Oral Questions



March 11, 2020

CONTENTS

1

Mr. G. Arseneault HEALTH CARE

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Melanson

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Flemming

Hon. Mr. Flemming

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Oral Questions

CORONAVIRUS
Mr. D'Amours
Hon. Mr. Flemming
HEALTH CARE
Ms. Mitton
Hon. Mr. Higgs
Mr. K. Arseneau
Hon. Mr. Higgs
TAXATION
Mr. Austin
Hon. Mr. Steeves
Mr. Austin
Hon. Mr. Steeves
CORONAVIRUS
Mr. D'Amours
Hon. Mr. Flemming
Mr. D'Amours
Hon. Mr. Flemming
Mr. C. Chiasson
Hon. Mr. Cardy
Mr. C. Chiasson
Mr. C. Chiasson
Hon. Mr. Higgs

Oral Questions

[Translation]

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, Opposition House Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

I am not leading off question period, but it is customary in the parliamentary calendar at this stage to extend the question period by 15 minutes. I would seek the consent of the House to extend question period in such a manner. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Do we have unanimous consent to extend question period by 15 minutes?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It feels good to be back in the Legislature. I can assure you of that, Mr. Speaker. Since we last sat in December, many, many things have happened. Many things have happened. But let's go back to December, when we were here in the Legislature. The official opposition asked many pertinent questions regarding health care and rural hospitals. The Premier and the Minister of Health clearly said that we were fear-mongering, and they would never answer the questions. Then February 11 happened.

Mr. Speaker, when we listened to the budget speech yesterday, there was absolutely no clear indication that what was brought forward on February 11 would not come about again. My question is for the Premier. Is it possible that these cuts and changes could happen again under your government?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, what is clear is that we have a major crisis affecting our health care system in our province, and what is unclear is the fact that some people refuse to accept that we have challenges. What I have said in terms of the reform package that was put together is that, yes, the rollout was flawed. There were questions that were not able to be answered, which was unacceptable.

I have had a number of conversations with different mayors throughout the communities affected, and I have planned, as I said, to do the tour, the consultation tour. Do you know what I am getting back as feedback, Mr. Speaker? We know there is a problem, and we want to help. We just want to be part of the solution. They are not ignoring it or saying that there

Oral Questions

is not a problem, Mr. Speaker. They want to be informed. They want to help, and they want to have creative ideas to fix it. So will we change the process? Absolutely. Will we find solutions while working with local communities? Absolutely. But will we bury our heads in the sand and ignore the health crisis that is coming to this province? We will not, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, with regard to the Premier's standards, he said that if we have clear questions, we will give clear answers. I am going to repeat not the full preamble but my question. Regarding what you brought forward on February 11, affecting six rural hospitals by eliminating the night emergency rooms—yes or no, Mr. Premier—is it possible that your government would bring these changes forward again? Yes or no?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, what the member opposite does not seem to want to recognize is whether we have a problem. We have said that we are going to meet with every community and talk about this, but we have also said that we are putting a health summit together in June to put all the issues on the table, including emergency access and the capabilities of our ambulance system to deal with rural issues.

Mr. Speaker, all the issues are on the table. That includes everything. We can have that discussion openly with every community and ask what it would do in order that we can ensure better health care, not only to sustain it, but also to improve it going forward. Mr. Speaker, many of these hospitals have 50% or more people waiting to get into alternate levels of care and long-term care. We do not have the capability to manage that. The members opposite know that. Let's work together to face the reality and not to find a way to separate and to do nothing. Doing nothing is not an option.

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, when we listen to what the Premier is saying, it really becomes an issue of confidence. As we all know, a budget speech becomes a public relations tool that highlights the most positive elements of a budget. However, it is the unspoken things in a budget speech that must always be challenged. I am listening to the Premier this morning. He says all the issues are on the table instead of giving a yes or no to my first question. This means that what was announced on February 11 can always be put back on the table and that this Premier will want to go ahead.

Through you, Mr. Speaker, how, Mr. Premier, can people have confidence, and how can we believe that what you are saying is what is written in the budget speech?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think if one thing is certainly very clear, it is that everything that we said we

Oral Questions

would do when we started this program 16 or 17 months ago, we are doing. We developed a plan. We developed a physical capability in our province that is sustainable. We said we would invest more in health care and education and social assistance, and we are doing just that. We said our indications... We want to measure and to get results for what we do. In our budget speech, we said we are reducing the waiting list for primary care by half. We want 18 000 more people to have access to primary care. We want to reduce our wait times on surgeries and hip and knee replacements by less than one year or maybe even less than six months. It is not acceptable to be where it is today.

