

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



November 10, 2021

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COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, this is the 13th day of a strike that nobody but the Premier and this government wants. Yesterday, the Premier tabled a motion I would characterize as propaganda. This is a motion that will ensure this Legislative Assembly, guided by the will of the Premier, will be wasting time. It will be wasting time while the solution to this strike nobody wants is to be found at the negotiating table, when the Premier takes the pension plan issue off the table. The whole salary issue seems to have been resolved. Why does the Premier want to use the Legislative Assembly to try to solve a problem he created?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I must say that I am shocked by the position that the opposition members would take, that they do not want to have this debate on the motion that would basically cause the Legislature to say: Okay, we want the members—we are urging the members—of the CUPE locals to vote on the offer.

Mr. Speaker, what do you think would be wrong with that? The opposition does not want to take any responsibility of any kind. We could sit and talk about things here, and we could have what was suggested as a debate—a debate with no resolution. Debating this very item would bring resolution to an agreement that would say whether we go forward with saying to vote on this or whether we just let a few in the senior leadership rank dictate to the rest.

I guess the point that we are making is this: Let's put it all on the table. Let's let the membership vote and let the House allow that to happen or urge that to happen. What would be undemocratic about that, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the official opposition actually does take its responsibilities, but also, we admit if we make mistakes, which is unlikely of the Premier. You have made a mistake, Premier. You have dug yourself into a hole. You have painted yourself into a corner because you are stubborn. You do not want to get this resolved.

The whole strategy of your government is to push this away and let it stretch out so that people may turn on these workers. You are probably hoping for a snowstorm because the plows will not be out and people will get mad. This is not how we resolve issues—by dividing and conquering. This motion is a waste of time. Prorogue this House. Prorogue this House, get back to the negotiating table, and get this resolved.

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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): It is interesting, Mr. Speaker, that the Leader of the Opposition would say that it is a waste of time to have the House agree to encourage the union locals to vote on an offer. When the Leader of the Opposition says “push this away”, we know that would be the typical process of the opposition, which is as simple as saying: Do not deal with the issues that are in front of us. Just resolve it. Let it all happen.

The point that we are trying to address here is that there are fundamental issues in our province that need to be fixed. While the Leader of the Opposition could moan about this issue and say to take it off the table, I would like to reiterate that back several years ago, which would have been in the election of 2014, the opposition members said this: If we are elected, we are going to take all those pensions and reverse them—reverse all of them. Well, Mr. Speaker, they did not reverse one of them. Do you know why? It is because they know that unsustainable pensions are a risk to the employees.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): The opposition members know that the unsustainable pensions are a risk to the taxpayers, and they know that there is a need to fix them.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): We can idly chat over here, Mr. Speaker, but actually doing it is a different story.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, while the Premier keeps issuing propaganda about what he considers solutions to everything, our children are still not in school, and their parents are again in a situation where they have to choose between staying home with their children and going to work. Often, their employers do not give them that flexibility. Our teachers are overcome with confusion created by this government with the labour dispute.

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The labour dispute is not going to be solved by debating a motion here in the House, Mr. Speaker. It will be at the negotiating table. This is where we solve labour disputes, in the prescribed manner. Mr. Speaker, is the Premier going to withdraw this motion?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, this is an interesting little discussion that is going on here. As we know, all of a sudden, we have seven unions—it might be eight with NB Liquor—lined up in CUPE. This issue that we are discussing involves two unions. Typically, you would be having negotiations back and forth with the individual locals. They would vote on issues that are an issue for them. CUPE has taken a position of saying, okay, we are going to shut down the entire province and force the government's hand. Of course, the opposition would be only too willing to accept that.

Mr. Speaker, at the end of the day, if we do not allow the members to vote on their particular issue, what is the process all about? We are in a situation where we now have a union of eight unions that is basically holding the government to ransom. We have to get out of this. At the end of the day, we do need a path forward, because spending more money simply on wages is not going to fix all the things that...

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier says that the union is holding the government to ransom. Do you know what you are doing, Premier? You are taking hostage of the kids who cannot go to school. You are hoping that parents... Because of virtual learning, parents have to make difficult choices about whether to stay home with their kids or to go to work. They are struggling. They are struggling because employers will sometimes, for legitimate reasons, not allow that. Stop blaming others.

There is no use in having the debate here. I am actually asking that you prorogue the House. Go solve this problem that you have created, this mess that we are going through. There is now another group that wants to go on strike. You are creating this mess. You are contributing to this mess, but you are certainly not contributing to fixing this mess.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I would guess, judging from that, that the Leader of the Opposition would not agree with the member of the Green Party in relation to the emergency debate in the House. I guess that would be the position because it is kind of along the same vein, is it not? Rather than have a discussion on a motion with substance, the opposition would just say that there is no point in having any discussion in the Legislature. That must be the position that is being taken here.

