

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

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[*Translation*]

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, last Friday, the Minister of Health indicated that the use of medical personal protective equipment may have been a factor in deaths in nursing homes in this province. The minister also indicated that the use of this equipment had been identified as problematic in one New Brunswick hospital.

The minister likes to blame others instead of taking responsibility herself. We have been dealing with the pandemic for more than a year, and the minister now feels that we should learn from our mistakes. If the minister had done her job, maybe we would not have to learn from our mistakes.

To follow up on her comments, could the Minister of Health explain today what she has done to fix these mistakes? Some New Brunswickers have suffered over the past few months. I think the minister needs to explain herself today.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question, and I will offer clarity. At the scrum, we were talking about lessons learned from the pandemic. Lessons learned are very important. In fact, if we look at lessons learned, we know that our Provincial Rapid Outbreak Management Teams (PROMT) have become not only excellent but absolutely probably the best in the country. It is difficult, when we know the sadness that has happened because of deaths from COVID-19 and we grieve every single loss.

But, Mr. Speaker, that is our COVID-19 reality with regard to delivering services to the people of New Brunswick. We know that our long-term care facilities are vulnerable, but it was not to point out any deficiencies in staff or even in the organizations. It was to talk about the good work that our people are doing, not only our PROMT but also our frontline workers in nursing homes, in long-term facilities, and in our hospitals.

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): A lesson learned: The minister now knows that she cannot say just everything and anything at the same time. I hope that she will learn about that.

We just learned about the memo coming from the Department of Health concerning the risk assessment of the COVID-19 vaccine transportation in New Brunswick. It is very serious to learn that the Department of Health is thinking that vaccines have possibly been lost in this province. We know that some vaccines, such as Pfizer, are sensitive to temperature. It is important for the minister to stand in this House and explain to the citizens of New Brunswick how many vaccines have been lost since the beginning of this

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vaccination program and what she is doing to be sure that in the future, the quality and the efficiency...

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Oh, my goodness, Mr. Speaker, it is an early start to a long day. The way that they phrased the question is indicating that something has been done incorrectly. Vaccine integrity and safety is of paramount importance to public health, and that memo was shared with health professionals to reinforce this.

I am not aware of any lost doses. It is always best to reinforce measures of importance, such as the transportation of vaccines when we know that we need to transport those vaccines to a number of nursing homes in this province and to ensure—to always ensure—that we are doing it the right and proper way. Mr. Speaker, that is what that memo was referring to, and I really resent the implication that they are saying that it was meant for something else.

[*Translation*]

ROUTE 11

Mr. Guitard (Restigouche-Chaleur, L): Mr. Speaker, in the past few days, three people have unfortunately died tragically in the Bouctouche area, on Route 11. Could the Premier tell us today if he has called the victims' families to offer his condolences on behalf of the government?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am deeply saddened by the fatalities on Route 11, and my sympathies go out to the families, friends, and communities that have been affected. It is my understanding that the cause of these two accidents has not yet been determined. DTI crews are gathering data and putting information together on the cause of the accidents. These two accidents occurred on a section of Route 11 that had not been proposed to be twinned in the original project.

We are proceeding with the twinning of Route 11, as we had planned. We will be going up Route 11 to Ward Road, south of Bouctouche, and we are evaluating options for improving safety along the highway beyond that point. I have asked my staff and the teams to expedite that process to maintain safety on Route 11. Thank you.

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[*Translation*]

Mr. Guitard (Restigouche-Chaleur, L): It is reassuring to know that the minister has asked her officials to speed up the work. However, as we all know, if the work had been done more quickly and had not been put on hold, we might have avoided some of these tragedies. In light of these events and in response to the comments from the minister, who would like things to move faster, could the Premier possibly amend his capital budget in order to speed up the twinning of Route 11 between Moncton and Miramichi and thus avoid tragedies like the ones that have occurred over the past few weeks?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I said in my previous answer, that portion of Route 11 was not slated to be twinned in the original project. We are proceeding with the twinning of the highway. We are working on it this year and next year, and we are investing large funds to get the twinning of that highway done.

I would also like to point out that we have a number of highways in New Brunswick where there are safety concerns. We are doing safety studies on those, and we are trying to improve safety on all the highways in New Brunswick. Thank you.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The morale of the province's licensed practical nurses could not be any lower. The province has refused to have an open dialogue with LPNs about a recent application before the Labour and Employment Board to change their bargaining unit. The government does not appear to value the work of these dedicated health professionals, and frustration is growing among the ranks. Will the minister stop hiding behind the Labour and Employment Board and sit down with the LPNs to look at how their concerns might be addressed?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Finance and Treasury Board is responsible for leading collective bargaining for 25 collective agreements across Parts I, II, and III of the public service. Negotiations continue with a number of groups. Negotiations with nurses—with LPNs—and more will continue, but it is before the labour board, so it has to run its due process. It has to run its just course. That is where we are right now, Mr. Speaker, and we are working for the best for all New Brunswickers, including all our LPNs. We value the relationship with them, and we value them very much. Thank you.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would have thought I would hear from the PETL Minister on this, but I guess that he is not allowed to speak.