Mr. Speaker, in order to fix the problems in New Brunswick's health care system, which everyone, except for those in this room whom I am staring at, recognizes are real, we have to put everything on the table and ask how we utilize what we have to get the best result. That means we want help from every citizen in this province. Did we engage properly? No, we did not, Mr. Speaker. Will we engage properly? Absolutely.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, listening to the Premier this morning validates and confirms what many New Brunswickers have said, that the plan announced on February 11 is not cancelled, but is just on pause. It is just on pause, and it is delayed.

The Minister of Health said a few things, but one thing that he said is that there is only one plan. He made that public. In terms of consultation, he said that we had enough consultation. He said that publicly. Now the Premier is saying there is going to be more consultation. Who is right? Mr. Speaker, we have a well-respected physician from Sackville who said that this health summit is fake consultation—fake consultation. So, Mr. Speaker, which plan? Is it the plan about which the Minister of Health said there is only one, or is it the plan about which the Premier said there is supposed to be some other plan? Which plan? You made it public. It is only on pause. Are you going to go ahead with that plan?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, we have one plan, and that is to fix the health care system for the future of this province. That contrasts with the only plan that we see from the opposition, which is: How do we get the government to fall so that we can continue our activity of spending more money, taxing more money, chasing people away from our province, and not delivering the services that we need? That is the only plan that exists across this floor, Mr. Speaker.

It is not acceptable for people to say that we have a problem, but we are going to walk away or quit. Mr. Speaker, we are not quitters. We are going to focus on delivering for this province. If we want to divide it up, north and south, that is very unfortunate. In talking to the Chairperson of the Vitalité Health board, Michelyne Paulin, she said that this is one of the few times that we have had both Vitalité and Horizon working together to help sustain the health care system. What an achievement, Mr. Speaker. Let's not make this a language issue. Let's not make this a north and south issue. Let's make this a health care issue.

Original by Hansard Office

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, when the Premier gets the opportunity to speak, he obviously changes his story. When he put his plan on pause, he blamed the health networks. Today, he seems to want to give them a bit of credit. It is not very clear what the Premier is telling us, since he has lost credibility and certainly the confidence of the people.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health says there is a plan, and the Premier says there would be a plan. Why does the Premier not unveil the whole plan?

The Premier has put Phase 1 on pause, and Phase 2 is still unknown, but he knows what it is. What about Phase 3? Unveil the whole plan; be transparent, so people know what to expect and nothing is hidden with regard to health.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I saw something interesting about two or three days after the original health reform date was put forward and then withdrawn. It was this big, thick document that the former government had had all the time that it was in office. It had dramatic changes to our health care and to our hospitals across rural New Brunswick—dramatic changes.

Is it not funny that the government members' only plan was uncovered after they left office? Here it was. I just saw that document. Maybe we should talk about that because it was significant. We did not plan to do all of that. We planned to find a way to save health care in our province. We planned to find a way to ensure that our long-term care patients were not just lying in hospital beds, but had an activity centre and an opportunity to live out their lives in dignity. We have to address this situation. It is most unfortunate that it is only in here, through these political games, that it gets ignored. Mr. Speaker, we will not ignore it, but we will work with communities to get it.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, speaking of political games, your Health Minister said that the plan was all about winning urban New Brunswick in an election for your party. You guys started this political game. That was the strategy. So I ask the Premier, through you, Mr. Speaker...

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, L): Why does the Premier not put it all out: Phase 1, which they announced on February 11, and Phases 2 and 3, which you would suspect may affect the bigger regional hospitals? Why is that information not public? We need to know from the Premier. He is the leader who says that he is going to consult now. He is going to take it into

Oral Questions

his own hands. He is going to go talk to different communities, which he should have done prior to... Give us all the facts—Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3. What is the plan that the Minister of Health and you are referring to? We need to know.

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the statement that the member opposite made is misleading the House, if he said that I took the position...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): You are not supposed to use the... Mr. Minister, do not use the word "misleading", please. You have the floor.

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Show me the proof, please, where I was quoted as saying that. I would like to see it. I have no recollection of it, and it is inconceivable that I would say such a thing.

