

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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REGIONAL HEALTH AUTHORITIES

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, again, this week has been a very important week with very revelatory issues. We now know that the Premier has always had changes to health care in mind—preconceived changes to health care, even though they have had this fake consultation in which they are not even listening to New Brunswickers. His true colours showed again this week in terms of who he is and what he thinks. He wants to make changes and squeeze the system to be able to justify the lack of resources, to cut services, to amalgamate hospital services, and to amalgamate the two health authorities.

Premier, can you tell us here today, because you did not reveal this in the media yesterday, whether you want to merge the two health authorities? Yes or no—do you want to do it?

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the fearmongering continues.

On May 8 and 9, Vitalité was going to close its ER. Horizon's CEO and Vitalité's CEO had a conversation about how they could work through the weekend to continue providing services from both hospitals. They did wonderful work, and they got through that weekend. It is their job to have a contingency plan. I am very proud of them. They will continue to collaborate as we work through an HR shortage to have a summer where nurses can have some respite. Then we will have new graduates in August. There is no amalgamation.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is the Premier's job to make sure that there are appropriate and adequate resources in our health professions. That is why these health authorities are in a crisis.

[Translation]

That is why the Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont Regional Hospital is in crisis. It is because of the Premier's inaction. I just heard the minister say that there will be no amalgamation. The problem is that the Premier does not respect the opinions of his ministers and MLAs.

The premier has already contradicted his MLAs or his former ministers several times. I want to hear the answer from the one who makes the decisions in this government: Does he want to amalgamate the two health networks, Horizon and Vitalité?

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[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, he continues down this path of fearmongering. What a shame. We have two health authorities, Vitalité and Horizon. They are both strong, strong entities.

With regard to the health resources, I want to make a comment, Mr. Speaker. For four years, the Liberal government under Brian Gallant sent \$8 million per year to the universities to fill nursing seats that they did not fill. The Liberals allowed it to happen. They think that shoveling money out the door is going to solve a problem, just as they think that a budget will balance itself. Mr. Speaker, we got to work and put resources in place to give us more nurses and to help us bridge the gap with our shortages. We are going to continue on that path with two regional authorities, just as we said we would.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): The Premier's silence so far says it all. Either he agrees to merge the two authorities or he does not want to say it yet. That is our interpretation of his silence right now.

A third question to the Premier is this: Do you want to merge or amalgamate the two health authorities? Through the consultation process that the minister has undertaken, we have not heard one idea to merge these two health authorities. Premier, you need to be very clear on this. You are throwing stuff around. People are feeling insecure, and there are unknowns. You need to be clear. Do you want to merge these two health authorities? Yes or no?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the fearmongering does continue.

What I have said for a long time is that we have some big challenges in our province. It was interesting the other day on a political panel where we discussed whether we could take on the next big challenge together, as a team. Health care is one such challenge, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased right now that the department is working together with the Nurses' Union, with Horizon, and with Vitalité. They are looking at the big picture right now and focusing on the Moncton area and what has happened there.

When people ask me what I want, Mr. Speaker, I say that I want the best health care in our province. I want the professionals in our province to determine just what that looks like and where we go from there. The reason our health care is in jeopardy, Mr. Speaker, is that we do not let the professionals do their jobs. We do not listen to them about the real facts and the real issues and how we are going to address them. It is not a matter of just saying that we can hire more professionals because we cannot. There is a real issue with supply. I am very pleased that the minister and the professionals are working...

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

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[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, as I heard when I was younger: He is a smooth talker. The Premier just told us that he wanted to listen to people and consult them. He just told us that he wanted to let health professionals do their work. However, what he is doing is imposing his ideas. He tells us that he wants to work with those who share his ideas. That is not cooperation. Then, I see the Conservative Party caucus applaud him, sounding like seagulls in the wind, Mr. Speaker.

I would like to know whether the member for Moncton East agrees with amalgamating the two health networks. Does he agree with reducing services at Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont Regional Hospital? His constituents use these services. The member for Moncton East should say what his position is.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, we have two health authorities, Horizon and Vitalité. They have an obligation to deliver the health mandate of the government. They have a responsibility to deliver health services to the people of New Brunswick. They have a responsibility to work together with contingency plans when there is a problem. They have done it all through COVID-19, they did it on the weekend of May 8 and 9, and they will continue to do so, and I want the leadership in the CEO positions to do that. We need them to work together to ensure that the people of New Brunswick have health care services when they get up to the door, and that is what they have done, Mr. Speaker.

The members opposite are blowing this out of proportion in a divisive manner.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health was heard from many times, and, for me, that is enough. The Premier does not say much about the various issues, except in front of the media, when he brings forward all sorts of ideas in which he truly believes.

