

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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FEDERAL FUNDING

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we all know that, to date, New Brunswick has been one of the least generous provinces in terms of income supplements for essential workers. While workers in nursing homes, workers in the health-care sector, and most day-care workers are getting a salary increase in other provinces, New Brunswick has limited its supplement for essential workers to avoid having to spend a single provincial dollar on recognizing these people. The minister has indicated that we could see more essential workers being recognized with salary increases. What happened to this promise?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I indicated to the Leader of the Opposition several weeks ago in this House, it was very important for us, right from day one, to make sure that we acknowledge the frontline workers who were compensated through the taxpayers and that those workers who got us through this COVID crisis be recognized first and foremost. That is what we did. We have always indicated that there could be other phases down the road. But that was our priority from day one, and that was exactly what we did.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Among people who are receiving an income supplement in other provinces, but who will not get one here in New Brunswick, we find nurses, most social workers, paramedics, hospital workers such as cooks and security guards, nursing home workers, people working in the mental health sector, and corrections workers.

We have seen what is happening in Zone 5, where our nurses, paramedics, and workers such as cooks and security guards in hospitals and special care homes, are putting themselves in the line of fire. We are now seeing what these workers are facing in other provinces right now. Why do we not recognize these efforts with a salary increase, as other provinces are doing?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said before in this House, the criteria that was put in

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place was set out by the federal government. It was for individuals who made \$18 per hour and less. That was the criteria that was laid out by the federal government, not us. The workers that he is referring to are in many cases well above that. Based on the criteria that was set out by the federal government, we decided to recognize the individuals who were spelled out in the letter that we sent to the federal government. We believed that those individuals who got us through this crisis needed to be recognized, but we were doing that based on the criteria that the federal government set out for us.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I would have liked the Premier to be the one who rose to answer these questions.

Now, the minister is talking about federal criteria. I think they are flexible criteria and that the province can do anything it wants in this regard. With respect to the strict eligibility requirements, we now find there are even more restrictions on the number of people who are receiving a well-deserved supplement.

Home-care workers are not eligible for this supplement; only those who are employed by an agency are eligible. This basically means that half of home-care workers in the province are not receiving the money they so deserve. Home-care workers do the same important work, so why are they not eligible for this supplement?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, in our province, we are fortunate that most of the people in the health-care field were not able to qualify under the federal program. In relation to the home-care workers that could qualify for the federal program, since we have been here, I think we raised wages by \$1 per hour in the first year and the raise will be 50¢ this fall. That is because we recognized that both home-care workers and day-care workers were not paid appropriately. We will continue to raise that bar on a permanent basis, Mr. Speaker, not on a one-shot deal that is a fad for the day.

Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that the philosophy is different. At the end of the day, we obviously want to recognize the health-care workers who have helped us get through this. We also recognize that we do have a pay scale that is certainly paying well for many if not for most of them. We also recognize that we have a tentative deal with the nursing home workers and we expect that to be ratified. Hopefully, it will be. Mr. Speaker, I think we are doing what is right by New Brunswickers.

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[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Haley Flaro, Executive Director of Ability New Brunswick, says that this decision is very disappointing. She has stated that doing that work when there is a shortage of home-care workers had a deterrent effect. Here is what Ms. Flaro said: If home-care workers were to disappear tomorrow, every hospital, every special care home, and every long-term care home would be overflowing; our health system would be just annihilated. What does the Premier say to that?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am happy to take that question. At first, we wanted to roll this money out. You know, the feds are really good at giving announcements and then taking several weeks to figure out how that money is going to be distributed. We acted as soon as we were able to get clearance from them that the money was, indeed, on the way, and we reached out to all our companies that deal with Social Development.

We do know that there are private vendors out there, private individuals, who work with the disability community. We have made it very clear to Haley Flaro and others in the disability community that those who are subsidized by Social Development and who work on a private basis will be receiving the top-up as well. There is going to have to be a different system because of how it works with the individuals. But that is going to happen, and it is going to happen very soon. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, is the minister telling us that these people are going to get the \$5 supplement? We know how this government has targeted rural New Brunswick, from health care to social work to Service New Brunswick centres, and much more. Ms. Flaro also points out that private workers are the only option for people living in rural New Brunswick where agencies do not go. So, this is another kick in the pants for rural New Brunswickers. What does the Premier have against rural New Brunswick?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, we absolutely are not against rural communities. In fact, we are trying very hard to ensure that we are inclusive in all the work that we do.

