

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**November 4, 2021**

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### COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, this is the seventh day of the strike here in New Brunswick. This is a strike nobody wants. I would say that today is a very important day to try to resolve this situation. There will be a meeting at 1 o'clock this afternoon. The Premier has finally come to a realization and assumed his responsibility, after the protests that have taken place throughout the province and the sustained pressure from the official opposition. The meeting will be held this afternoon.

Like everyone else, I would like to know what the Premier's attitude will be today. What will he aim to accomplish at this meeting? We know that Rome was not built in a day, but we are convinced the strike can be over in a day, today. Mr. Premier, give us a clear explanation of your objectives for this meeting to take place at 1 o'clock.

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, my objectives would be the same as what I would expect my colleagues, not only on this side of the House but also on the other side of the House, to have—that any deal discussed and developed in the past and going forward would be based on the reality of the situation, on the issues and the facts that need to be discussed and presented, and on making rational decisions following that. I would expect that is what will happen today and likely for days to come in relation to discussing all the facts around this, presenting all the information around it, and deciding on how to move forward in the best interest of all New Brunswickers.

Mr. Speaker, that is what we do not often do in this House. In this House, we often speak for the moment. We often hear from the opposition that to be in opposition, its members oppose, and of course, that has been the tradition. When we talk about traditions, they have caused our province to go around and around and around but not forward in a way that we are progressing right today, as we have seen coming out of the pandemic. Let's get the facts right, and let's have good...

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): The Premier forgets about how he acted when he was in opposition, on this side of the House.

You had three years to discuss and to try to make your case, and you have not yet resolved it. You have an opportunity today to stop digging a hole for yourself. You are digging a hole, and the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is trying to fill in the hole because he wants to distance himself. Stop digging. Get to this meeting today in good faith. Again, you had three years to make your case, and it is still not resolved. I mean, leadership

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is about making decisions and getting this resolved. We all want to get back to some kind of normality, even outside the pandemic and, certainly, outside this labour dispute. Can you make a commitment today to be there in good faith and to get this resolved so that we can all get back to normal?

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

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I can absolutely make the commitment that I will be there in good faith, Mr. Speaker. I will be there in good faith for the entire province, to represent every taxpayer and every employee and to do the right thing for them so that they want to live and work here in our province. We will be discussing what we are facing collectively, not only in this House but also in every part of the province.

I know that in relation to the health care system and our current situation with COVID-19, it is extremely unfortunate that there is action of any type being taken in a pandemic. We will have those discussions because we cannot let our health care system fail us at this time and because we know that there are many dedicated workers who have held all of that together throughout the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, I am hoping for some very frank discussions on the issues we are all facing. The only way that we, as a province, are going to succeed is to face all the issues—the real issues—together.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Premier, if you want to be frank, you are keeping the pension issue on the table. You said that 5 000 part-time employees would now have access to a pension. It was quite a bit distorted, because we learned afterward from you that 3 000 of them do have access to a pension. They all have access to a pension, but 40% of them opted not to be part of it. How can you not take that off the table? On top of that, this whole pension issue is in front of the courts. It is being dealt with in the court system. Normally, you do not touch issues that are in front of the courts. You let the final ruling come from the courts, and then you deal with it. Can you take it off the table, Premier?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, this is where the facts come into the process. First of all, this item regarding pensions has been in the negotiations from the very beginning. Presentations were made in 2019. I know that it was said earlier that it just came on. Well, it did not just come on. It has been on from the very beginning.

Not unlike the 5% situation, there was refusal to talk about anything other than the 5% and refusal to talk about anything regarding the pensions. In the discussion about what the pensions will do, for those women who are primarily affected by this change that we are

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proposing, this will give them a pension. As far as this issue being in the courts, these are negotiated pensions. They are not subject to what is being discussed in the courts.

I know, as we discussed before, that it would not be the role of the Leader of the Opposition to actually learn about the topic prior to speaking, but I encourage the Leader of the Opposition to be informed. We can connect him with all kinds of help with that process.

