

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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FIRST NATIONS

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week, we saw the Premier write two new chapters in the New Brunswick history book. We became, for the second year in a row, the poorest province in the country. The other chapter he wrote last week was that he has now broken the relationship and trust with our First Nations community.

We know the history of the Premier in regard to his relationship with First Nations. When he was Finance Minister, we know that he wanted to cancel the revenue-sharing agreement with First Nations, which was for them to be able to prosper and to have economic growth. Last week, he gave direction to his caucus and Cabinet members and minister to amend and vote against an independent inquiry. Mr. Speaker, the First Nations leadership is very, very concerned. Actually, I want to ask the Premier here this afternoon: Has he, since last Thursday, reached out to the First Nations chiefs to try to repair the damage?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting that as we go forward and talk so many times about so many recommendations, so many studies, and so many inquiries, there are so many things across the country, in the province, and in other provinces around us in Atlantic Canada that have not had action. We have said that we could spend the next two or three years talking about doing something or we could actually do something. Now, I am very pleased with what is on the table with respect to all these things that have been learned from prior inquiries and from prior recommendations that have not been fulfilled.

I believe that the First Nations throughout our province will want action. They will want action more than words, Mr. Speaker, and that is what we are committed to. I am proud to say that the minister is very focused on actions delivering on real results, and when you look back in six months or a year, you will say: Why did it take us so long? Well, the time has come for action, and I am proud to be part of a government that is based on getting results.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the question was very specific. The Premier speaks about actions, and we have not seen any actions on this file and on many others. I have been asking the Premier since last Thursday to try to repair the damage done. Hopefully, it is repairable. It is going to be very difficult because they lost credibility with New Brunswick's First Nations chiefs. Premier, have you reached out to the leadership of First Nations since last Thursday—yes or no?

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, Mr. Speaker. I take exception to the fact that you are saying we have not done anything. I think that is a fallacy. I think that if

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you look at it, the record will show that this is the first time in the history of the New Brunswick Legislature that we have actually admitted that systemic racism exists, that it is a real issue, and that we are going to do something about it.

The other thing that I would say to you today is that you also have to take into account the fact that we will take the steps that are necessary in working with First Nations to identify a plan, a work plan for moving forward with respect to systemic racism, and how it is going to be developed as well as implemented.

Finally, on the TRC recommendations, we have already committed to those. We are going to do that as well, look at those recommendations and implement the ones that make sense for the province. Thank you for the question.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): It speaks loudly when the Premier will not even answer a specific question. He keeps talking about actions, and he keeps talking about results. But he cannot even stand here today and tell all of us and the New Brunswickers listening whether he did or did not, since last Thursday, reach out to the leadership of New Brunswick's First Nations. It is really shameful.

Mr. Speaker, last week, the Premier put his minister in a very, very difficult situation. The minister now has to try to rebuild the relationship with our First Nations and try to regain some credibility. They have asked her to resign. That is what they asked for last week. The damage is serious—very serious. I do not know whether it is repairable. Can the Premier tell us the specific actions that he is going to undertake to rebuild this relationship?

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): Mr. Speaker, thank you again for the question. I really appreciate it. As I said earlier, I think that I gave you a plan with respect to the concrete steps moving forward. That is the action plan we are going to be implementing. I would also reach across the House to say to you that if you would like to assist us with respect to that plan, we would certainly appreciate it. Once again, thank you for the question.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, wow, that is quite an answer. I have to admit that the Premier and the minister announced a Working Group on Truth and Reconciliation. I want to know from the Premier... Let's be respectful toward the First Nations of New Brunswick. I was the minister responsible for that file. I worked really hard to try to build a relationship with them and to really understand some of their challenges and needs. They want to be respected. They want to have a dialogue with the government. This is what I am going to ask the Premier: If the First Nations communities decide not to participate in this Working Group on Truth and Reconciliation, what is going to happen next?

