

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

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November 26, 2021

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IMMUNIZATION

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, this pandemic is obviously still ongoing, not only in New Brunswick but, certainly, around the country and the world. We now have a new vaccine for children who are between 5 and 11 years old. I see that as of yesterday, about 15% of the kids eligible for vaccinations have had appointments scheduled for them by parents. I guess the question is for the Premier or the minister. Could he or she explain the government's strategic plan to make parents aware, by educating and informing them, of the benefits of this vaccine for their children so that we can get to a high, high percentage of vaccination for these kids?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I do appreciate the question from the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Speaker. I will just give an update that as of 8 a.m. today, 9 392 children have been booked for their first vaccination. We have clinic appointments and times allocated for every single one of those children, and we will be expanding clinics as necessary. I think the member opposite, the Leader of the Opposition, knows that we have become very nimble at providing clinics for our adults as they were getting their vaccines, so that is happening.

As for the education part, I think that it is also very important. Coming up, you will be seeing some Facebook Live presentations by Dr. Russell and Dr. Ouellette, who spoke to the public on Tuesday, to help parents understand the safety and efficacy of the vaccine and the measures that they can take to help make it comfortable for their children. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister gave an update on the situation, and it is good to see that another thousand children have vaccination appointments. However, it must also be borne in mind that there are about 54 000 or 55 000 children in this age group who are eligible for the vaccine.

So, I think it would be important for the minister and the government to be more proactive in enabling credible experts in the field to explain everything to parents and convince them of the benefits of getting the vaccine. This explanation must be science-based. Could the minister tell us what the time lines are for the measures she and the government will be taking to ensure parents understand the benefits of the vaccine for their children?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am just proud to say that pretty much right at this moment, the first child will be receiving an

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inoculation and the vaccine. This is a really, really good day, as we see children get protection for themselves and for their families.

I could not agree more with the Leader of the Opposition when talking about bringing on experts. Right now, we have Dr. Russell, our Chief Medical Officer of Health, and Dr. Ouellette, a local pediatrician here in Fredericton, who will be speaking and offering advice. We will certainly have materials available on our website, and we will be doing everything that we can to make parents comfortable with the vaccine. We will have Q & A sessions.

Mr. Speaker, if the Leader of the Opposition were involved in the COVID-19 Cabinet committee, he would be privy to the rollout plan, which we will be bringing forth next week. Thank you.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I find it unfortunate that the minister referred to the COVID-19 committee, because this is the forum to make information available publicly. This is the forum where we are elected to speak on behalf of all our constituents and on behalf of all New Brunswickers. It is not privy to just the government or these people who are sitting in closed meetings where everything stays secret. I think it is important that we have this discussion.

Speaking of discussions, Christmas is about four weeks away. We all want to have a normal Christmas. Last year was brutal, to be honest. We all want to have our families and friends gather in our homes and in different homes—wherever Christmas dinner is being hosted. The minister mentioned yesterday that there could be new rules. There could be new rules to control this virus that is still going around. Can the minister give us any details about these new rules and when they will come in?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have asked Public Health to provide us with a road map for the coming month. As the minister said, we know that living with COVID-19 is a way of life. We are working every day with the health authorities to understand the situation in the hospitals. They report on the current status and their ability to manage what we have. The outbreak in Moncton was unfortunate, and we are analyzing it to see why it happened. Obviously, there are lots of infectious disease experts there who are watching it. We obviously need to make sure that people feel safe when going into these facilities.

I am hopeful that in the coming weeks—obviously, well before Christmas—we will receive recommendations from Public Health on how we manage through Christmas. Our goal, obviously, is that we do not want to cancel Christmas. We want to work through Christmas while living with COVID-19. We are going to need all the people to participate in doing the basics to protect themselves and their families—that is all that we ask, because the



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outbreaks that we are seeing are directly related to home gatherings—so that we all can be part of the next success.

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

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, Premier, for those comments.

I want to ask the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board to give us an update. We know that the Minister of Health tabled a document that tries to stabilize health care in New Brunswick. One of the key components missing in the plan is having more nurses and more health care professionals in the system, through either retaining them or recruiting them.