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With regard to private home-care workers and private personal support workers, we realized that this gap was there. We knew that there had to be a process to work out how we were going to account for it. That process has been underway. It never stopped when we announced the first rollout. These workers are being addressed. All of them will be made aware in the very near future as to how that process will work, and they will receive the top-up.

I am not sure about the dollar figure that the Leader of the Opposition has assigned because that was not the dollar figure that was included in the other. But let's be assured that we are not leaving out the private care workers who are subsidized by Social Development for the services that they provide to our disability community.

[*Translation*]

AUTISM

Mr. Horsman (Fredericton North, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker, there are approximately 400 children under the age of five in the Fredericton area who are autistic, and I know that there are thousands more around the province. The development of these children requires autism intervention services, which are provided across the province. In many instances, children receive up to five hours of intervention service per day, either at school, in day cares, or at home. Unfortunately, these services were stopped several months ago due to the pandemic.

My question is for the Minister of Health. Now that we are in the yellow phase, can you provide parents of autistic children with information about when they can expect these vital intervention services to restart?

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of primary concern during a pandemic is the health and safety of our citizenry, particularly vulnerable groups. The decision to resume the training is important. It is a good question. I thank the member opposite for it. But it is very important that this be a clinical decision so that under no circumstances are the safety and welfare of children compromised.

Like the member opposite, I am looking forward to resuming, not only the important care of autistic children, but also the many, many more things on which this pandemic has inflicted restrictions. I am sure that all members of the Legislature are in agreement on that. It is through working together with the COVID-19 Cabinet committee and things of

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that nature that we are really working toward something that is a reasonable, safe, and necessary goal for all New Brunswickers. I want to thank the member for the question.

Mr. Horsman (Fredericton North, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For this Premier—and we have all seen it—it is all about the bottom line, not about people in need, such as autistic children. I understand everyone’s frustration.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Department of Health provided for Autism Intervention Services to resume last Friday, June 12. I believe that they always were alongside and open to the second phase, the yellow phase, but it was never communicated to them. There was a lack of communication, and that is what we have to start doing, communicating with AIS and with the parents of autistic children. Families should have been contacted last week. Or they are being contacted this week regarding planning for their children.

I am asking the Minister of Health to ensure better communication both to AIS and to the families of autistic children. It is time that the government started getting back to work, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): When you say that it is time for government to get back to work, I can assure you that the fine public servants of New Brunswick have been doing much more than you would ever imagine. The suggestion is that they need to get back to work when they are working 50, 60, and 70 hours per day, when they are sleeping on cots in their offices, when they have not had a shower in three days, and when they are bringing in boxed lunches. And you have to say that these people have to get back to work. I am telling you that you had better get to work, mister.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I understand that the Premier had his meeting with the Indigenous leaders, and I also understand that it did not go well. They repeated their call for an independent inquiry into systemic bias and racism against Indigenous people in our police and justice systems. To quote the chiefs: “We were very disappointed with Premier Higgs.” To the Premier, what did you say that was so disappointing for the Indigenous leaders?

Hon. Mr. Stewart (Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. To the member opposite, today was a meeting with four members of Executive Council, including the Premier. We had 15 or 16 chiefs here, including the regional chief. It was a stepping stone. It was a meeting for about an hour and a half. We had a prayer, and we did a lot of listening. We wanted to listen to what the chiefs wanted to say with respect to their frustration within the justice system and the public

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safety system of New Brunswick. I want to say that there was a lot of compromise. We all agreed that the status quo is not going to work. The Premier committed to meaningful change and action and actionable items. We agree that we are going to make a change.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let's hope that the Premier will get up and answer this question. Here is another quote: "Despite the fact his minister of Aboriginal Affairs has recognized that bias and racism exists, Premier Higgs is not prepared to recognize that". I think that is appalling from a Premier. My question is for the Premier: Why are you not prepared to recognize that?

