

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



June 1, 2021

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FIRST NATIONS

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we are collectively mourning the terrible loss of the 215 children whose remains were discovered on the grounds of the Kamloops residential school. We are profoundly saddened by this tragedy.

There is a need for healing, and there is actually a need for the Premier of this province to reach out to New Brunswick First Nations leaders to discuss—and to hear their voices on—the history of systemic racism in the province and to listen to what might be and to how we can address the past and present injustices. Premier, will you reach out to and listen to the leadership of the First Nations of New Brunswick on this issue?

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question. I would say that this government is the first in the history of the province to actually acknowledge that systemic racism is real and that it exists and that we are going to do something about it.

I would also say that I have personally discussed many of these issues with First Nations in the province. We recognize the importance of understanding this and making sure we are going to do something about it. You actually heard the Premier previously when he stepped up and said that we are going to investigate every one of these day schools in the province and determine, if any of these children did not come home, why that happened. I think that is unprecedented. Thank you.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I sincerely would like to hear the Premier answer this question.

New Brunswick is not free of the history of residential schools. In addition to the Indian Academy, which operated in Sussex from 1794 to 1833, there were 12 Indian day schools in the province that operated on or near First Nations reserves.

Will the Premier really reach out to First Nations leadership and communities to ascertain whether there are any requests in the province related to this history of neglect and abuse that occurred, given the tragic events that unfolded in British Columbia?

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you again for the question. I would reiterate the fact that this provincial government is committed to doing everything that it can with respect to the residential school systems as well as the day schools.

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I would also remind you to think about the fact that, potentially in Sussex, historical records actually show that those day schools ended up being residential schools and being the reason why residential schools actually started, so this province is going to do everything we can. We are going to be discussing this with First Nations. We are going to be working on this issue, and we will get to the bottom of all of this. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the minister for her remarks, but the Premier's leadership will clearly be required on this issue.

I will move on to another topic, and I wish the Premier would answer my question. In recent months and weeks, we have seen that we have serious problems with our health professionals, with recruiting and retaining them. The Premier set out a bargaining mandate of 3% wage increases over 4 years. Now that New Brunswick paramedics have officially been reclassified, will the same mandate for a 3% increase over 4 years be applied to them since the reclassification?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Yes, in relation to the paramedics and what they have seen through the legal process, that is not an implication of what would happen elsewhere. But I think that the point is real that wage parity with our Atlantic neighbours is certainly important.

It is important to ensure that not only we are able to match our conditions for benefits, but also we have to recognize the working benefits. There is the message that a nurse should not be afraid to go to work. We have heard that over and over again when meeting with the President of the Nurses' Union. Certainly, it has been well articulated that it is an issue that has to be addressed.

There are many issues related to better workplaces for our health care workers and how we manage that going forward. I am interested in having those real discussions, and more than just in terms of wages, Mr. Speaker, as I have said many times. It is about the workplace, it is about the environment, and it is about the conditions of work so that people love what they do every day, and that is looking after the citizens of this province.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, people who work for the public service actually want to provide services, but they also work as a means of living. They need to have a decent means of living. In the budget, there is a line item called Supplementary Funding Provision. Clearly, it is defined, as an objective for this line item:

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“To provide supplementary funding to other programs in government for the cost associated with the settlement of collective bargaining agreements”. That line item went from \$62 million in 2018-19 to \$163 million in this fiscal year that is planned for. It is an increase of over \$100 million in that budget line item. I want to know this from the Premier: With this money now available in this year’s budget, is he going to change the bargaining mandate of 3% increase over four years?