Now, there is a collective agreement with some 20 000 employees of government. There are still many different groups—I think, 16 groups—that still do not have a contract or a collective agreement. One of the key groups in the health care system is nurses. They rejected the second proposal on September 26. I want to ask the minister whether there are actual negotiations going on now to try to prevent a possible strike.

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite. Yes, we continue to negotiate, we continue to talk, and we continue to explore the wants, needs, and desires of the folks in the nursing profession. They are absolutely key to what is going on, especially now, but they have been key forever—forever. Right now, with the pandemic and with the number of cases and the number of people in hospitals going up, they are even more key.

We are looking at different options for them. It is not all about money. It is also about safety in the workplace. It is about shifts, about handling a shift, and about not having to work an eight-hour shift and then being asked to work another four hours after it. It is about not being called in on your day off. There are all sorts of things that we are working on, bargaining on, and talking about. Those are discussions that happen behind closed doors and that certainly will not happen here. I know that the member opposite understands that as well. We are working, we are talking, we are bargaining, and we are trying to get things wrapped up, absolutely.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you to the minister. When the minister says that talks are ongoing, I would like him to give us the exact dates, this morning, of the meetings he has had. I do not want him to talk about the content of those discussions. I want him to give us the exact dates of the meetings he has had since December 6, when the nurses voted against the last proposal. We are talking about the last

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two months. Give us, please, the exact dates of the meetings you have had with the New Brunswick Nurses' Union to try to resolve this situation.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you to the member opposite for the question, through you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, meeting dates were set up and meeting dates are ongoing. The information on the dates is not something that I would have here with me. That is bargaining. We will leave the bargaining to the folks who are doing it, and we certainly will not be doing it in this House.

Rest assured that if you are in the nursing profession, we value you, we need you, and we want to make things work. We need a stabilized life for you. We need safety on the floors for you. We need a number of things—a number of things that we will work on—and we will continue to talk in the bargaining room. It will not happen here, but it is happening. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Talk is cheap, by the way, minister. Talk is really cheap, certainly, from your government.

The reality is that wages may not be the only issue, but it is a big piece of trying to retain and recruit nurses in New Brunswick. At a minimum—at a minimum—can the minister tell us this: Since October 6, when they rejected your last proposal, how many negotiating sessions have there been? We are very concerned—very concerned—that we are going down a path to a strike, and nobody wants to have a strike in the health care system, for sure. Certainly, the nurses do not want it. How many times have there been negotiating sessions since October 6?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): To the member opposite through the Speaker, thank you very much for the question. There have been multiple meetings. Meetings continue to go on, as we value people. Do we want a strike? Absolutely not. Of course not, and it would be ridiculous to even suggest that.

We will work night and day to solve this situation. We will work for the safety of our nurses and for the safety of the people who work in the hospitals. We will work for shifts that are standardized. We will work for shifts that are not called in at the last minute on a day off. Too many times, we have heard of nurses saying that they are scared to answer the phone on their day off for fear that they will be called in for an extra shift. Do you know what? There are standardized practices that we need to put in place. We need to help them. We need to protect them, and we need to work together, with the nurses.

The meetings will happen when they happen. Do I have the list of meetings right now? No. There are multiple meetings on the go. There are multiple meetings on the go. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

BELLEDUNE GENERATING STATION

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, this morning, a letter was made public, and it said that the Premier has committed to end the use of coal by 2030. This is despite the fact that last week, at briefings, the minister's staff was still telling me that equivalency was the best bet, despite the fact that, last summer, employees at Belledune said that they were going to start operating at lowered production because they believed that equivalency was going to happen, and despite the fact that the CEO and his president—who were in my community, in a community hall—when asked about equivalency or alternatives, said this: We believe that common sense will prevail and that the federal government will go with equivalency. That is the best bet.

