

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



November 2, 2021

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[Original]

M. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L) : Mr. Speaker, I would like to welcome all our colleagues back, and I would like to underline the point that, traditionally, when we have been away from the House for an extended period of time, we add 15 minutes to the first question period. We would need unanimous consent for that, and I would ask Mr. Speaker to seek unanimous consent to extend question period by 15 minutes just for today.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you. Do we have consent?

Some Hon. Members: Agreed.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): We have consent.

Point of Order

Hon. Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Minister responsible for La Francophonie, Government House Leader, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Before we start question period, I would like you to call to order the member for Victoria-La Vallée for accusing the government of “misappropriation of funds”. That term is actually right in the *Criminal Code of Canada*, so he is accusing the government of fraudulent activity. I would like you to ask that member to retract that statement.

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Excuse me, Mr. Speaker. I apologize. I was just trying to say that the funds were put there for a reason.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Member, retract your statement, or we will...

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, I respectfully retract that statement.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you.

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Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I also want to give my full support to the statement from my colleague the member for Campbellton-Dalhousie regarding the unceded territories of our First Nations. We stand by that, and we believe that is actually factual.

GOVERNMENT

We have been away from this House for a few months, and this province is in a mess. There are so many different messes that this Premier and this government have created that we



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do not know where to start. I will give you a few. Over the summer, the Premier decided that he was the expert on public health. Look at the mess we are in with this fourth wave. The Premier decided that he was the expert on the First Nations Peace and Friendship Treaties. Look at the mess he put us in. The Premier decided that he was the expert as the chief negotiating officer. When is the Premier going to stop his messes, and when is he going to fix his messes?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is great to be back. That is true. In relation to the opening and to going to the green phase, we will not go into all the details around that. The member opposite, the Leader of the Opposition, was certainly there at the time when all the facts were assessed and the decisions were made, so he can answer that himself, Mr. Speaker.

In relation to where we are going with First Nations and this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, the province is being sued. The province is being sued for 60% of the land, and it is all-inclusive. There has been no caveat to that. The Attorney General or the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs can speak more to that. We have an obligation—at least, I believe that we have an obligation—to represent all citizens in this province and to do that equally. When 60% of your province is being sued, you need to do something. You cannot ignore that. It is being sued for the very question of whether we are on unceded or ceded territory. That is why the First Nations have brought that to court, to get it solved, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, there is an urgency right now. I cannot imagine for one second that the Premier likes to hear what is going on outside. True leaders take care of their responsibilities. Right now, New Brunswickers need leadership. If I were the Premier, I would have locked myself into—not locked people out of—the negotiating room over the weekend to find a resolution to this labour dispute. Premier, put your ego to the side, stop flexing your muscles, and be responsible. Be responsible. We have people out there. They are 22 000 highly professional public servants. We cannot forget the nurses who refused two of your offers. When are you going to get back to the negotiating table so that we can resolve this labour dispute?

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): You know, I agree that we do want to get back to the negotiating table. Absolutely. However, we have to recognize what all the issues are that have to be addressed. The issue that we have in our province right now is how we maintain the momentum. How can we be fair and equitable across the board, Mr. Speaker, with what we pay and what we offer? How do we compare that with other similar areas? What we know is that we are being challenged in every sector when it comes to where people will work all across this country. Nowhere is that more prevalent than in the health care sector.

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Mr. Speaker, we put a very fair offer on the table. We offered to provide pensions for 2 200 people who do not have them. We offered to fix the pension program, which is certainly not sustainable at this time, and we offered to go from 80% to 100% for casuals. We also offered to make comparisons throughout the system to see where we have a shortage of workers, where we are uncompetitive, and where we are not, and we offered to do that throughout Atlantic Canada. How much more of an offer could you put on the table that is fair to workers...