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If you think about this, you realize that we would love to see the schools get back in service. We would love to see the custodial staff get back in service. There is nothing preventing them from voting on their contract—not a thing. Not one single thing is preventing them from voting on their contract. Why would we not do this? That is what the motion was all about. What would be the reason that we would not do that? I absolutely want to have parents take their kids back to school, as does the Minister of Education. So let the workers vote on it, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I know that we cannot take this Premier seriously. What he says and what he hopes for are not what he does. That is not what he does. We have this conflict that can be resolved now, not by having motions tabled so that we can debate and so that the Premier can give all his propaganda about what he thinks is best for New Brunswick. Seriously, it is getting really frustrating because the Premier is not taking on his responsibilities. Nor is this government taking on its responsibilities.

You know, our children have already lost too much during the pandemic in terms of learning and education. This government is taking more away from them now by having this conflict and by not resolving this strike. Take the pension off the table. The salaries are resolved. Sign the deal. The strike is over. The schools are back in.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting, and we know that it is consistent. I mean, the Leader of the Opposition is certainly consistent. He certainly does not want to deal with any fact. He certainly does not want to deal with any issue. He certainly does not want to be supportive of anything that will bring some fundamental improvement to our situation. He certainly does not care whether more people can have a pension or whether it can be sustainable once they get it.

The reason he does not want to debate the motion is that—he said it right there—he does not want to give me a chance to put all the facts on the table so that everyone from far and wide can hear them and so that the Leader of the Opposition can debate them because—do you know what?—debating facts has never been a strength of the Liberal member and because the Liberals do not deal in facts. They just deal in fearmongering and in working away from the issues. Do not fix anything. Just move on. That has been consistent, and the Leader of the Opposition continues to portray that very issue: Do not confuse me with the facts.

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[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the official opposition did not cause the labour dispute, nor did I; that was each one of you, on the government side.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask a question about forcing health care workers back to work. If nurses choose to vote for a strike, if the number of designated workers causes problems—if they are on strike—and if the pandemic is still going on, does the Premier expect to do the same thing he did on the weekend with civil servants, using emergency measures to force them back to work, which is an abuse of power?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the Attorney General may want to speak further on this. The point is that the emergency order and the change to have the health care workers back in the hospitals were based on the pandemic, based on the emergency order, and based on that requirement. That requirement, as long as it continues to be in place—and the emergency order is in place because of the pandemic issues—will continue, and the Leader of the Opposition knows that. He absolutely knows that. This is not a question. This is just some way to make another statement.

Mr. Speaker, the point of having our health care system protected, which we have been saying throughout this, is based on the health and safety of the citizens of this province—health and safety. We will continue to use the emergency order as long as we have a pandemic to protect the health and safety of every citizen in this province. That is why it was put in. That is why we have it, and we must continue to ensure that it works.

FEDERAL FUNDING

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, it is amazing that all of this is going on while New Brunswick is the only province in Canada that has run a surplus during the global pandemic. This is on the backs of the public sector workers, New Brunswick citizens, and businesses that needed our help and that continue to need our help. Other Canadian provinces have stepped up, yet New Brunswick continues to boast about a surplus. Why is this? Instead of taking advantage of federal funding to keep people safe and to get through the pandemic, our Premier refused to spend some of the funding that was offered.

Mr. Premier, in addition to that extra \$300 million in federal cash that you took straight to the bank, what other federal money did you leave on the table to deal with COVID-19?

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Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): The fact of the matter is that we did not leave any of the money that was to go to COVID-19. It was spent on COVID-19.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you.

The same situation is happening right across Canada. We are showing a surplus.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Ontario has lessened its debt by \$11.7 billion. It was going to run a deficit of \$36 billion this year. It is down to \$25 billion. Ontario is still running a deficit, but it made an \$11-billion change in that deficit.

Additional federal support comes in, much of the time, in different ways. But do you know what? What was designated to go to medical care, to PPE, and to helping out with screening and all of that was spent exactly the way it was supposed to be spent. All the federal money was spent, going exactly to where it was supposed to go.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, there is a pattern here, and it is not a good one. They need to do some fact-checking because the Premier did leave money on the table. There was \$20 million in funding for safe long-term care as well as \$30 million for wage top-ups for essential workers.

I say all of this while we continue to hear the essential workers who are out on the street and striking for a better wage. Rather than addressing this challenge by improving wages and working conditions, the New Brunswick government has achieved a large surplus—a very large surplus—on the backs of public-sector workers. New Brunswick is experiencing a workforce crisis in health care and in other sectors where it is very difficult to recruit and retain. Other provinces, our neighbouring provinces, are addressing those issues while we are falling behind. How can this government justify a \$408-million surplus last year and another record surplus for the year ahead?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Mr. Speaker, the fact of the matter is that everybody who qualified for any federal support got that federal support thanks to this government. We fought for them. The Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour came out as soon as COVID-19 started with a \$900 bonus to help people in New Brunswick.

