

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**May 19, 2021**

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### GOVERNMENT AGENDA

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, New Brunswick has had some great leaders. New Brunswick has had leaders who wanted to continuously improve the social fabric of our province. Our province has had leaders who also wanted to protect the rights of all New Brunswick communities, including Anglophone and Francophone communities, First Nations, and newcomers.

Yesterday, in the House and in front of the media, this Premier, with a short statement, called into question all the work that great leaders such as Richard Hatfield, Bernard Lord, David Alward, and so on, have succeeded in doing.

Today, the Premier has the opportunity to correct what he said yesterday, when he called into question all this work that has been done over the last 50 years.

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. You know, Mr. Speaker, it is an interesting situation that we find ourselves in right now in New Brunswick. Coming on to the end of the pandemic, we can look across our province and see what great work people have done throughout. We can see the cooperation that we have had here in this House and in the COVID-19 Cabinet committee that was unprecedented across the country.

Looking at the challenges we face in our province is a must, Mr. Speaker, not an option. It is not, well, we will do things the way we have always done them, and life will, all the while, be... Mr. Speaker, we have real challenges. For the major issues that we can work on together with the leaders, I am prepared to continue as we have done, but it will not be a matter of ignoring the problems. I am not prepared to ignore issues. I am not prepared to have our hospitals understaffed and to ignore it. I am not prepared to see tax agreements that are unfair. If we want to look at all the details of these tax agreements, I am sure that the opposition would more than understand why they are unfair going forward. We have to...

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

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, this Premier did not actually answer my question. He does not want to set the record straight. So, we and many other New Brunswickers who are paying attention to what is happening believe this

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Premier wants to destroy everything that has been done in New Brunswick over the last 50 years by several leaders and Premiers who are still well respected today.

Yesterday, the members of the government caucus all stood up to applaud their Premier and his comments. Who on the other side of the House will stand up and uphold the values of the Progressive Conservative Party? I ask because, today, given the Premier's leadership, I would say that these are being called into question. Who will stand, today, to set the record straight?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, we see, as would be the normal situation with the opposition members, that they cannot resort to substance because substance is a foreign situation for them. So they resort to fearmongering. We cannot look at the problems, Mr. Speaker, because we do not want to talk about any of that. We will just fearmonger. We will just go on and on about the same old issues that have always been brought forward as arguments.

Mr. Speaker, I am prepared to sit with anybody and talk about the challenges that we face, whether they be in health, whether they be in education, whether they be financial, whether they be in social assistance, or whether they be the case of not finding people for employers in the province—not talk about it, not fearmonger, and not just say: Oh, well, you cannot do anything differently. That is the way New Brunswick is.

Well, do you know what? I think that New Brunswick can be bigger, better, and greater and that it can be greater with both official languages, Mr. Speaker, and that is the commitment I am making right here.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): No one—no one—in this room, me included, has told the Premier not to address the issues—no one. What we are telling the Premier and the entire Conservative caucus is to protect the laws and the rights of all communities in this province.

Decisions need to be made about retaining and recruiting health care workers so that we address the issue. I want to know from that side of the House whether that is exactly what the government members are going to do because in yesterday's message from the leader of their party, it did not seem to be the case. There have been so many strong leaders who have built this province. Let's not destroy it over one comment by the Premier.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, our province is on an unprecedented path forward. We are seeing people from all over the country and internationally, as well, looking at New Brunswick. They are not just passing through New Brunswick but investing in New Brunswick. We are seeing, in record numbers, people who want to stay here, live here, and invest here. Why is that? It is



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because they have suddenly realized how great a province this is. We have known it all along.

When we want to talk about all the issues and work together on all the issues, obviously, we will be respecting the rules and the laws of the land. That is not an issue, Mr. Speaker, but when we have cases where our health institutions are not delivering the services and they can find better ways to work together, you bet that I am going to work with them. I am going to work with the CEOs and with the leaders of the unions, and we are going to find a way to deliver results for the people of this province in every corner of this province because the people expect nothing less, whether they are French or whether they are English.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Richard Hatfield would be disturbed by your comments and your approach, Premier. Bernard Lord, I am sure, is very worried about what you said yesterday. David Alward, I would say, would feel the same.

We are asking for the Premier to be crystal clear. We have a challenge in attracting and retaining health care professionals. All those leaders that I just mentioned made investments to try to keep them here and to recruit more and to improve our social fabric, while always respecting individual rights and community rights. We want to hear from the Premier on whether he agrees with what they had done and with their approaches or whether he wants to destroy everything that they had done over the past few years.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting to listen to the Leader of the Opposition. He often comments about our getting excited over here. Well, he seems to be a little angry and excited over there today. He is somewhat animated, I might say.