The Premier wants to make major changes in the health system and wants to do so by reducing services, amalgamating, and not listening to the people, who are not suggesting that these changes be made, Mr. Speaker.

In addition, the Premier wants to make these changes without respecting Acts that are enshrined in the Canadian Constitution. The Member for Moncton East should stand up and say that amalgamating the two health networks would be a mistake, that reducing or eliminating services at Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont Regional Hospital would be a mistake, and

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that, moreover, the *Official Languages Act* should be enforced if there are any changes. Could the Premier inform us of his position?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): It is quite amazing to listen to the Leader of the Opposition continue to just drool on, Mr. Speaker, about the different things that he can speculate on.

We are not suggesting any reduction in meeting our obligations as an officially bilingual province. There has never been any suggestion of that, and there has never been any suggestion of reducing services. It is about maintaining services. It is about ensuring that we have services, Mr. Speaker, and it is about working. It is about working together to fix a problem that is in crisis.

Everybody knows that our health care system across this country is challenged. Why did every Premier—every Premier—and every territorial leader say to the Prime Minister that we need to ensure better health care funding on an ongoing, annual basis? Every one of us recognizes these challenges. Getting people is a major issue. But the Leader of the Opposition would like to sit over there, live in the clouds, and just throw out darts and hope—hope—that we can turn this into an emotional issue. It is a real issue.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, there is one thing that the Premier is consistent about. It is the fact that he is very inconsistent. He throws out all kinds of stuff. He announces the end of the world and then brings something back. He creates a lot of commotion in society and even more in the health care system.

There is a crisis in the health care system. The inaction by this government over the past two and a half years has made it that way. The shortage of resources, the shortage of resources—he is using that to cut services. We want to know. We—not I—really want to know. New Brunswickers want to know and people working in the profession of health care want to know the clear position of the Premier. Is he going to merge the two health care authorities—yes or no?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I do not know how many ways I can say it, Mr. Speaker. We have Horizon and we have Vitalité, and we have two CEOs who understand the need to collaborate when they have problems.

For four years, the Liberal government sat pouring out money with an agenda that it did not even know was not happening. It did not even know that it was not working. So when we came to government, we took action on it.

Mr. Speaker, in every single engagement session, I talked about every hospital in this province having a role to play. We need a network of excellence to deliver the best health

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care services to the people of this province, and that is my ambition, Mr. Speaker. It is a lofty goal. I am supported by my Cabinet and my Premier, and we are going to do it.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, the members opposite forget because they want to forget. But when we were in office, there was never a crisis at Georges-L-Dumont like what we see now. There was never a crisis at Georges-L-Dumont. This government is...

(Interjections.)

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

(Interjections.)

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I asked the member for Moncton East to get up earlier. Now, he is screaming.

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): If the member for Moncton East wants to give his position on merging or not merging the two health authorities, I think that he should do so officially, not by screaming from across the room.

Mr. Speaker, the members opposite are squeezing the system. They are not investing in retention and recruitment. They are not allowing the appropriate resources like RNs, LPNs, and all the professionals because they want to use that as a justification to cut services. Is that not true, Premier?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that the history speaks for itself. Certainly, you can look back over the records. I know that the classic is the \$8 million spent at two universities to increase seats and no seats were increased at all. When you get that sort of result for the money being spent, you get a situation like what we have right now. We get a situation where the system is untenable and the nurses and the authorities are trying to figure out how best to make it work.

We have nurses who are apparently working 24-hour shifts—unacceptable. We need a system that manages that so people can work the shifts that are appropriate. For us to sit here in this room and go on and on and say that there is not a problem is just avoiding the obvious.

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There is one thing that this government will not do: We will not avoid dealing with the real issues in this province. We will not walk away and say, Oh, well, we will put it off. We believe that now is the time to fix New Brunswick, and we are on a roll with fixing New Brunswick. That includes the best health care for every citizen of this province anywhere...

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): There is more applause; it sounds like seagulls in the wind.

[*Original*]

Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? Do you know what? There is a problem.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Member. Member, please. Twice now, I have heard you use that expression, and I think that we have already agreed that it is unparliamentary. I would ask that you withdraw that remark. You have called the opposition members by a name that is not parliamentary.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I will retract those words.

But in terms of the issues, no one in this room has said that there is not a problem in the health care system. Actually, we have said that there is a crisis in health care. For the past two and a half years or just about, there has been no significant focus on investing in HR resources for health care. The members opposite want to use that as an excuse to cut services. Please tell us whether you are going to merge the two health authorities, yes or no.

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

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to give the Leader of the Opposition some numbers when he talks about investing in human resources.