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we all remember the Premier at one time saying this: If you want good wages, go to Alberta. That is what he said. We know his mentality and his ideology in regard to dealing with employees. Look, you are the employer right now. They are your employees. That is not how you treat employees. That is not HR 101. You want to respect them. You want to value them. You want to give them decent and respectable working conditions and benefits that make sense so that we can retain them and recruit more as we need them. But that is not how you work. You divide and conquer. You are punitive. You use all kinds of tactics. Actually, right now, you are in panic mode. You are in panic mode. That is why you canceled the throne speech today. That is why you canceled it. You are improvising. You do not know what you are doing. Please, can you get back to the negotiating table? I want a date.

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, we canceled the throne speech to deal with this situation directly, but we also did so to not lose sight of the great things that are happening in this province.

Obviously, this labour dispute is not one of the great things that are happening. But if the Leader of the Opposition would like to discuss what is on the table, how we compare, or the benefits... We have a very generous package within the entire system, whether it be the health benefits, sick time benefits, pension program, insurance programs, dental programs, or health programs. Put it all together and you say, wow, the government of New Brunswick is a good place to work.

But, Mr. Speaker, who pays for that? It is every taxpayer in this province. Many of them do not share—at all—the same benefits, but they are the ones who have to pay. So when I talk about representing all employees and all citizens, that is the whole goal. Let's represent the whole province.

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

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[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Listen, I have been listening to this Premier in the House for 11 years now, and he always says the same thing. I do not know what planet he is living on or what society he wants to live in, but there is one thing...

The Premier just said he offered our civil servants a generous package. Mr. Speaker, 22 000 civil servants are legally on strike. There are also more than 8 000 nurses who have twice rejected the offer from the government. So, we are talking about nearly 30 000 employees, representing over half of the civil service. Do not try to pull the wool over my eyes here, Mr. Premier. Your offer is unacceptable. Come back to the table. Tone it down. Be flexible. Respect the employees. Resolve this situation quickly, please.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is not about flexibility or inflexibility. It is about how we stamp out a path for the future. If we want to talk about a fair offer—I appreciate that many of the CUPE folks today are behind in their contracts by about three to four years—we will talk about catching up with inflation. The average inflation rate over the past five years has been 2%. But then if you compare where we stand to the private sector and to other wages and benefits, you see that we are probably 20% or 25% higher. So I think that all taxpayers in the province need to understand: Are we being fair with employees, or are we not? That is it. Let's put all those factors on the table. Do we compare with other jurisdictions, or do we not?

You know, when we talk about the issue, we hear that for many, particularly those in health care, the working conditions are the issue and they are tired. They are tired of COVID-19. We are all tired of COVID-19, but the frontline health care workers have had to bear the brunt of that. That is what we need to fix, the working conditions in our...

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, this is no chicken dance. This is serious business here. This is not a chicken dance. This is serious. When I look at all the members of his government, I think that they are falling asleep or they are embarrassed by what their Premier is doing or not doing. This mess needs to be resolved.

It needs to be resolved—not here, by the way—at the negotiating table. Lock yourself in. Lock yourself in. Stop locking people out—illegally, by the way—so that we can get a resolution of this strike. Those people outside, you were not there to talk to them. I was. I spoke with them. You are not even having a dialogue with them. They want to work. They

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want to serve New Brunswickers. They want to have dignity and a good job, and they do. You should respect that. Please give me a date for when you will get back to the table.

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I certainly agree, and I would like to be back at the table as well. You know, I am not afraid of being locked in a room and hammering away until we come up with a deal, but it has to be something that is fair for all New Brunswickers. It is not a case of: Can I get out of the room in a hurry? It is case of: Am I going to do the right thing, or am I just going to do what past governments have done for generations? This is about a generational change.

When we talk about how I have not changed my tune, I would say that, no, Mr. Speaker, I have not. It has been 11 years, and every step that I have tried to take here in this government has been about the future. It is not about my time in government. It is about a decision based on the next government, the next generation. And do you know what? We have unprecedented interest in our province. We have things happening here that have never happened before, and we will talk about all of those when we bring back the throne speech. But now is the time to focus on the negotiations, and I am more than prepared to do that, with all the cards on the table.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we have a government that is panicking and reacting impulsively. It is being punitive. When I say that the government is being punitive, it is because we saw the proof of it last night. The government chose to lock out civil servants in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to punish them—to punish them. Last night, the Labour and Employment Board ruled that this decision was against the law. It was against the law. Mr. Premier, when are you going to do your duty, start doing the right thing, and respect civil servants throughout the province? I would like you to respond. Mr. Premier, you are the chief negotiator. You are the chief negotiator.

