

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

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May 10, 2022

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GOVERNMENT AGENDA

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess the former leader already has the song to sing and the Kool-Aid to drink because he is certainly part of that government now, for sure.

Mr. Speaker, we have been away from the Legislative Assembly for too long. We have been watching from outside this Legislature what is going on in this province. We certainly have seen many different crises either brewing or having been accelerated under this leadership and this Premier. We see a health crisis, we see an affordable housing crisis, and we see a crisis in rents, which are out of control. We have seen a labour relations crisis, we have seen a crisis with First Nations, and we are seeing the cost of living going up in record amounts. But as we are seeing different crises in our society, this Premier is happy that he has accumulated a surplus of over \$1 billion. Premier, when are you going to start investing in people so that we can stop these crises?

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, this is interesting. You know, some people cannot see for looking. Our province has never ever been in a position such as it is today. It has never been growing in population as it is today. It has never been growing with employment opportunities as it is today. The province has never been growing as it is today, with people coming here for the first time—we have the highest rate in 45 years.

But do you know what? It brings challenges. It brings challenges in terms of the inflation, but let's think about how the inflation all came about. It came about from federal policies that basically shut down an industry and shut down our national security in terms of energy, and that all flows out into higher costs. There are a lot of things with which New Brunswick is on the move, and there are a lot of challenges created by that. And there are a lot of things on which the members opposite should look to the federal government and say: Why are you destroying the economy in our country?

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we are all sick and tired of what the Premier is saying. We are all sick and tired because he keeps blaming others all the time.

Take your responsibilities, Premier. Take your responsibilities and look at all the different crises that you have created with your government. Go visit the hospitals. Your minister

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went. She realized that it was her problem, and then she blamed the health authorities for the problem. She is also blaming others.

Do you live in this province, Premier? Do you understand what is going on in New Brunswick? We have significant problems in our health care system. We have been trying to tell you that through question period and through our work in the Legislature. Unions and stakeholders are trying to tell you, Premier, to invest in health care, but you are choosing not to do so. If you do, it is peanuts. If there is any money coming in, it is so difficult to get that people cannot get it.

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Oh my goodness, Mr. Speaker. Either somebody is hangry or COVID-19 is escalating that anger.

It is the largest—largest—increase to health care since 2008, I think. We know—I know—the situation in our hospitals, and there are a tremendous number of people working to solve these problems, because they did not happen overnight. The 800-plus nurses that we do not have today happened under the watch of those members. It is always an accumulated problem, and it will be an evolution to get to the fix. If the members opposite have an immediate fix, I am all ears and I would be happy to have those meetings on any day of the week. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): No, Mr. Speaker, it is not about being mad. It is about trying to get in their minds and their heads and trying to make them understand the serious matters that New Brunswickers and our health care system are facing right now. There is a serious crisis right now, and this government does not care to try to address the situation.

Last November, the minister announced *Stabilizing Health Care: An Urgent Call to Action*. Then she added that there will be no closures or reduced hours of service. Hello—have you been living in New Brunswick over the last six months? Services are reduced, ERs are closed overnight, and there is a lack of nurses. We need more nurses and LPNs. Stop blaming others. Invest in health care, please.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Again, Mr. Speaker, I would be happy to listen to the suggestions of the member opposite as to how he thinks those investments need to happen. There is a human resource shortage globally and, certainly, in our country. We have not put temporary closures in place for any other reason than the safety of our human resources—our nurses and our doctors—and, most importantly, our patients. And until we get the recruitment issue solved... I do not see it being permanently solved for a long time. We have numbers that indicate a human resource shortage all across this country, and we take it very seriously. We are working.

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You know, the members opposite said: The minister is doing this herself. Well, they know that this is not accurate. They know that this is a partnership with our regional health authorities, with EM/ANB, and with all our associations. We work together, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, if the minister is so sure she is doing the right things, why is she making the health networks responsible or blaming them for trying to resolve the situation? The problem is that the government is not investing enough in health care in New Brunswick. We see how long paramedics have to keep patients in the ambulance until they can transfer them to the emergency room.