You know, in 2013-14, in terms of enrollment in the nursing programs in both universities, it was 1 272. In 2014-15, enrollment went down to 1 147; in 2015-16, it went down to 1 081; in 2016-17, it went down to 953; and in 2017-18, it went down to 888.

The other day, the Leader of the Opposition told me to relax. Well, do you know what, Mr. Speaker? We do not have time for that. But based on those numbers, the opposition knows all about relaxing.

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In 2019-20, by working with the universities, that number went up to 950, and the projection for this year is 1 062. That is on top of a bridging program and international recruitment, Mr. Speaker.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health promised that a plan would be announced by the end of May for the situation at the Dumont hospital. This is going to be the last day of sitting for a week, so we will be at the end of May before we get back. I want to know this from the minister or the Premier: Is there going to be a plan, and which instructions have you given to the two CEOs and the local group over there?

I am hearing that you want to create a committee, and there is only a week left before the end of May. Is there going to be a committee? Which instructions did you give to the committee, if there is one? And are you going to have a plan by the end of the month? Please inform all of us regarding which instructions you gave.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to clarify that I said I would have recommendations by the end of the month and that we would be planning for the summer, to have a successful summer.

I want to talk about the inaction that the Opposition Leader talks about. Do you know what? We have taken action on mental health. We have had action with COVID-19 all through, and I want to announce today that we are at 52.6% of our population over the age of 12 that have been vaccinated. We had a single-day record of 13 751 doses administered yesterday, and we are going to hit 400 000 vaccinations today with what we are doing. So, Mr. Speaker, we are all about action, and we are all about basing everything that we do on fact and working with our professionals. We are going to continue to do that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, with all the things that the minister just announced, why is there still a crisis in health care? Why has the government not paid attention to where it really matters at this time? We all agree that mental health needs to be addressed, and we did applaud the plan. We asked that it be shortened to three years, and I think the government agreed to do that. We did agree with that.

Regarding vaccinations during this crisis, thank you to the federal government for making sure that we have had enough of a supply and thank you to Public Health for making sure that this has been done in an efficient and good way. Congratulations.

But we have a crisis now in the HR field of our health professionals. At the Dumont, it is a crisis now, but there are others. Something is brewing also in Saint John, and there is a

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problem in Campbellton. What have you done for that to be resolved? You have been there for two and a half years.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, if there is one thing that I have learned from being in this Chamber since 2010, it is that no matter how many years the Conservatives and Progressive Conservatives are in government, it takes the Liberals only a very short amount of time to screw it up. Whatever we gain, whatever we accomplish, whatever we put into action, they do not want to leave it alone. They are the epitome of zigzag, zigzag, zigzag: Because somebody else thought of it, we cannot do it.

We have proven in this House this week that we will work with the opposition members, and we will gladly work with them if they have ideas they want to bring forward. But four years of inaction on this file—four years... We have made gains in three years, and we will make gains in another three. We are going to work with our professionals to do the job that needs to be done. It is not easy, Mr. Speaker, but we are up to the job.

WILDLIFE

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, lawyers from the Maliseet Nation Conservation Council, the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, the Nature Trust, Nature NB, and WWF Canada sent a demand letter to the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development concerning many long-standing violations of New Brunswick's *Species at Risk Act* by the minister, which he has not remedied, despite their correspondence of six months ago. They identified many failures of the minister to comply with the Act's statutory duties, including the failure to prepare and publish management and recovery plans for species at risk and the failure to prepare and publish assessments of the feasibility of recovery for those species at risk.

Will the minister comply with the demands of the groups to carry out his legislated responsibilities, or is he going to force them to commence proceedings against him in New Brunswick's Court of Queen's Bench? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate, on the last day of this session, having the chance to reply to a member's question as it relates to species at risk, in view of the significant respect I have for the stakeholders in the nongovernment organizations that represent such.

I am here to say that we are certainly taking their information seriously. We are certainly taking that conversation seriously. We have been in communication with them, and we are engaging to ensure that the committees are put in place to do just that.

Keep in mind that this does fit part and parcel with the work that we have been doing hand in hand with those very same organizations to expand and double the protected natural



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areas of the province. Certainly, that goes beyond just talking about land mass. It talks about the sensitive areas where those species at risk require habitat. We take that very seriously. Our door has been open, and we will absolutely, with an open hand, work toward making sure that the climate is favourable for these species at risk—absolutely.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Well, Mr. Speaker, apparently, those same organizations have lost their patience with the chronic and systemic failures of successive Ministers of Natural Resources to safeguard wild species and implement the *Species at Risk Act* in this province. This is threatening the survival of hundreds of wild species.