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Mr. Speaker, our licensed practical nurses are among the lowest paid in the country. Many LPNs are searching for employment in other provinces. This will add to the shortage of nurses that is fast becoming a crisis here in New Brunswick. Will the minister recognize the value of LPNs and the crucial role that they play in our health care system and bargain in good faith to ensure that their wages are increased to a level of compensation that is competitive with other jurisdictions so that we can keep them here and retain them right here in the province?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have never been afraid to speak on the floor of this Assembly in 22 years.

The member opposite knows full well that, as Minister of Labour, I am not going to comment on a quasi-judicial body such as the Labour and Employment Board. The fact of the matter is that the Minister of Finance was well within his rights to stand up and answer this question because this is a Treasury Board issue. And may I note that all members on this side value the work that LPNs do in this province. We always have, and we always will.

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Higgs government has a mandate for negotiating collective agreements with public-sector groups that offer no more than 3% wage hikes over four years, one of the years including a 0%, prompting an outcry that our heroes, our frontline health care workers, are worth more than zeros.

We know this government's track record—or inability, I should say—when it comes to negotiating collective agreements, and we have 36 of them on the table for this year. The tone apparently has been set for the 40 000 or so public-sector employees. Mr. Speaker, I am sure that the government would rather take them to court. I recall that it spent over \$350 000 taking our nursing home workers to court and denying them their bargaining rights. If this government does value the work of our health care workers—the frontline workers who are our heroes, as has just been said—then will it go down the path of continuing to offer them more than just zeros?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Do you know what? We value all of our workers. As I have just said, we are in the midst of bargaining for 25 different collective agreements for Parts I, II, and III of government. We value them all. We value them not only for now but also for the future.

I am fond of quoting our Minister of Justice and Public Safety, the Attorney General, who says this: We do not budget for the next election; we budget for the next generation. This

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includes when we are dealing with collective bargaining. The proposed annual wage increases will support long-term stability. Long-term stability is what we are looking for right now and for the future. New Brunswick is a wonderful place to live, and we will bargain in good faith with all those 25 collective agreements.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, if they are going to be budgeting for the next generation, then they should know how desperate the numbers are in our recruiting efforts. We know that our nursing graduates are continuing to leave the province and go elsewhere for opportunities because we are refusing to pay them a competitive wage. This government and the Premier have frozen wages for some, have left the conciliation table in another case, have torn up an agreement that was negotiated when it came to the Cabinet table, and have taken another group to court.

Mr. Speaker, this government will cite a precarious financial position for the province as its motives, but we know that for this Premier, when he was Finance Minister, it was the same thing. His ideology is never for negotiating in good faith, but for looking for service cuts and reductions. Workers are asking to be treated with respect in contract negotiations. That is all—respect. Is this government prepared to negotiate in good faith, or does it run the risk of strike action?

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Throughout the pandemic, we worked with every sector of employment, every sector of the population, in order to be successful thus far. Obviously, we hope to continue that process as we roll out the vaccines.

Mr. Speaker, with every union and with every employee, we want to be fair and reasonable in any sort of wage settlement, and we have asked for their input into part of the solution, things that we can do differently. What we do know is that every province in the country is challenged, particularly in the field of health care employment. I think it was Ontario that said it needed 250 000 workers. You can go right across the country.

The way that we are going to be able to manage going forward is to be innovative in our service delivery model, to listen to the people on the front line on how they can help us succeed and, yes, to pay fair wages. It is not by doing everything the same as we have always done, but by finding a new way to lead New Brunswick as the first in the country—to lead the country, not follow.

STUDENT SERVICES

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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[*Translation*]

My question is for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development and is about Bill 35.

Did the minister consult with the College of Psychologists of New Brunswick before tabling his bill in the House to allow teachers to administer psychological assessments, interpret their results, and develop student learning plans?

In other words, it is not just a question about whether the minister met with this group to talk about the weather and general issues. Did he consult with this group specifically about Bill 35 and the details it contains?

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I thank the member for Kent South for his question. I am pleased to say that, on November 30, 2020, between 1:30 p.m. and 3:30 p.m., a meeting took place between officials from my department and representatives of the College of Psychologists of New Brunswick regarding the delivery of effective and timely interventions.

Dr. Jacques Richard, who signed the letter that was sent yesterday, said there had been no consultation with the department. Well, this person who signed the letter was at the meeting.

On January 14, 2020, between 10:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m., there was a discussion about access to psychological assessment. Again, representatives from the College of Psychologists of New Brunswick were there, and the discussion was specifically about this issue.

