

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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CONTENTS

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Higgs
Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Higgs
Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Higgs
Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Higgs
Mr. Melanson

ELECTORAL REFORM

Hon. Mr. Higgs
Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Higgs

PROPERTY TAX

Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mary Wilson
Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Higgs

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

CRAB INDUSTRY

Ms. Thériault

Hon. Mrs. Johnson

Ms. Thériault

Hon. Mrs. Johnson

RENTS

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Fitch

HOSPITALS

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mrs. Shephard

SMALL MODULAR REACTORS

Mr. Legacy

Hon. Mr. Holland

Mr. Legacy

Hon. Mr. Holland

NURSING HOMES

Mr. Mallet

Hon. Mr. Fitch

PROPERTY TAX

Mr. Melanson

Hon. Mary Wilson

[*Translation*]

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am going to start off today on the same subject that I started off with in the first question period when we came back three weeks ago. Collective bargaining is an essential and important element when you come to deal with labour conditions, working conditions, and having appropriate benefits for our employees.

The Premier has historically been very critical or not really respectful to a certain extent of bargaining in good faith and valuing the labour movement. Today, we read in the newspapers that he is now negotiating through the media and asking the CUPE movement to take out the management of the collective bargaining group. They had no clue about this. Why is the Premier not wanting to negotiate at the...

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. The opportunity that we have here in front of us is enormous. It is about thinking differently. When I think about some of the difficult approaches that we have, it is as if we are lost in time and in discussion. So it is not just about the wages. It is about that, but it is also about doing things differently and about everyone taking ownership for what they do, where they do it, and when they do it, and Mr. Speaker, we have seen that through COVID-19.

My discussion in the particular interview to which the Leader of the Opposition referred was, Let's think out of the box. If you work and live in a region and you have responsibilities for that region, then be part of the solution. Let's make that a requirement. I know that one of the big issues that the CUPE leadership or managers of the employees, being managers outside the union, would have is that a new political party would come in and then they themselves would all disappear. Mr. Speaker, we need to fix that part of it because we need managers in every sector to help us to have a better New Brunswick.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I have no idea, obviously, what the Premier is making reference to with respect to the goals of the labour movement, but one thing is clear: Negotiating in good faith is done at the table and not through the media, as his Health Minister has said over the past few days. She said that she would not negotiate through the media, but the Premier does it every single time.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Why can he not give a clear mandate to the bargaining unit of government and put things on the table so that the labour movement that sits at the table can react, act, analyze, and come up with a fair package for our public service—and, more particularly, in the health care system—to have fair, competitive wages and good working conditions?

Get away from the media during negotiations. Get to the table, and get this resolved.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, what we all have to recognize here is that every dime that is spent and every issue that is addressed is done with public dollars. Those are public dollars, and that is the reason we need to make sure that the public understands.

This is not about negotiating on the street or negotiating in the media. It is about saying: What are the issues that we, as a province, need to address? What are the issues that are important to the people for whom services are being provided? What are the issues that are real concerns to the employees? We would then get all the facts and nothing that has been funneled through at a particular meeting, and employees would also feel, I want to be heard because I want to be part of the success story in New Brunswick.

I want to see New Brunswick continue on this path that it is on right now. I want to see New Brunswick be reinvented, as we have talked about so many times, and employees want to be part of it, Mr. Speaker. Let's not be confined to any particular topic or to any particular issue. Let's put all the cards on the table, and let's fix what are chronic issues that have not been fixed before because they have not been allowed to be discussed in this room, particularly, and outside.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, the Premier is not at all addressing the question this morning. When he has nothing to say on a specific subject matter, he has this recording, this message, that he keeps referring to, about doing things better and putting everything on the table. The table? Get to the table, the negotiating table. That is what we need to do right now.

This is our last day of the session until November 2. There are 26 collective agreements that are either expired or just about to expire. We are just ending, or close to ending, a pandemic. These people work hard. They are working really hard, these public servants. They need to have respect and to value what they have done and what they keep doing. The Premier does not seem to be giving that respect at the negotiating table. Step away from the media, negotiate in good faith, and get this resolved.