The Atlantic Canada Conservation Data Centre will soon release its assessment for 2020, but five years ago, it identified 701 wild species that are at high risk or very high risk of extinction in New Brunswick. The vast majority of endangered species have been left without the legal protection of the *Species at Risk Act* since it came into force eight years ago. If that is not a massive failure of successive governments to safeguard the habitat, manage the population, and provide for recovery strategies, I do not know what is. The hard evidence of failure is there for everyone to see, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister comply with his legal duties under the *Species at Risk Act*?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am not prone to answers that are very short or brief, but that work has absolutely already started. Now I will continue to take the rest of the minute because the member opposite has made the point that in the past there have been issues.

There have been deficiencies. Species at risk have been marginalized, and quite honestly, they have a very important place at the table. But I am very proud to say that although we can look to the past and talk about governments and Ministers of Natural Resources in the past and see that it was not a focus, that is not the case today. That is not the case today. I would ask the member opposite to speak to those organizations and ask them whether they had ever had the unfettered access to the Department of Natural Resources that they have now. The answer is no. Had they ever had access to the information, the data, and the science about how we can make things better going forward? The answer is no. I would answer unequivocally and absolutely that, yes, the work will be done to ensure that species at risk...

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

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, one thing is becoming very clear in this province, and that is, many New Brunswickers cannot get health care in either official language. It is probably because of the fact that successive governments have put language over life when it relates to medical needs and medical care.



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Mr. Speaker, I am getting more and more phone calls and e-mails from frustrated patients who are waiting for surgery. While the medical term for some of these procedures is defined as “elective”, that term can often give a false impression of the medical issue at hand. While the diagnosis of the problem may be that it is not life-threatening and, thus, is defined as elective, that can change if the problem persists for months on end with no intervention.

My question is for the Minister of Health. Can she tell us how the pandemic has worsened an already large backlog of surgeries and where that backlog is today?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I appreciate the question, Mr. Speaker, because I think it is important. Those who have to wait for surgery certainly have a disadvantage with their quality of life. We understand that, and we know that. You know, despite COVID-19, over this past year, we have actually been able to... The overall wait-list for hip and knee surgery has decreased by 9% from September 2020 to January 2021. We know that going through red phases and certainly having challenges with our ICUs, depending on the zones and their recoveries from COVID-19, have had an effect on elective surgeries. It is indeed something that we have been working with.

I want to talk about a very special initiative that has happened with the surgical teams that are actually working together to book surgeries. It is working so well. It is not a top-down approach. Again, it is working with the medical professionals in the community. They are doing a tremendous job at helping us prioritize and ensure that the people who have been waiting the longest are getting their surgeries. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

CHILD CARE

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, the federal budget has set aside \$30 billion over five years for early learning and childcare programs. This will make life more affordable for parents who are struggling to pay the costs of childcare. It will reduce childcare costs by 50% by next year, and costs will be down to \$10 per day within five years. This is a real game changer. Will the Premier commit to partnering with the federal government on this program that could make a real difference for so many families?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. We are working to understand the details around this program. As you know, it is a program that requires joint funding between the federal government and the province. There are a lot of things that have been done in this world, Mr. Speaker, over the past while, with raising wages and with the way we set the standards and the support we provided for the increased standards in that field.

The minister is not here today to comment on that, but we will work with the federal government. We will understand exactly what the requirements are and also what its



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contributions will be and what that means to New Brunswick, because we certainly want to have a day care program here that works for everyone. Thank you.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, the province's largest employers have come out in support of the national childcare program, calling it an economic necessity and a building block for a healthy, vibrant, and inclusive society. It will provide the opportunity for thousands of women to enter the workforce. Parents will not have to choose to stay at home instead of joining the workforce.

We know that the Premier does not like to spend money. Again, in his previous answer, he kept alluding to that. But can he not see the tremendous benefit and opportunity that we have in front of us? I am asking the Premier to think of not just the problems that are there but also the opportunity. This opportunity will be a major game changer for all families of New Brunswick. Please, Mr. Premier, please think about this seriously. Think about the good and not just the bad. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite was talking about alluding to money. What I was alluding to is the money that we have put into this day care profession over the past couple of years, raising the wages, increasing the standards, and also raising the money to allow that to happen. So we have already gone down that track, independent of what the federal government is doing, because we recognize that parents need a safe and healthy place for their kids to go to. That needs to be available to all parents in this province. Maybe, for once, there is no disagreement here on what is required to provide the right care for our kids.

But it is like everything else—the federal government put out this stuff and it did not really put out all the details around it, so you do not know quite what it means. We like to understand details. I know that is not a factor across the hall because the Liberals never pretended to know any details, but that is something that we would kind of like to know. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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