

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



December 17, 2020

CONTENTS

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Ms. Thériault
Hon. Mr. Higgs
Ms. Thériault
Hon. Mr. Higgs
Ms. Thériault
Hon. Mr. Higgs
Ms. Thériault

ABORTION

Hon. Mrs. Shephard
Ms. Thériault
Hon. Mrs. Shephard
Ms. Thériault
Hon. Mrs. Shephard
Ms. Thériault
Hon. Mrs. Shephard

BRIDGES

Mrs. Harris
Hon. Ms. Green
Mrs. Harris
Mrs. Harris
Hon. Ms. Green
Mrs. Harris

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Hon. Ms. Green

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Mrs. Landry

Hon. Ms. Scott-Wallace

Mrs. Landry

Hon. Ms. Dunn

Mrs. Landry

Hon. Ms. Dunn

ABORTION

Ms. Mitton

Hon. Mrs. Shephard

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Ms. Mitton

Hon. Mr. Fitch

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mr. Higgs

ABORTION

Ms. Thériault

Hon. Mrs. Shephard



[Translation]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier was first elected as an MLA 10 years ago. So, he has had 10 years to read and understand the *Official Languages Act*. However, yesterday, he got bogged down in details again when he was asked about the review of this legislation. He talked about immersion, learning a second language, and the exodus of young people. In short, he talked about everything except what relates to the *Official Languages Act*. It has become embarrassing and shocking. You have to wonder whether the Premier has the skills needed to run this province properly. So, can the Premier explain to us what the *Official Languages Act* is?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, what I have said from the very beginning is that we are going to ask the tough questions. We are going to get solutions to issues that have been ignored for years in this province.

Yesterday I referenced a conversation that I had had with Katherine d'Entremont. In the past, I had a conversation about education with the member opposite when he was the NBTA president. You know, the idea that our education system... The very root cause of why we keep talking about being a bilingual province and having an education system that matches that talk and our sincere belief in making that happen...

Mr. Speaker, what I said yesterday and what I will continue to say with respect to the *Official Languages Act* is that we are going to have the review, as it requires, but we are going to go beyond that. We are going to have a discussion on all the issues so that we can put this to rest once and for all in terms of the challenges we are facing and pull our province together. We did it with COVID-19. We can do it together on this issue so that we grow together.

[Translation]

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Mr. Speaker, my question was simple and was aimed at finding out what the *Official Languages Act* was about. The Premier is unable to answer it. He shows a complete lack of understanding of the *Official Languages Act* review process. He talks to us about having language training to qualify for government jobs, and we know where that comes from. The Leader of the People's Alliance of New Brunswick is the one pushing for reduced language requirements for civil service jobs. Could the Premier rise once again and specify what his vision is for the review of the *Official Languages Act*? Thank you.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that I have been quite clear. I said that what we want to do is to have very open and transparent discussions about either the myths or the reality of what our citizens are facing, because what we learned in COVID-19 is how good we can be together. What I am saying is: Why are those... Are there barriers? Are there not barriers? So the review needs to be more than just confined to a very specific topic. It needs to be broadened, so we add to that and then have the open, frank discussions about the reality. We end the debate, and we find a solution.

Now, I know that there are those who would like to continue pushing this political football back and forth and back and forth, but I do not want to do that. It is the same with any activity. I want to find solutions. I want to have a path forward where we grow together, Mr. Speaker, because the division that we have in our province should not exist. We should be promoting together, proud to be the only bilingual province in this country.

[Translation]

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier wants solutions; I am going to give him one. At COVID-19 press conferences, there is still no Francophone political representative to speak to Francophones in their own language. Why? The Commissioner of Official Languages clearly stated that simultaneous interpretation was not enough. Can the Premier clearly explain to me why, although it is now December, there is still no Francophone political representative to speak to New Brunswick Francophones at COVID-19 press conferences?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): There lies, I guess, a fundamental issue. The beauty in our province is that we say that regardless of our speaking one official language or the other, we have the right to communicate in either official language.

We have COVID-19 pressers that have gotten 85% or 90% approval for their effectiveness across the province. In that situation, we said that we would have simultaneous translation. Anyone can ask a question of me in their language of choice, and I can answer a question in my language of my choice. Mr. Speaker, that is the foundation on which we were built in this province. That is the very foundation and principle that we cherish. Is the member opposite saying that my choice and my official language does not count? Is that what the member is saying? That is what I am trying to put across to you. The member has the right to choose her language, and I have the right to choose mine. That is the beauty of living in New Brunswick. That is what we all cherish.



Oral Questions

[*Translation*]

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): No, the Premier really does not understand. We have the right to speak in the language of our choice. However, the Premier must answer in the language of the person who spoke to him. He still does not understand. After 10 years, he still does not understand the *Official Languages Act*. He cannot answer in the language of his choice, he must answer in the language of the person who asked him the question. Well, Mr. Speaker, I will move on to another topic.

