

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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[Original]

COST OF LIVING

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we have spent many hours in the Legislature over the last few weeks discussing, debating, and offering constructive ideas on how to deal with the increase in the cost of living. Last week, the government announced a very limited but important program for the people who have the most challenges, based on their income levels.

I have to tell you where I was over the last few days. I was in the Miramichi knocking on doors—I would have liked to see the Premier there also—and going into people's homes and listening to their concerns and their struggles. I have to tell you, Mr. Speaker, a lot of people, not only in the Miramichi but also all over New Brunswick, are struggling to try to put food on their tables and pay for their gasoline. Premier, what are you telling them, because they do not have any help from you?

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, as the Leader of the Opposition acknowledged, we did roll out a program—a targeted program—to deal with those individuals who would be hit the hardest by these inflationary costs. I have also been in the Miramichi, and I have spoken to people in different communities about what we are faced with and what the solutions are. They are not short-term solutions, as I have said quite often to the Leader of the Opposition.

We have a national issue in relation to energy. We have opportunities here in New Brunswick to mitigate those impacts not only on our citizens but also on people worldwide. I have made those comments regularly. It is not only in terms of the energy solution. We also have numerous jobs in our province that are available for people, and we want people to be able to afford to go and be part of our job market. So as we work toward changes in our energy policy, working with the federal government in how we develop energy resources here that will have a positive reduction in price, that is the goal—a long-term solution for our residents, Mr. Speaker.

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

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we sat down with people in their residences or in their homes, mainly in the Neguac and Baie-Sainte-Anne areas, where my colleagues and I went door to door to see people throughout the two ridings where campaigning is taking place for the by-elections.

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When we sit down and listen to people, they explain their issues and their difficulties to us. When they hear the Premier trying to explain all the global conditions affecting the price of gas at the pump, they do not understand what the Premier is telling us at all. For them, what matters is what they are paying for gas. The price of gas at the pump went from \$2.08 to \$2.12 per litre. People who want to go to work have to pay far too much every day. They have an incredibly hard time putting food on the table. Mr. Premier, give these people some hope.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, that is exactly what we are trying to do here through this process—give people hope that there are better days ahead for the cost structures that we are facing. We are actually looking beyond today to next week, next month, and next year because, otherwise, what they could look forward to was just increased taxes. So as we look at how to mitigate all of this, it is about asking: Okay, what do we do through these spikes right now and through these inflationary periods, which we have had before?

I mean, the opposition members should know as well that we cannot chase energy prices. We cannot track that. It is a commodity in the world. But we could make ourselves a whole lot more competitive. They also know that anything that we change here in our current revenue structure means asking what we will do with the budget that we have put forward for health care and social assistance and education. There is record spending in areas. There is record spending in Social Development in order not only to give people a chance to earn more money but also to help those people who are unable to earn more money. So, Mr. Speaker, we have put together a program to help people get through this, and we will continue to put programs through to help people.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the people in Miramichi right now do not care whether you can chase the pricing of these commodities. Do you know what they care about? Do you know what they clearly understand? You have control over the provincial gasoline tax, and you could decide—again, today, without asking anyone—to reduce the price at the pump by 10.87¢ right now, tonight at midnight. That would have an immediate, positive impact on them. They would be able to put gasoline in their vehicles and put more money in their pockets so that they could buy groceries. That is what people have been telling me in their homes over the past few days. Premier, maybe you should go door knocking and listen to these people. People are struggling, Premier, and you should know this. If you do not, we are going to keep reminding you. Are you going to help them?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think the reality is that we are helping people throughout this province. And we have done it today not only in the sense of the changes we have made to put additional revenue into the areas that need it the most and to put money into people's



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pockets to help them in the grocery stores and where they are being hit hard but also in relation to housing by changing taxation levels so that we can get more houses built and deal with the housing crisis.

In the cases I have mentioned about what our budget already was addressing, we did not wait for a crisis to put this in our budget. We did not have the largest spending in the history of our province in critical areas because of the current inflationary needs—we could not project that. But we did have a budget in advance of all of this. We needed to help people because they needed it. That is the way that we are looking at everything, Mr. Speaker, and that continues to be the way that we look at everything.

Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition knows that prices could go up by 10¢ tomorrow, down by 13¢ the next day, and down by 10¢ the next. We do not know where that is going to go. But what he, having been the Finance and Treasury Board Minister in the past, also knows is that we are actually in a situation where that revenue is going right out into people's homes.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I will tell you what I know, Premier, through you, Mr. Speaker. When you sit down in the homes of hardworking New Brunswickers, which I do not believe you have done lately, Premier, you sit down with them and you listen to what they have to tell you.

Clearly, what the government announced last week is not going to help a vast majority of working New Brunswickers who need to go to work every day and who are paying so much more—too much—at the pump. We need to give them a bit of help and to increase their buying power so that they can buy groceries for their families and be able to go to work every day as normally as possible. That is what people are telling me when I go door knocking and when I sit down in their living rooms or kitchens. Premier, please announce some help for these working New Brunswickers.

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

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member across the way. Do you know what? If opposition members were so interested in helping New Brunswickers, why did they not vote for our budget? Why did they not vote for our budget, which included reforms for social development and which included, over the next five years, \$500 million—half a billion dollars—in early education centres? Why did they not vote for that? Why did they not vote for the biggest increases ever, I think it was, in health care? Why did they not vote for that, Mr. Speaker?

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Why did they not vote for property tax cuts? Why did they not vote for those? Rent caps, the food and fuel program, the spike protection that we just announced on Friday... Why were they so negative against the spike protection, helping people throughout New Brunswick and lowering prices so that they could pass on some of those savings to New Brunswickers? If they are so interested in helping New Brunswickers, why did they not put their vote behind themselves for our legislation, which is helping New Brunswickers?

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, the Finance Minister had a few good talking points, but at the end, I think he was spinning his wheels. He could not spit it out. Premier, maybe you should get his talking points because I think that he probably did a better job than you, to be honest. I think he did a better job than you.

This is not about us, by the way. This is not at all about us on this side of the House—not at all. If you want to make it about you, that is fine. It is about struggling New Brunswickers, Mr. Speaker, who are not in this Legislature but who are expecting us to speak on their behalf and to work on their behalf. That is what people are telling us at their doors and when we go and sit down in their kitchens or living rooms and talk about their struggles.

Mr. Speaker, to the Premier, get rid of your talking points. Go listen to New Brunswickers, and they will tell you that they are struggling. They are paying too much at the pump. Are you going to help them? Please, say yes.

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, thank you to the member opposite. You are right. I was a little tongue-tied because I am excited about what this government is doing for New Brunswickers.

I am excited about the fact that the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour has helped us to raise the minimum wage by a dollar this past April and by another dollar in October. The minimum wage is going up to \$13.75. Thank you, minister, through you, Mr. Speaker, of course.

We can continue. How about carbon tax recycling? If you are on natural gas, you are getting some of that carbon tax recycled back to you to help you. It is helping New Brunswickers. That is what we do as the Progressive Conservative Party. We help New Brunswickers.

I have to go back to the spike protection because it is new, and I want to make sure that everybody understands how great it is. Our government has heard from individuals. We have heard from the business community that there is a need to address the high tax burden—absolutely. The last government put us in terrible shape with taxes. The Gallant government never, ever saw a tax that it did not like. So we are...

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

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Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for asking the minister to sit down, in a way.

Mr. Speaker, when you listen to these Cabinet ministers and government officials, you would think that everything is going right, that there are no struggles, that New Brunswickers go to work every day and are so happy about paying \$2.12 per litre, and that they go to the grocery store and just fill up their fridges and it is not expensive. Everything is going well based on what you hear from these ministers and the Premier. But do you know what? The Premier did not do it yet, but I hope that he will. Go sit down. Go knock on doors. Go talk to New Brunswickers in the Miramichi, certainly, but also everywhere else in the province. They will tell you that what you are saying here today is not true. It is not helping New Brunswickers. They need help. Are you going to get up and say that you are going to help them because they...

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, this could go on and on. I think that it went on last week, and it is back on this week, only it has an election twist. The idea that we have all these things that have been happening in our province... We have, in our province, unprecedented growth, which maybe the Leader of the Opposition is not aware of. We have population growth that is the best that it has been in 45 years. Maybe the Opposition Leader is not aware of that. He is not aware of all the investments in private-sector businesses in our province. He is not aware of that. We have had record delivery of exports around the country and around the world. He may not be aware of that either.