The offload delay has risen by 61% at the Moncton Hospital, by 76% at Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont University Hospital Centre, by 76% at Dr. Everett Chalmers Hospital in Fredericton, by 56% at the Saint John Regional Hospital, and by 40% at Hôpital Stella-Marie-de-Kent. These patients are in ambulances. They cannot be transferred to a hospital, to the emergency room, quickly enough, because there is a human resource shortage. There are not enough nurses. Madam Minister, take responsibility. Resolve this situation.

[*Original*]

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I do not believe that I have ever not owned my responsibilities. And I think that it is very important to note that we have been putting in strategies from day one and, most importantly, though, since the health plan has been tabled.

We have worked with pre-alert with Ambulance New Brunswick. I believe that if the members opposite were to check with Ambulance New Brunswick and the Paramedic Association, they would think that pre-alert is doing pretty good work and that it is a really good step in the evolution of the care that we need to bring to the people in our community. So when paramedics go to a call, if they are able to treat and release, then they are going to be able to do that. That saves a call to the ER.

I absolutely understand the importance of offload delays. I went to the Moncton hospitals a week or a week and a half ago to see it for myself. I spoke with paramedics who were doing one call in a 12-hour shift. Mr. Speaker, this is urgent. I understand that it is urgent, and our CEOs are there to support and help the health care system. I am counting on them.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Madam Minister, stop blaming the CEOs. Give them all the tools that they need to resolve the issue. With an increase of 61% in

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the time required to offload patients from ambulances at the Moncton Hospital over the past year, with an increase of 76% at the Dumont hospital, with an increase of 76% at the DECH here in Fredericton, with an increase of 56% at the Saint John Regional Hospital, and with an increase of 40% at Stella-Maris, obviously, you are not providing the right tools for them to resolve the issue.

Last summer, you said that it was going to be a difficult summer. But it has been over a year, and the problem is getting worse and worse and worse. And the issue is not about paramedics. The issue is that there are not enough health care providers in the hospital system—nurses, LPNs. Do you not get it? Please—and I am being polite—please invest in nursing and health care providers.

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Well, again, Mr. Speaker, in what way? We have incentives to recruit nurses. We are working on a nursing strategy with my colleague the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour. We have done some tremendous work that will pay off. We have increased the internationally educated nurses in our province by so much more than ever before. You know, we did single-digit numbers only two years ago, and now, we have 80 and another 150 in the queue. These are changes that are instrumental.

We do need to work with our frontline workers because they know some of these solutions. They have worked very, very hard. With this being Nurses Week, I want to acknowledge that, that our nurses are frontline.

We have seen many other provinces go through what we are going through. We are trying to learn from them. We are trying to avoid the future that they are experiencing even now. We are going to do it together. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, if their strategy and their lack of investment are working, I will give you another couple of examples where it is not working. The government established a standard, a goal, such that people who wanted to have either a knee replacement surgery or a hip replacement surgery could get access within six months. For knees, the goal was that 75% of all people wanting to have access to knee surgery would have it within six months. The result is that 45% got access to knee surgery—only 45%. For hips, it is the same thing. In six months, the goal was 85%. The reality is that only 46% got access to a hip replacement. In school, with 45% and 46%, we would be failing. This government is failing miserably because the Premier is fixated on having huge surpluses and bringing down the debt even as we have major crises in our health care system. He does not care about health care and the people of New Brunswick.

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

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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): You know, here is another news flash, Mr. Speaker, for the Leader of the Opposition. We not only have unprecedented spending in departments—particularly in Health, as the minister pointed out, unprecedented since 2008—but we are also dealing with specific issues and targets that are going to make a difference in how we deliver health care in this province. Working together with Vitalité and Horizon, we are able to focus together and complement each other in the delivery of health services no matter where they are in this province. Yes, hip and knee surgeries got a bit behind during COVID-19, but the situation is better than it has been for three or four years. So, right now, we see that we have momentum.