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. Yes, we are doing our due diligence in collective bargaining, as we speak, for some 25 different collective agreements. The money that you speak of is for, yes, collective agreements. It is also for storms. It is also for ice storms and floods. And we happen to be going through COVID-19, and that has not ended yet either. I mean, a lot of this money, as the member knows from when he was Finance Minister and President of Treasury Board, is spoken for, for emergency situations. It is not just fun money. It is for emergency situations, and for the past year, we have been going through a genuine worldwide emergency situation with the pandemic. So, yes, that is what the money is for.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the key element of this budgetary item is for collective bargaining and collective agreements. This government went from \$62 million in this line item to \$115 million the following year, 2019-20, then to \$175 million, and now to \$163 million. This government has increased this line item significantly year after year after year, and it is not using this available money to sign for respectful wage parity with other provinces for our public servants, mostly in the health care sector. We have a challenge in retaining nurses and recruiting nurses, LPNs, and now paramedics, who have been recognized and will want to be treated fairly. Premier, are you going to change your bargaining mandate?

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. With respect to the proposed wage increases that we are talking about with these contracts, these collective agreements have to be good for both sides. They have to be good for the workers, absolutely, but they also have to be supportive of New Brunswick.

I have to reiterate once again that the member knows from when he was President of Treasury Board and Finance Minister exactly what this money is for. It is for emergency situations. It is for emergency situations such as floods, ice storms, or a worldwide pandemic. A worldwide pandemic has reached us and has clawed money out of our system. Absolutely, we are doing what we can to support New Brunswickers, but it is about supporting New Brunswickers all through. It is supporting the people who are bargaining, and it is supporting the rest of New Brunswick and coming to a fair solution for everybody. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance should move over, look at the Minister of Health just behind him, and ask her whether we have a crisis in health care. He talks about emergency situations. That is what we have right now in health care. That is what we have right now in health care, Mr. Speaker. We have a shortage of nurses and LPNs and professional health care workers. The Saint John Regional Hospital had to make changes in its ER services. The DECH here in Fredericton had to do the same thing. The Moncton Hospital, the Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont University Hospital Centre... Those are just to name a few. They are all in need of nurses, LPNs, and professional health care service providers.

Who is defining emergency in terms of how this money can be used? I suspect that it is the Premier because he wants to use this money to please the bankers in New York and not to allow us to recruit and retain...

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, there we go again, with the Leader of the Opposition trying to create an issue that does not exist. Mr. Speaker, we know... We will agree, though, Mr. Speaker, that there is a crisis in health care. However, it is not only a labour shortage but also a labour shortage that is across the country. It is not going to be solved with any one issue. It is not going to be solved by salaries alone. We are competing with every province in the country, Mr. Speaker. It is going to be solved by recognizing what we can do best and how we can do it best and by having the willingness to change.

Mr. Speaker, when we talk about a crisis in health care, we need to talk about all the issues to ensure that we can not only maintain our current level of health care but also enhance it. Right now, to the Leader of the Opposition's point, there have been changes made to ERs and to operations in hospitals that have been caused by shortages, but they have been caused by situations that are external to the routine operation of the hospitals. There is a crisis, and it will cause a different view as to how we manage health care and how we ensure that our health care meets all the needs of every citizen in this province and that we do it together, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, the Premier says that it is a situation that does not exist. It clearly exists. There is a crisis right now. We have 26 collective agreements that have expired—or just about.

In 2019-20, there was \$115 million available for collective bargaining. In 2020-21, there was \$175 million. This year, it is forecasted as \$163 million. There is money available. There is money available to negotiate collective agreements in good faith so that we are able to retain all our graduates in nursing, retain our LPNs, and recruit.

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We have a crisis now. We need to fix it now. Money is available. Are you going to use all this money for collective agreements? They need it, we need it, and we need their help, Mr. Premier.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to some of the comments of the Opposition Leader. I am looking at an article from 2017 that says, "Overcrowding at Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont Hospital to force patients home". Mr. Speaker, this has not happened overnight. This has not happened overnight.

We are willing to work with our partners at the RHAs and, certainly, with government to do what we can in these negotiations, but we are not going to negotiate in the media, Mr. Speaker. It happens at the table, and it is happening now. We will continue to have those negotiations.