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, as you know, I am always willing to take advice from the Leader of

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

the Opposition. But in this particular case, the opposition would be quite happy to carry on with the same old process.

The success of the province has been gained through many efforts—through the many efforts of my colleagues here in this room but also through the efforts of people from all over this province. You know, you can transpose that into what potential we can have for our province, like having people feeling good every day when they come to work saying, Wow, this is what I can contribute. It is no matter what they do, how they look at their jobs every day, and what they like to do.

Mr. Speaker, I will go back to my first few years here in government. I remember at that very time thinking, wow, this is so different from what I experienced for so many years. Here, we are dealing with people's lives, their health, their education, the social systems, and the very quality of life in our province. Now, COVID-19 has given us a new view on how good we can be. Let's not lose it. Let's not be afraid to talk about it. Let's just do it, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we know from whom the Premier takes advice—the guy in the mirror. That is the problem with this Premier, Mr. Speaker. He does not take advice. He takes his own advice. If he thinks his process works, well, when we formed government, none of the 26 collective agreements were signed. That same process, which he is trying to use now, is putting collective agreements in jeopardy, and we may be seeing strikes by our New Brunswick public service. This is clearly not the right approach. His process has failed in the past, and he wants to use the same process and try to negotiate through the media.

Use the process that has worked historically and that can still work. Put the conditions of what you want to accomplish on the table, and they will analyze it and get these collective agreements resolved before it is too late.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know whether I can make a general statement such as this, but my perception would certainly be, from any past agreements, that there were no real negotiations. There were no real changes that were made, because it was just the same old same old. There was not any foundational change to be different in how we deliver service.

In managing what we see coming forward, we talk about the issue in relation to nursing shortages and what we are going to do about this. Mr. Speaker, we are going to try to recruit people, but that is not the only answer. It is the same with doctors. It is not the only answer. There are many answers. Everyone is in the same bucket of trying to recruit and trying to make that work. What is going to be the answer is for everybody to figure out how they can do something a little bit differently and a little bit better. We need to listen to ensure that we aid them in doing that.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

The key to success is not in this room. It is in the people who go to work every day saying, If only government would do this differently, then our jobs would be so much better. Well, that “better” is what we are looking for, and that information is what I want to hear. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we will be following the next steps in collective bargaining very, very closely, even though we will not be in the House. I will now move on to another topic.

ELECTORAL REFORM

There is an Act that requires us to take a look at redistributing the electoral map in New Brunswick every 10 years. Mr. Speaker, this commission should be formed and submit its report by 2022.

Since we will not be in the House for about six months, I will put these questions to the Premier this morning: First, has he thought about the commission and who will be on it? Second, is it his plan or intention to require a reduction in the number of MLAs?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, if I had all those plans, the member opposite would ask why I have a commission. I have thought about it, and it is because we know that we have an obligation to do it. It is very much on the radar for next year to set up that proper commission and to get it underway. I do not have any preconceived notions. Rest assured, the Leader of the Opposition can feel comfort at home over the summer period that we are thinking about it. It will not be forgotten, and it will be done next year. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): The Premier is a bit inconsistent. He has no preconceived plans in terms of the redistribution and the number of seats. He has said in the past in the media that there are too many MLAs in New Brunswick and that this puts too much pressure on investing money in each of their ridings. He said in the past that he could see no more than 30 or 35 seats in New Brunswick. He has already made statements publicly, and now, he is hiding behind this new commission that he will create. He sets the mandate of this commission and these commissioners.

Come clean to all of us and let us know what you are thinking. Are you going to require or mandate this commission to reduce the number of seats in the Legislature? Democracy is about having effective representation. That is critical in all democracies, including New Brunswick. Are you going to mandate this commission to reduce the number of seats?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know whether that was a question or advice or what that was about. As I said, there is no preconceived notion of what the commission should look like.

But, you know, Mr. Speaker, going back to COVID-19 again and thinking about what we did collectively here in this Legislature... I mean, having a COVID-19 Cabinet committee was kind of unheard of across the nation, but it was something that I think played a key role in our success in this province in working to support the health officials, the people on the borders, everybody who was really driving the results, and the people in the labs—people everywhere. It made the difference. We were together on supporting them, and I think that was a fundamental game-changing opportunity that New Brunswick has really benefited from.