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

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Premier, you have said so many different things over the last few months that a lot of people do not really know what to believe. The last time I checked, you did not have any legal background. I do not either, but I do know one thing: common sense and good judgment say that when a matter is in front of a court, you do not touch it before the court deals with it.

The union representatives said that it was not part of the negotiation from the get-go. It was a last-minute thing that you, I suspect, brought in and put on the table. It obviously helped derail a whole bunch of discussions around this collective agreement. Why do you not let the court deal with it, as it is now in that process?

Get the wage mandate resolved, get workers good working conditions, and respect them. Try to respect them. I think that is the minimum that we should ask. You have an opportunity today at one o'clock to get it resolved. You are the leader of the government. Resolve it.

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

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the risk of repeating myself, as I just said... The Leader of the Opposition quoted the union leader saying that it was not there from the beginning. Mr. Speaker, the presentation on this was in 2019. We are going back three years, and it was on the table prior to that to discuss it when the presentation was made on the state of the pensions. I did not introduce this at the last minute at all.

The other situation that I want to clarify is that these are not the pensions that are in front of the courts. These are negotiated pensions. Also, something else that I would like to clarify is that we are very happy—because it only involves two groups—to take the other seven groups and say: Let's complete the wage mandate on those seven and let them go and be back to normal. Then let's work on the two groups that we have other issues with, because it does not impact everybody.

Mr. Speaker, it is the right thing to do—to have every person working for government have access to a pension plan. That is what we are trying to accomplish.

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

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the 5 000 part-time employees in the education system do have access to a pension. It is voluntary—but they do have access—and 40% chose not to take part. The Premier wants to convert them over to a new system, which the union does not agree with. Put that aside for now, Premier. Resolve the wage issue and the working conditions. They already have access to a pension. They said so, and you said so here yesterday, quite frankly. Do not be obsessed with that, because it has derailed the whole process. It is hurting the ability to get a positive outcome in the collective bargaining negotiations. You know that. You want to try to impose your way of thinking and what you believe is best. But there are other people around the province who also know what is best and what is better. Can you resolve this at one o'clock today and take this pension issue off the table for now?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, again, talking about the facts, what I said yesterday was that 3 000 part-time workers, who are not able to do so today, would be able to participate in a plan. That is what this is all about, and 80% of government employees—maybe higher, at 90%—are in this plan. It has proven to be valuable. It has proven to be flexible for anybody to participate in any way. All the discussion about it causing high contribution rates is not true. The Opposition Leader can do what he feels he must do, and he can echo what he has heard in the press or what he has maybe heard when talking to folks from the rally. All that I am asking is that the CUPE leadership review the details. That is all that I am asking, to not simply say no, as it has done...

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

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Premier, you are saying that it is all about that, but in reality, if you stop and think about it, it is all about you and you knowing best. That is the problem right now in trying to get this thing resolved.

You said a few times—actually, even before we came back to the Legislature—that you were thinking about bringing in legislation that would include a wage mandate. Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that would be a huge mistake—a huge mistake—because we are not even sure, based on the ruling of the Supreme Court in 2015, that you actually have the authority to do so. Also, the Nurses' Union said this morning that it would be a huge mistake to apply a wage mandate across the board.

Did you already draft that piece of legislation? I want to know whether it is drafted, and I want to know whether you are going to table it.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is nice to hear that the Leader of the Opposition actually wants to know



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something because there are a lot of things that we could share with him so that he would know more. Then he could speak with factual information about the concerns.

I do not want to introduce wage legislation. I am hopeful that today will be the start of meaningful discussions with the CUPE leadership and that we can actually put all the facts on the table with regard to what we are facing economically and how we can better the working conditions and lifestyle of our employees. This is not about any particular desire of mine. This is not about any issue other than our not walking away as so many governments have done in the past—kick it down the road and hope for the best—Mr. Speaker, because that has been the history of our province. Right now, we are in a situation where we are growing like never before. People are coming here like never before, they are investing like never before, and they want to see a path like one they have never before seen...