Hon. Mr. Stewart (Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, I want to make it very clear here for the record that both the Premier and I and all the colleagues on this side of the floor have made it very clear that we know that there is a systemic bias. We know that the justice system was imposed on Indigenous peoples. We know that it was not inclusive when it came about, and after 150-odd years, it is about time that we did something.

Today, we actually agreed that there was systemic bias, systemic prejudice, and systemic racism in our province. It does exist. But as a government, we first have to acknowledge it, and then we have to do something about it. Today, we met with all the chiefs. We gave them our sincere commitment and political will to make actionable items and meaningful change in this province. Thank you.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am kind of in awe here. I do not know whether the minister is putting words in the Premier's mouth because he will not say anything. He is saying that he recognizes it, but the chiefs are saying that he does not. There is something not lining up here. The chiefs are asking the Legislature to adopt our Motion 69, which is calling for such an inquiry. My question, since the Premier will not stand up and answer today is for you, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs. Are you prepared to break ranks with the Premier and vote in favour of our motion?

Hon. Mr. Stewart (Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the member opposite for the question. Today, we did speak about an inquiry, and we did leave it on the table. There was not a no answer to that term. One of the things that we, as a government, looked at is that the Indigenous peoples tell us that they need immediate action and change, so maybe it is just that we want something more than an inquiry.

I looked at 24 years of national inquiries and 797 recommendations, and less than 15% of them were actually put in legislation or in changes to the Constitution or charter. An inquiry is a very meaningful thing. But if all the recommendations do not get done and 24 years later we are still looking at them, we have to look at a system where we can get results. In two weeks, we are going to meet again. The Indigenous peoples have agreed to share their perspectives on how they feel this could go forward, and we are going to share

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ours. We are really hopeful and optimistic that we can reach a compromise and fix this together, once and for all.

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, a barrier for many low-income New Brunswickers, including many people with disabilities, is the Household Income Policy. This prevents social assistance recipients from sharing accommodations to allow their meagre income—\$696 for a single person with a disability—to go a little further.

Kaitlyn Layden of Saint John wrote an op-ed about how she cannot get married and move in with her partner because this policy will cut off her social assistance and disability payments, making her completely dependent on her partner. These are her words: “Those living with a mobility disability and cannot work should not have to be forced to pick between love and financial stability. The current system makes it difficult for someone to try to become financially independent and maintain a well-balanced quality of life.”

Will the Minister of Social Development commit to repealing the Household Income Policy?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I have spoken to this before, and I am very happy to speak to it again. The Household Income Policy has 15 exemptions that can allow people to live together. Not all situations are covered. That is why our government brought forward increases in our last budget to those who are single and on disability, and they received the first raise that they have had since, I think, 2014.

Mr. Speaker, we are not deaf to this, and we understand that reform is needed. We will continue to work because I believe—I fully believe—that, when we do the investigation and look into what needs to be done with social assistance reform, it is going to be our disability community that will reap the benefit of that reform. We know that those people have needs that are not being completely met. No system is perfect, Mr. Speaker, but we understand that this is a priority. We have committed to social assistance reform. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

RACISM

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, I spoke about the calls that the Black Lives Matter community in New Brunswick is making on the provincial government. One is calling on the government of New Brunswick to “incorporate content on the history of slavery, segregation, and systemic oppression in New Brunswick

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and Canada into the public school curriculum”. It is calling on the government of New Brunswick to “commission independent research on the personal, social, and economic impacts of racism in New Brunswick and develop an action plan to remedy these issues through an anti-racist strategy”. It is also calling on the government of New Brunswick and municipal governments to “implement mandatory cultural competency/anti-racism training for police and government officials”.

My question through you, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier is this: Will the Premier commit to implementing these calls from the Black Lives Matter community? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that it is important to recognize what these calls are asking for and to get into the details of what is required. We know that something is required, Mr. Speaker. I do not think that this is the place for me to just say “absolutely”. My point is that I agree. We have to find a way to follow recommendations, and we have to find a way to implement recommendations. That is what the whole First Nations discussion was about this morning, Mr. Speaker.