So when we go the next step and ask about reinventing New Brunswick, let's not fall back into the same old process that has gotten us here. Let's build on this momentum. What that looks like, Mr. Speaker, in terms of numbers and in terms of organization, I have no idea. But we are required to look at it, and that is what we will do. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

PROPERTY TAX

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting to hear the Premier talk about collaboration and cooperation. When he was at this desk, sitting in this seat, as Leader of the Opposition, he never cooperated with the government and he never wanted to cooperate on any issue that was put forward by the previous government. The Premier's comments sound a bit ridiculous. Now that he is Premier, he says he wants to work with everyone. I find that quite interesting.

I will move on to another topic. In New Brunswick, in the real estate sector, we are experiencing a market where house sale prices are extremely high. We are seeing sales price increases of 30% to 40%. The market conditions are really unusual. We can deduce that next year, given the sale value of these homes, this will have an impact on the assessment of these properties and the surrounding properties in these neighbourhoods. Will the government and the Premier find a mechanism to minimize the impact of property tax increases on these properties?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mary Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. I want to assure New Brunswickers that assessors at Service New Brunswick have a way of sorting out real estate sales that are overvalued. As this year is not a typical one, there will be extra evaluation and analysis. One sale does not make a market, Mr. Speaker.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

There are also programs in place to protect owner-occupied homeowners. The 10% spike protection mechanism protecting most owner-occupied properties is in place. Also, we have the Property Tax Deferral Program for Seniors. It is a voluntary program that provides property tax relief to eligible seniors here in New Brunswick, allowing those interested in the program to apply for a deferral of the payment of the annual increase in property taxes on their principal residence. Mr. Speaker, our seniors will never—

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that this is going to be an opportunity for this government to go for a tax grab because it has eliminated the permanent assessment gap program, which was allowing a maximum increase of 10%. Sale price increases of 30% to 40% in housing in the province will have an impact on the property assessments. There will be spikes next year because that program has been eliminated. I can just see the government saying: Well, you know, it is the market value. It is the way the process of assessment works. I can see the government saying all those good things and taking the money from taxpayers and probably not even saying thank you. We need to have a clear—clear—indication of how these increases will be controlled and put under control.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am going to take that question because that is an incorrect statement in relation to what the P-Gap actually did. The P-Gap was a freeze on a permanent tax assessment. Effectively, it allowed one neighbour's tax rate to be frozen for the past eight years and the other one to be at market. All it did was close that so that the two would now be in market-related numbers. You could say that those folks who had it frozen got a real benefit for eight years but the people next door did not. That is how that worked. It had nothing to do with sudden increases and all of that. It had nothing to do with it whatsoever.

What the minister just put forward was actually what was put in place back in 2013 or 2014. It is a protection in terms of assessments, because that was a big issue before that time. The tax assessments went up wildly. So that gap or protection is there, the 10%, but to the minister's point, you also have protection for seniors and a rate freeze for as long as they live in their houses, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

CRAB INDUSTRY

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The snow crab fishing industry was built here in New Brunswick, or, more specifically, in the Acadian Peninsula. However, a disturbing phenomenon is emerging in this industry. We are witnessing the takeover of several of our crab licences in Area 12 by out-of-province financial interests.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Knowing that a crab licence can be worth \$12 million to \$15 million, that each licence provides employment for about 20 people, and that each licence obviously generates economic activity of key importance to our regions, we want to keep our licences here.

My question for the Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries is this: What is your government doing to prevent the sale of crab licences to interests outside the province? Thank you.

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Thank you to the member opposite for the question. We are working diligently with the crab fishermen and we are making sure that they are working within the industry to be watchdogs for the sale of licenses. We are actively engaged in conversations with them to make sure that the industry is sustainable. We do not want to see the licenses go to other provinces any more than you do. We are hoping that by working together with the industry and with the department, we can ensure that these licenses remain within the province. Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): (Inaudible) ... residency criteria. So, once again, this government has been in power for three years and no concrete action has been taken.