[*Original*]

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

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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Before I start, I would just like to say that it is great to see the members for Victoria-La Vallée and for Saint John East again, although, of course, not in this Chamber, because that would not be appropriate to say.

[Translation]

As for the question that was asked, we completely agree when a board like this one tells us we need to change the way we are doing things. We are in complete agreement. However, it is certainly not true to say that the reasons we are trying to ensure continuity in the education system are the ones the Leader of the Opposition mentioned. Nothing could be further from the truth. We did what we did because, Friday morning, we had received no notice from the union that staff members were on strike. We needed to provide a certain level of security to parents, students, and other school team members to ensure continuity in the education system. We have work to do. However, there is a government team and a union team; the students in the province are caught in the middle. I am here to advocate for them and at least provide them with the best education possible during the strike. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

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

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister has no credibility at all. He imposes virtual education, but he was against virtual legislative sessions. He has no credibility at all. If the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development really has children's interests and education at heart, why doesn't he talk to his boss and say: Let's deal with this collective agreement and get back to the negotiating table? He should not try to punish civil servants in his department or find operational solutions. Without a strike and with a good collective agreement, we would not have this problem. Let's get back to the table. I want a date and a time when the Premier will ask civil servants to come back to the negotiating table.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): So, I would go back anytime, Mr. Speaker. That is not an issue.

The whole concept is, Let's find an appropriate path forward. But it is not about any one group. It is not about me. It is not about the CUPE leaders. It is about the right thing for this

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province, and that will be the basis on which we will have further discussions: What is the longevity of the deal that we strike?

The challenge that we have, the other piece around the discussions, is, How do we become innovative in our province in delivering services? I have been asking that question for a long time, but now, it is more acute than ever, because right across this province and right across this country, we cannot get enough workers. Ontario is looking for 300 000 workers. When you talk about Alberta... Do we, in New Brunswick, the highest-taxed jurisdiction in the country, feel right now that we can realistically compete with Quebec and Ontario? Realistically, do you feel that way? Will we just continue to raise taxes?

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, when I listen to the Premier and I look around at colleagues, I see that nobody wants to look at him. They all want to look somewhere else. They are embarrassed about what is going on right now. They are embarrassed.

In 2019-20, you had, for collective agreement negotiations, \$115 million; in 2020-21, \$175 million, just about; and in this current year, \$162 million. Guess what! You had a surplus last year during a pandemic. Do not tell me that we cannot afford to invest in our public servants, the employees of government. The money is there. It is budgeted for, but you are not using it. It has been three years that you have been in office, and you have not resolved major collective agreements because—do you know what?—you do not want to invest in people.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the arguments are so shallow—the comments that are being made here about carrying a 1% or 2% surplus and the comments that were made earlier about the pandemic money that came in. There was \$2.3 billion from the federal government, and every dime went across this province directly, as required by the federal government. We spent \$350 million. Out of that, \$290 million was what we got from the federal government. So we spent all the federal money out in the system, as well as more from our own budget.

But, Mr. Speaker, more importantly, it comes down to it not being about whether we can maintain a fiscal balance so our ratings stay whole and our interest rates stay low, because we do not know what interest rates are going to do. It is, once again, building for the future. So you take the situation today and say: Okay, what does that mean? It means \$81 million to \$100 million more per year. If you look at it across the board and ask, Is it required, because we are not being fair and competitive? All right, it is. Is it not? Well, then, we know that too. But let's not be...