I first raised these issues over two years ago. The College of Psychologists of New Brunswick says that it is not interested in getting involved in resolving this crisis. I am here for the children and not just for the psychologists, despite the job that they have to do.

[*Original*]

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister said he was there for children and not for psychologists. Is the minister saying that psychologists are not there for children? Is he saying that school psychologists are not there for children? Is the minister saying he is there for children more than psychologists are? I find this statement a bit worrying.

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[Original]

Regarding this bill, the minister, as he said, met with the College of Psychologists, but according to the college, it was not told of the specific plan to allow some teachers to practise the scope of psychology and the bill was never mentioned. Would the minister, based on his previous answer, go as far as to say that the college is lying? If not, could he tell us, as politely as he can—because we do have to state that, unfortunately—what is the science backing the bill? If he is not consulting the psychologists who are the specialists regarding this theme, whom is he consulting? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thanks to the member for the question. There have been extensive consultations with multiple groups over an extended period of time. We have kids in our system who have been waiting multiple years because more than half of the positions for school psychologists in our schools remain vacant. They remain vacant in part because the college, a couple of years ago, changed the criteria for school psychologists. You now need to have a Ph.D. instead of a master's degree.

What we are proposing is that 25 specialist resource teachers who already have master's degrees will receive 952 hours of additional instruction specifically to assist with psychoeducational assessments. They will then feed into the school psychologists and other mental health professionals, who will now, in addition, have more time to work on the mental health crisis that we have often talked about, especially in the context of COVID-19.

We are here to present a plan to fix a long-standing problem. The College of Psychologists is welcome to come to the table. So far, it has said no. I regret that and look forward to talking to the college if it is interested. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

NURSING HOMES

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, when the budget is tabled, the government talks about its intentions and shows people where the money is supposed to go. Now, people are holding their breath, because they do not know what will happen until they see results.

Here is my question. The budget contains \$10.3 million under the Nursing Home Renovation and Replacement Plan for three new nursing homes. Can the minister specify where the 148 new beds will be located?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I look forward to when my estimates will be debated here on the floor because we can get very much into the specifics of where these monies will be invested.

But right now, we have Moncton, where the RFP has been closed. We have Saint John, where the RFP has been closed. We have issued a request for proposals for the Shediac area. We have also listed a request for proposals up in the northeast, in the Acadian Peninsula.

[Translation]

Tenders were issued for the Peninsula. It is 60 beds. This is good news that I am giving you today.

[Original]

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Well, until we know, why waste time? The more we know, the better people will feel.

Mr. Speaker, there does not seem to be any money in this budget to deal with recruitment related to the staffing of our nursing homes. We are facing a crisis, with shortages of both nurses and long-term care workers. Everybody knows it. So, that being said, it is very important. We say that we love our seniors, but they need to feel it. Let me tell you something right now: They are not feeling it. My question is this: How does the minister plan to address this crisis?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Again, Mr. Speaker, we are very happy to discuss these issues. When we talk about recruitment and retention, that is something that affects not just the nursing homes here in New Brunswick. It affects Health, and it affects other areas as well. We are working with the other departments to make sure that we can look at some of these issues in terms of addressing the retention and attraction of nurses and other workers. We also work with the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour in trying to move those files forward.

Mr. Speaker, even today, we heard the member for Saint Croix get up and talk about the increases in pay for the various sectors right across the province that are dealing with issues in taking care of our seniors, the most vulnerable. There are 10 000 different workers right across the province. We are addressing the situation, and we are working in collaboration with all the other departments. Mr. Speaker, you are going to see results. You are seeing results, and you will continue to see results with this government.

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[*Translation*]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, I was shocked to learn that the government had hidden the rapid increase in the number of cases of a mysterious neurodegenerative disease in New Brunswick. There are 43 cases, including 35 in the Acadian Peninsula and 8 in the Moncton area, and 5 people have died. Thanks to Radio-Canada, which did its job, we now know about this epidemic and that there were 11 cases in 2019, 24 in 2020, and 6 during the first 11 weeks of this year.

The problem is growing. People have the right to know what the risks for their health are. What do we know, and what remains unknown? What has been ruled out as a possible cause? Which possible causes are under investigation? How are the cases spread out? Will the Minister of Health ensure that, this week, the people of this province get a complete picture of the situation...

[*Original*]

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question, and I appreciate the anxiety that news of this memo has created. It is a very serious issue, and I understand the member's question. This is also science. The staff at Public Health are not only fully aware of this, but they have also gone the extra step of engaging experts from across the country to aid in understanding what this is. They sent out a memo to doctors to ask them to be aware of it and to understand that if they have patients with conditions that have not been diagnosed and are still a mystery, perhaps they need this help. By bringing forward any other patients who may be having symptoms, they are going to have the full force of all these experts helping them through their medical journey.

