project real? What can we do to facilitate it? How can we move it forward?

It seems that there have been numerous roadblocks. I think one of them was getting our carbon plan finished and agreed upon. That poses a problem, and I had spoken of it to Dominic LeBlanc early in my mandate, about whether this could fit in as a global solution for emission reductions. Certainly, when we consider transportation to Korea and then coming back for the sale of steel products in the U.S., it seems as though there is an overall improvement. I have offered to go and visit the company that was actually promoting this at the time, probably a year ago, so we are digging under the hood of that project, because if it is real, we are chasing it. We have ramped up the intensity there. To the member, I want to continue working with the leader on that file, because we want to make it happen.



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### BRIDGES

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, what a difference a day makes. Earlier this week, the minister who is killing tourism was calling himself the special one, claiming he had received \$1 million for a new bridge. A day later, we learned that most of that money is for repairs to the existing bridge. Apparently, there is some money for planning, but that appears to be a recycling of an announcement made by the previous government. I will repeat: Most of this money is for repairing the old bridge. Can the Minister of Transportation confirm that there is no money in this budget for actual construction of a new bridge?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Gauvin** (Shippagan-Lamèque-Miscou, Deputy Premier, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Thank you for the question. Every time I have the opportunity to rise to talk about the Shippagan Bridge, I will be pleased to do so. There is money for the engineering design. There is money to determine where the bridge will go, and there is money to make models so that people can actually see what the new bridge will look like.

These steps are necessary to know how much the bridge will cost. What do you want us to announce, \$70 million, without knowing how much the bridge will cost? It is necessary to go through these steps. It would be nice to throw money around right now and say: We will see. It is necessary to go through these steps. Processes are in place, but money is going toward developing the new bridge, and I can assure you of that, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much.

[*Original*]

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): I think we actually need to hear from the Minister of Transportation. He did get up and read his speech, which he did not share with us, and mention that a large part of that money was going toward the repair of the actual bridge. I do not know whether the Minister of Tourism and Deputy Premier did not read his briefing notes, but the money that has been allocated this year is going toward repairs and maintenance and not toward the actual building of a new bridge. In order to make things clear—in order for everybody to understand—can the Minister of Transportation please explain to the Minister of Tourism that the money for this year's budget is going toward repairs and maintenance and that there will be no actual work done on the construction of a new bridge?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): It is interesting because it shows how little they know about the construction and design process.

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Back a few years ago, a year or more ago, I met with the group that was studying the need for a bridge between Shippagan and Lamèque. You kind of ask why anyone is even questioning that. I mean, there is no concern about the need for the bridge, but there is a need to ensure that while we are designing a new bridge, we actually have a reliable bridge there. Do you know how long it takes to build a bridge that will replace a drawbridge? It takes a while. If you want to go back in history, you can look at project after project and the time it took not only to design but also to implement them. So, will there be construction this year on a new bridge? No, there will not. Will there be design work done on the new bridge? Yes, there will, because that is the process. Look at the system.

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): I cannot believe what I am hearing. The Minister of Tourism and Deputy Premier was counting the days to go in front of the camera and announce to the people in his riding that he was investing \$1 million for a new bridge. The Minister of Transportation clearly said that most of that money from that \$1 million would go toward the repair and maintenance of the actual bridge. He brought in the mayors, and he was grinning from ear to ear. But the actual truth is that there is no new money being spent for the new bridge.

Again, in order for everybody to clearly understand, I ask the Minister of Transportation to speak to the Minister of Tourism and explain to him that there is actually no new money being spent on this year's bridge and that there will be no new construction this year.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think I just answered that. Will there be new construction this year? Very unlikely. Will there be new money spent on design work? Absolutely, because that is the process. Will there be money spent to ensure that the current bridge is reliable and that the people can depend on the bridge and on getting back and forth? Absolutely, because that is the process. I know every—every—situation is the same. You look at the reliability to ensure that it continues, so, yes, there is money being spent on maintenance. We did not ignore that. But there is new money being spent on a design feature as well. That is the process that we are going through, and we will go through this for a while.

I would encourage the member opposite to go back and look at the projects over the years. The previous Minister of Transportation—how many times did he ever announce anything before he did something? Do you know the difference? We actually do things when we talk about them. That is the big difference from this side of the House.

## ROUTE 11

**Mr. Bourque** (Kent South, L): It sounds to me as though it is more like \$1 million to bridge the gap between the Deputy Premier and the Premier.