So, Mr. Speaker, there are a lot of things that he could argue about, but there are a lot of things that he could talk about in a positive way. He could support a budget that was unprecedented, as the Minister of Finance just alluded to. We do have high energy costs. If we want to do something about them, then let's be unanimous in dealing with the federal policies that will see this continue, that will not be short-winded but will continue. This is what the federal government wants, Mr. Speaker.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): The Premier was listening to the Finance Minister, and it really got him going. I guess that you can thank the Minister of Finance, Mr. Premier.

You know, Mr. Speaker, on November 14, the Minister of Health announced a task force—a task force with cochairs, Mr. Richard and Ms. Johnston—to supposedly do the implementation of the strategy that she announced. When you look at it, there really is not much to it, but she announced the task force. I noticed that in the announcement of the task force, one key element was certainly collaboration, which she talked about, but one of the

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most important things was that this would be a task force independent of government. The government has muzzled these two cochairs. We do not hear from them. It has been seven months. We want to hear from the minister, at a minimum. What have the members of the task force been doing? How are they helping to improve health care? You have muzzled them, and we cannot hear from them.

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, there is that negative tone from the opposition again. You know, the task force was put in place to oversee the implementation of the health plan. It has been extremely active, not only in consulting with our communities but also in working with the department on a weekly basis to ensure that the systems that are moving the health plan forward are in place.

Mr. Speaker, there is no silencing. This is a task force that meets with the Premier and me on a weekly basis to give us an update on the happenings and on the work that is being done. Their job is to help us ensure that movement is progressing on the health plan. Movement is progressing on the health plan. I am grateful for their participation. Mr. Speaker, the member of the opposition is just spewing negativity, and I hope that in the very near future, he will see the validity of what we are doing. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister or the government members can try to create all kinds of narratives regarding what we bring forward on this side of the House. The reality is that we are listening to New Brunswickers. We are talking about the New Brunswick reality and about what is happening in different communities.

When the minister announced the creation of a task force, one of the things that was mentioned was that the two cochairs would be making recommendations to the Minister of Health. However, she has just revealed to us that she and the Premier meet with the two cochairs on a weekly basis.

The task force was established seven months ago, but we have received no updates. A press release from a civil servant said that the cochairs would not speak to the media. Could the minister at least explain to us what discussions take place each week about improving the health care system?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health, the Premier of the province, and every single member of Cabinet is

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responsible to be answerable to the public, and that is what we are doing. The task force most certainly can bring forward recommendations, but it is working with the department on a weekly basis where those discussions happen. We are working with Extra-Mural/ANB, Vitalité, Horizon, and the department, all to move the health plan in a very progressive way. We were the first government ever to table a health plan that begins and finishes within its mandate.

Mr. Speaker, we will be accountable.

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we recall that, in the plan announced by the minister to—apparently—improve health care in New Brunswick, there was no mention of the need for human resources or health professionals. The minister talked about technologies that were supposed to improve the situation. We know that there are problematic issues with the technologies that have been proposed or brought forward.

I am asking the minister today . . . She often tells us that her government works very, very hard to recruit and retain human resources in the health sector. My question for the minister is this: How many vacant licensed practical nurse positions are there in New Brunswick today? How many vacant registered nurse positions are there in New Brunswick?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, like every other province in this country, we have vacant nursing positions, and they go into the three-digit numbers. There is absolutely nothing that says this government is not prioritizing recruitment and retention. It is ongoing work that not only does not need to be in the health plan... It needs to be a daily conversation, which it is. We are working with our associations and with our partners in Vitalité, Horizon, and EM/ANB to ensure that we are providing not only proper incentives but also proper educational opportunities and return to service agreements for many of those recruitment incentives. We are going to continue that because there is no way to stop this. Every province needs to do this.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I would also ask this of the Minister of Health because she is supposed to be working very hard to retain and recruit: How many social worker positions are vacant in New Brunswick? How many laboratory technologist positions are vacant in New Brunswick? How many patient care attendant positions are vacant in New Brunswick? How many psychologist positions are vacant in the New Brunswick public sector? How many occupational therapist positions are vacant in the system in New Brunswick? How many oncologist positions are vacant in New

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Brunswick? How many pharmacist and psychiatric positions are vacant in the public sector?