My question is to the minister. Minister, did you know about this strategy? Did you know about this letter when all of this was going on?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to address that question by talking about a member's statement given earlier. We sat here and listened to the member for Restigouche-Chaleur talk about the eventual death of Belledune. Do the people of that region deserve an MLA who is presupposing a negative outcome for an important region of the province? I do not think so. I do not think so at all.

Let's look at what happened when the smelter closed. Who was the first one on the scene? The Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, a Saint John MLA nonetheless, was there to ensure that the interests of the north were taken into consideration.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Add to that, the member spoke in the news about the conversion of Belledune to a natural gas facility when the truth of the matter is that he sat with a government that imposed a moratorium on the development of natural gas. The headshakers and the head-scratchers are unbelievable on that side.

I will tell you what. Thank you for the advice, but we are too busy working for immediate action and getting results to get distracted by detractors. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, \$5 billion—presumably, \$5 billion has something behind it. There is something behind those numbers. For over a year, we have been asking: What is the alternative? What are the projects for Belledune? And we

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have been told: There is not one. The only thing is equivalency, and we will do it somewhere else.

What are the projects? And to my Green friend, you know, we Liberals want solutions.

[*Translation*]

Idealist?

[*Original*]

We are not interested.

So what is behind the \$5 billion? Or are we just being used as a bargaining chip to get more billions of dollars so that the Minister of Finance can pretend that he can balance the books?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, when we evaluate the energy picture in the province, I would stand strongly behind the work that we have done over the past three years. We have recognized a couple of things—the challenges that are before us and the opportunities that are going to be presented as well. That is why we stepped forward and continued to work toward developing the SMR sector. That is why we are working in the next year to open up the embedded energy project again to see wind added to the total grid when it comes to how we put our power together. That is why we are continuing to work on the Atlantic Loop, absolutely. And that is why we are going to make sure that when the federal government is very clear about the direction in which it wants to see us go with emissions, we want it to be a partner that provides not only the direction to do so but also the resources to do it with. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Environment and Climate Change. We have been going back and forth for a year, and he has been saying that the equivalency agreement is a complicated document. There was a lot of work. It was complicated to prepare. Presumably, it was not sent in draft form, so I would ask him this: Are you willing to give us a copy of the final paperwork so that we can actually get some comfort in knowing that the work was done?

Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you for the question from across the way, Mr. Speaker. Regarding the plans for Belledune, new plans will be coming soon, as we see in the news. We do need clean, green energy renewables, as mentioned a minute ago by the minister, who is sitting below. There are ideas about solar, possibly wood chips, and maybe onshore or offshore wind, but we need to work with the businesses to make that happen. It is not for the government to take that on by itself.

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We will also make sure that training takes place in the area to retrain people for the jobs that may be coming. Belledune is a prosperous area, and we will certainly work ahead to create more employment there. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Premier. This situation with the Belledune plant is very serious. Obviously, coal is on its way out, and it should be on its way out. But the entire community of the North Shore is very dependent on these jobs. With 300 people—300 families—there is a huge economic impact. And, yes, there has to be diversification. On this side, my colleagues and I understand that.

But in asking for \$5 billion through a letter that the Premier signed, there must have been more thought around the content, around asking for this amount of money from the federal government. So, this morning, can the Premier tell us how much of that money, which would be in an Atlantic pool, would be for northern New Brunswick and for the Belledune area?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that the difference we have seen over the years is that we look at every project on the basis of its merit. In the case of Belledune, there have been numerous meetings held with the port CEO and with his staff in terms of what new development can exist there. We see an increase in wood pellets. We see an increase in chips. There are a lot of chips that go off to China and then back to Europe. That is going to create more wood pellet plants there. We see an increase now with Trevali, and its future looks brighter. We have also had recent discussions on other possible activities around ore and what that might mean in terms of clean energy development and generation.

But, Mr. Speaker, I think that the Liberals' philosophy is always coming at it from the other end. They ask how much money you have to spend regardless of what projects you have that make sense to spend it on. That is a very different philosophy. But I am convinced that there are projects in Belledune that are very worthy of our supporting them to get the job done—a meaningful job, not like other political discussions. It is about getting a meaningful job done that will last for generations.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier can always criticize or blame opposition members, but the reality is this: There is a history with this Premier. When he gets money from Ottawa, he runs to the bank to deposit it.