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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 again for the question. It would be very unfortunate if they decided to do that. I am committed to actions. That is something that, from the very outset, I have explained to First Nations. I do have the utmost respect for them. The time for doing something is now. For several decades, no one has done anything, sadly. I think that this is long overdue. If they decide not to participate, I will commit to doing the work that needs to be done based on the recommendations that we have before us. Thank you.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I am listening to the minister this afternoon. She is doing the very best that she can. I think she is trying to make us believe... She wants to work hard. At the end of the day, I know and we know how the Premier operates. He is the Premier of the province. All decision-making goes through him. We know that. New Brunswickers know that by now.

I want to ask the Premier to please stand on his two feet this afternoon and tell us what he is prepared to do to reconcile with and to regain the respect of the First Nations chiefs and First Nations communities within New Brunswick so that they can have a trusted relationship with the present government and, obviously, with the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): It is interesting. We see the Leader of the Opposition talk about being in charge of the file for two years. I guess I would ask what he accomplished that he can actually point to. What was actually accomplished? Have the communities' living standards been raised all through this province? Are violent crimes down? Is drug abuse down? Are illegal operations down? Mr. Speaker, I bet he cannot point to one single thing anywhere in the province. He can talk because talk has always been cheap, and they have always been good at that—talking.

I will tell you what I am going to do. I am going to support the minister 100 percent because I have a true belief that she will get the job done.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): If the Premier wants to know what we have done, go ask First Nations Chiefs. We built a relationship—a respectful and trustworthy relationship. We actually listened to what their needs were. That is why, last week, we tabled the motion that you have completely gutted and changed. We renewed the revenue-sharing agreement with them and extended it for a time when they can prosper and see jobs and economic growth in their communities, which you are against. We know that.

Mr. Speaker, I want to ask the Premier to tell us here today when he is going to call each chief of the 15 communities to try to regain some respect and credibility with the First Nations Chiefs.

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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, what is clearly obvious is that the Leader of the Opposition cannot point to any better conditions for First Nations around the province. He can maybe point to some areas, but when you point to 80% of the population, are they living better? Are their communities in better shape now? Do people have a higher standard of quality of life? For the majority of First Nations communities, I think not.

You can talk about talk because we hear lots of that. Or you can ask how we raise elbows. How does every community in the First Nations world... How do we raise the level of living conditions and standards in all communities? That is our goal. I think that we can go around this province talking to different chiefs and different leaders in the communities and ask whether anything is better for them or whether they are seeing more results. I think, sadly, the answer would be no.

MUNICIPALITIES

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, the handling of the COVID-19 relief fund for municipalities is a fiasco in the making. What could and should have been a very easy fix for everyone is turning out to be an administrative nightmare.

The \$41 million made available by the federal government was to be sent to municipalities as quickly and efficiently as possible in order to help them deal with the hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, the Minister of Local Government has opted to make this process very complicated. Mr. Speaker, the minister rose last week. He was all proud to get up last week to mention that within two weeks of the deadline, 7 of the 102 municipalities had submitted their claims.

[*Translation*]

Is the minister convinced that all municipalities will submit their claims before December 31? Does his promise to send them money within six to seven days still hold?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are pleased to have worked with the federal government on the Safe Restart Agreement. As we indicated to the House last week, there are seven communities that have applied and have received or will be receiving their monies. The only thing that the municipalities have to do is to make a motion within. It is a public motion, so there is no secret. We can tell the conspiracy theorists from the MLA... from Grand Falls that there is no conspiracy. We have three phases in the \$41-million Safe Restart Agreement, and we will make sure that the 2020 Phase 2 money will be sent out as soon as possible and as soon as we can.

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Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, I would ask the Minister of Local Government whether he has confidence in that answer. In my role as Critic for Local Government, I have the opportunity to speak with mayors and different stakeholders in the province, and they have told me that they have submitted their plans to the province and the department has asked them to resubmit a new plan because what they submitted was not correct. Supposedly, they overestimated their savings. Now, imagine that. Already the process is complicated. The administrators are saying: We do not have time to do this, and it is very hard to go back seven months and draft up the list of all our expenses. Now, they are being asked to do it a second time.