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

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Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, for three years, these members have been in office. They have not negotiated in good faith. They were obviously not able to resolve these labour issues with the government employees. In their first budget, they had \$115 million budgeted for collective bargaining; in their second budget, \$175 million for collective agreement negotiations; and in this current year, \$162 million. We can add it up. That is a lot of money that was budgeted for collective bargaining. We have nurses that we cannot retain. They are stressed, and they are having a hard time. These public servants who are protesting today want to work. They were there for us, to keep us safe, during this pandemic. The budget was there. Why are you not resolving these labour disputes, Mr. Premier?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, these might be questions that you would expect from someone who did not spend any time in Finance, but the Opposition Leader did. He actually knows better than what he is saying, but I get it. It is the opportunity to do a lot of grandstanding.

The idea is that everything in this is cumulative. Everything in this goes around to 55 000 employees, so you cannot look at anything in isolation. The Opposition Leader knows that very, very well. Yes, if you want to check a box and just say, Oh, well, I finished this negotiation and that one, you can do that, but what taxpayer dollars are going to cover them?

Then, if you say that you are trying to fix the longevity and sustainability of providing pensions to everyone, knowing that 65% of the people of this province do not have a pension at all but you are asking them to pay more for others... Mr. Speaker, it is about fairness. It is about doing right by our employees because we must. We need them, and they have done a super job for us throughout the years and throughout the pandemic.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, the truth hurts sometimes. I know. The truth hurts. The truth hurts, Mr. Premier.

When we were there for four years, we were not perfect. I get it. But there was never a strike. There was never a strike. You can laugh, Mr. Premier, but there was never a strike. That is factual. We did negotiate in good faith. We did resolve the labour issues at the table, and both parties signed—25 collective agreements out of 26. That is the reality. I am not inventing that. That is true.

What we want to know... Actually, it is not what I want to know but what the people who are outside and the New Brunswickers who are listening want to know. We want to get this mess behind us, this labour dispute. I have asked you a few times, and I will ask you again. You have a chance to tell us when and where you will invite people back to the negotiating table.



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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): As I have said, I will certainly do that and go back to the table, and I would assume that the CUPE leadership would do the same thing. I anticipated that it would have happened over the weekend, but other factors kind of got in the way. We came to a crossroads a week ago in relation to a proposal that was reflective of and actually higher than what other unions have accepted or are debating on. It is like: All right, where do we come back? Then, when you look at some of the things, they say, well, we are just not talking about those.

Well, Mr. Speaker, it is not about that. This is what it is about. We are willing to put all the comparators on the table. Are we being fair, or are we not being fair? Let the taxpayers decide. Let it not be in the cloak of the Legislature. Put it out there and say to the people of this province that this is what they are going to pay for. I do not think that is unreasonable, and I think anyone should expect that if we are being prudent with taxpayer dollars.

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

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, until now, the character of the Grinch was always associated with Christmas. Who would have ever thought that the Grinch would be coming out on Halloween? That is just what happened when the Minister of Education canceled school on Friday, making it an operational day and crushing the dreams of children who were excited about the traditional pre-Halloween school activities and leaving parents struggling to find childcare. Make no mistake, Mr. Speaker, it is not CUPE workers who shut down the October 29 school day. The minister and this government are solely to blame. So how can the minister justify taking such drastic action? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thanks to the member opposite for the question. I have a brief revision of some facts. At 12:24 a.m. on Friday morning, CUPE notified government that bus drivers would not turn up for duty. As the morning progressed, we heard of increasing waves across social media about members of other locals also not turning up for work. We were left in no position but to say to the school system that in the interest of stability and making sure that our kids were protected in a time of pandemic... We took a step that was necessary to make sure that we could protect the children inside our school system and the rest of the staff as well.

We have attempted since that Friday morning to find out exactly what CUPE's intentions are in terms of designated workers turning up so that we could try to reach some sort of operational accommodation. So far, we have not been able to do that. I would appreciate the support of the member opposite as we try to reach that goal so that we, while respecting the right to strike, can have schools open as much as possible and where possible, within the context of the global pandemic that we are all trying to fight.

