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SPECIAL CARE HOMES

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, a very serious matter was raised in the House. The investigation that was revealed by CBC yesterday with regard to the pilot project is very serious. For the most vulnerable of society, there has been a question in terms of the level of care that they should be provided.

The minister tried to answer the question and actually sank in the quicksand he was walking on. Normally, when that happens and a minister is struggling, the Premier gets up and helps his or her minister. Yesterday, the Premier decided not to get up and not to answer any questions regarding this matter. I am going to give the Premier the opportunity today to get this situation under solid footing. Can the Premier stand today and explain why this decision was made in 2019?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I am glad to rise today to talk about this very serious subject. Again, this serious subject is important to all of us here in the Legislature. I am very pleased to say that if an allegation comes forward from a former employee, a present employee, a member of the opposition, or a family member of a senior in a senior home, that allegation will be inspected, and it will be inspected to the nth degree. If those allegations are founded, it could move to an adult care inquest. There are safety measures in line with what is going on. So if there is a complaint or an allegation, it will be inspected. I must say, in the question of La Vallée, every allegation was inspected, and none were found to be true.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): You know, Mr. Speaker, the Premier is pretty revealing this morning. He is still not getting up on this issue. I suspect that he is not comfortable with the decision that was made or that he cannot defend and explain the decision that was made by his government. Cabinet normally would approve these types of important decisions.

So again—again—I am going to ask the Premier to stand on his two feet this morning and take the opportunity to explain and help his minister because the minister is struggling. He is struggling big time—big time—because he cannot be on solid footing to justify this decision. The Premier is the leader of this government. All decisions go through Cabinet, which he chairs. Can the Premier please stand up and explain why he approved this decision?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to address the Interim Leader of the Opposition. When it comes to senior care in the province, I am proud to say that there are many, many people on the front lines helping the seniors when it comes to their care. This province, this government,

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spends \$556 million per year looking after the seniors in this province, much more than when the opposition was in power.

I might remind the member opposite that when he was in power, the only new thing that he thought about in trying to help seniors was to take their money, to do an asset grab. That was his innovation. It was to say this: Let's reach into the pockets of the seniors and take their money. Well, here we are looking for innovative ways and working collaboratively with the people providing care for the seniors. If the member across the way does not want to look at any innovative ways to try to serve the population better in the care homes, then he is just again looking to look into their pockets.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, when you cannot defend or explain a decision such as this, you blame others, and you shift the blame where it should not be. We did not make this decision. The Premier did. The Premier and the government made this decision in 2019 behind closed doors. Nobody knew about it. It was only after some individual had to speak up and CBC had to reveal what it found out.

The Premier and this government decided, supposedly—we heard yesterday after question period—that they have cancelled this pilot project. They are trying to sweep this problem under the rug so that nobody talks about it anymore. A serious matter has happened. They made a wrong decision, and they will not admit it. They will not admit that they made a mistake. Leadership is about leading by example, showing leadership, and admitting a mistake. I am going to ask the Premier this morning whether he can get up and admit that he made a mistake.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, if it is wrong to try to find innovative ways to better provide service to the seniors of this province, then it is what it is. I will tell you this: It is the government that does not try anything new and tries to repeat the same mistakes over and over. I saw the Interim Leader of the Opposition sit on this side of the House, and I saw the mistakes he made, trying to reach into the pockets of the seniors. We remember the pushback that was received at that time. People said: Do not take the assets of the seniors.

We are looking for ways... It was a pilot project, and like any project that goes on across government, it was ended because the results were not there. Mr. Speaker, if you never try to improve what you are doing, then you will be sentenced to continue doing the same things over and over again. We are trying to improve service to seniors. That is what we are doing. That is what we are committed to do.

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

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Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the New Brunswick Nurses' Union asked for an inquiry in terms of the services and the level of care offered in nursing homes, special care homes, and long-term care homes. Now we know why the government refused. It basically said that, no, there is no merit in doing that, because the government members had in mind what they had decided to do in 2019. They had it in mind to spread that out—I am sure—all around the province.