Just as a news flash, Mr. Speaker, we barely have a surplus this year because we took the money that we saved from their largesse in past years and put it into the system. It is out there right now, working for every New Brunswicker, and that is without new taxes, which would have been the plan from that group.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I guess the Premier just said that we barely had a surplus. This is news. I think that he is trying to divert what we are discussing here. We did not receive the audited financial statements yet, not that I have seen, anyway. Maybe he could elaborate on that.

The fact of the matter is that there are 1 300 nursing positions that are vacant. Over the next five years, through retirements, there are going to be another 3 200 or 3 300. That is about 4 600 nurses that will be needed in New Brunswick through either existing vacancies or retirements. Good, they recruited 80 nurses from the international market. Good. Good, we will take those 80. We need those 80. With the plan that they announced for universities, if the universities can get their money, it is going to take 12.5 years to fix the problem of the nursing shortage. Do you think that is realistic and the right thing to do, to take 12.5 years? Please explain that to me, Mr. Premier.

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): You know, I listened to the member opposite a few minutes ago saying that there are crises brewing. Well, there is the brewmaster sitting right there, Mr. Speaker. You know, when they took office, there were 1 147 nurses enrolled in the system. By the time they left, that had dropped to 888. That is 259 fewer each and every year. Over the course of their mandate, that is 778 nurses that did not get to go through the system. And they are talking about what we have not done?

We have an international recruitment strategy. We have a strategy to enroll more students in the nursing programs, to get the enrollment up to a baseline with additional seats on top of that. On top of that, we have a bridging program that is churning out all kinds of graduates in a two-year period as opposed to four years.

Mr. Speaker, my wife asked me why I keep doing this after 23 years. There are 16 reasons sitting over there.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the member from Quispamsis has been in this Legislature for about 12 years. Over those 12 years, he was Finance Minister for 4 years and he has spent 3 years—too long—as Premier. He has had 7 out of the 12 years in the most senior positions in government to try to resolve some of these issues and avoid some of these crises.

There is a columnist in one of the daily newspapers who said last week that if the Premier cannot fix health care, he should retire. Well, health care is not being fixed, clearly, when you look at all the statistics. Government can blabber on about what it is trying to do, but by all the results and statistics, health care is in crisis. Premier, when are you going to retire?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I guess only I can answer that question, and it is not an answer that I am going to give here in the Legislature, in case anybody is thinking of that.

Mr. Speaker, we have a lot of challenges in our province. That is right, but we have a province that is on the move, as I have talked about. We have an opportunity in health care. We saw it during COVID-19. We saw it when we had a group that was overseeing our entire health network, and it was working together. That was before the Leader of the Opposition quit. Rather, it was during the time the Leader of the Opposition was there and before he quit. By the way, it was also before the Leader of the Green Party quit.

Mr. Speaker, we did not walk out on health care, but they did. They walked out on health care. We are here to work with the professionals across this province to fix it. That means fixing it in both English and French. We have two great networks that are working to deliver the best health care. It does not matter where it is being delivered; it just matters that it is being delivered. That is our goal. Members opposite will see it, but I am sure that they will be moaning about it, because they would not recognize success if it hit them in the face.

[Translation]

PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, Bill 90, *An Act to Amend the Prescription and Catastrophic Drug Insurance Act*, will mean that New Brunswickers will be paying more for prescription drugs. These are drugs they need to stay healthy. In some cases, they are drugs that could mean the difference between life and death. How can the Minister of Health be so insensitive, endangering people's lives so that the Minister of Finance and the Premier can increase their record surplus?

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Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I sat through estimates, and I accepted questions from the member opposite. They were good questions. But I also sat through his mansplaining business plans to me. I thought it was interesting because he explained what a business plan is. So I just want to kind of mansplain back that if you do not do this work ahead of time, you actually leave problems for people to bear later in a very burdensome way.

This bill is about being accountable each and every year and having evaluations done so that things are always fair to New Brunswickers. We are going to increase the categories so that you do not jump with big numbers when you go from one level of income to another. Mr. Speaker, we are doing what is best for New Brunswickers. It is a job that was left undone.