I also might say, Mr. Speaker, that the RHAs are taking the actions that they need to take right now to address very serious situations, situations that other governments have left untended. We are taking action, Mr. Speaker. We wish that we could make it a switch, but it is not. It is a small evolution. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, there is a program in the budget called Supplementary Funding Provision. In 2019-20, \$115 million was available in this envelope. The Premier did not use this money to negotiate collective agreements in good faith. In 2020-21, \$175 million was available to negotiate collective agreements in good faith. This year, \$163 million is provided to negotiate collective agreements.

The mandate of this funding envelope is mainly to be used to negotiate collective agreements. This money is meant to be spent on agreements with the civil service and our health care professionals so they can stay, work, and provide essential services in our province. It is to avoid crises, and certainly a strike.

I am asking the Premier how much money is available in this funding envelope for the collective agreement in question.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I rise here basically just to repeat what the Minister of Finance has said in relation to this funding. The Leader of the Opposition knows full well that this funding is used for multiple purposes, and he also knows full well that the pandemic is not over and that, even yet, we have not seen all the consequences of what the costs are in relation to the

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pandemic. So, every deal and negotiation must be looked at across the broad spectrum of 50 000 employees, and the Leader of the Opposition knows that as well. It is not any one isolated case where you can just say, okay, well, we will do this for this group. There are 25 other groups, so you have to treat it all in context.

I know that the Leader of the Opposition makes it sound simple and easy because, in many ways, that is the way it looks from a distance. But I know that he has been there and that he knows better. Other than the political side and the posturing, Mr. Speaker, the reality is that we will do what is necessary because we must. We need these people on the front lines looking after us, and we need to be fair to each and every one of them.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, the Premier's 1% financial help to try to get through this pandemic is not making the cut. Of all the financial help for New Brunswick, 99% came from the federal government, so I cannot see why he is using the argument that this is for the pandemic situation.

We have a crisis in health care. We are losing our graduates, who are moving to other provinces that are more attractive. They are a lot more competitive. There are incentives to bring them there. There is \$162 million available for collective bargaining. We want to keep these people here, and I am sure that you want to keep these people here. You need to offer them fair bargaining, and you need to offer them incentives so that they can stay here, work here, live here, and enjoy the quality of life.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, there is likely something here as well that the Leader of the Opposition and I can agree on. I have said here in the House, I have said in many meetings, and I have said publicly in interviews that we need to ensure that we understand all the barriers to people who are in our province and who want to leave our province—we need to understand why. That includes anyone who is currently employed, anyone who could be employed, or anyone who wants to come back to New Brunswick.

I say, Let's look under all the rocks. Let's understand every single issue that causes people to say that they cannot work in New Brunswick. I want to put all the cards on the table. I am sure that the Leader of the Opposition would like to have all the cards on the table, except... Maybe not. But I have committed to putting everything on the table and to having frank and open discussions with not only health authorities but also any group within the province. This includes discussions with the health care workers to ensure that we understand their situation and address their issues, Mr. Speaker, so that we have people who want to come, work, live, and stay in New Brunswick.

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[*Translation*]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, over the past few days, the board of directors of the Vitalité Health Network asked the government for concrete measures to improve the health care situation in New Brunswick. The board provided suggestions on direct solutions, such as the idea of enabling more professionals to help out our health care system. The board also made it clear that it is necessary to get rid of the NCLEX exam, which is not representative of our reality.

The last time the chair of a board of directors of a health network spoke on health care in New Brunswick, he was fired. The Minister of Health clearly said that, if people do not think like she does, they have no place in the system.

Although this government does not seem to agree with the requests from the Vitalité Health Network, will the minister do the right thing, which is to listen, to act, and not to fire those who want to help out the health care system in New Brunswick?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I so appreciate this, Mr. Speaker. You know, it is perspective. Perspective is everything. One perspective could be that a health minister needs a team that is going to help accomplish the things that we want to accomplish—big things that we need to accomplish in our health care system. The other is that maybe a minister is just arbitrary, such as when the members opposite fired Rino Volpé some time ago and actually lost a lawsuit, I believe, to settle that.