I ask the minister this: Would he please let us know how many municipalities have been asked to resubmit their demands and why have they been asked that question?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, what we are seeing today is Liberal spin. We are back to the culture of the politics of the Liberal Party. It is like a spinning machine, and it just goes spin, spin, spin.

I can assure you that I have been talking with all the mayors of New Brunswick and all the municipal community leaders. We are working in collaboration and making sure that they are getting their monies.

As we know, there are three phases in this file. In Phase 1, we gave \$1.6 million to the transit services. In Phase 2, in 2020, municipalities can get these monies through a motion—one motion—explaining where their money is. We want to make sure that municipalities are accountable to the federal government. That is why we are not spending Liberal money just to say that we are spending Liberal money, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister is spinning his wheels.

Listen, get this money to municipalities—end of story. The federal money was put there to help the provinces give money to municipalities because they need it. Other provinces have opted to give the money on a per-capita basis. This province says: No, we are going to make this process complicated; we are going to ask you to jump through a ring of fire in order to get your money.

On top of that—on top of that—he has already made the promise that he is going to give the money that is going to be left over to the municipalities per capita.

(Interjections.)

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

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Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): How does he know that there is going to be money left over? He has not seen the claims from these municipalities.

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): I would ask the Premier: Please take control of this file because the Minister of Local Government has mismanaged this fund right from the get-go.

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, we see here in New Brunswick Trump tactics—fake news right here in New Brunswick. We have our own Donald Trump, and he is from Tracadie. I will tell you that right now.

Mr. Speaker, we have been collaborative with municipalities. We have been listening. We are not slowing the file. We are working collaboratively. The department, the public service, is in constant contact, and it is very clear from every city manager, every municipality, what they have to do. I can assure you that the \$41 million will be spent efficiently. They will be accountable, and they will make sure that they get their money.

NURSING HOMES

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The recent media story about the pilot project that provided for staffing cutbacks in Restigouche long-term care facilities is extremely alarming. We are in the midst of a pandemic, when dedicated care workers are stretched to the limit trying to provide care in a very difficult time. Can the Premier explain to this House and to the people of New Brunswick why he deliberately cut back care in our nursing homes and put seniors at risk?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am glad to take this question from the member opposite. The member opposite is pulling threads of the truth from different fabrics and weaving a tapestry that is not really congruent with what really happened.

The MOU started before COVID-19, and COVID-19 followed directly after. There were checks and balances to make sure that the patients were cared for because this MOU was based on patient care. When COVID-19 hit, the department made sure that the patients were looked after again. We sent people in from other areas. We sent doctors in to look at the patients to make sure that any of the concerns that were raised by former employees were looked after. We found, again, that those two issues are separate, but this opposition is trying to meld them together to confuse the public. That is a disservice to the people and

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to the residents who are being cared for by the hardworking frontline workers here in the province of New Brunswick.

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): If we are talking about checks and balances, then why are they cutting inspections to nursing homes? Why are they cutting the inspectors? There are fewer inspectors now than there were before.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker, there are very few files that call for a public inquiry, but this one does.

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

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

(Interjections.)

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

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Members, come to order, please. I would like to hear the questions posed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): Mr. Speaker, there are very few files that call for a public inquiry, but this one does.

Can the Premier explain to the families of those living in our nursing homes why he decided to conclude a secret deal allowing these homes not to provide the level of care required by our provincial regulations? Will he commit to holding a public inquiry?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Once again, the member opposite is trying to weave a tapestry that is no friend to the real facts of the matter. The members opposite must be against seeking innovative ways to look after our seniors and innovative ways to help improve care for seniors.

I remember that, back in the day, Senator Brenda Robertson had an idea to start a pilot project to provide Medicare to seniors in their homes. That pilot project ended up being

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extra-mural care, which everyone here supports today. If the members opposite are afraid to look at ways to improve the care for seniors and if the members opposite are afraid to look at ways to improve the quality of life of seniors in the facilities and at home, then why do they not just stand up and say that they have forgotten all about the senior...

