

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**November 12, 2021**

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### COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, this is the 15th day of this strike. Yesterday, Remembrance Day, we had a chance to reflect on all the sacrifices of our veterans. Today, I am going to ask and plead with the Premier about whether he also reflected yesterday on this entire situation. You know, we have people who were forced back to work, a legal battle around this dispute, kids who are being significantly impacted, parents who are frustrated, and teachers who are doing the best they can, and we still do not have a resolution. We still do not have a resolution because the Premier is not showing the leadership and the flexibility that are needed. So I am going to plead on behalf of all New Brunswickers and all the workers: Premier, please, did you reflect on getting this resolved at the negotiating table?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition is correct. Yesterday was a time of reflection. It was a time to think about the many blessings our province has and what we enjoy here and what, many times, we take for granted, mostly—and obviously—because of the sacrifices made by many. We have certainly seen nothing that compares to what happened in the wars and what our forefathers went through, but we have seen what we have gone through in the pandemic and what sacrifices have been made and what people throughout the province have done to keep themselves safe.

Now, we have a situation such that there are many things we must address in the province as we move into a new chapter of what the world looks like. We know that economically, our province is going to be facing many changes, which the member talks about, with climate change and how we best deal with that. We know that we cannot just keep doing the same thing and expect better results. So in every meeting we have, part of our discussion is around what is different about what we are going to do tomorrow, and that is a big discussion that we are having right now.

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

[Translation]

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I think the Premier did not hear my question at all or, at least, he is extremely out of touch with reality. Yesterday, we had a day of reflection for our veterans, their contributions, and their sacrifices.

What I am asking the Premier this morning... I am making a plea for everyone affected by this situation, including employees who do not want to be on strike, Mr. Speaker. Has the Premier really reflected on the issue, after 15 days of this strike? I am being sincere, Mr. Speaker. After 15 days of the strike, can the Premier himself—he can include his colleagues

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if he likes, but he is not known for that—decide to put the whole pension plan issue aside for these negotiations? The salary issue seems to be resolved. I am making a plea to the Premier this morning. Does he want to resolve this situation and the mess he has made, today? Resolve this situation, please.

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, every day, there is reflection about what is going to happen next and what we are going to do in many instances. You know, a lot of the discussions that I have had on several topics have been related to these questions: How do we get better results? How do we find an innovative way for a new approach?

On the strike, we are having talks. The talks are continuing. We had discussions throughout the day yesterday. We met throughout yesterday and into the night. This is happening. It is ongoing. But it is about having a different approach. I know how easy it is in here just to say: Oh, well, we do not want to talk about things that are going to be controversial. We do not want to talk about anything that is really going to have a discussion point. We just want to agree and to carry on.

Well, that does not change the dial on what we need to do for the long term. All that does is perpetuate—perpetuate—the same situation. That is a consistent theory that I have seen from those on the opposite side, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, the Premier does not seem to want to recognize the damage that he is creating in our province and in our society. He has created this mess. I have been reading some of the stuff he has been saying over the past 24 or 48 hours regarding this strike. And now that the NB Liquor employees will be able to go on strike with a 98% vote in favour, he says that he is going to consult Public Health around that to try to keep them working. Well, the Premier seems to be more worried about selling booze than about getting our kids back in the classroom—selling booze rather than getting our kids back in the classroom. The approach of this Premier and his being so disconnected is frustrating. Please, Premier—please—resolve this labour dispute.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I wonder how many times the member opposite practiced that in front of the mirror. You know, it is interesting. He could twist any of the conversations or comments that I made in that sense.

To be more accurate, when I was asked about the NB Liquor situation, I said that NB Liquor going on strike is not exactly the top priority right now because we have all these issues



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with education, with our health care, with our roads, and with all the other locals that we are talking about. That would be the focus, and that was what I responded when I was asked that question.