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



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[*Translation*]

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, the government has locked out custodians, bus drivers, library assistants, teaching assistants, and administrative support staff. This action, which clearly has the Premier's fingerprints on it, brings to mind similar actions Irving Oil took in the 1990s, when the business locked employees out under the pretext of stabilizing the workforce. Did you dust off the Irving work plan, Mr. Premier? How else could such an incomprehensible action be explained?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, it is ironic even to ask such a question when we have a situation where we cannot plan at all for parents, kids, or teachers. The idea is to say, how can we have continuity? How do we manage a school system? How do we manage a health care system? How do we do this if every day... I think one of the quotes from the union leaders was this: We are just going to keep the government hopping. We are going to keep it jumping all over the province.

You cannot provide continuity to parents and kids if that is the mindset that is being portrayed. The minister took action in order to get stability, and I agreed with that action because it is necessary. We have to bring stability. Is it ideal? No, it is not ideal. We do not want to be in this position. But is it necessary so that people can at least plan their day? That is the rationale, Mr. Speaker. Sometimes, you have to go with a less than preferable option when it is preferred over other options.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Well, I hear about protecting the citizens and children and I hear about stabilizing, and that is the rhetoric that we hear from authoritative governments, Mr. Speaker. That is what authoritative governments use as an excuse to control the population. That is what we are seeing with this government, and we need to call that out. It is totally unacceptable.

Furthermore, parents have had it with this government and its gross incompetence, especially as it relates to managing the school system. Now, we hear that 1 700 educational assistants were laid off without pay as of November 1. How can the Premier even begin to justify these tyrannical actions, especially now that we know that the New Brunswick Labour and Employment Board ruled yesterday evening against the government's action? How is this justifiable? It is nothing more than tyranny, Mr. Speaker. That is how I see it. How do they see it? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We had a ruling by the labour board in terms of the EAs. There is no change there. In terms of staff, we are looking forward to welcoming them back to work once the strike is resolved.



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I believe the member opposite meant “authoritarian” rather than “authoritative”, which is actually the opposite. Do you know why we made the call that we made? It was so that the parents of kids with special needs who depend on routine and whose routine has been upended because of this strike do not have to get up at 5:30 a.m. every single day and wonder whether or not, today, they are going to have an EA to look after their children—to be able to make sure they have the stability that they need. It was to make sure that the single parents who are struggling to try to make ends meet and schedule shifts are able to do that.

If the CUPE people want to talk about how we can keep as many schools open as much as possible, they have my number. I have been calling them. I look forward to talking to them, and that is all that I can say on that subject.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, Robert Jones pointed out on CBC this morning that the Premier actually wants to pay public workers less than what he happily agreed to pay them when he was Finance Minister. At the time, the Premier praised the higher rates as fair for both employees and taxpayers. What has changed now? UNB professor David Frank rightfully asked: “Do we want them to have good jobs... or do we want service at the cheapest possible price?”

I would like to hear from the current Finance Minister. Could he get up and explain the logic of this Conservative government’s position for seeking only cheap labour?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Well, I do not think that we do, seek just cheap labour. I think that it would be wrong to say that CUPE would be considered cheap labour. I am sorry to hear that the Liberal Party considers it that.

Keep in mind that we have reached new agreements with three groups in recent weeks. We have already signed three contracts, and there will hopefully be another one before too long. Negotiations are ongoing with 13 other groups, and another 9 are to begin over the next 12 months. We continue with negotiations. We continue signing agreements. We continue working with whoever will come to the table and work with us. That is what we are looking for.

We are looking at the province facing significant challenges. We are looking to face them together, with you, the people from CUPE, and the other three-quarter million New Brunswickers. We are working together for a better New Brunswick. That is what we are doing.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, they are seeking cheap labour and that is why they are not prepared to come to an agreement with the workers of this province who have been here for us on the front lines over the past year and a half. Government does not want to pay them. It has actually signed only a handful of contracts in the seven years that

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it has been in government, from 2010 to 2014 and for the past three years—a handful of contracts. What is the government doing at the negotiating table?