And to the minister’s point earlier, there have been 797 recommendations over the past 24 years and less than 15% were implemented or partially implemented—or maybe not even that many. So we can talk, and it is easy for a government just to say: Well, we will call for a commissioner and a public inquiry and a new commission. Or we can actually deal with issues that are already on the table and need to be done and that are reflective of the concerns here in New Brunswick. Mr. Speaker, we chose the latter as the first step toward subsequent meetings, because it was only the first meeting. In this case, I would like to learn more about these recommendations, and I would like to understand what the next step should be. So let’s not just talk, Mr. Speaker.

AGRICULTURE

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mexico has announced that it will not allow any more temporary foreign workers to come to Canada until it has more clarity on why two people from that country working in Ontario died due to COVID-19. That means that temporary foreign workers, including some who were expected to come to New Brunswick, will not be arriving in Canada to help with agricultural operations.

We know that two temporary foreign workers and then another one, making three, have tested positive for COVID-19 since arriving in the province and while they were in self-isolation. Authorities in Mexico have stated that 300 Mexicans in Canada are believed to have been infected with the virus. The Mexican government said it needs assurances that the situation can be controlled before allowing more workers to arrive. Can the Premier say



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whether he has had discussions with the federal government and Mexico on this pause on temporary foreign workers?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. What I can confirm today is that there are roughly 300 temporary foreign workers from Mexico in the province as we speak. They have taken the appropriate precautions, as has been indicated with the current outbreak in Moncton. There are 30 more that are scheduled for over the next little while.

The preliminary conversations that we are having with the federal government... I know that the Premier's Office will be speaking with the federal government later today to get greater clarification, but at this point in time, it is not a Canada-wide ban from Mexico. It is zeroing in on certain hotspots across the country. At this point, we do not think that it is going to affect New Brunswick at this time, but we are going to get further clarification on that.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): I want to thank the minister for that answer and for the clarification on Mexican temporary foreign workers. But the issue of agriculture in New Brunswick is not just about the temporary foreign workers and how we have been utilizing them over the last several decades. The issue here in New Brunswick, as seen in this pandemic, is that the food supply chain and food security for here in New Brunswick have been disrupted because of the pandemic. The fear is that, going forward, food prices are going to increase and we are going to be less able to provide for ourselves here in New Brunswick.

Every year, we bring in temporary foreign workers. They work so many weeks, and they leave the country. The next year, they come back and do so many weeks' work and leave the country. Mr. Speaker, I do not see this as a long-term solution. I will ask the minister responsible for agriculture: What long-term plan and solution does he have to see that we can actually help the agriculture sector and have better food security for the people of New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Wetmore (Gagetown-Petitcodiac, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): I would like to thank the member for the question. My gosh, look at that—an apple from Gagetown in my pocket. I must have known.

The situation surrounding COVID-19 has highlighted gaps and threats within the food supply chain that have an impact on food security in New Brunswick.

(Interjections.)

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



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Hon. Mr. Wetmore (Gagetown-Petitcodiac, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): The Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries is working with Public Safety and other stakeholders, including the Department of Finance and Treasury Board and the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour. We are working to find solutions to these issues through a project called Strengthening New Brunswick's Food System. Although New Brunswick is self-sufficient in a number of food products such as potatoes, seafood, chicken, eggs, dairy, blueberries, cranberries, and maple syrup, there are still some gaps in our system. The object of this project is to analyze the risks and threats to New Brunswick's food supply and to implement initiatives that will allow our province to become more self-sufficient and to increase...

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

[*Translation*]

COMMUNICATIONS

Mr. Gauvin (Shippagan-Lamèque-Miscou, I): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since the beginning of COVID-19, the Premier has made remarkable progress in French. The progress made is impressive, especially when you look back to the starting point. So, I applaud the Premier's efforts. Bravo.