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They are talking about us not looking at our books? Talk to the C.D. Howe Institute, which says that New Brunswick consistently—consistently—has above-average transparency compared to other governments. That is the C.D. Howe Institute. Yes, it is saying that New Brunswick is transparent.

We are saying that the money was spent exactly as it should have been spent. If you qualified for the money, then you darn well got the money from this government.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, no matter how they try to present the facts, the Premier and the Conservative government have certainly left money on the table. Also, the Premier and his government have taken money from the COVID-19 Resiliency Fund that should have been used for projects like ventilation systems in schools to keep children safe and fixing old salt domes.

Mr. Premier, how do you sleep at night? How could you have chosen not to support improvements to keep people healthy and safe instead of favouring deferred maintenance projects on old government buildings? The aim was just to avoid using provincial funds and to inflate the surplus. When will the government step up and deal with New Brunswickers' needs?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Let's go over some facts here, Mr. Speaker, because we are tired of not getting the facts from the other side. The onetime federal transfers played a key role in recent fiscal results. That said, so, too, has our management of the pandemic and the province's finances.

The onetime supports related to COVID-19 are being used for their intended purpose. Our 2020-21 spending related to COVID-19 exceeded the level of the onetime transfers. As of the end of September, the province had incurred over \$425 million in expenses related to COVID-19. The 2021-22 budget and current spending projections include expenses related to COVID-19. It is all there. It is all transparent. New Brunswick—at least, this government in New Brunswick—is doing exactly what it is supposed to do, exactly what it promised to do, and it is protecting New Brunswickers.

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[*Translation*]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister told us that reform was on the way. In the beginning, it was supposed to happen in the spring. However, the minister had to go on vacation. Then it was supposed to be done in October. Why was it not done then? We do not know. Even the minister does not seem to know. Now, it will be this week or next, but the minister does not know for sure. Can the Minister of Health guarantee to all New Brunswickers who took part in consultations, who said they did not want to lose services in their regions, and who even said they wanted more services, that she will not disappoint them?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, there are times when I must be humble. You know, I have been pushing, pushing, and pushing to get our health plan out. At times, you have to realize that staff have a job to do and that they need the time required to do it in the circumstances of having a COVID-19 pandemic and many other issues.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): But having said that, Mr. Speaker, we had a lengthy meeting, and on Wednesday, the 17th of this month, the plan will be released.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, what a nice attitude. Once again, the minister is blaming others instead of assuming her own responsibilities. On October 29, the minister wrote this on Twitter:

[*Original*]

Look what's on my desk...final copy!

[*Translation*]

Last week, the minister said the document was being translated. Yesterday, she told us there were still some details to iron out. If things continue this way, we will end up as

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confused as the minister is. It seems to me that this is the opposite of what should have happened: There are details to iron out, the translation is done, and, finally, the document is finalized and ready to be presented. Is the minister really going to present a reform? Or are we going to waste months and years waiting for the minister to get back to us? Ultimately, is the minister going to try to put up a smokescreen, or have we just wasted weeks, months, and years waiting for New Brunswickers to get access to services?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, will it not be great when every New Brunswicker has access to primary health care? Will it not be great when the people of New Brunswick have access to surgeries when they need it? Will it not be great when we have a health care system that works together seamlessly and in a timeless fashion? Will it not be great when we move mental health and addictions from a five-year plan to that three-year plan, as we said—here in the Legislature, just in our last sitting—we would do? Will it not be great when we have long-term care facilities, whether they are nursing homes or ARFs or at-home services, working hand in hand, in tandem, with Horizon, Vitalité, and EM/ANB? Mr. Speaker, that is going to happen.

[Translation]

FIRST NATIONS

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Justice and Public Safety recently announced that civil servants could no longer speak the truth and say factually that New Brunswick is on unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyik, and Passamaquoddy peoples. This territory is covered by the Peace and Friendship Treaties these nations signed with the British Crown for the first time in 1726. These treaties did not deal with the surrender of land and resources, but they did in fact recognize Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik title and dealt with establishing rules to govern what was to be a permanent relationship between the nations.

My question is for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. Can he please indicate to us whether he believes this is factual and confirm for us whether this policy applies to classroom teachers, who have to strictly adhere to historical facts in educating the children of this province?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Justice and Public Safety, Attorney General, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am the Attorney General of the province of New Brunswick, and as such, I have certain responsibilities with respect to the carrying out of litigation when the



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province is sued. Unfortunately, the position taken by certain First Nations has been to commence a legal action against the province. That action is claiming 60% of the province. That action claims every square foot of 250 000 individual pieces of property, at a value of almost \$50 billion. I have to take this seriously on behalf of all New Brunswickers. That is my job, my sworn duty, and that is what I will do.