One of the issues that the government is relying on is shared risk pensions. We know that the Premier has an obsession with ramming those down their throats. Now, the government is holding it against the last two unions that have not come onto the shared risk pension plan. The Premier is not coming to a deal with the other 22 000 workers. How is that negotiating in good faith, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): You know, it is always nice to put some facts around the statements. If we think about all of CUPE on the shared risk plan, that is true. It is a plan that has proven its value through the pandemic, which has been the worst in the history, certainly, of Canada and New Brunswick and maybe the world. We know that in the case of two plans that are unsustainable, there is a top-up made every year in addition to the payments of about \$7 million. Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? We are not saying that the government is going to keep that top-up. We are saying that we are going to put that toward the current educational assistants, 2 200 of whom do not have a pension at all. We are going to fund their pension so that they, too, will have a pension plan. It is allowing one to become sustainable and another to even exist.

I think that what we see here is a national push. It is a national push to drive the agenda for New Brunswick. Mr. Drost will say: Oh, no, I am not negotiating for the national CUPE; it is about New Brunswick. Well, let's prove that.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. These negotiations are supposed to be about a fair wage settlement with the 10 CUPE locals, not about pensions. On the weekend, they came close. They came close. Government offered 2%. CUPE said that it would take 3%. It was so close. There is a sweet spot in there, but the Premier walked away from the table. Why? Because he could not get the concessions that he wanted on some CUPE members' pensions. That was not supposed to be on the table, Mr. Speaker. Why is the Premier holding 22 000 public servants and all New Brunswickers hostage to his demands for concessions on pension plans when the negotiations are supposed to be about fair wages for the public sector workers of this province? Why?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, negotiations are about a whole lot of things. They are not just about wages. Yes, the pension was on the table from the beginning. The whole point in this is not to say that it is just about the wages and to carry on. It is about fixing something. I know that CUPE likes to advertise to its members that it is a concession. However, what is the concession? You get a pension that is sustainable within the current group—it is in the bus driver group—and you get a new pension for those who currently do not have one with the money that is put over here to get other pensions for the EAs. Where is the concession, Mr. Speaker?



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I will tell you where the concession is. It is because CUPE National is driving the bus. CUPE National is driving this negotiation, and that is why we do not have a deal. It is as simple as that. We can talk about New Brunswick, and it can discuss New Brunswick. But it is CUPE National that is legally fighting this challenge around pension reform, and it is driving New Brunswick's bus, which is most unfortunate, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the majority of workers outside these walls today are women. It is the majority of women who are fighting for pay in jobs that most men do not do. These women do not get paid nearly enough or get provided with sufficient hours of work to be able to support themselves by themselves. This is nothing more than systemic discrimination based on gender, Mr. Speaker.

On Sunday, the educational assistants, who are mostly women and who have been designated as essential to keep the schools open, were even put on leave without any pay at all. Mr. Speaker, I ask this: Will the Premier put his obsession with pensions aside and get back to the table and negotiate a fair wage settlement that is focused on wages so that this can get done, everyone can get back to work, and New Brunswick can get back on track? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, you know, the majority of educational assistants who currently do not have a pension of any kind are women. What will we solve? They will all have a pension. We can fix this. We can fix it so that everyone benefits. Even casuals will be able to have a pension because the hours will not matter.

Mr. Speaker, let's put it on the table here. Let's call a spade a spade. This is about a national interest driving a provincial issue. Do we want an agreement for New Brunswickers, or do we want an agreement for CUPE National? That is what is driving this whole situation. I believe that we can do better for our citizens of this province, and I am determined to do just that, because we can. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier says that he is taking action for our future, but I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that 75% of New Brunswickers—who did not vote for his government—my caucus, and I want nothing to do with the future he wants for us.

My question is for the Minister of Finance. The Irving family was gifted \$500 000 in property tax credits, \$200 million for sawmills, power subsidies for the mills, \$100 million for pulp and paper plants, a refusal to raise royalties on timber harvesting, and a refusal to tax machinery and equipment, including those at the Irving refinery in Saint John.