ABORTION

Clinic 554 provides invaluable health services to a large group of patients: people suffering from drug addiction; people who are HIV positive; people with mental health needs; people from the LGBTQ2I+ community, and people needing an abortion. Will the Minister responsible for Women's Equality, a champion for women, support the funding of Clinic 554, and will she support the motion that will be debated this afternoon?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question from the member opposite. We are probably going to have a lengthy debate on the motion that the member has put forward today on Clinic 554. I think it is really important to mention that I believe that the issues the member opposite is talking about go far beyond one business in the community of Fredericton. We are going to be speaking to those issues later today during opposition day. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Mr. Speaker, some members of the Conservative caucus acknowledge the need to expand access to abortion services, including the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, the member for Fredericton North, who showed her support on social media during her election campaign.

Will the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure support Clinic 554 and the expansion of abortion services? Moreover, will she encourage her colleagues to do the same this afternoon?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, this motion has been brought forward by the opposition. We recognize that, and we want to discuss it. We will discuss it later this afternoon during opposition day. I firmly believe that the issues related to the motion are bigger than one business. That is what we will speak to this afternoon. Thank you.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Mr. Speaker, I would just like to know why the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure cannot answer the question that I asked her.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think, as every member of this House knows, that any question posed by the opposition can be answered by any minister who stands for it. On this issue, I stand to take the questions on Clinic 554. As I have mentioned, this afternoon we will be speaking to the member's motion. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Well then, I have no choice, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Premier. Given that members of your Cabinet and caucus have expressed support for expanding abortion services, will you permit a free vote on this motion and not seek to amend the motion?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the tactics of the Liberal opposition are always to divide—always to divide—never to unify. This topic is bigger than one business, Mr. Speaker. We will speak together this afternoon with different opinions and different voices, and we will discuss the member's motion. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

BRIDGES

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): The tactic of this government is to dictate, not communicate.

The Centennial Bridge is a vital link on Route 8 and Route 11, connecting the province's north and south. This bridge was to close during the 2020 construction season, but it has not. We now hear that the minister is putting it off again for another year. The government has wasted two years and is now saying that it will need to have full closure over two seasons. This will be devastating to local businesses and will also cause major disruption to the traffic flow, which will be dangerous for emergency vehicles to get through. Will the minister go back to the drawing board and look at possibly having full closure of this bridge for one season rather than two? Will she stop dragging her feet?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): I am kind of surprised that the member opposite is asking this question because she was involved in a discussion about how we were putting the plan together for the project.

We are doing much-needed work this summer underneath the bridge so that we can maintain flow, plan properly for the closures over the next two years, and do the project in a way that supports businesses on both sides of the river and gets people back and forth safely. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Yes, Mr. Speaker, I was part of that discussion, and I thank the minister for inviting me. I brought it up during that meeting. You are now going to close that bridge for two construction seasons rather than one, which will be devastating for small businesses and very dangerous for emergency vehicles to get through.

(Interjections.)

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

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): You have also cancelled any projects in Miramichi that were going to be able to help that traffic flow. What I am asking you is: Will you go back and visit what the engineers put forward just a couple of years ago, that they would be able to get this bridge completed by closing it for one season? It is so important, when you think about small businesses and how they are struggling. Will you go back and ensure that Miramichiers will have to put up with this bridge closure for only one season?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am confused because the timeframe of the bridge closure has not changed.

We had proposed a one-year closure, which would have had a huge impact. It does not matter whether just in the summertime or in the fall or the winter, it would have been a full year. Instead, we have listened to the stakeholders and we have shortened the timeframe. We have made it a short few months in two summers rather than an entire year.

Our job is to listen to the stakeholders. Our job is to minimize risk to the communities. Our job is to make sure that people are safe in New Brunswick. This is what we have done. We have a plan, and we are following our plan. The project will be done in the best way possible to satisfy the people in the Miramichi.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, she is confused and I am confused. The bridge was never slated to close for one entire year. It was for a few months. Go back and read the documents. No wonder we are going over two years. You do not even know what the first proposal was. I suggest that you go and talk to your engineers in your department and find out. It was never slated for one year.

Also, one important piece of that bridge is the sidewalk, and many people use that sidewalk to walk to work from the Chatham side to the Douglastown side. The other day, in our briefing, this minister said that this sidewalk is not important to her and that she is considering cutting it. Why? It is because they do not want to spend any money in Miramichi because it is not important to them. Well, it is important to me. I want to know whether this minister is going to allow that sidewalk to go ahead when this bridge is finished. Yes or no?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Mr. Speaker, there seems to be a lot of emotion in this room around the bridge.