Mr. Speaker, do you know what I want to do? I want to fix the challenges that exist today. It is not about going back 20 years, 30 years, or 50 years. It is about building on what we have learned over those years. It is about building together for a future New Brunswick that exists in today's challenges—not the past concerns—but recognizing the past rights, the past freedoms, and the past rules and laws and making them work for the challenges that we face today. That is the goal. We are going to continue to fix New Brunswick, Mr. Speaker, and not ignore the issues that have been ignored by generations.

If we want to talk about investing, look at what the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour talks about. There was \$8 million spent and given to two universities for increased seats. Not a seat was increased, Mr. Speaker, but it did not matter because \$8 million was spent.

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

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**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Premier, through the Speaker, it is not about excitement. What I am saying, I believe in. I have principles, and I have values. First of all, you have never, ever—this morning again—answered my question. What you just said is that former Premier Alward, former Premier Lord, and former Premier Hatfield did not do their jobs and neglected some of these issues. Without saying that, that is what you said, Premier.

They worked really hard to try to bring in a better social fabric and better, progressive social programs while always respecting peoples' rights and dignity. The Premier wants to destroy all of that, and it is not right to do so. Please get up this morning and correct what you said yesterday—that you will respect all laws that are entrenched in the Constitution.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, we are working for today. I have heard different comments from past leaders and Premiers when someone asked a question. They said, well, it is 2021—or 2020 or 2016 or 2015 or whatever other year it was. The point was that it was a new day, and we have to figure out how to meet new challenges. I am sure that if we went back to Premier Louis Robichaud's day or Premier Frank McKenna's day and asked whether they would accept a health care system that was not functioning the way it should and whether they would accept that for the citizens of this province, there would have been a resounding no. Would they have done something about it? Absolutely.

It seems as though the Leader of the Opposition would ignore all of that and say that it is not the issue and that we do not need to worry about it. Do you know what? Every Premier, every caucus, and every government is faced with the challenges of the day. Yes, we have to recognize that, deal with it, and not ignore it. We are not here for a good time, Mr. Speaker. We are here to get the job done. That is our goal. We are going to fix New Brunswick and keep it on an upward spiral. It is going forward, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, Premiers Louis J. Robichaud, Richard Hatfield, Frank McKenna, Bernard Lord, David Alward, and so on all wanted to address the issues of the day. They always did so to improve the situation and provide services to those who need public services, and they always respected the rights of all New Brunswick communities—all communities. They even continuously improved these rights, going so far as to entrench them in the Canadian Constitution.

What I am asking the Premier to do is not to work to address the issues of the day, but to be willing to do so, while respecting everyone's rights and existing legislation for the Anglophone and Francophone communities, and, of course, New Brunswick First Nations.

Given that the Premier has not yet given a very clear picture of the situation and the issue, could he do so now, since he has the opportunity?



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[Original]

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

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition is just trying to make an issue where none exists. But he is trying to make it an issue because the opposition's style would be either just to ignore the problem completely or just to throw money at it so that people would say, well, okay, they put money into it, so it must be better. It does not matter whether it gets any results or not, because that was never a factor for the Liberal Party. The result factor was totally inconsequential.

Mr. Speaker, I think that we need to be clear here. I am not for a moment suggesting that we are not respecting individual rights and freedoms in this province, which we cherish—not for a moment, Mr. Speaker. I never said that. The Leader of the Opposition can put all the words he wants in my mouth, but that never came out of my mouth, because I think we value... I think that New Brunswick is special and unique.

What we do not do is take advantage of our uniqueness. People are just starting now to see how good we can be. Mr. Speaker, when you have an article in the *Financial Post* that says: Suddenly, the have-not province has it all... That came from the *National Post*, and it is quite different from what we saw five years ago.

[Translation]

## HEALTH CARE

**Mrs. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, the Upper Madawaska region has a population of about 5 000 and is served by a community health centre. This is modern infrastructure in which local people and businesses have invested a lot of money. According to a recent report by the Upper Madawaska community health centre advisory committee, more than half of the people in the region do not have a family doctor. Mr. Speaker, that is 2 500 people. It is not 10% or 20%, but actually 50%.

The members of this committee want to propose solutions to address the family doctor and nurse practitioner shortage in the Upper Madawaska region. Committee members have requested a meeting with the department to present their report. Three times, Mr. Speaker, scheduled meetings were cancelled at the last minute. The people of Upper Madawaska have had enough of the indifference of this government and want to know, Madam Minister, whether you will commit to meeting with the advisory committee by the end of May.

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[Original]

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I just completed a virtual provincial tour in which we visited 49 communities and/or medical professionals in their communities. We have received 550 submissions to the department during our health review, and we have talked with over 1 800 people. The members from Madawaska attended, and, Mr. Speaker, we read the report.

I would like to think that we have endless hours and minutes in every single day—we do not. I appreciate all the hard work that our regional service commissions have done with regard to submissions, because they are valuable.