It will continue to be the focus. As I say, we are having discussions. I am hopeful that we will resolve this and that we will resolve it in a way that makes a difference, not only for us to get back to work and for everyone to get back to normal but also for the long term for over 2 500 employees. It will make a real difference for them. That is what I am hopeful for, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier can send messages around this House that are condescending or even disrespectful. The fact of the matter is that our kids are not in the classroom. Our teachers are doing the best they possibly can by trying to offer a minimum of education to our children. Parents are so frustrated. They are supporting the workers, but they care about their children. Premier, please, do not worry about selling booze. That is what you are worried about. Please end the mess of this strike that you have created so that our kids can get back in the classroom and get their education.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I did not have access, obviously, to Question 4, but Question 4 was answered in Answer 3. It was in relation to my priorities and what our priorities are as a caucus in relation to getting schools back in. It is not around worrying about the NB Liquor situation. I think I was clear on that. That is our goal, and that is what we are working toward.

Obviously, a lot of the unions could be back to work right now. It is unfortunate that we have this situation. Five out of seven unions say, we are good, and let's go. The other two say, okay, let's get more information and let's understand what we have to offer here. When the discussions are in detail about this, they could say: Wow, you are telling me that 2 500 people can have access to a pension that they cannot access now? Well, we want to learn more.

So five unions could go back to work tonight, but the union will not allow it. It will not allow it. Why is that? It is because it believes that all these folks that I am looking at over here will fold like a deck of cards and be forced into going back to work.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier can send the message that he is a tough guy and that he is going to flex his muscles. He is going to fix everything. But he is destroying everything that goes through his desk. Show some empathy. Show some concern. Be human. Care about our kids' parents. You can laugh all you want, Premier. Seriously. Seriously. Seriously, we are in a pandemic. Our kids are not in the classrooms. The workers want to go back to work, and the Premier is fixated on one thing—this pension stuff. Really? Really? When are you going to come to your senses, show

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some leadership, be responsible for all society here in this province, and get your mess resolved?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, there is a distinct difference between me and the Leader of the Opposition. He is never really fixated on anything that is going to have a long-term impact other than his future, and that is a fundamental difference.

So, yes, it is difficult. And, yes, the easy thing to do is not to have tough discussions. But I have met with a lot of people—not just in the capacity of this strike situation—who really want to see game-changing moments that happen in New Brunswick and that will see a renewed New Brunswick, and we are seeing that. We have seen it throughout these past six or eight months. It has been tough for the past few months, but we will get through this.

What we are seeing is record interest in our province. We are seeing people wanting, like never before, to move to New Brunswick. It is hard to go anywhere without hearing people say that they had a friend or a cousin move here or that somebody they had never met before moved here. So, Mr. Speaker, what does that tell you? We have something to be proud of, and we have something to continue to build and to get stronger with. Those are the discussions we are having.

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

*[Translation]*

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is strange to hear the Premier's answers this morning.

Think of the parents who have to make this choice: Should I stay home or go to work? Parents are tired and frustrated and children are upset by the whole situation, while teachers are doing their best to help students. We have a labour dispute going on that has serious consequences for the functioning of our society and our province, and the Premier is going around talking about people from other provinces coming to New Brunswick.

The Premier is completely out of touch with reality in New Brunswick, Mr. Speaker. Well, yes, he is going to blame us and attack us, but, in the end, he is the Premier. He should show his human side—if he has one—and settle this strike so that we can get back to normal.

*[Original]*

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I guess that we do not have any discussion here about the wage levels that have been accepted. But the wage levels that were put together and that were accepted by the union—at least, that was the offer of a few weeks ago—were based on the entire



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deal, and that was the agreement two Thursdays ago. That was the agreement. You get into that situation, and then it comes back: Well, no, maybe that is not the agreement. So it is a bit of a situation to deal with. It is not a case of saying, oh, well, sorry, I guess it is not then. It is a case of saying, well, if that is not the agreement, then we need to look at the whole picture again. That is where you find yourself.

I know that would be new ground for the Leader of the Opposition. The opposition members basically just say: Okay, that is fine. Let it go. They say: Taxpayers can just pay more, and we will tax more because that is what we do best. We will just continue to tax people more, we will just spend more, and everybody will be happy.

That is the philosophy of the Liberal Party. But in the situation where \$5 for every \$1 spent is \$5 of taxpayer money, there is a reason to get serious about that.

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

[*Translation*]

### HEALTH CARE

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health admitted in the House earlier this week that, of the only five pillars of the reform, there are two she knows nothing about. Even though the minister has been working on this document for over a year, she does not remember nearly half of the principal parts of it, though there are only five.