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

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): If anyone is scared, it is this minister and this government. Have a public inquiry, and put the facts on the table. We will find out what is going on in our seniors' homes and find out what is wrong with this government. It is difficult to understand how the Premier believes that cutting back on nursing home care and saving money on the backs of our most vulnerable citizens is acceptable. In fact, it is shameful.

The number of inspectors in Social Development for nursing homes dropped from five in 2019 to three in 2020. At the same time, Social Development is increasingly looking at nursing home inspections that require less work to accomplish. Well, well. Can the Minister of Social Development inform us as to what other pilot projects have been done that would impact inspections of special care homes? How can New Brunswick have trust in this government and this minister and the former minister as well?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): When it comes to getting the inspections done, the inspections will be done. The inspections will be done, and they will be reported online. During COVID-19, we had all hands on deck trying to make sure that the virus did not enter the special care homes and the nursing care homes. Again, those results have been positive compared to other jurisdictions, but we cannot let our guards down.

Mr. Speaker, if the member across wants to ask about this MOU, this secret deal, why does he not look two seats down at the former Minister of Social Development, because apparently, Dr. Guy Tremblay said that it started under that minister's watch?

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Members, members, silence.

(Interjections.)

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

RENTS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, I heard from another Frederictonian, a senior in my riding, whose rent increased significantly in the past year.

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She is fearful that her rent will go up again this year in the absence of rent controls and has yet to be able to find any more affordable housing. There is an inherent market failure here because modest rents severely limit the profit potential of new apartment buildings. There is a clear role for government here.

The Minister of Social Development should be priming the pump of not-for-profit and cooperatively owned housing where the profit motive is eliminated, but just the opposite is happening. In July, not-for-profit housing developers were informed that the province will no longer contribute to building new apartments that receive funding from the National Housing Co-Investment Fund, the federal government. Will the minister reverse his decision so that his department can help grow the not-for-profit and cooperative housing stock in New Brunswick to meet the pressing need for affordable housing?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is always of concern when I hear about people in housing. Although we cannot talk to specific individuals here in the Legislature due to the confidential nature, I would encourage the individuals whom MLAs hear about who are having trouble with housing to contact the housing authority and see whether they are qualified or can come up with a solution.

I also know that from an action standpoint, this particular government is going to spend \$97 million in the various aspects of housing here in the province this year. That includes building new units. That includes fixing the present stock. That includes rent supplements to people, based on their salaries and incomes. That includes a rural and Native strategy in order to provide housing in those areas as well. There is lots going on in housing, and my door is always open to MLAs who have concerns about their citizens.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, I do not think the minister gets it. Research by the Centre for Policy Alternatives found that 59% of working New Brunswickers who rent have less than a month's worth of savings in the bank. However, to date, 17% of all apartments in New Brunswick are now owned by out-of-province real estate investment trusts. These are financial vehicles designed to generate dividends for investors from the rents that they charge.

Growth in properties owned by real estate investment trusts is not going to deliver affordable housing when their *raison d'être* is delivering increasing dividends to their outside investors. The unregulated market is failing to deliver affordable housing to New Brunswickers. That is why government must act with new legislation and new spending commitments. Does the Minister of Social Development have a plan to meet the need for affordable housing now, not in 2030? Yes or no?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Yes, Mr. Speaker, we do. We have a plan...



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(Interjection.)

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): We have a plan. It is a 10-year plan, based on a relationship with the federal government, of \$300 million. We have an action plan that is on a year-to-year basis, with goals, with milestones, and with results.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): If the member opposite would let me have the floor, I would tell you, Mr. Speaker, about some of the announcements that we are making. We are going to make an announcement in Woodstock about affordable housing. We made an announcement in Hampton about affordable housing. We have an announcement in Shediac Cape about affordable housing. We have announcements about affordable housing. I have visited the John Howard Society off Joyce Avenue in Moncton, and it has 20 units on the go that will help people find the residence that they need when they need it.