The lobster fishing industry is also facing another major challenge, that of ensuring new workers and succession. In our region, boats and licences are often passed from parent to child. However, a licence is now worth about \$1.5 million and the banks often cannot finance those amounts, despite what the minister might be telling me.

So my question to the minister is this: Does your department still facilitate family succession? If you no longer do, when did the change take effect? Also, why are you no longer doing it?

Hon. Mrs. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): I apologize, honourable member.

[Original]

I did not hear the beginning of your question, so I cannot answer it fully. However, we can talk about the fact that you and I have had conversations about succession plans. We do not make deals to engage in succession plans. We encourage families to work within their family groups. For financing of the licensing, we invite them to create partnerships within proper financial institutions. We are not a bank. We are hopeful that, through partnerships with parents who are passing the licenses on to the children, they can have arrangements

Oral Questions

to get partial payments from the parents and then to complete the rest of the transaction with proper financial institutions. Thank you.

RENTS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Social Development has still not explained to this House how he intends to deal with the unacceptable increases in rent that are cutting into the ability of people to put food on the table and are even driving some people from their homes, nor has he explained how he intends to protect families against arbitrary evictions. The Premier asked for 90 days to look into the situation, and now over a month has passed since the 90 days have been up. Rents have not stopped going up. Arbitrary evictions have not stopped happening.

In a press release that was just put out this morning by the minister's department to respond to some of the issues raised in the report on the rental landscape, there is nothing—nothing—that will prevent unreasonable rent increases or arbitrary evictions. So we need to know from the Minister of Social Development what his plan is to do those things—to prevent unreasonable rent increases and arbitrary evictions—before we leave this House. What is his plan, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I think it is pretty clear in the press release that we just released that this government is moving on the 12 recommendations that were put forward to the House—I guess it was a month or so ago. There are many things in there that are going to strengthen the existing service, which will help to protect people who are in situations where there is a disagreement between the landlord and the tenant.

There are a lot of things in there that the member across the way does not want to acknowledge. When we look at the increase in the supply of rental units, we find that nine different departments are involved. They are not just going to solve the problems of today, but they are also going to help with the problems of the future. The member across the way wants to paint a picture that is very bleak, but the reality is that this government has a plan. It is a concrete plan with specific dates. Mr. Speaker, we are going to help by working with the people for today and tomorrow and the next day.

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

HOSPITALS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Last year, the Premier categorically promised rural New Brunswickers that their emergency rooms would remain open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Now, Horizon Health has just announced that the emergency room at the Sackville Memorial Hospital will be closed in the evening and all night from Friday through

Oral Questions

Sunday. This goes directly against the Premier's promise to residents in the Sackville area and in other communities with rural hospitals in this province. Not having an ER open at night may be a matter of life and death for people in this region who might not survive an ambulance ride to Moncton.

Mr. Speaker, my question is: Why has the Premier broken his word? Why has he not kept his word with respect to rural ERs, to keep them open through the night for rural New Brunswickers? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I share in everyone's concern about the temporary closure of the Sackville emergency department. The issue is that if you do not have doctors and if you do not have nurses to work in those emergency rooms, you risk the safety of every patient and staff member by keeping them open. This is not a permanent closure, Mr. Speaker. This is an action taken to support the summer staffing shortages that are certainly going to happen. It is proactive so that all the important measures can be put in place to help mitigate any concerns during the summer months.

Mr. Speaker, this is not something new to us. This is a long-standing problem that has not been addressed by many, many past governments, and we have a plan coming forward. We have a really good plan coming forward that is going to address the sustainability and the efficiency of our whole health care network. We will create a network of excellence, Mr. Speaker.

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

SMALL MODULAR REACTORS

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, when I asked the Minister of Energy about provisions that he has to see whether we are achieving our targets on the SMR file, his answer was that the guarantee is in the results. Well, of course, there are going to be results, but it does not mean that they are going to be good. The problem is that if you do not perform with the outcomes you are looking for, you do not know whether those results are good or bad.

The minister was in the private sector before. He knows that you cannot manage what you do not measure. So the minister has a decision to make early in the process: Does he want to be a manager or a cheerleader? If he wants to be the former, then he should tell us how he will measure performance in this file.