Yesterday, the minister said that he cancelled this. They keep using the pandemic as an umbrella to justify everything. That is the reality, to try to justify every mistake that they make, actually. They use the pandemic to do so. I am going to again ask the Premier to get up. Get up, Premier. Stand up and show leadership and admit the mistake you made and tell us when the decision was made to cancel this pilot project.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, what we have learned over the years is that back in, I think, 2004, an Auditor General's report said that there was concern about some of the operations in nursing homes and how the inspections were being carried out. I expect that will carry on as the next question.

We heard from a director of the special care association that these things are more about paperwork anyway and they are not really an inspection of the facilities. Then we heard of the situation where we have interest in doing a pilot project to say: Can we actually put in resources when people need them, not so much while people are sleeping at night but the next morning, the next noon, and the next evening, at supper, so that we have the right resources? Mr. Speaker, the news flash is that we have challenges in getting people to serve the challenges we have in our health care system. That is the reality. Looking for new ways is what we must do. We cannot procrastinate. We cannot put it off because time is of the essence. This is an urgent health crisis that we are going to manage and not ignore, as the previous government would have done.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Finally, the Premier got up. Thank you, Premier, for getting up and trying to explain and justify the unjustifiable.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to the independent inquiry that the Nurses' Union asked for, the government decided not to support it. If there are issues in the long-term care sector in New Brunswick, would the Premier accept it? We are going to ask the Auditor General to look into this and investigate what this was all about in terms of a pilot project that was done secretly, behind closed doors, and not telling New Brunswickers until only after the media did some good work and revealed it. The local MLA did not even know because even he was not informed by the government. Will the Premier get up again and say that the government will cooperate with the opposition and certainly support and fully cooperate with an investigation by the Auditor General of New Brunswick?

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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): See, Mr. Speaker, once again, we need to make a meal out of something where a meal does not exist.

Do you want to know the details of the pilot project and what was hoped it would achieve? Absolutely. Let's set the meeting up for next week. Let's go through the whole package and say: Here is what they are hoping to achieve to manage the staff better. We have met twice now with the Nurses' Union on their recommendations to look at ways to improve the situation. Mr. Speaker, we are going to react to the situations that are in front of us. We are not going to ignore them. I would love to have the opposition be part of that program rather than be part of the stall tactics, public relations issues, and public crisis issues.

Mr. Speaker, our crisis is real. It is to ensure that we have a sustainable path for health care in our province going forward. It is real in every province in the country. That is why we are all asking for more funding. However, we did not get it. We did not get more funding. But we are not going to lose the quality of health care that we have because we are going to look at new ways—new ways—to get the job done.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): The Premier attacked the former Attorney General because she dared to speak the truth about his lack of a plan for getting high-speed Internet in areas of the province where it is desperately needed. He referred to her comments as “unprofessional” and “sour grapes”. How insulting and disrespectful for women. Will the Premier immediately apologize for his unacceptable behaviour?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I will speak to this because it was an unfortunate circumstance. I was not happy with my colleague's comments, but the frustration was real—the frustration of not understanding what we are looking at here in rural New Brunswick and throughout New Brunswick for Internet services and high-speed connectivity. The fact is they are all... Unfortunately, we had not communicated that well within our own caucus and within our own team. I take responsibility for that.

However, we have serious new methods coming forward. Xplornet recently announced a three-year plan to deliver 5G through fiber-optic, and it is doing it all on its own dime. It made a commitment to rural New Brunswick. Rogers is doing the same thing. Bell Aliant is doing the same thing. There is also Starlink that is out there looking at that. We are very focused on rural Internet, and so is the private sector. I know that is an untapped comment that the Interim Leader of the Opposition would understand. We are going to deliver on better quality...

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

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[*Translation*]

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, we have a Premier who does not go in for introspection. The member for Fundy-The Isles-Saint John West is doing the job she was elected to do, which is to represent her constituents' interests. She is a respected lawyer and a brilliant woman. However, because she expressed her frustration with the Premier's lack of commitment to rural regions, she has been belittled and humiliated.