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

[*Translation*]

### STUMPAGE FEES

**Mr. Mallet** (Shippagan-Lamèque-Miscou, L): Mr. Speaker, lumber prices have set a new record over the last year, but the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development has not raised timber royalties, and sawmill assessments have not increased substantially. The minister seems to be suggesting that the skyrocketing lumber prices may be an anomaly. Why does Service New Brunswick treat rising housing prices the same way? Why not consider a price freeze or a modest adjustment until Service New Brunswick is sure this is a short-term increase in housing prices?

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mary Wilson** (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you very much for the question. I just need to explain that assessors use mass appraisals for these properties by analyzing assessment values annually and that trained assessors, who are unbiased, highly qualified professionals, follow guidelines to make sure that this is done right and follow industry best practices. Real and true market value for these properties is the value of the real property itself, Mr. Speaker. Properties such as mills are not assessed based on their ability to generate profit. The Act is very clear in stating that assessors assess real property—buildings and land. Thank you.

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[*Translation*]

**Mr. Mallet** (Shippagan-Lamèque-Miscou, L): Considering the strength of the lumber markets, can we expect the government to review some of the tax breaks and the assessment the then Minister of Finance, Mr. Higgs, granted to big industry in 2014-15?

**Hon. Mr. Holland** (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Thank you for the question.

[*Original*]

It was a little confusing over on this side, where we were trying to figure out in which direction the opposition member was going with that. The member opposite talked about anomalies within the forestry industry and changes within appraisal values. At the end of the day, what exactly are you trying to accomplish with those questions? Are you looking to have us change the scale with which we appraise stuff based on floating markets? I do not think that anyone in the province would agree that taking a knee-jerk reaction to something that important would be a prudent or smart way to go.

As it relates to what we are doing with the forestry industry, we have adopted stable, steady approaches toward that, and that is proven. If the member opposite had done a little research on the anomalies of the forestry industry and had realized that the board price of wood went down as fast as it went up, he would realize that our approach was prudent. Our approach had the best interest of New Brunswickers at heart. Forgive us for trying to take a confusing, all-over-the-map approach. We are good with where we are going. Thank you.

## PROPERTY TAX

**Mr. LeBlanc** (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, my question to the minister is simple: How much additional tax revenue does the province expect to receive as a result of the property assessment hike? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Do you know what? There is still a lot of work to be done. Thank you for the question—sorry.

We are taking care of the assessments one at a time. There is some spike protection in place. There are different things that we have to work out in the assessment process. The bills have not even been sent out yet. They will be coming out in the new year. We will take care of that. We will actually address the assessment issue, and we will get you the numbers. We do not have them right now, obviously, with the bills not even having been sent out. Thank you.



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**Mr. LeBlanc** (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker. I was not sure that I was going to get a proper answer. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker, New Brunswickers are seeing their property assessments increase at unprecedented rates, which will mean big increases in their property taxes. When will the minister be announcing a tax relief program to assist New Brunswickers affected by these massive increases?

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you for the question, Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite. I just started to talk about that. Yes, there are some situations available to people where they can certainly get an assessment review. If people aged 65 or older want to defer their tax, they have that. They have spike protection to protect them from having their taxes raised over 10%. There are a number of different protections out there, a number of different ways for people to save money, and a number of different ways to get reassessments and to get an adjudication on their assessments.

(Interjections.)

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

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): But it is not the time right now when we would do that. I mean, they have to get their tax bills first, and those are going to come out in the new year.

## EDUCATION

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, there are more and more groups coming out and, certainly, parents, who are saying they are very tired of this reactive, impulsive government when it comes to the education system. We now have virtual learning that has been made available because of this labour dispute. We know that the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development said a few weeks ago that a circuit breaker for schools—moving online—would be the worst idea because kids would be spread out in their homes and day cares and with their relatives. The Teachers' Federation said it was against this. There are school districts that are saying they are against this.

Now that the EAs who were locked out are back on the payroll, why do we not go back to learning in the schools so that we can get some order in our society?