I do not really work that way. It is not my ideal way of working. But we have some situations that we need to address. The board of Vitalité has certainly expressed some concerns that we have been discussing most recently, even as recently as the holiday Monday, when I went to the Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont University Hospital Centre in Moncton. We will be addressing all those issues, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, we all know that, even if the health care system in the United States may have some similarities to the Canadian one, the fact remains that the way we deliver health care in Canada and New Brunswick is quite different from the way it is done in the American system.

Knowing that, the current Conservative government stubbornly continues to use an American test that is not representative of the way we deliver services here in New Brunswick. A Canadian Examination for Baccalaureate Nursing exists here in Canada. Why

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does this government continue to favour an American test, when there is a Canadian one that reflects the way health care is provided here?

When will the minister take responsibility and make sure that the Canadian test is the one used for our nurses of tomorrow? I am talking about the Canadian test, Mr. Speaker. Will the Minister of Health finally realize that the Canadian test is the one we must use to meet health care needs here in New Brunswick?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, nurses are a self-regulated body, and they have the Nurses Association that oversees their credentials. The Department of Health, under our former minister, provided funding to the Nurses Association for the translation of all those documents. I am not suggesting that there is not a role; however, there must be a process.

I would welcome—I would welcome—Vitalité talking with the Nurses Association to explain its positions, its concerns, and its demands to change the NCLEX exam, because that is where it needs to go. The Nurses Association is a self-regulating body, and if Vitalité wants the test changed, that is where it needs to go. We have also been encouraging action on it as well, Mr. Speaker.

RENTS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Social Development told CBC last week that he would respond by the end of May to the recommendations contained in the Clerk of the Executive Council's review of the rental situation. That did not happen.

The Clerk concluded that the housing market is not working for everyone. She found that many New Brunswickers are making hard choices to stay housed. They are being forced to remove children from day care, forego groceries, avoid dental work, and ignore medication. She heard from New Brunswickers who live in constant fear of their rents going up to amounts that they cannot afford, leaving them homeless.

What is the minister going to do right now to protect renters from a housing market that is forcing them to go without and sometimes forcing them to get out?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the member opposite bringing this to the floor because it is an important issue for the province. It was acknowledged by the Premier in the state of the province address and by the amount of work that was done by the civil servants to produce this report. I want to thank them for all the work in bringing this forward.



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Mr. Speaker, we are not waiting for a specific date and time to start solving the problems of the people here in New Brunswick. We are acting now. As a matter of fact, we are acting now on a number of the recommendations that have been put forward to help improve the system and to help people understand what their rights are, what their responsibilities are, and how they can address some of the issues that are before them today.

This government will be coming forward in due time with a document and with its decisions on the report that it was given. I appreciate having the question here today. I ask the member opposite for a little patience, but we are working today to help the people deal with the consequences...

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

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, I have lost all patience with this minister and his dealing with this issue.

The Clerk of the Executive Council found in her investigation that tenants feel unprotected. It is no wonder, when they are losing sleep at night because they fear that the next rent increase is going to force them out on the street or that an eviction notice will do the same. Many tenants have no protection against arbitrary evictions. I have had constituents evicted because a landlord wanted to house a relative in the unit. I have had constituents evicted because they were told that the children were too noisy. I have had constituents evicted because they complained about black mold in their basement apartment. I have had constituents evicted for no apparent reason at all.

People need to feel secure in their homes, Mr. Speaker. What is the Minister of Social Development going to do right now—right now—to protect tenants from arbitrary evictions?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Once again, thank you very much for this question, Mr. Speaker. I will tell you that, right now, there are a lot of things going on to help people deal with the situations before them.

If there is a situation that requires that they contact the Residential Tenancies Tribunal to help them get through a problem, they can do that right now. Mr. Speaker, one of the recommendations that was put forward is that we provide advocacy groups with tools and information to help protect the vulnerable people within the population.

One of the areas that I am most proud of, Mr. Speaker, is that this government signed a bilateral agreement with the federal government under the Canada Housing Benefit. Right now, the money is flowing to people who need it the most to help them deal with their rental situation and to help them deal with making ends meet. This government is going to help 6 600 New Brunswickers and invest \$98 million during the life of that program. That money is flowing right now.