Mr. Speaker, there is no place in the Legislative Assembly for the Premier's chauvinistic attitude. In solidarity with my colleague, I am asking the Premier to apologize to her and to all women.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I know that the member opposite would like to make this a gender issue. This is not a gender issue. I know that is an easy turn to take. I would talk to any of my colleagues here to see whether there are any real gender issues, because in this party on this side of the House, we are proud of having the most women representatives in government in New Brunswick. We are proud of that. We did not have to pay them to join us. They wanted to be part of a party that wants to save this province. That is what is exciting.

I already said I am sorry that I got into a debate publicly with a colleague, because that is not professional of me either, but it is not a gender issue. It is an issue where we are working on communication within the system. It is an issue where we are resolving issues in the province that are real to the province. I expect my colleagues to speak up, and I expect them to be accountable. I also expect that they, too, feel open and willing to talk about this with me and any member of our caucus or Cabinet, because that is how we will build together as one team.

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

[*Translation*]

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): This government may have more women in its caucus, but the Premier puts them down.

[*Original*]

The Premier showed this week that he responds with anger and insult to those who dare to challenge him. In the past, he has said that MLAs who represent the interests of their constituents are inconvenient. His attack on the former Attorney General was totally uncalled for. This attitude is why it is hard to attract more women to offer for political office. What kind of message does the Premier think he is sending to women who want to

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get involved in politics? Will the Premier now admit that his comments were insulting to women everywhere and apologize?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): It is really rich. As I said before, I am proud of every one of the women who are in our caucus and Cabinet. Look around us here. Look at the number of candidates that we had in this election. How many did the Liberals have? I forget now. Nevertheless, we know that women came forward because they want to be involved in a party that makes sense for the future of our province—not a party that is just going to be spinning around and around, but a party that has a future. If you look at the positions that women hold in my Cabinet, you will see that I am proud of every one of them. Do you know what is most difficult? It is trying to keep up to them. That is the challenge that we have because they are interested in getting the work done, and it is exciting. That same thing applies in my office and in the civil service. This question has nothing to do with a gender issue. They would like to make it one, but it is not one, Mr. Speaker.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Aboriginal Affairs promised action on systemic racism and stated that she absolutely believed that the people who called for the inquiry would be satisfied. From what I see in here, they are far from satisfied.

Did the minister consult with the First Nations Chiefs or with her cochair on the truth and reconciliation commission, Regional Chief Roger Augustine, on the content of her amendment that totally gutted the chance for their requested inquiry? Or is she just like the Premier, believing that they know what is best for First Nations?

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, I would say today that I would ask this legislative House why it has failed First Nations. Why have we permitted inquiries upon inquiries upon inquiries to occur without any recommendations being implemented? That is the bigger question. That is applicable for our Aboriginal populations, and that is also applicable for our racialized groups in this province.

(Interjection.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order, please.

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for

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Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Everybody is asking this question, and they want to know why.

In terms of consultation, I did actually have a meeting with the chiefs on Tuesday. This particular issue came up with respect to the inquiry, and I gave them my thoughts. I have been on record with respect to my thoughts regarding the inquiry, so thank you.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order. Order, member.

POTATOES

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The potato farmers of New Brunswick have incurred significant losses in 2018, in 2019, and again in 2020. Despite the fact that there has been over \$7 million of federal money on the table since 2018, this government refuses to spend one dime to support our potato farmers. This past season was a total disaster, and losses will be in the tens of millions of dollars. My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, and it is a simple one: What in the world are you waiting for?

Hon. Mrs. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for the question this morning. I want to remind him that patience is a virtue. We at the Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries have been actively working with our federal partners and have been in discussions with Minister Bibeau. We have had numerous discussions and meetings, and we are actively participating in looking at the business risk management (BRM) to discuss possible alternatives to assist our farmers. I have had discussions with Potatoes New Brunswick and all the other sectors that DAAF supports, and we are actively looking at a program that will be put in place to help rescue our farmers from the problems that we have had this past summer, particularly with the drought. Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

FLOODS

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, a few days ago, a heavy rainstorm hit New Brunswick. We heard a lot about how this happened in the Sussex area, but my area was also affected, on the corner of Titus Road and Deuxième Sault Road. At least one property was flooded.