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My question is for the Minister of Finance: Why can he not pay a living wage to the working class so that these people can live in dignity, Mr. Speaker?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is what we are endeavouring to do right now. That is what we are endeavouring to do. The Premier has already said that he will go back to the table whenever. Today, he would go back to the table. We are endeavouring to get a good wage for people. That is why we offered 2%, because 2% is the cost of living. When you base it over a number of years—over decades, really—it averages out to 2% per year. We were giving the cost of living. We were giving a great deal for the EAs, in particular, to get a pension that they have never had before. They have never had a pension. I mean, this is a great deal.

The 80% workers are topped to 100%. What I am talking about are part-time workers who are doing the same job. If you and I were doing the same job and you were a full-time worker, you would get 100%. If I was part-time, I would get 80%. We are giving them that 20% immediately—a 20% raise immediately. I think that is a pretty good deal. That is what we are working at, to improve the lives of New Brunswickers.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, it seems as though the two sides in this labour dispute are not that far apart. It is government's position to ensure that whatever contracts are signed are being fair to both workers and taxpayers as well as being sustainable in the long term. It is the workers' position that because of rising inflation, wages, as well as some of the working conditions they have endured, a better collective agreement is critical. However, it would appear that while wages and working conditions are indeed important, the Premier has stated that it is mostly the pensions that have stalled the talks.

My question is for the Premier. Can the Premier tell me exactly how many employees in the public sector would be affected by a transition from the defined benefit pension plan to the shared risk model that is being proposed by government?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I do not know the exact number. It is the bus drivers' union, that local, that is involved in the current defined benefit program, but I do not have the full number. We can get that number and come back to you. But I know 2 200, that number, would get the new pensions.

I guess I just want to reiterate. Everything here that we look at going forward... We know we were happy to give the first quarter results, and we know that in the second quarter results, the HST is better than we expected. But it is not about any one particular point in time. It is about how we map out what the economy is going to do over the coming years because what we do here is basically to sign ourselves up for the long haul. That is why we



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need to be competitive, and we have said, Absolutely. But when you look across it, you say, okay, our averages are 20% to 30% higher when you count everything in. What do you do? Do you ignore that? Or do you say, the taxpayers are paying a fair wage; but maybe they are not right here, so we should look at this? That is our willingness to negotiate, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With this labour dispute ongoing over the weekend, I have had the opportunity to speak to many people, both unionized and nonunionized alike. Of the ones that I have spoken with, nobody wants this strike to continue. Workers who are on the picket lines are worried about the financial burden and about Christmas being just around the corner. Educational assistants, with tears in their eyes, are desperate to get back to the kids they love. Health care providers are worried about the effects that this strike is having on our sick, elderly population and on COVID-19 testing, and the list goes on. Citizens, both young and old, are suffering. We shuttered schools and scaled back health services.

My question is for the Premier. If we can step back from all the politics and all the hurrah back and forth, what is the plan to get both sides back to the table to end this labour dispute so that the province of New Brunswick can focus on the important things that are instrumental to the future of this province?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I absolutely agree with the Leader of the People's Alliance. We want to get back. I have said it before to the Opposition Leader. I have said that we want to get back to the table. Is there a date set? No. There is not a date set, but I would expect that after this debate in the House, there will be. There will be a willingness from both sides after the demonstrations that we have seen.

But, Mr. Speaker, we cannot have the disruptions in our province such as we are seeing. You cannot get back to the table with those events happening. But everything is on the table. I mean, everything that has been on the table is on the table. I am not saying that we are inventing new stuff. It all has to be a discussion point because, otherwise, we are not being fair to taxpayers in this province and we are not fixing any generational issues. I am not prepared to say that we are going to let our agenda be driven by CUPE National, because that is not in the best interests of our province.

Mrs. Conroy (Miramichi, PA): Mr. Speaker, this government has operated outside its legal mandate. The labour board has ruled that this government does not have the ability to put designated employees on leave without pay. All essential workers should be back today, so our schools could reopen. However, this has not been the case. Online classes are hindering children's education, yet the Minister of Education has not opened our schools. If the minister has determined which workers are essential to keep the schools clean and functioning, then this should not be a problem.