[*Translation*]

GOVERNMENT

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): It is shameful, Mr. Speaker, that the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development will not rise to say whether this policy also applies to teachers.

My next question is to the Minister responsible for La Francophonie and Government House Leader. We have been sitting now for two weeks, after a break of almost six months. Since October 22, we have not had a single meeting of House Leaders, and we still have no fixed legislative calendar for the Legislative Assembly, which makes it very difficult for families. In spite of a request, virtual participation was refused. The government is having trouble getting its legislation through and seems to be constantly on the defensive. So, my question is this: Are you perhaps seriously lacking in leadership in these areas?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I guess we would not expect much more from the member opposite. Obviously, the Minister responsible for La Francophonie has been working through some health issues, of which the member would be well aware. I would ask for some consideration of that, which certainly seems appropriate because it is a reality. I must say that I am impressed that he is able to be here and to participate and to be very much engaged in this session. He insisted on doing so. We can take the questions under advisement, but I would ask that the member recognize the situation for what it is at this current time. Thank you.

SNOW REMOVAL

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, last winter we had a below-average snowfall accumulation for most of the season. Despite this, my office received several complaints in relation to plowing. Winter road maintenance may not be top of mind for most, but it is an inevitable part of living in New Brunswick. As the character Jon Snow said, Winter is coming. The question is whether the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure will be ready.



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As most are aware, unless you have been living under a rock, we are currently undergoing some significant labour disputes with strikes. I have a question for the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure. Is the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure prepared should an early storm hit in the midst of the strike? Has the minister received an increase in budget to perform the services needed for the maintenance of roads during the winter season?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The team at the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure is incredible and hardworking. It prepares ahead. Our motto is Be prepared. We know snow is coming. It comes every single year. We have a team that is planning for strike action and for how to deal with snowplowing during the strike. We have plans in place. Will snowplowing be impacted? Yes, but our roads will get plowed. Our plows are available and ready to go at a moment's notice. We have a great team that is willing to step up and work hard at plowing our roads and keeping New Brunswickers safe. The good news is that the P3 highways, the public-private partnerships of Route 2 and Route 1, will not be impacted by the strike action. They will be kept clear for people moving between our cities. Thank you very much.

GOVERNMENT

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I think that it is time for the Premier to rebrand himself in a way that... When he was in the private sector, he was known to be the fixer. That is known. People talk about it. He was the fixer. However, since he has been the Premier, he has become the destroyer. He has been creating fights and conflicts with so many, and there are more to come, I am sure, with the federal government, his own caucus colleagues, and Dr. Ngola. Even the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is fighting with people on social media. First Nations and now his own workers in government... Mr. Speaker, the Premier needs to reflect and think about this: Is your approach the right one? Is it resolving issues?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, one thing that you learn over the years is that change is not easy. We can talk about the situation in New Brunswick, whether it be the health care situation, which the minister will be addressing or our educational system and our inability to graduate bilingual students and have a higher level of literacy after 50 years or the relationships that we have with others, which are based on the reality of our situation. Or, we can coast along, as governments in the past have done and as we have seen with the past Liberal government in particular.

We can say, well, we are not in favour of the situation with the federal government. We said to that government that we need more flexibility with where we spend money on things that we actually need to spend money on. At the end of the day, it is every taxpayer who



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spends it. I know that is not a consideration for the Leader of the Opposition, because he really does not care about the taxes that are levied on citizens.

It is a time of change, Mr. Speaker. With change, it does create more discussion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the idea of change must also apply to the Premier: He, too, must change his approach. Mr. Speaker, changing does not mean destroying, but rather enhancing and building on what we have already created in our province. It is really unfortunate that the Premier can never admit that he is part of the problem or that he has made a mistake. That is not great leadership, I must say.

That being said, the Premier is known as someone who was able to deal with files in the private sector. However, since he became Premier, there have been conflicts, problems, and messes throughout the province, all created by him and by his government. Is he going to change his approach to really solve these problems?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I guess we can agree on something in relation to the fact that there are messes everywhere. I did not create them, Mr. Speaker. I am dealing with them.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): If the Leader of the Opposition would like to discuss the particular points and finally be able to address a government that is actually working to fix things in this province... That is the goal of our government, Mr. Speaker. I am proud to be standing here today with my team that says that it is time to fix New Brunswick. That is exactly what we are doing.

I am surprised that I have not had any questions in regard to the tax agreement with First Nations. I would love to discuss with the Leader of the Opposition all the details around it, what it did, and the agreement of 2017. Mr. Speaker, I am really surprised that there has not been any discussion on that file, because there is a lot under the hood that the Leader of the Opposition is well aware of. There has not been a question. I would sit down to talk about any of these items...

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