This is the question that is beginning to be asked: Is this the Minister of Health's reform or actually the one the Premier himself wants to pass? When the Premier gets involved, everything is guaranteed to go badly.

Let's take the example of surgery wait times. The wait times continue to lengthen under the Conservatives, and New Brunswick is the fourth worst province in the country in this area. Now, the minister is trying to tell us that she is going to take charge of this, but what has she done over the last three years? What has she done to solve this problem? Absolutely nothing, but let's listen to what the minister has to tell us.

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, the opposition continues on its consistent and very predictable path. But let me tell you what we have done over the past three years because I have a great list here.

We introduced universal free flu shots for New Brunswickers. We implemented a process where women with dense breasts will receive that notification so that they can be on

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higher alert. We started the LPN bridging program. The first COVID-19 vaccine was injected in December 2020. We launched Bridge the gap. We launched the BounceBack announcement. The health plan review process commenced in February 2020. There were 39 Healthy Seniors Pilot Projects announced in February 2021. The addiction and mental health plan was released in February 2021. Plans to construct eight care homes were announced in April 2021. The Biosimilars Initiative was launched in April 2021. Amendments to combat youth vaping were made in May 2021.

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

*[Translation]*

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, I hope the minister will table this document in the House so that everyone can see it. I am going to lend a hand to the minister, though, because I think she is forgetting a few things. She seems to be forgetting that she wanted to close emergency rooms throughout the province. She seems to be forgetting the departments she closed in some New Brunswick hospitals. She forgets that she will be announcing the closure of some emergency rooms in New Brunswick for an indefinite period. This is the record, right now, for the Conservatives and the minister. She can tell us what she wants, then, but the work they have done in health has been a disaster.

*[Original]*

Mr. Speaker, there are reports of patients from upriver being sent to hotels, and there are no available beds at the Chalmers hospital. This is just another example of this government's mismanagement of the health system. What is the minister doing to address this situation? Is this an example of what this minister and this Premier, within their health reform, are ready to do to centralize essential health care and to cut services in regions?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is the same old same old. Those members are looking for a battle that is just not there. Let me continue.

The hip and knee surgery list was reduced in half in June 2021, and that is because the surgical advisory committee is doing great work with us. There was also the creation, in June 2021, of an oversight committee for the potential neurological syndrome of unknown causes. There was the opening of three nurse practitioner clinics in July 2021, initiated by my fellow colleague. There was, in August 2021, the filing of the Legionnaires' disease report as well as the expansion of the advanced care paramedics program to additional areas. The ban on the sale of flavoured vaping products happened in September 2021. The coverage of pharmacy costs for some prescription renewals and UTI assessments and prescriptions with our partners in pharmacy happened in October 2021, as did the deer donation pilot project to feed low-income families in southwestern New Brunswick. Also,



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we released the epidemiological report on the potential neurological syndrome of unknown causes. Our department...

(Interjections.)

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

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister should ask those who have family members with the mysterious illness what they think about her and her government, and she will have a good answer from them. You have done nothing. They have been waiting for answers for weeks, months, and years.

(Interjections.)

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

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): And you are still there saying that you are solving the situation, and it is not true.

Mr. Speaker, a pregnant mother had to drive 200 km from Plaster Rock to Fredericton because the labour and delivery unit at the Upper River Valley Hospital in Waterville had been closed. As if that were not bad enough, she had to spend two nights in a Fredericton hotel while she went through the process of being induced. People who are in medically vulnerable positions are being sent to hotels. Is this part of the Premier's health care reform, or is this yet another example of the government's sheer incompetence at handling the fourth wave of COVID-19?

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

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, once again, the opposition members are looking for a battle that just is not there. Rural health care is extremely important in this province, and we understand that.

Will it not be great when everyone in this province has access to great primary health care? Will it not be great when everyone in this province can see a connected health system—a network of excellence with Vitalité, Horizon, and EM/ANB all working together seamlessly? Will it not be wonderful when the mental health and addictions strategy is pushed forward—a five-year plan done in a three-year plan? When our seniors are aging better at home, in the privacy of their own homes, with the supports they need, will it not be better? Mr. Speaker, surgeries are also a focus of this plan.