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The people of this province want and need to have some semblance of order and to have their children return to school. If those who are truly essential are still on the job, can the minister tell us why the schools are not still open? Can he reopen schools when it benefits parents and teachers as quickly as he can close them when it benefits the government to pressure our underpaid support staff? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the question from the member opposite. First, online learning is no negotiating tactic. It is not included in any collective agreements. It does not apply pressure on anyone. What it does is offer some form of education at a time when the government and the union are at an impasse. I ask the members to imagine this: If I had not used that tool, the accusations would be the same, that I had kept the schools open as political pressure in a time of COVID-19 and was endangering the lives of students and staff. It would have been the same message, so I made a choice based on the only constituency that I care about, the students in the schools of this province. I make no apologies for that.

When it comes to how we are going to move ahead, we cannot in good conscience say that less than 50% of the EAs and a fraction of our janitors are sufficient to justify reopening the schools in a time of COVID-19 and additional stress. If CUPE wants to come up with a deal with us, we are there to talk. It has my number, and I hope I hear from it today.

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier said he agreed with the Leader of the People's Alliance. That is obvious, because he has often agreed with ideas from that political party.

[Original]

The Minister of Education wants tools to give these schools more stability. Get to the negotiating table. That should be the plan of this government. Negotiate. Lock yourself in. Do not lock people out, because on top of that, it is illegal. Get into a room. Negotiate with the representatives of these employees so that we can get a resolution and have stability. This morning, the Premier kept saying: We will get back. We will get back. We want to know when. When is the Premier going back? Maybe he should be there. Maybe he should bring in experts on negotiations, but we need a date for when they will go back to the negotiating table. Stop being distracted by CUPE National and all kinds of stuff. Get this resolved here in New Brunswick.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, it is obvious that the Leader of the Opposition has a pretty singular focus today, and that would not be unusual. He is back in true form after a little break.



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It is about bigger issues. We are willing to go back. As I said, I agree with the Leader of the People's Alliance, and I also agree with the Leader of the Opposition. We should be back at the negotiating table, and I said that I am willing to do that now. I cannot say when that will actually happen because it depends, too, on the CUPE leadership, but I would suggest that it is likely willing to do the same. So the point rises... I know that the Minister of Education is waiting for a call on this issue, so we will see what happens there.

I know that in our case, whether or not it is the negotiators who have typically been following this process and have been involved directly in the process, I am certainly willing to get personally and directly involved in the process. That is fine. It would not be the first time for me. I have in the past, and I am certainly willing to do that. Mr. Speaker, we will see where that goes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, in all sincerity, I would ask that the Premier not be at the negotiating table, since he is unable to negotiate agreements; that is clear from his past. I would ask the Premier this, though: When he asks to come back to the negotiating table, he should negotiate in good faith and stop doing it in public, with advertisements aimed at dividing New Brunswickers and turning people—even parents—against the ones who are trying to get an acceptable collective agreement.

We want this resolved now. Therefore, can the Premier tell us—he has to tell us, Mr. Speaker—when the negotiations will start up again? Can he give us a date right now? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I obviously cannot give the date today because I do not know when it will be. It depends on the CUPE leadership. I have indicated clearly that I am prepared to do so. If I miss some time in the House over the coming days, I guess the members opposite would say: Well, that is good. He is behind closed doors working on the pensions and working on the wages and working on other issues that are affected in relation to the negotiations.

But I think it is important to recognize that when we look at everything, we look at it in its entirety. I have said it over and over again. That is why it is of concern to me when the focus is so isolated and it does not really reflect who is paying for all of this. It is not our government any more so than it is every taxpayer in this province that pays for this. That is where the revenue comes from. I find that when you disconnect those two things and say that it does not matter, that is where you need to put all the focus: Okay, here are the comparisons, here is what is fair, here is what is reasonable, and here is what makes us sustainable going forward, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

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