In any event, what we have here that people will not try to play with is the fact that we have a serious shortage of health care professionals. We are retiring doctors faster than we are replacing them. We are running out of nurses faster than we are replacing them. We are running out of health care workers faster than they are being replaced. That is well known by everyone in this House. So to work toward a plan in a...

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, we still have not heard from the Premier on the full plan. I think that it is important that when you start wanting to change the health care system... There is so much at stake: people's access to health care, the providers, and the communities. People want to be part of the solution, but the Premier has not made the full plan public. We have heard about Phase 1, and the Minister of Health said that was the only plan. We have not heard about Phase 2 or Phase 3 or the fact that there may be more phases. Can the Premier get up today—as he said, a fair question will get a fair answer—and say when he will make public the full plan and the health care reform that he has in mind?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting. I referred to the document that I saw about three weeks ago that the former government had in its possession. I can only assume that the former Finance Minister would have seen that before, because it was something that they had all through their process.

So, let's agree to this, Mr. Speaker. We have a health care summit coming forward, so let's agree that all parties play a role with all the facts on the table. I will be the first to stand up with all the facts on the table. Let's decide whom we want to be part of it, but, Mr. Speaker, let's not ignore it. Let's have an opportunity to address the issues that one government after another failed to address.

Oral Questions

Mr. Speaker, I said that I am not here for the goodness of my health. I am hoping to have a health care program when I eventually retire. It could be sooner than later that I retire. Who knows?

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): But the point is that I will not walk away from a health care crisis in this province.

[Translation]

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development seems to be acting on his own by taking extraordinary steps with regard to the coronavirus disease file. However, we would much rather hear publicly what the Public Health officials have to say.

The Minister of Health is currently silent when it comes to the coronavirus disease file. Yet he is the minister responsible for health and public health in New Brunswick. Can the Minister of Health confirm to us that Public Health officials fully endorse his colleague's position?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you for the question. Public Health is the organization that deals with these kinds of issues. I do not know about the member opposite, but I do not have a medical degree in infectious diseases. I take it upon my position to rely on the people in Public Health. I rely on Dr. Russell and Dr. Muecke for the work that they do.

Public Health has performed for this province in an exemplary manner. When we look back at everything from Legionnaires' disease to measles to hepatitis to listeria, SARS, Ebola, and MERS, we see that our Public Health people in this province have performed in an outstanding manner. The House should thank them for the work that they do. The House should get behind them and encourage them for the work that they do.

If the Minister of Education wants to err on the side of caution by protecting the children in New Brunswick, well, then good on him, as...

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

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, the residents of my riding, along with many others around the province, have lost trust and confidence in the leadership of Horizon. Last week, Sackville town council unanimously approved a motion calling for the CEO's resignation. There are many reasons for this lack of trust, including the complete lack of consultation with doctors, nurses, paramedics, other health care professionals, and our communities. There is a lack of confidence in the current leadership at Horizon to engage in consultations with our communities.

On Monday, Horizon's board chair, John McGarry, said that the public cannot have the power to veto health care reform. This does not sound like someone who is open to other ideas. Considering the clearly stated lack of trust that people living in Sackville and a growing list of other local service districts and municipalities across the province have in the CEO of Horizon and the chair of the board of Horizon, will the Minister of Health ask for their resignations?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks for the question. I appreciate this. I have received those letters as well, and I understand the angst and concern there. I said that I wanted to do a postmortem with all the people involved in this rollout so that we can understand this: Where did we have opportunities, where could we have made improvements, and then how can we consult properly with different areas of the province? But here is where tradition changes a little. What has always happened? What has always happened in the past is that all we did was fire the people and start again, and then we did not accomplish anything. We just went back into a recycle.

So I am not here denying or defending or promoting any of us who were involved in this process. What I am saying is that I want to understand, I want to investigate, I want to know what we would do differently, and I want to know how we would do it differently and who would be the best people to lead that doing it differently. What I do not want to do is to go back and reinvent the wheel and procrastinate for another two or three or four years because, Mr. Speaker, time is of the essence.

[Translation]

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, the people of Kent North and throughout the province have lost confidence in the leadership of Vitalité Health Network.

Oral Questions

As a matter of fact, the Kent Regional Service Commission asked that Vitalité Health Network CEO, Gilles Lanteigne, be dismissed, and the Acadian Peninsula Regional Service Commission asked that he resign.