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**Hon. Mr. Cardy** (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, let me be clear: The Leader of the Opposition is suggesting that we cross picket lines? He is suggesting that we send kids back into schools where we do not have the janitors that we need to keep the kids safe from COVID-19, and he is suggesting that we impose on the already overburdened educational assistants.

(Interjections.)

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

**Hon. Mr. Cardy** (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): He is suggesting that those kids not be given the care that they need because they would be in classrooms with not enough EAs and with a teacher who is already responsible for a huge amount of additional work, which has built up and built up over the years, while this government, through the green paper on education a couple of years back, is doing its best to reduce the load on teachers. In a time of pandemic, when it comes to our children's safety, this government has one priority, which is acting in its best interest.

I am tired of the opposition trying to politicize the school system. Let the government negotiate, let the union negotiate, let them reach a resolution, and leave the kids out of it.

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

## CLIMATE CHANGE

**Ms. Mitton** (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, at today's COP26 meeting in Glasgow, world leaders are discussing phasing out coal by 2030. Just last week, our neighbours in Nova Scotia committed to do just that, along with committing to source 80% of the province's energy from renewable sources by 2030.

Yesterday, the Premier said that phasing out coal in New Brunswick by 2030 was dependent on the Atlantic Loop. While this is an important initiative, the Premier does not have to wait. Instead, he can invest now in locally owned renewable energy sources. People want to be able to put solar panels on their houses, small businesses, and community centres. Despite a lack of government leadership, Amlamgog, also known as Fort Folly First Nation, has taken the lead by investing in solar for its community on unceded Mi'kmaw territory. Will the Premier commit today to ending the use of coal by 2030 and to investing right now in locally owned renewable energy sources?

**Hon. Mr. Crossman** (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you for the question.



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The renewed climate change plan will be coming out. As I mentioned yesterday, there will be more information coming out as well early in the new year. With all the commitments in place, there is a lot happening. It will not happen overnight, but things will move ahead for lower emissions. We are working hard on that. The government has committed to the climate change solution, for sure, and we know that through our committee work.

As well, the Climate Change Secretariat is working with our deputy minister through the department and the Climate Change Fund to address many of these projects on an ongoing basis. Of the \$36 million in the Climate Change Fund, some is not being used, but they are readjusting that right now to accommodate other projects to make sure that we are moving ahead with reducing emissions and making things green. Thank you.

### PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

**Ms. Mitton** (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Well, Mr. Speaker, I did not hear any clear, firm commitments. We are falling behind not only our neighbours in Nova Scotia on renewable energy but also our neighbours in Prince Edward Island on affordable and accessible public transportation to serve the common good. Earlier this fall, Premier King announced a toonie transit system that will begin offering services on two bus routes, with a goal of expanding across the province. Best of all, Premier King called the initiative an easy investment for the government to make, costing only a couple hundred thousand dollars to get it rolling.

New Brunswickers would greatly benefit from an accessible public transportation system that would not only help them to reduce their carbon emissions but also help rural residents to access jobs and health care appointments. New Brunswick has a public transportation strategy from 2017, but it has been collecting dust for years because no minister has the mandate to implement it. Will the Premier fix this by assigning the mandate for public transportation to one of his Cabinet ministers?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): You know, I will discuss that point because I think that there is an opportunity throughout this province to establish a better transit system. There is an opportunity to look at our entire network and how we manage it in its entirety, to say: What should we do differently?

When we talk about a wage mandate for 55 000 employees, that is why the point is to be fair and reasonable. It is so that we pay the right amount to ensure not only that we are being competitive with our counterparts in the Atlantic Region but also that we can invest in things—not just wages, Mr. Speaker—because we need to do better. We need to do more, and we need to have access for everyone throughout this province, whether it be for health care services or for just getting around to see family for those who cannot. The more people we have on the bus, the better it is.

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I am very committed to doing something differently in that regard and so are my colleagues. But do you know what? We cannot have it all. To drive change, we have to manage with what we have. How do we innovate? Just sitting here and suggesting that throwing money at it is going to fix it...