The Premier has no intention of helping people out or ensuring that the northern regions, including Belledune and the Chaleur and Restigouche regions—I am talking about this whole, beautiful part of the province—receive the financial support they need for what is to come when the Belledune Generating Station is no longer fueled by coal.

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When the Premier requested \$5 billion from the federal government for the Atlantic region, surely he had a budget envelope earmarked for this part of the province. At least, I hope he had done the right thing. Can the Premier tell us that this morning?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, we have an opportunity here. We are dealing with the federal government and with its having put restrictions on our... What we applied for was an extension to 2040, and the federal government denied that. We cannot have that. So we are now trying to find out this: How do we manage until 2030? How do we manage to create an economic development profile that actually makes sense for the long haul, for the future, and for the region and province combined? In terms of asking for \$5 billion, Nova Scotia is also asking for a settlement, as it will close four or maybe five coal plants in its province. So it is a comparison of how we move to a greener energy source and manage changes in the region as well.

There is a transition requirement, but to go back to the situation again, it is not just about saying that we will allocate this much money. It is also about saying that we will accomplish this much work and that we will get a result at the end of the day that will last for generations—not for as long as the taxpayer dollars fund it.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the Green Party's principles is that our democracy must be participatory and grassroots. That is why we have always maintained that all citizens should be part of a local government and that they must have meaningful opportunities to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. While the planned reform of local governance ensures that 92% of our population will soon be self-governing, 8% of citizens have been sent into a kind of purgatory, which is being called "rural districts".

My question for the Minister of Local Governance Reform is whether there is a way that they can get out of purgatory to form a rural community with the others who are stuck there with them or to even join with a nearby village. What do they need to do, minister?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On our side of the House, we have a lot of confidence in people who live in rural areas. Rural New Brunswickers are part of a New Brunswick tradition. They are proud to live in a rural area.



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Yes, 8% of the people in this province live in rural districts. For the first time in 50 years, they will have access to democracy. They will be able to vote for a rural councillor. The objective of this reform is indeed to make sure there is a municipal commission by 2024. People in rural areas will be able to go see this to determine whether they can establish or form rural communities.

So, in fact, the plan was established for the next four years. We want to give people living in rural areas a voice. That said, the objective is to bring democracy to rural areas. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Well, Mr. Speaker, they need a path out of purgatory right now.

As Greens, we are committed to community-based approaches to forestry and community approaches to land and water stewardship. We had hoped that the local governance reform would make environmental protection and ecologically sustainable resource use easier in rural New Brunswick, yet the vast majority of Crown lands and waters fall within the boundaries of these rural districts. The right thing to do would be to attach a land base to rural and First Nations communities. That is what Greens would do. Rural New Brunswickers want to know who was the Irving interest that prevented the minister from doing so, from providing them with a land base attached to their communities.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, we have a positive plan. So far, everyone who has read our plan and analyzed it agrees that we have to go forward. Our governance structure is over 60 years old. We want to make changes. What the member opposite does not realize is that there are vast tracts of New Brunswick that are, unfortunately, sparsely populated. That is the definition of living in a rural area.

There are rural areas in New Brunswick, and that is a good thing. We want to work with these people. We are going to give them some tools. For the first time in 60 years, they will be participating in democracy. We are going to have development plans. We are going to ensure that these councillors have their say in what happens in their area. Mr. Speaker, I am sure we will have positive results.

[Original]

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

[*Translation*]

BELLEDUNE GENERATING STATION

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If he would, the Premier should give us some more information about the Belledune situation.

We were told the provincial government had taken measures to extend the use of coal at the Belledune Generating Station for another decade. We hear that the Premier signed and sent a letter indicating that he agreed that the Belledune Generating Station would stop using coal in 2030.

So, it is important to note, Mr. Speaker, that, as has been mentioned, there have been public verbal discussions. However, it seems that things have been done that are contrary to what was stated. Can the Premier table and provide us with the documentation sent to the federal government about the request for a 10-year extension for the use of coal at the Belledune Generating Station?