I hope the member realizes that I just gave the five pillars. I am sorry I stumbled last week. But we are getting it done.

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[Translation]

### RENTS

**Mr. Gauvin** (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We have learned that the current Conservative government in Nova Scotia will be following in the steps of its predecessor and maintaining the rent controls established during the pandemic, at least until 2023.

Winter is coming, and we know that there is a problem. There is no use calling people names, because we all know there is a problem. The New Brunswick government has provided three more months of notice, if ever people are not pleased with their rent. Then they can move. Now, can this government at least ensure that a ceiling is established to protect New Brunswickers, at least until the end of the pandemic? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[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. Mr. Speaker, this is a very important issue, of course. We know there are concerns for tenants here in New Brunswick, and we are paying very close attention to their concerns. Available, affordable housing is a supply issue being faced across the country.

I would like to point out that, yes, Nova Scotia has implemented rent control, but I would also like to point out that Nova Scotia changed its mind four times in the past year. Developers do not know what to do. Landlords do not know what is going on. Tenants do not know what is going on. You can hear the air brakes screaming while coming to a halting stop in the province of Nova Scotia because landlords do not have any certainty.

We in New Brunswick can be certain that we have done our research. We know—as do many individuals whom the opposition likes to quote, such as several economists—that rent control does not solve the problem of affordable housing and available housing. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

### COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

**Ms. Mitton** (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, the Premier says he speaks for all New Brunswickers, but clearly, he speaks for some more than others. The Premier says he is in for the long haul regarding the ongoing labour dispute between his government and 22 000 public sector workers who are asking for real wage increases. When Irving Oil requested an increase in gasoline wholesale margins earlier this year, the Premier had civil servants scrambling over the Christmas holidays to prepare a briefing for him and then his office wrote a letter to the EUB urging it to accept Irving's application to increase its profit



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margin. If only the Premier cared as much about public-sector workers as he cares about his former employer.

Will the Premier act today with the same urgency that he had back in January and accept CUPE's counteroffer so that workers can go back to work and students can go back to school on Monday morning?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess, as with most situations, a correction might be in order here. I think, if we go back to that particular request for a price increase, which was granted by Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and, I think, Prince Edward Island, what we asked was that the EUB review it—look at all the facts and make a recommendation. That is what we asked for, so let's set the record straight on that issue. Also, when the EUB went to review it, Irving did not supply the details but withdrew the request. What route would you take, other than to ask the EUB to have a review of the situation? So, Mr. Speaker, let's just clear that up.

On the other issue, the last part about getting schools back up and running, we are working directly on other items to make this process move forward. I am encouraged by the discussions held last night. I know they will continue today, and I am hopeful that a resolution will be the result.

## CLIMATE CHANGE

**Ms. Mitton** (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Well, I hope the Premier can move faster to get students back to school and workers back to work.

Mr. Speaker, the COP26 meeting is wrapping up today in Glasgow, and workers in sunset industries like coal and oil need to be retrained and supported to find meaningful work in sunrise industries such as renewable energy. Earlier this year, the federal government announced a new, more stringent carbon emissions target for 2030. To avoid climate disaster, we need to transition away from oil and coal and toward renewable energy like wind and solar. This just transition needs to be completed before the decade is out, and it needs action immediately. What is the Premier's plan to invest in renewable energy, like wind and solar, and to ensure that New Brunswick workers are not left behind and are properly trained for the jobs of the 21st century?

**Hon. Mr. Holland** (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to have a chance to answer and to have a conversation about the work that the province has done. Successively, since 2005, collective governments have worked very hard to ensure that significant and large steps have been made. When it comes to the discussion about investment in renewables, I believe that both previous governments and this existing government have done an incredible amount of work on



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that, to the tune of a \$1-billion investment as it relates to wind energy here in the province. We should celebrate that.

We should celebrate the fact that 81% of the electricity generated by New Brunswick is done in a renewable and clean fashion. That is something that has us leading the country, Mr. Speaker. We need to recognize that. We need to recognize that we are investing in horizon technologies that have an opportunity to bring us to 0% emissions. The small modular reactor sector has an opportunity to take us there. We are building upon the work that the previous government did. We are going to continue to do that. We are going to make sure that New Brunswick leads the fight.