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

### COVID-19

**Mrs. Conroy** (Miramichi, PA): Mr. Speaker, staff shortages have been an issue for some time in New Brunswick, especially in our health care system, and the pandemic has now completely heightened that. With the new vaccine mandate coming up on November 19, I have had many calls from workers who are not going to be able to work. These people are not anti-vaxxers. Some are nurses and paramedics. They are citizens who are genuinely concerned about the risks of a vaccine and who feel that they should be able to be tested and still go to work.

Considering that we are critically short-staffed as it is and we cannot lose any workers, we know that your deadline is coming up. We have seen Quebec and Ontario abandon their vaccine mandates. My question is for the Premier: Can you tell us what is coming up for November 19? Will you haul back on the vaccine mandate for workers, or will you go through with it? If you do go through with it, what are your plans to keep our services, our hospitals, and our surgeries going forward?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much for the question. We are aware of the Quebec and Ontario decisions. I have to emphasize that we have seen what happens when COVID-19 gets into our hospitals and into our long-term care sectors. It is a very difficult time, and we know that the best way to prevent that is through vaccination. We are still working diligently with everyone—with those who are resistant to getting their vaccines. We are trying to use every piece of information that we can to suggest that this is our best way. We are reviewing the decisions of our partners across this country and staying in touch with medical officers of health throughout. We will not have a decision on that until into the forthcoming days. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

### GOVERNMENT

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, I asked a question of the Premier about the role of his Cabinet and caucus colleagues in the decision-making process of government policies and decisions. The Premier answered a few things, but one thing that he did say—and I quote—was this: he's been more tolerant than most premiers of diverging views. Well, I think he should step back and think about what he said just yesterday. He should ask the member for Fundy-The Isles-Saint John West



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and the member for New Maryland-Sunbury because they were not in agreement with some of the government policies and he punished them. They are not in Cabinet anymore.

I want to know from the Premier: What actually is the role of his caucus and Cabinet colleagues in the decision-making of this government?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, it is interesting to watch the Leader of the Opposition try his very best to continue to divide, create wedges, create differences, create emotions within, create a division in caucus, and create a division in government—just divide and conquer and separate. If he would spend just half the time trying to think about how he could actually make improvements in this province rather than trying to think about how he could get back into government and continue to waste the opportunities that we have in front of us...

I am hoping that through this session, a lot of things actually come out that were done in the days of the previous Gallant government, because it makes Atcon look like a walk in the park. Let's get all the facts on the table. Let's spend our time working for the best in this province and not spend our time trying to divide people who are trying to make a difference here. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I guess I touched a nerve, Mr. Speaker. You know, the most constructive thing that we can do as an opposition and, certainly, as a province is to get rid of this Premier. But there are still three years, and we respect the mandate that he has. New Brunswickers have spoken.

*[Translation]*

What I would like to know from the Premier—he never answers the question—is if members of his Cabinet and caucus really play any significant role. I am still not sure... I am acquainted with several government members who do not want to see this happening with the labour relations dispute. They want a solution. They are all getting calls from parents in their ridings. The Premier has an opportunity now, at 1 o'clock, to resolve the situation. Is he going to resolve the situation at 1 o'clock today?

*[Original]*

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, look who got revved up there.

We all want resolution to this. There is no debate there. We all want to see this resolved and behind us—absolutely. I would say that we are in the same situation. That may be one thing we in this House agree on completely, across all party lines.



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But we have a process where we are trying to say: How do we get better? Do you know what? You could look today and say that New Brunswick cannot meet the future needs going down the road. We cannot meet them in terms of our ability to attract new labour. It is because the labour does not exist. It is the ability of what we can do differently because we must. It is the ability of how we can be better in our health care system and have better working environments for nurses. And it is not going to be difficult. It means paying attention to nurses because they have been crying out for years. It means that when you put money into, for instance, the universities, you want more students coming out as a result. But that never mattered to the Liberals. It was, I invested in this, and that is all that is necessary.

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