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to have a continuation of yesterday's question period with the member opposite. When we talk about success being the ultimate measuring stick, I am assuming that when the previous government invested in this file, it

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

was anticipating as well that success would be the desired outcome. This is a collaborative effort where we have worked together on that.

We have seen both of the proponents that we have chosen here in New Brunswick reach VDR-1 certification—vendor design review—and one company is vastly and quickly moving toward VDR-2 certification. They have set up and established postsecondary education and training here in New Brunswick.

An MOU, which has been worked on by both the previous government and our government, contains a series of steps to advance toward an off-ramp if we are not seeing progress. This is the progressive realization of a game-changing technology here in New Brunswick. I can guarantee the member opposite that we are on track and ready to deliver those results. Thank you, Mr. Speaker

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, in the MOU, there is a project oversight committee that receives a monthly report within 10 days after the end of each month. Part of this report includes all contracts relating to development activities. I imagine that this clause was included to give some kind of oversight to see whether some of those funds are spent in New Brunswick. Does this committee have any measurable objectives that it can gauge its success with? Since there have already been four reports—actually, five since yesterday—how is the oversight going in this group?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that evidence of oversight was very lacking when the previous government embarked upon the Joi Scientific energy project. We were the ones who said, No more. We were the ones who said, responsibility needs to be a part of driving our energy sector. And that is exactly what we have done with the formation of the project oversight committee, and not only with that. There is also the strategic management board. All parties are sitting there, ensuring that we reach those benchmarks along the way.

We can certainly have lots of conversations and provide lots of information. I do not have the time in a minute to talk about the advancements and the developments that have been made. But rest assured that this deal was absolutely structured in such a way to protect New Brunswick, to position New Brunswick to be a leader not just in the provincial fight but also in the global fight to reduce emissions, and to create economic development with a supply chain with thousands of jobs here in the province.

We are moving forward with this, and I look forward to sharing that with the member opposite. We can hopefully share in that...

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

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[*Translation*]

NURSING HOMES

Mr. Mallet (Shippagan-Lamèque-Miscou, L): Mr. Speaker, I am addressing this government. I would like to know when it will be announcing the new construction of Résidences Lucien Saindon Inc. in Lamèque. These residences are the only level-3 public senior care facility in the greater Lamèque Island area.

Built in 1977, 43 years ago, the facility no longer meets construction standards. The home has been awaiting government funding for new construction for over 10 years. In a pandemic, how could this centre, which is already outdated, meet the requirements of Public Health? When will the new construction be announced? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, we have been working with a 10-year plan right across the province to add additional beds to the system as well as to renew beds. We have moved very, very quickly in the last little while to make sure that this plan is viable and moving forward, and we have announcements coming up shortly in places such as Moncton and Saint John. We also have an outstanding request for proposals up in the northeastern part of the province. This plan is based on demographics and on the age and condition and whatnot of the homes. Again, this is a plan that has been endorsed by this government, and work continues to make sure that the vulnerable people in this province are looked after and cared for.

I really commend the frontline workers who have looked after the seniors during the pandemic. They have done a great job.

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

PROPERTY TAX

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I think that we need to hear something very clearly from the Premier. With the price increase for housing in New Brunswick, which is probably temporary, we need to clearly understand next year's property assessment process. Will the property tax values increase by no more than what the program supposedly says—no more than 10% in the province? If not, the renters will pay more rent and the owners will pay more property tax, and it is going to be very difficult for these people to get beyond the pandemic costs that have occurred over the past 14 months.

Hon. Mary Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question, again. Of course,



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

we can assure New Brunswickers that the 10% spike protection mechanism is in place for owner-occupied homes. That is done, full stop. And as stated, the assessors have a way to sort out real estate sales that are overvalued. Mr. Speaker,

Mr. Speaker, it is pretty rich coming from the Liberals on the other side. I was not around in 2016, but my colleagues were. I hear two words all the time—fast track, fast track. Maybe their memories are really bad, but we are here to remind the members opposite of what happened in 2016. The fast track was icing on the cake for the seniors' assets grab by the Liberals. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

(Interjections.)

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