Minister, you are supposed to be working hard. You must know the number of vacant positions in all these professions. Supposedly, you have been telling us that you know what you are doing and that you are working hard. We need to see numbers. We need to know whether you actually understand how many vacant positions we have in all these health care professions. Can you answer that, please?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is obvious where the Leader of the Opposition is going. If he wants numbers, I will get him all the numbers he so desires. We are actually going to be putting up dashboards on our website so that people can understand the vacancies that are available.

And, yes, do you know what? One of the things that I believe is important is that communities—rural communities, in particular—need to understand that hospitals are a major employer. We need high school graduates to understand that they have the potential to work in health care in their communities. That is one of the most pivotal parts, which we can do, to promote fulfilling every single vacancy that we have in our health care system.

But, Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition knows that this is Canada-wide, this is North America-wide, and this is global. The number of health care professionals and those who work in the medical communities is lacking, and we need to get our numbers up. But, Mr. Speaker, these are challenges that we, along with every other province in this country, accept.

NEW BRUNSWICK MUSEUM

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, this morning a Royal Caribbean cruise ship pulled up to Port Saint John and planted 3 500 passengers, the first of many to come. Many of those people will be eager to learn about our peoples, our cultures, our social history, and our natural history. Those looking to visit our provincial museum to learn something will find it difficult because it has ceased to exist as a public museum, as many of our schoolteachers found out when they tried to book class trips.

The Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture has had the museum packed into boxes and stored away. I say “the minister”, Mr. Speaker, because she seems to have taken over the governance role from the museum board and chair. That is a violation of the *New Brunswick Museum Act*. Can the minister explain why she is trying to run the New Brunswick Museum in place of its board of directors?

Hon. Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, Minister responsible for Women’s Equality, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about the New Brunswick Museum. The New



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Brunswick Museum is a gem, and within the four walls of that building the stories of New Brunswickers throughout history are shared.

There is no question that there was a need for renovation at the New Brunswick Museum. And so, Mr. Speaker, absolutely, we are looking at a new permanent location in Saint John. This is a commitment that our Premier made in the state of the province address. We will absolutely be rejuvenating a museum in Saint John. We are very proud of the work that is being done, and we are very excited about what the future holds. Thank you.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, two years ago, the New Brunswick Museum board made the wise decision to hire Bernie Riordon to take on the role of CEO of the New Brunswick Museum after he had served many years as the CEO of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and, more recently, had served as the CEO of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. You could not find a better person to deliver a nationwide capital fundraising campaign and develop a new path forward for our province's museum, yet seven months after he was hired, he was terminated. Mr. Speaker, he was offered money to sign a nondisclosure agreement, and he refused. Why did the Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture want to gag the CEO of the New Brunswick Museum?

Hon. Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, Minister responsible for Women's Equality, PC): Thank you so very much, Mr. Speaker. The member opposite spoke to the hiring of the person whom he mentioned, and that was a decision of the board of directors. That hiring is absolutely not a jurisdiction that I have, over that hiring or what happened in terms of that HR decision that the board made.

But I will just reiterate that there is a lot of work—steady, hard, exciting work—that is happening to secure the right location with a modern approach that I think all New Brunswickers will be incredibly excited about. Hopefully, we will have some news to share very soon. Thank you.

[Translation]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, we are going to help the Minister of Health a bit. Last February, there were at least 1 000 vacant positions for registered nurses and 360 vacant positions for nurse practitioners in New Brunswick. This shortage is causing departments to close throughout the province.

Yet, in July 2019, with great fanfare, the former Minister of Health announced a nursing recruitment strategy that would only require 130 new nurses per year. Since 2019, the Conservative government has not even reached those numbers. The former Minister of Health no longer talks about it, and the current Minister of Health is too embarrassed to say



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that she did not include anything about recruitment in the brochure she presented last November. Mr. Speaker, where is the Conservative government's recruitment plan?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, the plan is to do what we have been doing all along to keep on recruiting and retaining those in our health care system. This has been a very challenging couple of years not only in New Brunswick but also across this country. If you go to the media in other provinces, you will see that, every single day, they are dealing with these same challenges. They are all trying to retain their health care professionals.