There are ample reasons for this lack of trust, including the lack of consultation with physicians, nurses, paramedics, firefighters, the RCMP, and our communities. Furthermore, the vice-chair of Vitalité Health Network, Norma McGraw, a democratically elected member, not a member appointed by the minister, resigned from the board, saying she had never voted on this proposed reform.

Considering the loss of confidence on the part of the people of Kent, our elected officials, and our communities across the province, will the Minister of Health ask the CEO and the chair of the board to resign? While he is at it, will he resign, too?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, once again, I would say that the purpose for me is to understand all the issues surrounding this exercise and where we have opportunities to get better. Does that mean that different people should lead it moving forward? Maybe it does, but it will not be something based on just a criticism that we all cannot explain and understand.

I guess that the concern about anyone who quits a board or quits our party is that it is not how we are going to solve the problems of this province. That is not how we are going to fix New Brunswick. We are not going to fix it by quitting and walking away. We are going to fix it by looking at the issue, understanding our shortcomings, dealing with it, and moving back if we need to, but, Mr. Speaker, at the end of the day, we need to move forward. That is our goal. I am convinced that, as we get better at this, we will find ways to work with every community to deliver the very best health care that we possibly can, and we will protect our citizens going forward.

TAXATION

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, I was very pleased to see that this government has acted on our push for tax reduction, specifically, the double tax and the nonresidential tax. Tax reduction and deregulation are key drivers to a successful economy, and as a province, we must do all we can to drive private-sector growth.

I believe that when it comes to the elimination of the double tax, it has to be twofold. There has to be a benefit for the landlord, but there also has to be a benefit for the tenants, especially in the housing crisis that we have in this province. My question is for the

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Oral Questions

Minister of Finance. With the reduction of the double tax of 50% over four years, how can he ensure that the tenants of the province will receive some of that benefit?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for asking a question about the budget.

We are absolutely monitoring the situation. We are absolutely talking to the landlords and the association, and we do want to pass on the savings as best we can to the renters. We have talked to them about freezing rents. We have talked to them about improving the buildings. We have talked to them about a number of different things, and we will continue to monitor that situation to make sure that the situation is improving. They are going to benefit from this, and we want all New Brunswickers to benefit from this. We want all New Brunswickers to feel that they have some extra money this month to spend on themselves. Thank you very much for the question.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for that reply. Again, back during the campaign, one thing that was very strong in our platform was the reduction, with the elimination, of the double tax. Again, it is nice to see that we are moving in that direction. We cannot have a thriving economy if we depend solely on public-sector employees. We have to look at private-sector growth to make sure that New Brunswick can survive.

Included as a part of the plan for the double-tax elimination that we had called for and fought so hard for was a rent rate freeze for three years. By eliminating the double tax, you could freeze the rental rates from going up, which, again, would trickle down to the tenants. The reality is that when the landlords are paying too much in tax, they inevitably pass that down to the tenants. When the reverse holds true and you start to reduce it with the goal of eliminating that tax, you have to make sure that the benefits flow down to the tenants as well so that they can have some benefit from it. Again, I just want to ask the minister: What concrete plan does he have to make sure that tenants benefit from that tax reduction?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. As we see this roll out... It is rolling out, first of all, over four years. We have to see how this looks in the short term, we have to see how it looks in the medium term, and we have to see how it looks in the long term. We have to see how we can use this to help the people of New Brunswick, as I said earlier. The consultations will be beginning, and we will be talking to them. But we will also be monitoring—and they know that as well—how the situation is going to unfold. They know that we expect that New Brunswickers' lots in life will improve from this. The landlord association, I am sure, will react positively to that as well.

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Oral Questions

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, I am very happy to know that the Minister of Health is not a specialist. So it should be the same thing for his colleague, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. Since we cannot hear directly from the Public Health officials, can the Minister of Health confirm that Public Health officials fully endorse the position of his colleague?

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Well, you are right. I do not have a degree. I have confidence in Public Health. I know that Public Health is working on a regular basis with members of Cabinet. Public Health has been meeting with the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development as late as yesterday afternoon. I know that they are in constant communication. I know that the government is setting up an all-party working group, which is made up of the leaders of the three other parties here as well as the government. It is a process in which we are working together.