Mr. Speaker, let's not have a lot of special treatment. Let's use what we can do. We are going to get the job done.

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

[Translation]

**Mrs. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, the situation is critical in Upper Madawaska. Every week, I get calls from people in tears who cannot renew their prescriptions, who have no follow-up on their health, and whose physical and mental condition is deteriorating.

The advisory committee created a sub-committee to address the issue of recruitment and retention of professionals for its community health centre in Upper Madawaska. The committee wants to propose an initiative for Upper Madawaska with an interdisciplinary team of family physicians and nurse practitioners.

The minister stated last week that all New Brunswickers would have a family physician in less than six months. Will the minister commit to supporting the efforts of the advisory committee of the community health centre in Upper Madawaska, to meet with the committee, and to deal with this matter?

[Original]

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that I made it abundantly clear that we are tackling the family physician issue in our province. In every single community that I visited, I shared this message: We want you to be part of the solution. We want to work with you, and we will, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, they do not need the Minister of Health to sit down with them in order to move a project forward. It will be worked on with the department staff. We can see what is feasible. We can see what they are proposing and then try to work together to reach a very positive solution.



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But, Mr. Speaker, this is not a free-for-all. We cannot expect to have everything in every single community. What we can do is ensure that we meet the community needs, because that is what this health review is all about—understanding the needs and filling them. Family physicians are certainly a top priority.

**Mrs. Harris** (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Residents of Miramichi and the surrounding area were shocked to hear that pediatric services at the Miramichi hospital have been cut and that the department has been closed. Will the Minister of Health confirm whether this is the case and whether this cut is temporary?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, throughout the health care system, there are measures that are put in place to see us through times when accommodations need to be made. Pediatrics is one of those challenges where staffing is an issue and where we have to make decisions based on the number of patients that we have and how we can approach it. I leave that with the RHAs. They need to determine how we get through times like these.

While we will always be in touch and we will always consult, I cannot tell the member today how long a time this will be. We will be transparent about it, and we will certainly engage with the community to talk about the issues that it is worried about. We do not want there to be a lot of concern because our children need to be looked after. I am willing to work with the community to understand what the real issues are and to ensure that we address them.

**Mrs. Harris** (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. No one told the community that this was happening. We are just hearing it throughout, and staff are afraid to speak up because they know they will be hauled in and raked over the coals if they speak out against these cuts.

Is this just another example of service cuts that are being made to hospitals throughout the province? We are in the middle of a crisis, but the minister does not seem to be overly concerned. Is this another backdoor approach to cutting services at our hospital and blaming them on the RHA and on the nurse shortage?

The buck stops with the minister. She should know whether the pediatrics floor in Miramichi is open or not. I want to know this: Why was this not made public, and what is the minister going to do to fix it?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, there are no cuts. The Liberals love to utilize the word “cut”. Cut, cut, cut is their favourite terminology in the fearmongering approach that they take in the political world. The facts are that they were amalgamated and this is temporary. No beds are been closed. There is no net loss of beds or clinical needs.

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As we go forward, we will be engaged with the RHAs, but, my goodness, they must be able to pivot when they need to. That is part of the health care system with the human resources that are necessary. We are not going to wait. We are going to take action right away. We will work with our communities. I visited the Miramichi, and we had great engagement in the Miramichi. The health review is going to be addressing a lot of the issues that we have, but we must do it responsibly, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

### STUMPAGE FEES

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, my question this morning is for the Finance Minister. He must be concerned about the revenue from timber royalties that his government is losing, considering the high cost of lumber.

This morning the CBC reported that, in March, sawmills and wood-treatment facilities in New Brunswick obliterated a 19-year-old monthly earnings record by more than \$80 million. Yet New Brunswick's royalty rates have not budged, and New Brunswickers cannot afford a two-by-four anymore. It is the classic steal from the poor and give to the rich. Forestry companies in New Brunswick are still benefiting from the rates that were set after the Alward government's great forestry giveaway of 2014, which committed the government to provide certainty for competitive wood costs and to help reduce the cost of Irving's forestry operations.

Does the Minister of Finance think we are receiving fair value for our timber resources?

**Hon. Mr. Holland** (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank you very much for the question from the member opposite. Let's sift through the meaningless political rhetoric that he threw around and talk about the real issue. It is easy to throw around comments that talk about rich and poor, and he has made a legislative career out of doing just that.

The truth of the matter is that if we move into a situation where we are reckless or we operate with forest royalties in a knee-jerk reaction, the very people he says he stands for could suffer. Now, would he stand here and take the blame for that? Absolutely not. I am sure he would not. But I will not and this government, as well, will not, and the Minister of Finance understands that we are going to work toward ensuring that we get the best level of revenue that we can. We are working on it with a variety of different components. We will not be taken off our trajectory with foolishness and rhetoric, but we will deliver results in the same way that we have been committed to, in an unprecedented way for...