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I do want to say that I am pleased about the funding for this year regarding Route 11. I am glad to see this because we all know that last year a lot of untold millions were left on the table to pay for the project. My question is this. From my understanding, we all know that the twinning from Cocagne to Bouctouche is going to happen now, and that is a good thing. But the bridges are not going to be done. My understanding, when I speak to engineers, is that this raises a lot of safety concerns—concerns that I do share. My question is: Was it recommended by the engineers to have this twinned without the bridges? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Oliver** (Kings Centre, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Certainly, we have always been concerned with safety along Route 11. We have had to make so many difficult decisions as to what we can and cannot do. The structures are one of the issues that we certainly know are important to the crossings of the rivers, but, at this point in time, we have had to make a decision as to what we can do that is in everyone's best interest and is the safest way to proceed with this project. We have announced that we are going to continue to twin the highways from Shediac River to the Little Bouctouche River without the structures. We certainly have talked to our engineers, and they say that this can be done. This can be done safely, and we will proceed in that direction.

*[Translation]*

**Mr. Bourque** (Kent South, L): I thank the minister for his answer. However, I have reservations about it, since I am not sure it is the safest way to proceed. I have talked to several engineers. In fact, when we were in power, it was clear from the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure that this was not the safest way to proceed.

*[Original]*

Having said that, we also know that this is not the national standard for four-lane highways. We know that federal money is based on this, or it was. I am hoping it is still the case that 50% of the costs are covered by the federal government. I am asking the minister: If it is still the case, even with the bridges not being four lanes and with our having substandard highways—I mean, Kent County, of all places—again, would this still qualify for half of the funding by the federal government? That is my question.

**Hon. Mr. Oliver** (Kings Centre, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Certainly, I want to assure the member opposite that before proceeding with any of these issues, as the members opposite are very much aware, there were federal dollars promised. We went to the federal government people last year and talked to them about delaying this project. They certainly gave their assurance that monies would be made available in coming years. The money that we are spending in the project this year certainly includes the dollars from the federal government. That is how we are proceeding with it at this point in time.

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### CROP INSURANCE

**Mr. C. Chiasson** (Victoria-La-Vallée, Deputy Speaker, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The head of Potatoes New Brunswick says that the feds are ready to come to the table for our farmers on the losses that they incurred in the last season. I do not think that our Premier understands the gravity of the situation. That person also says that the minister told Potatoes New Brunswick that the government does not have the money.

There is a line item in the budget for this under General Government. There is a supplementary funding line item that you increased from \$62 million to \$115 million this year. It is supposed to be for unanticipated events such as this. It is not just a political slush fund. You have a responsibility to help our farmers. I am sure the member from Carleton would agree that our potato farmers are important. Other provinces have done so. Why has this government not done so?

**Hon. Mr. Wetmore** (Gagetown-Petitcodiac, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the question. Certainly, on this side of the House, we do recognize what an important contribution potatoes make to the provincial economy.

I would like the member to know that I have met with Potatoes New Brunswick on numerous occasions while working through this. There are a number of business risk management programs available. There are AgriInvest, AgriRecovery and AgriStability. These are programs that can be accessed. We have sent letters to all our potato growers saying that if they have any problems or financial issues, we are more than prepared to sit down and discuss concerns with any potato growers in the province. We certainly do take this with a great, a great...

(Interjection.)

**Hon. Mr. Wetmore** (Gagetown-Petitcodiac, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): A great interest. Thank you.

We will be, Mr. Speaker... We are working...

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

**Mr. Harvey** (Carleton-Victoria, L): Mr. Speaker, New Brunswick potato farmers pay membership fees to Potatoes New Brunswick to represent them in negotiations with industry and federal and provincial governments. This government has met with Potatoes New Brunswick. It keeps meeting with the organization, but it is all talk and no action. There has been no action from this government for nearly one year, with no results.



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Now it wants to meet with every individual potato farmer in New Brunswick. There are 145 farms that it wants to meet with individually. The divide-and-conquer strategy is shameful, and it is an attack on Potatoes New Brunswick, as mentioned in the recent articles in the newspaper. Potatoes New Brunswick is fed up with this government, and the potato farmers in New Brunswick are fed up with this government because it will not come to their assistance, unlike the provinces of Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia, who have come to the assistance of their potato farmers in their times of need. This government is shameful in that it will not stand up for the potato farmers of New Brunswick—shameful.

**Hon. Mr. Wetmore** (Gagetown-Petitcodiac, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We did have a one-minute rant from the member across the way. I would like to tell you what we are doing for the potato industry. We have made commitments to work with the New Brunswick potato growers. We have met on numerous occasions, and we have laid out the steps that we are more than prepared to take.

Again, there are a number of business risk management programs that are available. But, unfortunately, the member across the way seems to forget about those. The Premier of New Brunswick has met with the New Brunswick potato growers, so they certainly know what we are doing. But, unfortunately, this opposition wants to play politics with what is considered our biggest cash crop in the farming industry. It is a shame. They should be sitting around and helping the potato growers...