If the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development wants to err on the side of caution with respect to protecting the children of this province, it is his prerogative under the Act to do so. I can just imagine the howling that would go on over there if somebody went to school and got infected with something. They would be screaming because he did not do any...

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

[Translation]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health clearly has no idea, once again, of what is going on. If he let Public Health officials and professionals from this sector speak, the public would know exactly what is going on.

The Minister of Health is clearly trying to leave the door open for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development to make decisions or reverse them. The minister wants to make decisions one day and reverse them the next because he is changing his mind from one day to the next.

New Brunswickers want accurate information. Health professionals are the ones who can provide it. People in charge of Public Health can provide it. Representatives of the Minister of Health can provide it.

When will the Minister of Health let Public Health officials speak directly to New Brunswickers about the COVID-19 situation? Also, when will the minister tell us whether or not he supports the decision made by his colleague, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): This afternoon, Public Health will be available for questioning.

One of the things that really disturbs me... We go back and forth politically on a lot of issues here. That is fair ball. That is the Legislature. We give and we take, and we take and we give. But surely, if there was ever an issue on which we should come together and talk reasonably and rationally, it is this issue.

I can be political. We can bounce back and forth, and we can do what we do in question period. But surely, are we not beyond that? Do we not put the safety and the health of our citizens... Do we not put a potential issue with the health that is going on around the world... I mean, do you really have to stoop that low that you want to turn this into a political issue?

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La-Vallée, Deputy Speaker, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There seems to be a lot of confusion around what is going on with the coronavirus with schools and with hockey, so my question is to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. He announced restrictions on attendance in public schools and early learning facilities for 14 days for those who have travelled internationally. Would the minister tell the House whether it was Public Health who advised him to take this action? Did he consult with Public Health, or is this his own initiative?

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The federal government and the World Health Organization have called for a whole of government response to the coronavirus that is currently threatening populations around the world. I have consulted with people here in the province, in Public Health, beyond Public Health, at the national level, and at the international level to make sure that we have the best possible protections in place for vulnerable populations in our province. You are going to be hearing further action from this government on steps to be taken to protect additional vulnerable populations.

Let me use this opportunity to specify very clearly the steps that are in place. International travel, excluding the state of Maine, where obviously we have a lot of cross-border contact... If any people have travelled, travellers only are affected by this policy. If you have gone on a trip and you work in the public-school system and you come home, you cannot go into the schools for two weeks. If you did not bring your kids on the trip, the kids can still go to school. If anyone has any questions on this, please do not hesitate to contact me at 238-55...

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

Original by Hansard Office

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La-Vallée, Deputy Speaker, L): It sounds a bit like an advertisement there.

Mr. Speaker, again, there is so much confusion around this. I am getting calls, and I know my colleagues are getting calls and messages. People are wondering whether they can still go to school if they visit somebody who has returned from a trip. There is a lot of confusion. The minister alluded this morning that pizza might have something to do with it as well. I am hoping that he can provide us with a bit of clarity.

The restrictions are pretty broad. If you travelled anywhere other than the state of Maine, you cannot go to school upon your return. Why did the minister not just stick to the areas that were identified by Public Health as areas of concern where there are major outbreaks? People are travelling to places where there is no coronavirus at this point in time.

(Interjections.)

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La-Vallée, Deputy Speaker, L): And yet we do not know that there is none here, by the way. Mr. Speaker, I am just wondering whether he can clarify why.

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you for the question. We are in uncharted waters right now with this situation with the coronavirus, but we are seeing that it is spread worldwide. We are fortunate to have a Minister of Education who monitors this worldwide and who stays really focused on this, which has brought us to be in the leading area in this regard right now.

The Minister of Health is working with the Chief Medical Officer. This afternoon, there will be a press release with the Chief Medical Officer where she will be outlining the next steps for us in Canada. She has been in constant contact with her colleagues across the country. Mr. Speaker, we are also setting up an all-party group. I spoke to the leaders of the other parties yesterday. We want to have ongoing oversight so that we get answers directly back to individuals in their ridings and we ensure that we are dealing with that.

There is also, which will be unveiled... It is all set up and has been for the last several weeks, but basically, Mr. Speaker, it is all our EMO and all our responses, working with Health and Public Safety, so that we are ready should the first case come, the second case, the third, or the fourth. Our goal is to protect the citizens, and we need to do this together. Thank you.

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

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