Mr. Speaker, we have launched bridging programs that the former government members never attempted to do. We have recruited IENs at a better rate than they ever did. We have not stopped. We have opened more RN seats at our universities. We are educating our doctors locally. We are doing everything that we can to build up our medical professionals in this province, and we are going to continue to do that. We will not stop, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister will not talk about the nursing recruitment strategy because it did not work. While the Minister of Health set the number of family physicians that need to be recruited each year at 100, we actually need between 200 and 250 new family physicians each year to replace those who leave the province or retire.

Mr. Speaker, where is the Minister of Health's plan that will give all New Brunswickers access to a family physician? Ultimately, it was the minister herself who promised last year that it would only take six months for all New Brunswickers to have a family physician. Where is the plan?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, this is not going to turn around on a dime. This is going to take commitment, commitment from everyone involved, and that includes Vitalité, Horizon, EM/ANB, the New Brunswick Medical Society, and the Nurses Association. They are all on board to help us with this recruiting.

Right now, we are recruiting more doctors than we have lost. We are going to continue that. Our nurses are part of the solution, and we have taken many, many steps to ensure that LPNs who want to be RNs can do that and that RNs who want to be nurse practitioners can do that. We are putting every advantage out there in order to ensure that we are competitive and that we are offering work conditions that are beneficial to them. This is an

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ongoing process, and for those members to insinuate that this can be turned around overnight is not genuine, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, after departments were closed across the province because of a shortage of physicians and nurses, we are finding out that more and more of our health professionals are at the end of their rope. The number of medical radiation technologists in New Brunswick showing signs of occupational burnout increased between 2018 and 2021. Almost three quarters of them—73%—are now suffering from emotional exhaustion. That is just one example among many others. The Minister of Health is aware of this and is doing absolutely nothing about it. Where is the minister's plan to support our health professionals?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker—unbelievable.

Let me say this. Let me tell you about some of our accomplishments in these last several months. We expanded options for community health care, diverting nonurgent patients out of the ERs to other services. That means pharmacists, Tele-Care 811, and eVisitNB. We did that in January. We have online cognitive behaviour therapy programs for public safety personnel. That has begun. There was the final report on ruling out the potential neurological syndrome of unknown cause, and the Department of Health worked on that. We have a new dedicated Public Health laboratory to enhance public health monitoring, investigating, and mitigation.

You know, Mr. Speaker, I cannot say the amount of work that all these entities have been doing, but personnel is our number one concern and issue. It is a priority. We are working on it, and we will continue—continue—to increase those numbers. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): You know, Mr. Speaker, there are people who work well and people who do not work as well. This minister keeps saying that she is working hard. She is working hard. She is at it. She does not even know the number of vacant positions in the health care system.

How does she explain why the Sackville emergency room has been disrupted over and over? The Georges-L.-Dumont emergency room has major challenges. The Upper River Valley labour and birth unit is gone. The pediatric unit in Miramichi is gone. The Campbellton birth unit is gone. Ophthalmology in Campbellton is gone. At the Stella-Maris-de-Kent ER, there are always challenges. The Moncton Hospital ER has significant challenges. How is your strategy working? Can you tell us what you are doing to hire staff to help these units?



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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): My goodness, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If it was that easy to turn around a medical system in crisis, the members opposite would have done it in their four years. They lost over 800 nurses in their four years in government. Those nurses would have been in our system today.

So, Mr. Speaker, I cannot qualify what the Leader of the Opposition thinks. I cannot. I am not going to change his mind. But here is what I am saying: This is not about me working. I know the work that the Department of Health, Horizon, Vitalité, and EM/ANB have been putting into their recruitment efforts. I know the strategies that we have been supporting with them, and they are ongoing, Mr. Speaker. We have the same challenges that every other province has, and nobody has the silver bullet for them. So, Mr. Speaker, we are going to continue. We are going to continue doing the work that needs to be done. They can sit and criticize. Maybe they could come up with a suggestion or two.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for oral questions has expired.