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

**Mr. Harvey** (Carleton-Victoria, L): Mr. Speaker, I think the minister needs to get a little bit of a tutorial from his staff on the AgriRecovery framework because the program is there for natural disasters. It is designed to help farmers—all farmers from whatever sector in the province—in their time of need from a natural disaster in terms of wet conditions and weather conditions. That is exactly what happened in the fall of 2018. The program is there. It is a federal-provincial program where the federal government pays 60% and the province pays 40%.

In this case, Mr. Speaker, there was \$18 million of damage to the potato crop of 2018. In the 70% margin... The minister knows this, and he will not act. In the 70% margin, the province pays only 40% of that. It is \$5 million for a billion-dollar industry. The government will not help the farmers of New Brunswick. Nova Scotia helped its farmers. Prince Edward Island helped its farmers. This minister is not doing his job, Mr. Speaker, and is not working with the farmers.

**Hon. Mr. Wetmore** (Gagetown-Petitcodiac, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. What this member does not tell you is that there is AgriInvest, there is AgriStability, and there is AgriInsurance. There are a number of business risk programs. But he does not tell you what is going on.

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Mr. Speaker, we are working with all sectors of agriculture. It is not just potatoes. It is blueberries, and it is apples. We are working with all of them. The member across the way knows there is more than just one recovery program. That is what we are working... We are prepared to work, and we are prepared to look at all the programs. But, unfortunately, we have an opposition that is playing politics with one of the biggest sectors in our agriculture business, and we are not going to be pushed around by this gentleman across the way. We are going to find a way to work...

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

## HOMELESSNESS

**Mrs. Conroy** (Miramichi, PA): Mr. Speaker, I am disappointed that the Department of Social Development is taking away funding for 70 subsidized apartments in Moncton. Those who work closely with more than 150 homeless people are concerned that this will do serious, lasting harm to those who need subsidized housing. The minister has stated that she has no choice but to remove the funding for these 70 subsidized apartments, which will continue until April when the new budget begins. My question to the minister is: What are these vulnerable people supposed to do during the cold winter months coming up?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, homelessness did not happen overnight. There were many years when things could have been done when the former government was getting \$1 billion more in taxes and decided to start giving it to Liberal friends. The former government was more interested in a Minister of Celtic Affairs. It was more interested in giving lucrative deals to Cannabis NB lease owners than it was in putting money in its communities.

So, Mr. Speaker, in this one year, we have provided shelters for up to almost 200 people. We have provided permanent housing to over 100 people in Saint John, Fredericton, and Moncton. And we have provided the wraparound services to help them have a successful transition. This is not about the effort, because the effort has been there. This is about the capacity and its growth.

**Mrs. Conroy** (Miramichi, PA): We know that homelessness does not happen overnight, but it certainly happens overnight when these people had a home one day and had to leave. I can certainly appreciate the job that the minister's office, the department, and she herself have to do, but at this time of year... It is hard to lose your house at any time of the year, but for something like this to happen over the holidays, at a good time, it is even worse.

Housing is the only solution to ending the homelessness issues that we have in the province. Providing tax incentives for contractors who can build affordable housing units



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will help this problem. Emergency shelters are already stretched to the max. Does the minister agree that this decision to remove the subsidies for these 70 units only adds to the homelessness problem in the province?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, the former government left this lingering. I barely had time to enter a password into my computer before the homelessness file was slammed in front of us to deal with. And we deal with it, Mr. Speaker. We have not left it...

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Order.

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): We have not left it for others to pick up the slack. We are moving forward with this. In order to fulfill our shelter commitments and in order to provide the most basic necessities to those who are living roughly, we invested immediately. We knew where the money had to go. We are early in our mandate. We are not going to shirk this responsibility as others have done. We are working toward a resolution. The former Minister responsible for Celtic Affairs could have done it.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Members, I have mentioned this often. When people are speaking or delivering a message, please listen and try not to interrupt your colleagues when they are trying to answer or ask a question.

## ELECTORAL REFORM

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, last year's election resulted in the first minority government in New Brunswick in a century, with no party receiving more than 40% of the votes. The first-past-the-post electoral system results in a Legislature that does not reflect the proportion of the votes cast. This could be fixed by bringing in a mixed-member proportional system.

A recent poll by Angus Reid found that levels of support for proportional representation are at an all-time high in Canada. Two thirds of Atlantic Canadians favour proportional representation, up from less than half three years ago. The poll also found that there is also support from people who support all political parties.

Will the Premier commit to starting a working group on a mixed-member proportional system so that our voting system would better reflect the votes of New Brunswickers?