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

## PROPERTY TAX

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning, I read that the Apartment Owners Association is going to be meeting with four ministers regarding rising property taxes and how that affects tenants and landlords alike. There is no question and there is no more debate about this. Frankly, the more we do reviews, consultations, and talks, the less we have actual action for change. It is a foregone conclusion that the double tax is crippling the economy and increasing the cost of rent in New Brunswick—if you can even find a place to rent in New Brunswick.

The double tax in this province is 251% higher than the Canadian average. Anywhere you rent in this province, you are looking at rent that is two and a half times higher. That is based on downtown Toronto rent, for crying out loud. Then we wonder why tenants cannot afford rent and we wonder why there is a housing crisis.

This government committed to eliminating the double tax. We are seeing a surplus like we have not seen in decades. Will the Premier commit to eliminating the double tax?

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

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, as I listened today to all the bantering back and forth in question period and to the latest question, I was reminded of Bruce Springsteen's *Born to Run*. Do you remember the video for *Born to Run*? At the start of the video, he said "nobody wins unless everybody wins". The Boss said: "nobody wins unless everybody wins".

That is what this is about. That is what is going on right now. Everybody has to win, not only the 22 000 who are with CUPE but also the 750 000 people who are the other citizens of New Brunswick and not only the people who own the apartment buildings and want the break on tax but also all the people who need some tax so that they can help. Do you know what? Nobody wins unless everybody wins, and that is what we are attempting to do. That



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is what we are attempting to do, to walk that fine line and to make sure that all New Brunswickers are treated equally, whether you own a building or you do not, whether you own a house or you do not, or whether you work in CUPE or you are part of the 750 000 other New Brunswickers who are not represented by CUPE.

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

### COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

**Mrs. Conroy** (Miramichi, PA): Mr. Speaker, we have been speaking with many members on the strike line, and the message is very clear: The workers have had enough. They want to return to work, and they want their kids back in school.

Many want to go to a vote, but they want to do so without the fear of losing what they worked so hard for. The strike is causing a lot of grief and anxiety for a lot of people, and it needs to come to an end. Government is pushing for an objective analysis; however, in the documentation released by the Premier last Friday, there is a contradiction in the statement. On one hand, the Premier is asking for an objective, independent analysis of the two locals' pensions, which affect bus drivers and custodians, but on the other hand, the same document talks about a transition in the pension plan. Mr. Speaker, it cannot be both ways. Will the government commit to removing any predetermined outcomes and allow the process to be truly independent and objective to ensure that these two locals have a retirement plan that is healthy and sustainable?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): So, Mr. Speaker, the document that the member refers to... I appreciate what it talks about in the sense of a transition to a new vehicle, but it does not talk about what that vehicle might look like. The reason that it says it like that... There has been that debate and that discussion on what that means, but the purpose is that it is to be reviewed by the actuaries. What that ultimately means is that the current situation that is unfunded needs to be addressed in some manner. It cannot be the same program going forward. That is the reason that it is there.

I appreciate the comments because it is something that has been talked about directly at the table, about how do we say: What is this definition of a new transition vehicle or a new retirement vehicle? The purpose is simply to say that we look at this situation that we have today, we know that it is untenable for the future, so what should the new one look like? We do not know. We are not prescribing. We are asking actuaries to do that. That level of discussion is underway, Mr. Speaker.



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### RENTS

**Mr. Gauvin** (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is about rent control again, although I will be more specific this time. With the new proposal, landlords can raise the price once per year—no limits. I will go straight to the point. You can say whatever you want about us, but there is a 77-year-old lady in the province whose rent is going to go up from \$560 to \$1 180. Say what you want about us. What are you going to tell her?

**Hon. Mary Wilson** (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you very much for that question, Mr. Speaker. What we are going to tell her is what you should be telling her: Call the Residential Tenancies Tribunal now at 1 888 762-8600. We want to hear from her. Over the past two weeks, I have heard other colleagues here in the room fearmongering again: Tenants do not want to call. They are afraid to call.

I am sorry, Mr. Speaker. Please, encourage your constituents to call us. That is what we are there for. Put it in your speed dial: 1 888 762-8600. Thank you.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Members, the time for question period is over.