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, more people are struggling financially and living paycheque to paycheque. They are seeing skyrocketing rents, huge increases in gas and home-heating fuels, rapidly rising inflation, and wages that are not keeping pace with rising costs. How can the minister justify adding to their financial burden through this mean-spirited legislation?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): I will take this on behalf of Finance, Mr. Speaker. Do you know what? We are doing everything we can to make New Brunswickers' lives better. We have done it over the last four years, and we continue to do it in this mandate.

We invested in education. We invested in social development and social development reform. We invested in health care with the largest increase since 2008. We reduced provincial property tax rates, and that is going to help the people that the member is talking about. We increased the basic personal amount for the low-income tax reduction threshold. That is going to help the New Brunswick people that the member is talking about. We increased the minimum wage. We reformed social assistance. We brought about rent relief. Do you know what? That is going to help the people of New Brunswick. That is what this government is about. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

RENTS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, I am hearing from tenants around the province that landlords are getting around the rent cap bill. One elderly couple in my riding was given notice of an unaffordable rent increase just before the bill was brought to first reading. Well, that was withdrawn, and then the couple was issued a new notice of an unaffordable increase to take effect after the rent cap is supposed to lapse at the end of the year.

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Others are being renovicted since the rent cap does not apply to the building's units, but to current tenants, so property owners looking to cash in on the increasing market rents today, in the face of the rent cap, are evicting tenants under the guise of major renovations. Even the New Brunswick Apartment Owners Association called out a rental property owner in Bathurst for what it labeled as a predatory rental strategy. Clearly, the rent cap bill, as drafted, will not achieve its goal of protecting tenants from unaffordable rent increases. Will the Minister of Service New Brunswick amend her bill to close those serious loopholes?

Hon. Mary Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you for this very important question, which, certainly, I was anticipating today and hoping that you would bring up.

As MLAs in New Brunswick, we are all concerned about our constituents and the 38 000-plus units that are rental properties in the province. I can guarantee you right here today that the small percentage of landlords who are trying to find loopholes to circumvent this system are not going to be successful.

With respect to the upcoming legislation that we are putting through, are you aware that there are going to be only four reasons a landlord can terminate an agreement? They are: (1) if a relative to the landlord will occupy the unit, (2) if extensive renovations will be done that will warrant an empty unit, (3) if an employment contract related to the maintenance or management of the unit has ended, and (4) if the unit will be converted for nonresidential reasons. Other than that...

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

HOUSING

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, it was Frank McKenna who ended New Brunswick Housing's role as a vital and effective Crown corporation. Before that, it had successfully carried out its legislated mandate to ensure that there was an adequate supply of affordable housing for New Brunswickers during the last affordable housing crisis. It was Bernard Lord who ended the government's role in presuming any kind of housing policy altogether, more than 20 years ago.

Today, I understand that the Treasury Board is developing recommendations for how this government can reestablish some kind of proactive role in housing policy and programming in this province beyond social housing and subsidies at the Department of Social Development. Can the Premier tell the House what options are under consideration? Will he restore New Brunswick Housing as a fully operational Crown corporation? Thank you.

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Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to take a moment to thank the people in the housing department in the Department of Social Development. We have over 300 people working very, very hard and very diligently to make sure that the housing units are up to snuff, to make sure that the repairs are done, and to make sure that they are dealing with some of the nonprofits, some of the private landowners, and some of the private developers to make sure that there are options for people out there who need housing.

Additional bureaucracy is not going to add to the issue here. That is why, this year, we moved to have one of the largest budgets in housing in the history of the province—\$120 million. Over the past two years, that budget has increased by over 20%. We actually exceeded the number of new units that we are putting into the market for affordable housing in New Brunswick, and the next section is going to double that as well.

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, I am going to continue on the topic of affordable housing. We know that housing prices and rents are rising faster in New Brunswick than anywhere else in Canada, and we know that there are 7 400 households currently on the subsidized housing wait-list. But this government's nonsolution to this crisis is to put a temporary 3.8% rent cap in place and to phase in a 50% reduction to the so-called double tax. As a result, we have been left in chaos. Tenants and landlords have been left in chaos on how to apply these new provisions. We know that rents have increased by almost 9% this past year and that vacancies are at record lows all across this province.