This has been a recurring problem for 20 years, and you visited the area yourself, Mr. Speaker, when you were Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, and announced, along with the federal government, a flood mitigation program in this area of Titus Road

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and Deuxième Sault Road. Unfortunately, last year, that program and those projects were cancelled. Mr. Speaker, I am asking the new minister whether this project will be carried out in 2021.

[Original]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We did have a big storm a couple of weeks ago in the Sussex area. We have a team at DTI that responds to storms when they come. We go out, responding immediately, and we start to clean things up and get them going. I am proud to say that in one particular spot, we had a bridge wash out and we got it replaced in 12 days actually. In 12 days, we had service restored. We have a group and a team that take care of issues. We have plans next year to continue to respond to problems and floods. We have just the people that we need to do it. Thank you.

ENERGY POLICY

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Savvy investors across Canada are embracing renewable energy but not in New Brunswick. The Canadian business news is full of headlines such as “Canadian renewable stocks see tailwinds from global shift to green energy” and “Green power: Four reasons to bet on renewable energy”. The Premier insists that he wants more private-sector investment, but New Brunswick’s renewable energy and energy storage companies are forced to miss out because current government policies and legislation stifle their growth. Why is the Premier not pulling out all the stops to make the policy changes needed to ensure that private investment can flow to our renewable energy and energy storage companies, as it is in every other province and territory of this country? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I do not think that there is that big a differentiation between New Brunswick and the other provinces in that regard. However, throughout the country, we are seeing a complete devastation of the economic situation. I guess nowhere is that more prevalent than in Alberta. That is why through this pandemic and prior, it was about a transition economy, from one based primarily on fossil fuels to one based on renewable energy. But there is a balance in this process, and New Brunswick is certainly meeting our targets and exceeding them going forward.

Looking at long-term, big solutions to worldwide demands—and I know that the Leader of the Green Party would not accept this—the federal government is actually sponsoring, in partnership with us, the technology of small nuclear reactors. They are non-carbon-emitting, and they are an answer to energy demands worldwide. We are not an island to ourselves here. We can be a solution and, at the same time, provide a strong economic growth potential and an export potential for the province. That is our focus, Mr. Speaker—



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

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Speaking of Alberta, the University of Calgary just released a report that shows that the cost of wind and solar power is now on par with natural gas and that it is actually cheaper to build and generate renewables than it is to run existing power plants. Yet, New Brunswick's 20-year integrated resource plan is based around what? Extending the life of its fossil fuel plants.

Mr. Speaker, there is a climate crisis. The natural world is unravelling around us. New Brunswick has abundant renewable energy and the companies to exploit it. Just to the north of us is the Saudi Arabia of hydroelectricity in Labrador and Quebec to back all of that up. My question is simple: Why is the Premier so opposed to the economic development of renewable energy and energy storage technologies right here in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is not being opposed at all. It is putting the two together: economic energy development. I would suggest that the Leader of the Green Party uses his word "economic" loosely because if you look at wind and renewable sources, you will see that it is not only a cost factor. It is a supply factor. It is a continuous supply factor. You cannot have them in the current technology without having a backup supply for when the wind does not blow or the sun does not shine. So there is a balance.

Yes, we can tie all our energy needs to Quebec because there is no question that it does have lots of hydropower. That is why the Maine transmission line is going to be increased, and that will supply Nova Scotia and will also be able to supply us. But in the process, we want a bit of independence in all of this. We want to be able to provide our own energy solutions that are clean and green. It is a balanced approach, and, Mr. Speaker, we are not beholden to any one particular province for our future.

CANNABIS NB

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, the recent news surrounding Canopy Growth closing its doors should also highlight that we are still waiting to hear from government regarding the future of Cannabis NB. The province of New Brunswick has many issues and challenges, whether it is an economy that is in desperate need of sustainable growth, hospital wait times, lack of staffing at our nursing and special care homes, or crumbling infrastructure—and the list goes on. The last thing that government should be involved with is retailing cannabis. Can the Minister of Finance please tell us what this government plans to do and why it is taking so long to determine the outcome of Cannabis NB?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the member opposite, thank you for the question. Yes, we



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certainly think today of the employees who are now displaced from the plant in Fredericton North. We do have staff from the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour available for career counselling. We are taking the necessary steps to find the next step for those people, and our hearts and our thoughts are certainly with them in this Christmas season in particular. So thank you for mentioning that.