Mr. Speaker, Public Health is the guide here. Public Health will tell us what we need to know, and we can make it accountable for the information.

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

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, when your doctors discover that you are sick, they do not keep it from you if they are not sure what it is. They tell you what it is not, and they tell you what kinds of tests they are going to order to try to get to the bottom of it.

Is Public Health all over this? We do not know. We cannot tell. The medical officers of health are the population's doctors. They are not civil servants. They have a responsibility



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to level with the population about their health concerns. This, once again, raises the question of the independence of our medical officers of health. They are not paid to support the government. They are paid to tend to our health needs as a population.

Can the minister tell this House who made the decision—who made it—to keep New Brunswickers in the dark about the growing outbreak of this neurological disease?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, nobody made the decision to keep the people in this province in the dark. First of all, the staff at Public Health have followed a responsible protocol for understanding what they are dealing with. They have invited experts from across the country to assist them in understanding more about it. As we proceed and as they get more information, we will understand it with them.

Now, ruling something out and ruling something in may help the Leader of the Green Party across the floor, but we do not need distractions here. We need to have the people at Public Health double down and work on this condition to find out what they are dealing with. They are doing that, Mr. Speaker.

POTATOES

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier and this government like to talk the talk on food security, but when it comes to walking the walk, they are still crawling.

Our potato growers have been facing losses for the past three years. Livestock producers, in this past year, have been facing one of the greatest hay shortages in a decade. The feds have their money on the table. The Minister of Agriculture here in New Brunswick likes to talk about how she is talking to her counterparts at the federal level. Well, their money is on the table, Mr. Speaker. I want to know this: Where is the province? Where is the money that the province needs to help our potato growers get through one of the worst droughts that we have faced in a lifetime? They need help. They need to have the province step up to the plate.

Hon. Mrs. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Thank you, member opposite. We are in active negotiations with our federal counterparts. We have been having several discussions with our FPT counterparts. However, the decision is left up to a majority, and we are waiting for the majority decision and for all the provinces to sign off on the agreement. Thank you.



[*Translation*]

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We all know that COVID-19 variants are around us in New Brunswick. They are also found in other Canadian provinces and other countries.

You know, Mr. Speaker, for weeks, we have been speaking out against the fact that the Conservative government is holding tens and tens of thousands of vaccines in reserve. People from across the province call us every day asking us why they cannot get their vaccines. People of all ages, sometimes the most vulnerable or younger people, are asking us when New Brunswick will make sure they can get the vaccine that will protect them against COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, in recent weeks, the percentage of available vaccines in reserve has fluctuated and went up to almost 33% of the number of vaccines received in New Brunswick. When will the minister and her government make sure that New Brunswickers can get the vaccines? Vaccines should not be kept in reserve. People need them.

[*Original*]

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, we have been administering vaccines now, for four weeks, I think, in long-term care.

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): We have been administering the vaccines as we have received them. Yes, we had some in reserve for second doses when we were going to be doing them in the earlier 28-day recommended timeline. That plan changed.

We know, through our COVID-19 experience, that we get daily information that changes that. Right now, we are probably one of the top provinces for having needles in arms. That number, again, has been updated now on a much faster and ongoing pace. We realize that updating those numbers once per week was causing some confusion, so we have taken that step to ensure that those numbers are updated.

Mr. Speaker, we are not only vaccinating at a very fast pace but also accelerating. Right now, we are doing people aged 80 and above. They can start their vaccination process this week, and then we are going to ages 75 to 80. Mr. Speaker, we are doing our job.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the fact remains that many more New Brunswickers could be vaccinated. There are some weeks when we have large quantities of vaccines in reserve. We could almost say we have industrial quantities of them. The other provinces—whether we are talking about Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, or the western provinces—are vaccinating people. Here, we are stockpiling vaccines and hoarding them. We are adding vaccines to the stockpile.

Now, we are learning that certain vaccines are being distributed in New Brunswick at temperatures varying from 2°C to 8°C. Knowing that certain vaccines are very sensitive to heat, how can the minister ensure that not a single dose of the vaccine will be wasted? How can New Brunswickers be sure of receiving the vaccine they have been eagerly awaiting for almost a year? New Brunswickers have been waiting to get vaccinated for a year now. When will they finally get vaccinated?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, everyone is waiting for their vaccine. I understand the member's passion for understanding that we have people who want to receive their vaccines. I know that. We are responding. We are doing it in a methodical, practical way.

We have a task force rolling out the vaccine. We have great people who are mobilizing every single day. Last week, we finished 517 long-term care facilities and nursing homes and we finished our First Nations communities with their first doses. In order to get our high school students back to school, we made room for 4 500 teachers with our AstraZeneca vaccines. We are doing the job. We will continue to do the job. When everyone gets their vaccine by the end of June, this conversation will be moot.