I want to hear again from the Minister of Service New Brunswick, who has brought forward Bill 96, *An Act to Amend the Residential Tenancies Act*, on whether she truly believes that this bill will address the affordable housing crisis that we are facing.

Hon. Mary Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you again for the question. There are very important concerns for tenants here in the province. These are absolutely unprecedented and confusing times for our tenants here in the province. I encourage tenants to please reach out to us, especially if they have received a termination notice. The tenants can call us. We all know the toll-free number now.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mary Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): It is 1 888 762-8600. They can email us at <irent@snb.ca>. They can go to any Service New Brunswick location in New Brunswick. They can send a relative on their behalf, or they can send a friend on their behalf. If they cannot go, you can help them and we can help them to get their answers. We want to be



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very clear that we are accessible. We are here to represent tenants and landlords as well with the questions that they have for us. The upcoming legislation, yes, is another form of protection over and above what we already did in December. If we need to do more, we will.

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, I heard our friend from Fredericton South talk about the loopholes. We do need to have this government amend the legislation to address those loopholes, but we also need to have more action from this government. We know that there are skyrocketing assessments, but apartment owners have no spike protections like those we see for homeowners. Really, it is a catch-22. On one hand, if we maintain the rent cap, we will see new units enter the market at a high rate, but if we do not have it, then we are going to see the continued exploitation of apartment owners increasing rent.

It really is a catch-22. We need to see spike protection for apartment owners. We need to see a plan to address the whole housing crisis that we are seeing. There is a shortage of construction workers. There is a shortage of the housing needed to bring new employees to regions that need those employees—regions that have jobs. Is this government ready to step up and bring in an action plan for housing to address the issue?

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that this government has certainly proven that we will step up. These are unique times. We are experiencing things that we have never experienced in the past in this province. I understand that. In reflecting on that and looking at assessments, we looked at reducing the double tax to take that burden off the landlords but also to let that move on to the tenants. The increasing costs have been higher than any of us would have anticipated.

Is there a possibility of looking at the other aspect? Obviously, we have met with the same group as the opposition has with respect to spike protection. But we put that in place for residents many years ago in order to allow people and seniors to stay in their homes at a time just like this, when assessments were going through the roof. We were thinking ahead then. Did we know that it was going to explode as it has done today? No, we did not, but we were thinking about the future of seniors living in a home where the prices were going up all around them. We will work with businesses because, right now, we are seeing unprecedented construction. I was visiting with a group from Moncton, where there are 5 000 new units and they are building another 2 100. We need to have that happen all over the province.



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HEALTH CARE

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, health care is the service that New Brunswickers need the most, certainly in a province where the population is aging faster, proportionately, than it is in other provinces. We know that over the next few years, there is going to be even more need for health care services. We do know that there are crises right now. We need more nurses, we need more LPNs, and we certainly need more physicians. People are looking for the quality of services that they not only deserve but also have actually paid for.

The Premier will not tell us when he is going to retire, but before you retire, Premier—before you retire—instead of having a \$1-billion surplus that you have accumulated and given to the bankers in New York, why do you not consider taking a portion of that to help our health care services hire more nurses and stop the crisis in health care?

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, we have invested largely in health. If the member opposite can tell us a concrete way that we could take more money and invest it and magically produce more nurses and more doctors, I would be happy to listen to him.

Mr. Speaker, we tabled a health care plan. Ours is the first government ever to table a health care plan that begins and ends in its mandate, so we will be accountable for the outcomes of this health care plan. I have no reservation about saying that I will be held accountable for this health care plan. That is why we have the team that we have, our CEOs of Horizon and Vitalité and EM/ANB. We have the task force that is going to help us implement our changes. We have our associations with whom we are partnering in order to deliver higher recruitment numbers. Mr. Speaker, we are all in it together.

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