I understand that it is very important to the communities, but we need to listen to the communities. We had our meeting a few weeks ago. The stakeholders were all in the room, virtually or not virtually. They explained to us what things are the most important to them about the project. We discussed the issues that we had to consider when we are making the final plans for the project. They expressed how important the sidewalk is.

I have certainly never used any words around not caring what the people of Miramichi need or want. And we have gone back to the drawing board to find a way to get the sidewalk on that bridge for the people of the Miramichi. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister responsible for Women's Equality. What is the government doing to help women who are financially impacted by COVID-19?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, Minister responsible for Women's Equality, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, as a government, we recognize that women were disproportionately affected due to COVID-19 and that the caregiving roles were dominated by women. The gendered implications of COVID-19 are compounded when they overlap with other identifying factors such as race, disability, income, and age. To address this, we modified our current gender-based analysis tool to apply the COVID-19 response and recovery efforts, to present further economic and social inequalities, and to create more responsive, vibrant, and sustainable communities.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, women represent 60% of people struggling financially in the country, which means they say they can barely cover their basic expenses and are relying on food banks to get by.

Women represent the majority of minimum-wage workers and part-time workers in Canada. These are often precarious jobs. In Canada, a higher proportion of women lost their jobs right from the beginning of the pandemic. Studies show that, in the long term, pandemics can have a greater impact on women's incomes than on men's.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Can the minister list the programs that have been established since the beginning of the pandemic to help New Brunswick women who find themselves in precarious financial situations?

[*Original*]

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, member opposite. Mr. Speaker, what I would say is that the number one commitment that women are looking for is the ability to keep our schools and our day cares open. I think that is why it is so important that we make sure that we continue our efforts—our joint efforts—around COVID-19 and make sure that we keep our economies open. Women are disproportionately affected by this issue, but if they cannot go to work, which means that day cares are closed or job opportunities are closed for them, that is the biggest devastating impact. We need to keep up those efforts, and I want to applaud all members who have done that thus far. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, obviously, no concrete steps have been taken to help women who are financially impacted by COVID-19. My question is simple, and it is for the Premier: Why is that?

[*Original*]

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): Once again, thank you to the member opposite for the question, Mr. Speaker. I would reiterate what I said earlier with respect to the devastation that occurs for women. We know that with COVID-19, women, unfortunately, have lost their jobs. They do not have the opportunity to progress in their careers because these issues set them back. I think that once again, I would state emphatically that from a woman's perspective, including my own, it is very important that we open those channels and keep those channels open so that we can all go to work and also have proper childcare for our kids. Thank you.

ABORTION

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Access to abortion services in New Brunswick is extremely restricted, being available only in hospitals in Moncton and Bathurst. The closure of Clinic 554 in Fredericton has only exacerbated the lack of access. The reason that Clinic 554 and other community health clinics, not

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

businesses, cannot provide abortion services is that the *Medical Services Payment Act* restricts funding for abortions provided outside of hospitals.

This afternoon, we will be debating a motion to remove the section of Regulation 84-20 that prevents payment under Medicare for abortions outside of hospitals. It is widely recognized, even by this government, that care provided in community health care settings and clinics is an important part of our health care systems. I want to ask the Premier a simple question: Has he changed his views on abortion access in community health clinics being covered under Medicare, and will he change the discriminatory part of Regulation 84-20?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member opposite for the question. Again, regarding this motion, we will certainly have a lengthy amount of time this afternoon to debate it and to talk about the different aspects of what it contains and what it is asking for.

The position of this government has not changed. It is no different from prior governments in the past who stated that Medicare would cover the cost of abortions performed in hospitals. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, this government did not create these discriminatory laws and policies, but like successive governments, it insists on keeping them. The household income policy is another example of a policy that is harming certain people in our communities. People with disabilities are having the income that they depend on cut when they get married or move in with their partners, as what happened to Amy Mcdougall-Fraser. Or, to avoid losing this essential income, they are unable to get married, like Kaitlyn Layden. Both advocates have started online petitions that have garnered over 1 600 signatures total, and I am sure there would be more if people knew what was happening.

My understanding is that this policy is also having a disproportionate impact on women with disabilities. Mr. Speaker, why does this government insist on maintaining discriminatory policies that harm New Brunswickers? Will the Minister of Social Development finally get rid of the household income policy?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for that question. As the member may or may not know, I, as minister, have strict rules with respect to confidentiality, so I cannot address any of the cases that have been raised here today.

What I can say is that our department is ready to help people in various situations and that I would encourage people who find themselves in situations to call the intake line. Look at

Oral Questions

the website and call 211, which is a new and innovative way to get the information that is needed. The intake line is 1 833 733-7835. Let's work with the people involved. There are a number of exemptions that people can have based on the situation. Once again, the member opposite knows that we are more than willing to work with people in these situations. That is the method going forward at this point in time.