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

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, I really want to hear what the Minister of Finance thinks about this because every time the Minister of Natural Resources speaks out



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and says that he is looking out for a certain group, that group then comes out a few days later and contradicts him.

Just this morning, Linda Bell of the Carleton-Victoria Wood Producers' Association called the royalty situation very frustrating and absolutely ridiculous and said that the government's royalty policy encourages a depressed marketplace. The only group that cannot contradict the minister is J.D. Irving. Maybe that is because the minister is its spokesperson—after all, it did defer comments to him on CBC.

Many of the other issues discussed in question period, such as the shortage of nurses due to low wages, could be financed if the Finance Minister adequately tackled the royalty revenue issue. Will the Minister of Finance raise timber royalty rates so that New Brunswickers also benefit from the profits that the big mills are receiving from this lumber boom? If not, who is he protecting?

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

**Hon. Mr. Holland** (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, from the onset, it was clearly political theatre on behalf of the member opposite. He read from a paper that he expected the Minister of Finance to answer, but he knew that I was going to. Once again, this is ludicrous.

And, speaking of JDI, I would invite the member opposite to talk about what would have happened in 2015 when the industry was hit with a 20% countervailing duty as it relates to softwood lumber tariffs. The government held firm on stumpage prices at that point. In 2018, with record lumber prices, the industry put on an enormous amount of pressure to lower stumpage rates, but we held firm. Tell the whole story. Tell the story about a government that is working hard to ensure that we bring order to a system. At that point, we will then have the conversation. But it is very easy to disregard comments that are irresponsible and totally political.

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

## CORONAVIRUS

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Fifteen months ago, I was honoured to be part of the all-party COVID-19 Cabinet committee, with the sole purpose of flattening the curve to ensure that our health care system did not become overwhelmed. As we now have over 40% of residents inoculated and vaccines available for every adult New Brunswicker, I believe that we must not allow ourselves to lose sight of the original goal, which was stated when this pandemic started: to flatten the curve and protect our health care system. Now more than ever, New Brunswickers need hope that the end is in sight and that people can return to what were their normal lives before this pandemic started.



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My question is for the Premier. Now that every adult New Brunswicker has the opportunity to get vaccinated, can the Premier give us a timeline of the process that will unfold to end the state of emergency?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. I guess that we will work consistently with Public Health and our neighbours in that regard, as we have done throughout this pandemic. When we get to where everyone is vaccinated at the 75% level, that would certainly be a trigger. Whether we are able to reduce the emergency order when only one group... I would say that will happen in the next two or three weeks. It could be by mid-June for one vaccination level. I would suggest that we are likely more in tune with saying that we need to take a cautious approach to the summer until everyone is vaccinated. But we will work with Public Health and with what our colleagues across the country are doing as well.

I know that we do not want to take a chance to open up and risk losing what we have and going backwards at all. But I am optimistic that things will dramatically open up going into July. Whether the emergency order stays in effect depends, I would say, on how quickly we vaccinate the number with the second vaccination.

### SENIOR CITIZENS

**Mr. Gauvin** (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. All over the province, we have wonderful organizations that work with seniors, and they do a great job. My question is this: Would the minister advise as to whether the department provides funding to the Saint John Seniors' Resource Centre? If so, is the minister aware of what types of activities and services are provided through this funding?

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The department partners with many, many organizations across the province, and we appreciate the work that those organizations do. When we look at the work that these seniors do, we look at what the outcomes are and whether they are able to develop on those outcomes. If, in fact, during the pandemic, certain groups are not able to reach the outcomes with which they were originally tasked, then there is always a review of the funding that we give to them.

For a particular group, I will take that question under advisement as there are many, many of these organizations across the province that we deal with at a local level.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Gauvin** (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am sure the Saint John Seniors' Resource Centre does a great job. Now, could the minister indicate whether the funding for other seniors' centres has been reduced, including funding for the Moncton senior resource centre, the Université du troisième âge du Nord-Ouest Inc., and



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the Association des universités du troisième âge du Nouveau-Brunswick? If so, why was the funding, which provides invaluable support to seniors, reduced for the three organizations I have just mentioned?

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Fitch** (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, when it comes to some of the rules with respect to COVID-19, there were some activities that were not allowed because they promoted the spread or transmission of the disease. One of those was drop-in centres. Some drop-in centres were possibly the function of some of the groups that were mentioned by the individual across the way.

So, if there was no drop-in centre because of COVID-19, then I guess that I would ask the member across the way: Should the government continue to pay for a service that is not being provided? Could those funds be redirected to other areas to better enhance communication from a virtual standpoint or to do something virtually instead? So I guess the question goes back to the member across the way: Do these services still exist during COVID-19, or were they drop-in centres and things that were prevented to protect...

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister. The time for question period has expired.