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PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, there is ever-growing concern among mayors, councillors, regional service representatives, and citizens alike about the lack of adequate policing in rural areas. Over the course of my time as a village councillor, the deputy mayor, and, now, the MLA, I have seen a steady decline in community policing and the number of officers available to respond to serious incidents in a reasonable time frame.

Just last week, a serious incident happened at the Minto health clinic, where a health care professional was assaulted while providing medical care. After 911 was called, it took the RCMP over 30 minutes to respond to the scene. My question is for the Minister of Public Safety. What does this government plan to do to address this very serious problem that directly affects public safety in rural New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Justice and Public Safety, Attorney General, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the member knows, with respect to the issue that he spoke about, I cannot speak about an individual case of law enforcement which may or may not produce potential charges. I can tell you this: Safety is very important to this government as it relates to its citizenry. There are issues, and we are looking at them.

There are nine municipal police forces that police 3% of the geography and 30% of the people. The rest is done by the RCMP, which does 97% of the geography in the province and 70% of the population. The province of New Brunswick does not have direct-line policing. It is either municipal or RCMP. However, whenever there are delays like this, I am hearing the message about issues with respect to policing. I have met with my colleague the minister responsible for municipal reform. We believe that policing should be part of municipal reform. It should be looked at carefully, and it will be.

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

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is for the Minister of Health. As violence against nurses continues to grow and more and more medical professionals are being assaulted, it is clear that something has to be done. Many private-sector businesses and public-sector institutions have some form of security to help mitigate the effects of these types of incidents. I know that there are urban hospitals that have certain levels of security personnel, which, frankly, is often inadequate, but rural clinics are left completely to fend for themselves. When you add on unacceptable RCMP response times, the problem is compounded. Frankly, Mr. Speaker, I am concerned that these serious incidents are going to continue and get much worse.

To the Minister of Health, what does this government plan to do to address this growing problem of violence against nurses and other health care professionals?



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Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really appreciate this question because I share the concern of the member opposite. We have certainly met with the Nurses' Union and the Nurses Association on violence in the workplace. We understand that we do have to have protocols for security. At times like this, there is a protocol that is followed by the RHAs. Now, I believe that we can strengthen this approach. Certainly, I am more than willing to explore opportunities that we can implement. It is a difficult decision to decide whether full-time security is needed for things that happen every so often. I know that we will be able to analyze this in full with the RHAs to see what we can do to mitigate any risk. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, Chris Curran, president of CUPE Local 1251, said that members have been without a contract for nearly four years. He has accused the government of refusing to bargain fairly, stating publicly that Premier Higgs is "forcing a strike on essential workers"—the province, the public. Mr. Curran added, "It's unbelievable and unethical". Mr. Speaker, it may be all those things, but it is also foolhardy.

We have six locals now in a deadlock with more on the way. The Premier said that he prefers cuts before addressing wages, or efficiencies, as he likes to call them. Let's not forget when he told workers to leave the province if they wanted to find better wages. Mr. Speaker, why is the Premier prepared to risk a strike by essential workers at a time when the province is in the midst of a pandemic? When will he recognize his error on this file and come back to the table with a reasonable offer?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it would be really refreshing if the opposition could get some new material. The situation that I have talked about is that, in order to manage health care in the future, we need to think differently. They can interpret that in any way that they would like, and they can perpetuate the same old, same old.

But, Mr. Speaker, we got through COVID-19 as a team because we did things differently than the rest of the country, and I am proud of every single person in this province who made that a reality, including the people in this room. So, Mr. Speaker, you go to the next step, and you say: Okay, how do we fix health care? How do we ensure that we have a health care system? We know what is happening across the country, and I encourage the members opposite to have a look around this country and say: What challenges are being faced?

We have unique opportunities. We have unique challenges in our province, but we can face them all and fix them all. But we cannot do it with the same old, same old, same old program that has continued to exist on that side of the House, Mr. Speaker, at this time, in this province. We are going to fix them for the future.

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Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period has expired.