As far as the movement of Cannabis NB is concerned, obviously, COVID-19 has set us back with that, to the tune of four months behind. An election set us back as well, Mr. Speaker. Do you know what? We want to have the best deal. We want to have the best return on investment. We want to have what is best for New Brunswickers, what is safest for New Brunswickers, what is going to reduce the amount of illegal trade, and what is going to bring the best amount of profit for the province too, quite frankly. We have to look at that. It is a long process...

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

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, minister. Unfortunately, the issue of Cannabis NB predates COVID-19 and it predates the election. We are talking about 2018, when we started discussing the privatization of Cannabis NB. In terms of the illegal trade that the minister referred to, right now, there are multiple operations operating under a “grey area” when it comes to retailing cannabis outside the authority of Cannabis NB. Turning Cannabis NB from a government monopoly to a private monopoly is a better offer, but it is certainly not the best format. We need all private-sector businesses to have the opportunity to retail this product with reasonable regulations and fair taxes. If the government does decide to create a private-sector monopoly to retail cannabis, what will it do with all the grey-area retailers of cannabis, including those on First Nations lands?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the member opposite, yes, we are working with Public Safety in relation to illegal stores. We are working with Public Safety in relation to the illegal trade—period. We are working with Public Safety in relation to any number... The illegal tobacco—there are a lot of areas that we are working in and trying to recover what we can in revenue. We are trying to come up with the best business model. Should it be sold outside of Cannabis NB stores? That is absolutely part of looking at it.

Part of the reason that we started this whole RFP process... I am sorry, Mr. Speaker. I should be looking at you. Part of the reason that we started this whole RFP process was to find out whether or not we should be in the business of business, right? We have talked about that before. This is a perfect example of why I think we necessarily probably should not be in the business of business because it takes so long to get an answer. Having said that, we are doing our due diligence, and we are finding the best deal possible for New Brunswickers, from all aspects.



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[*Translation*]

WATERWAYS

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A white paper on the outcomes of the consultation about the Restigouche River watershed park was to be published this year. Can the Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture inform us about actions and plans surrounding this fine project for the Restigouche region in 2021? Will the 235 km watercourse linear park be opened to the public in 2021 as planned?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you very much for the question regarding the Restigouche River. Of all the things in my recent travels and what I have been looking into, I will be looking into the Restigouche watershed file. There is lots to go through in our department, and that is one thing that I will bring back up with you as soon as I can find the details on it. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

ENERGY POLICY

Mr. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, L): Mr. Speaker, my wearing this mask does not mean that I am representing a snowmen's association.

My question is for the Premier, and it is regional in nature. People in the communities of Pokeshaw and Black Rock are concerned about economic development in the region. A few years ago, they agreed to move forward on a wind turbine project. That being said, Potentia Renewables was not able to meet the project deadlines for all kinds of reasons, including COVID-19 and the worldwide pandemic. People in Pokeshaw and Black Rock are simply asking the Premier to meet with them at a later date, either by Zoom or in person. So, I am asking the Premier: Will he meet with these people?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Thank you, member. I thank the member for his question.

[*Original*]

It is a pleasure to speak about that subject matter here. It is also important to build upon the Premier's earlier response to the Leader of the Green Party. When it comes to those projects, we are very serious, we are very committed, and we are moving forward. We are

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coming from a base where 80% of the electricity consumed by New Brunswickers right now is from sources free of greenhouse gas. We are moving forward with projects like that. As the public would prefer, the politicians do not play a major role in the work with those projects. The utility, NB Power, has worked very strongly and has connected with a number of these projects. As the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, what I do is work with NB Power to hear that it is going through a thorough process. What I will commit to the member opposite is that in the event that there are any stakeholder groups that require consultation, we will ensure that the utility makes sure that they are fully briefed and aware of everything that is taking place. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period is over.