However, during press conferences, the Premier was not able to answer journalists in French and relied on interpreters. During simultaneous translation, there can be situations where some nuance gets lost. Furthermore, certain expressions are difficult to translate, and some words have more than one meaning.

In the House yesterday, a member asked a question in French, and, when the minister answered, he clearly had not understood the question correctly. In New Brunswick, there are people who do not understand English, and, in times of crisis, it is essential to be able to inform people directly and properly.

So, I am asking the Premier this: Could you please appoint a Francophone political spokesperson on COVID-19?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I thank the member for the question. I believe I understood it perfectly through the interpreter. Mr. Speaker, that is the advantage of living in New Brunswick. We all have equal opportunities and equal chances, no matter which language we speak, and no matter whether we speak one or both. That is why we have such a great province.

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Mr. Speaker, throughout the province, I have had responses about our government's performance while working with the COVID-19 Cabinet team as being exemplary for the country and about how we have not only instilled confidence but also had results like none other. The situation in Campbellton is unfortunate. I absolutely agree with that. We are trying to do our best to contain it so that Campbellton gets back on the yellow track and we get moving.

But, Mr. Speaker, we live in a bilingual province. We have a right to speak the language of our choice. That is what I am doing, and I am doing the best at it. We have an interpretive system that is second to none so that we can communicate all over this province. Whether you are unilingual French or unilingual English, you should have the same rights and privileges as every other person in this province. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. Gauvin (Shippagan-Lamèque-Miscou, I): Mr. Speaker, our people's health is at stake, if not their lives. Take the people in Zone 5, for example. They are under tremendous pressure, and they need to be informed. Someone must be able to talk directly to them in their own language so they can understand. There is no room for grey areas; there is no room for interpretation or guesswork; things must be clear.

Therefore, I reiterate my request to the Premier. On behalf of the people who do not understand English, I am politely and respectfully asking him to appoint a Francophone political spokesperson on COVID-19. Since two of the party leaders on the Cabinet committee on the novel coronavirus are bilingual, I am reiterating my request.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I could repeat what I just said, or I could continue to say that I believe we are communicating very effectively. We made changes to our structure so that we could do that. We have a system in our province in which we use interpretation. We translate every document. I do my press releases with sections in both languages. I believe that we have to recognize that the potential exists here for our province to succeed together, and the potential is not limited by whether I speak both languages or one or the other—French or English. Our potential should not be limited.

Mr. Speaker, at this point in time, I am the Premier of the province. We do not have two Premiers. We have one. I want to represent everyone in this province, in fairness and equality around the province, and I feel that is exactly what I do. I feel that I can communicate that very effectively to help others. People around the world work together and are able to communicate in one language or the other of their choice by having effective interpretation through the process.



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

[*Translation*]

GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For more than a year now, we have been trying to get clear and specific information from the Premier about the Northern New Brunswick Economic Development and Innovation Fund and the Miramichi Regional Fund. He says that the programs still exist, but he does not want to put any money into them. After that, you wonder why there is a division in the province.

The Northern New Brunswick Economic Development and Innovation Fund and the Miramichi fund were established to help those of our regions that need financial assistance the most. This is a matter of fairness.

So, my question for the Premier is this: Does he commit today to reviving these funds so as to enable our small and medium-sized businesses to flourish here in New Brunswick? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I recall when the northern fund was first put together. It was back around or after 2008, or maybe it was in 2010 or somewhere in that range. There was about \$250 million put together: \$200 million for the northern development fund and \$50 million for a particular Miramichi fund. I asked this question about 5 or 10 years later: What has that done for you?

Twenty percent of the population has left the north. We have had huge changes in the north. So what has the fund done for long-term economic sustainability? It did not create projects of lasting development. It created projects such as the Bas-Caraquet shipyard and that issue, which we have now resolved because we have a company there that wants to build that region and build a business in that region. It is not work created by taxpayer dollars to send off somewhere else, Mr. Speaker.

So the focus is different, and the money we spend will be used throughout the province to build sustainable development in communities—not for just a passing, fleeting moment because the tax dollars are spent and an election is coming. We are taking the election results out of the situation. We are taking the politics out of the situation to build communities for the future.

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