[Translation]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is legally mandatory to review the *Official Languages Act*. Recently, and again today, the Premier made some statements indicating that he obviously wants to review the Act, but he also seems to want to open the door to a potential review of the *Education Act*, given that he includes all sorts of things in the dynamics of language issues in New Brunswick.

Could the Premier again stand up today and, first, tell us categorically and clearly when he is going to announce the formal review process? Second, will the process be transparent, open, and public? Lastly, Mr. Speaker, when is the Premier going to announce this process?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that we have had adequate discussion in terms of the opportunity that is presented here, not only in the review of the *Official Languages Act*, but also in the timeline that is required, which is 2021. I am hopeful to be able to announce something prior to the new year on how the structure will work.

We have gone through what is required and what it should look like. I have also been very clear about how we want to have more of a wholesome discussion in order to put to rest some of the discussions, issues, complaints, challenges, and rumours so that we can all say that we have this fixed, we know the situation, and we are working together to solve it or that there is not any problem here and move on.

I have made it a point to have open discussion on many issues, and this is no different. I will be meeting the deadline for 2021 to have this review completed. I hope over the coming weeks that I will be able to announce exactly...

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

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, all the different statements the Premier has made recently suggest to us—at least, on this side of the House—that he does not understand the *Official Languages Act* and its merits at all. Does

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

the Premier intend to reduce the language requirements set out in the law, or is he considering doing so?

Also, in the same vein, when the Premier says he wants to be open and transparent... We must not forget that it is now the eleventh hour; there is not a lot of time—not so much time—left to complete the review. Could the Premier also commit today to telling us that he is prepared to support what the official opposition wants to see—a legislative standing committee on official languages that could establish a fully open and transparent process for the mandatory review of the *Official Languages Act*?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I have been very clear over these past few weeks about the need to broaden the review. That includes the review that is required in the *Official Languages Act*, but it also goes beyond that, to having a very open process in how that is done and giving people the opportunity to participate as necessary to share their views.

I have not decided what format that will take just yet, but it will take a format that complies with the *Official Languages Act*. On that, the Opposition Leader can rest assured. Mr. Speaker, we will. We will certainly do this review in 2021, as is required. The Opposition Leader can take that to the bank as well. We will determine exactly the format, and also I am interested to get input on some of the questions that should be asked so that when we seek input, these are some of the issues in addition to what the *Official Languages Act* requires. That is the goal, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is now December 12 or 13. I did not look at the date this morning. The year 2020 is almost over. Last time there was a review of the *Official Languages Act*, the Alward government was in power. The current Premier was Minister of Finance. A period of two years had been allowed, because the *Official Languages Act* is so important for protecting minority rights and both official languages in New Brunswick.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier could make a commitment today. He said he has not yet made his decision. The fact that he has not yet come to a decision about the process is already alarming. He thinks he will announce it by the end of the year. That is what I heard. He could make a full commitment by establishing a legislative standing committee on official languages with us, on our side of the House. The process that he wants to trigger would then be open and transparent.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, at the risk of being repetitive, I have committed that we will fulfill the requirements of the *Official Languages Act*, but in addition, we will be looking to seek input on other issues that continue to be put forward in the province. That involves why this is still such a big discussion after 50 years.

I know that we do not want to talk about education and that we think that is all exclusive of the discussion. Well, I feel that the root cause of our not being a one hundred percent bilingual province in terms of all our citizens being able to converse in both official languages is our inability in our English system to teach our kids to speak both official languages. It is as simple as that. What the reasons are for that, I guess, could be many, but I do not think it is the educators. I think that it is a system that has been designed around it for the educators to put forward. Unfortunately, we have not been prepared to have those open discussions and have the educators' input or have them listened...

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

[Translation]

ABORTION

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So, my question is for the Premier. Regarding Motion 4, which will be debated this afternoon, I would really like to know if the Premier, on such an important issue as women's right to choose... I want to know if the Premier... This is a major issue. We are the last province in Canada not to fund abortions in clinics. Will the Premier allow a free vote? Will he seek to amend Motion 4?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, we have discussed this a few times during question period this morning, and I appreciate the member opposite's diligence in trying to push her agenda. That is what this House is for: It is to have open discussion and debate on issues at hand. This afternoon, we all will have an opportunity to discuss Motion 4. We will have speakers, just as they will, and we will have an open-ended discussion for a two-hour debate.

Mr. Speaker, it will be what it will be. I think that the members opposite truly love to see division, and that seems to be their agenda this morning by the line of questioning that I am hearing. I look forward to that discussion this afternoon, Mr. Speaker.

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