Again, I encourage people to reach out and ask the questions. Let's see whether we can help these people when they need it.

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

IMMUNIZATION

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, we are pleased to hear that the first round of vaccines is now in New Brunswick, with imminent rollouts. Of course, there is a large number of people who work the front line, and they are all waiting their turn. One of those groups is our paramedics, some of whom have been given a date and time by EMO to get the vaccine. However, we are also being told that Ambulance New Brunswick will not allow some of those paramedics the ability to switch shifts to allow for the date and time given. Can the minister explain why Ambulance New Brunswick is not being more accommodating in allowing some paramedics to receive their first round of vaccines?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question. Some of the information in the member's question is unfamiliar to me with regard to having a response for that today, but I will say this: We have 1 950 doses coming to the Miramichi. We are limited in where we can move them, which means that we actually cannot move them anywhere, so there will be limited access to this vaccine. That is why we will be working with the area to promote and get this vaccine to the individuals on our priority list. There will be more vaccines. There will be

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vaccines that will be mobile, ready to go to other communities for other vaccination clinics. As that rolls out as we proceed, all our priority groups will be addressed.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, minister, for the response. I understand that she may not have the full details on that particular incident. However, there are paramedics that we are aware of who are scheduled to receive those vaccines on December 19 and 20 but who are not being allowed the shift changes by Ambulance New Brunswick. I will ask the minister this: When she does become familiar with this incident, will she commit here and now to ensuring that Ambulance New Brunswick gives those paramedics the time that they need on the 19th and the 20th to get the vaccines that they need?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, it would not be very responsible of me to speak for Ambulance New Brunswick today without understanding all the facts. What I can commit to is that all our first responders with Ambulance New Brunswick and Extra-Mural are in the priority group and will be receiving their vaccines very soon. Now, if it cannot accommodate the human resource issue, which I know the member across knows that we are challenged with on a daily basis, we must work with Ambulance New Brunswick to allow its people to arrange their shifts and their compromises as best they can. We cannot have unmanned ambulances, Mr. Speaker, so in a way, I can kind of understand that there has to be some protocol with this.

It will be done in a responsible, fully transparent way, and we look forward to all our first responders in Ambulance New Brunswick and Extra-Mural being vaccinated at the soonest possibility. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

SCHOOLS

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, my important question is for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. When will the major midlife upgrades to Polyvalente Louis-J.-Robichaud in Shediac resume and be completed? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you very much to the member opposite for his question. I think that everybody here in the House knows the agenda and how many days are planned. In the House today, we will have the tabling of the capital budget, which includes all government projects for the coming year with regard to roads, schools, and other institutions that are managed through the province's public finances.

Opposition members know how things go with the government's capital budget speech: The Minister of Finance is the one who will deliver the capital budget, after which the

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ministers will take questions. I am pleased to be here to share information that might help the member opposite plan a question for tomorrow. Thank you very much.

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, my question is quite simple. I asked the minister a very specific question: When will the work begin and be completed? According to the Auditor General's latest report, there was interference in the prioritization of major midlife upgrades. My question to the minister is simple: When will the work at Polyvalente Louis-J.-Robichaud in Shediac resume and be completed? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question. This time, in English: We are all aware of the capital budget that is going to be presented today by the honourable Finance Minister. We are aware that in that budget are included details on capital plans, including midlife renovations and upgrades, new schools, and new roads—all the things that government spends money on to make life better for the people of this province. The member opposite is also very well aware of the fact that you do not, in advance of the budget being presented, share information about that budget.

This, to me, is an excellent opportunity to remind the members opposite of the need for a broad-ranging civics program in our province's schools so that all New Brunswickers can be aware of the way in which their Legislature works. They can be aware of the way in which things like budget speeches are presented and, importantly, the way in which the opposition can play a constructive role in asking questions and receiving answers so that we can do our best job for the people of this province. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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