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**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. You know, it is interesting. We have the first minority government in 100 years. It has brought a whole lot of new dynamics to the House. I think that, in many ways, it has brought a better dynamic to the House. I think that we are working through this process right now, and I am not interested in moving forward and changing something in another way until we see how well this one has worked.

Yes, it may have taken us 100 years to get here, but, you know, it took a long time in the federal government to see what we have seen over the last election. Big changes are happening in the electoral world, and they are unfolding in a democratic system that has been working for us for centuries.

So I think that we will give this minority government a chance to do the job. I think we are working as a government, collectively, with our colleagues here to get the job done. Progress is being made, and I am pretty excited about that. I am not prepared to go down another trail and mess that up. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, this is still on the topic of a healthy democracy. The Premier might have heard of the detrimental effects a media concentration could have on social debates and government policies. A 2013 paper by Toby Couture of the London School of Economics and Political Science, which I will table, concludes that the concentration in the print media in New Brunswick is unhealthy and that our people are not getting the breadth and depth of hard news coverage they deserve.

As Charles McElman, one of the 15 senators serving on the Davey Commission, asked in 1970—but it is still very relevant today—my question for the Premier is this: Suppose there was a province where the one family that owned 84% of the market share of all print media in the province also owned woods, pulp mills, oil refineries, shipping lines, sports teams, and rail lines. Perhaps they are even the biggest single employer in this province. In that situation, could the newspapers do a good job of reporting?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, if I look around this room and think of all my colleagues in here, I would think that my colleague who just asked the question would be most aware of the impact of social media and the widespread opinions that we all receive every day. Times have changed. Papers are disappearing. That dominance, whether it was real or not real in the past, has changed. It is not to the point today, with social media... For one paper after another, for the dominant papers that existed throughout our country, circulation is disappearing. It is dropping.

I think that our social media aspect... We have asked, in many ways, what are the other aspects of social media on our youth, on mental health conditions, and how do we understand the messages that are getting out there? Mr. Speaker, it is not fake news. It is real news. So often now, we are all bombarded with anyone's opinion, just over and over



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and over again. What role is that playing in our schools? I think that the world has changed, and I think that my colleague across the aisle would certainly have to agree with that. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

### FERRIES

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was nice to hear from the Minister of Agriculture today, especially when he and his staff are not out yelling at and pushing road crew workers.

I would like to get an update on the Gagetown ferry. Can the Premier update us on this file? Will money be spent or lost this coming year on this ferry? Also, how does the Gagetown ferry and the imaginary bridge in Lamèque for the special one compare with the hardworking nursing home staff who care for our frail and elderly on his mysterious ability-to-pay scale? How does that work?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am not sure whether there was a question in there. There was a bit of a diatribe, but was there a question? There were several topics. I think it started out about a ferry. So, in relation to the ferry, we said that we were going to work with the community to find a solution, and we are doing just that. We are working to find a solution on the ferry, and I am comfortable and confident that we will find one. But the idea is that right now, I do not have anything to report. There is no ferry moving in for the winter. However, we will continue to move on that file, continue to find a solution for the community and surrounding communities, and do what is right for our province in all sectors of our province.

That is our goal—making decisions that make sense. I know that it is a novel concept and something that was not very prevalent in the previous government, but it is one that we live by. You do what is right, and you do it over and over again, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, that is a fairy-tale answer, but it has come to be expected now from the fairy-tale ministers who spend time at party fundraisers making phantom announcements about projects that are not going to see the light of day. All the while, this government has been attacking our labour unions. The members opposite have not bargained in good faith. They have had months to settle that issue, and now they want us to sit day and night when we could have been here resolving this while the Premier was out campaigning for his friend Andrew Scheer. Can the Premier now tell us how he is going to resolve the issue and what are the conditions of his ability-to-pay legislation?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that I have made it very clear over and over again—and I made it clear

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again yesterday—how important this particular bill is to the future of our province. I guess what is most disturbing to me is that members of the prior government were in the very same situation and their attitude only changed when they lost the election. Before that, their attitude was the very same. You know, we are holding the line here because it is what is right for New Brunswick. When they change power, it does not matter what is right for New Brunswick, because they are just going to try to get back in power.

We have seen eight cities in the province—eight cities—come forward to say this: We have a problem, and we are hoping that you, as elected members, will represent us. Those eight cities are from all around the province. And we have a situation in our government where we are saying that we want to be fair and reasonable with our employees and that they need to be fair and reasonable with the taxpayers. That is what this is about, because we cannot manage going forward otherwise. There are key things for us to improve the way we are as a province, and this is one of them, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Question period is over.