[*Original*]

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): So, Mr. Speaker, we did ask the federal government for an extension for Belledune and an equivalency agreement that basically would see the same emissions but have them spread out over a longer time so that we could continue to run that plant until 2040. We did send a letter to that effect. It was denied. The federal government basically said that it did not agree with that. We are trying to find what we can do now because in 2030 we will have a problem. As with everything, we are looking out to the future and saying: What will be our fallback position to provide energy?

As the minister has said, we have about 80% green energy production, but there is that 20% that is certainly still on the fossil fuel program. So we will continue to find ways to provide clean energy and to try to find a new way to reach 2030, but that is where the \$5 billion came into play. Basically, it was, Okay, you are not going to allow us to extend this, so we need to find and to have a way to invest in clean energy solutions. At this point, that has not been approved.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, thank you. There is a track I have heard here that says that talk is cheap from this government and this Premier. He said that an official letter was sent to the federal government requesting an extension of 10 years. Can you please commit this morning to sending me a copy of that letter and the documentation so that we can really understand what was requested, on paper, of the federal government?

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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): The Leader of the Opposition may think that he has a revelation here, Mr. Speaker, but it really is not. In fact, it might be in the paper, so we could cut it out and send it to you or send it online. Nevertheless, yes, sure, you can have the letter. If you have any ability to have that decision reversed, we would appreciate your help. I am sure that is why you want it. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, members on the other side of the House can laugh all they want. This is a serious matter in northern New Brunswick. This is livelihood. This is livelihood. There are 300 families who are working and depending on this Belledune energy generator.

Now, I am not talking about the letter you signed agreeing to stop the coal operation of Belledune in 2030. I am asking for the letters or letter that was sent by you or your minister to the federal government requesting a 10-year extension.

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, let's not lose sight of the important subject matter here. We have been talking about the importance of the northern part of the province—the Belledune area. We have talked about what this government has done to step in when these people have seen issues in the past, and we will certainly make sure that we are there as they face challenges in the future.

But what the member of the opposition is not talking about here is how serious this actually is and what will happen in the absence of equivalency. We face a hard stop in 2030. It is not those of us here in the Legislature who face a hard stop. It is every ratepayer in New Brunswick. That is why we have been working so hard to achieve equivalency. That is why we will continue to work hard to find alternatives, and that is why it is important for the federal government not only to impose that but also to stand by us and provide us with the resources to do it so that we do not hold the ratepayers of New Brunswick hostage for something that they had nothing to do with.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, I think that the minister is screaming so hard this morning that somebody from Ottawa may have heard what he said.

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I think that this government, this minister, and this Premier are breathing too much air. We know what happens when they breathe air. I will stop there because I cannot say what it is in this House.

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Mr. Speaker, so far here this morning, it is very clear to me that there was never any official request in writing to the federal government to extend by 10 years the Belledune operation's use of coal.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, I want to see it. I do not believe what this government is saying. I want to see it on paper. I want to see it on paper because, with them, talk is cheap. Provide to us, Premier, the letter that you or your minister sent to Ottawa that asked to extend it by 10 years.

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that we could do a chronological series of events with the discussions that the Department of Environment and the Department of Energy have been having with Ottawa for probably a year or more—maybe two years—in relation to an extension for Belledune. So, Mr. Speaker, it has been a flat no. It has been this: I do not want to talk about it. It has been a flat no.

So whether our requests... The letter that we have sent now says \$5 billion. If you are trying to drive a nuance between our request now for \$5 billion or our request for an extension, there have been numerous requests for an extension through the departments to get there—numerous—that have resulted in the letter stating: All right. Pay us the compensation for losing it.

I am not sure what the point is or whether you think that there is relevance to your question. But, Mr. Speaker, the issue is clear. The federal government has said, No, there will be no extension for that plant in the community of Belledune even if the emissions are the same in an equivalency agreement. It said no. That is the issue, Mr. Speaker.

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