

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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NURSES

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to very quickly touch on some information that came out this morning about the sexual assault nurse examiners. There are four who have left that position as a result of comments made by the Premier and the CEO of Horizon. They called the comments a slap in the face, saying that they felt disrespected and, basically, that there was a lack of support for the staff.

I am asking the Premier right here and right now whether he is ready to apologize to those workers, because making comments and lowering staff morale is only going to make the problem worse. We have to acknowledge the workers in the system who are doing great work with the resources that they have. I am asking this Premier to stand up here today and apologize in order to restore staff morale in this province. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Certainly, I acknowledge the great work that the health care officials and the staff are doing all over our province. You know, every day I am held accountable for the decisions that I make. No matter whether it is about something that I have personal knowledge on or something that I have secondhand knowledge on, I have to make decisions and be accountable for them.

I have four daughters, Mr. Speaker, and to think of any one of them going to the ER in a situation where they had been raped and were seeking help, only to be turned away... It is not a matter of experience. It is a matter of social conscience. How could we turn away a rape victim from our emergency facilities? I think that we all need to hold ourselves to a higher account, no matter what we do, and make decisions that are in the best interest of the people who need us when they need us the most. Mr. Speaker, I know that it hurts, but, boy, for that rape victim, that situation was beyond...

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I feel for this rape victim as well. I have extensive practice in criminal defense work, and I know that these examinations are very important. They are essential for prosecution, but they are also essential for the victims to be able to get the services and treatments that they need.

I believe that the problem has only been made worse because of this government's inaction on health care. The staffing levels that we are seeing right now are the government's responsibility. As a result of these nurses who have left, we are now left with three in the Fredericton area who are doing these examinations and it sounds as though they are also covering Saint John. There are two left in the Upper River Valley area. Covering 24-7

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service is just unimaginable. I do not know how they are doing it. I want to know what this government has in store and what it is doing to work on increasing staffing levels for these SANE nurses. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate that the opposition wishes to make this a political issue. It is not a political issue. It is not something to gain points on. It is a very serious situation. A nurse who had been a registered nurse for many, many, many years called me and said: Before we had the specialized training, we did it as RNs. We could do up to 90% of the treatments necessary in a situation such as this.

So maybe you could not do it all, but you could do up to 90% of it. Now, I cannot speak as an authority on that because I do not know, but my point is simple. We do what we can when people need us the most. I do not think that we should, in one way or the other, find fault as such, but we should learn from it and ask: How do we do better next time? Let's address it in real terms by asking what we could do rather than turn someone away in a time of extreme need. That is the issue, Mr. Speaker, and we all have a responsibility to do better in that regard.

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

GOVERNMENT FINANCES

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, this government does have a responsibility, and it has the financial capacity to do more in different areas. It announced the audited \$770-million surplus from last year. That money is gone, and that is fine. But it also announced at Q1 that there is \$100 million more in surplus than what was projected that it can use right now. It is there in the coffers right now. We are facing several crises in the province as we speak, and this government needs to come in here and be able to adapt in-year. The government says that it was not nimble enough in the past to make changes to announce new programs. It needs to be able to adapt in-year.

People are struggling. They are struggling to survive, and this government has turned its back on them. That is what people are saying. It is hard to fathom such megarecord surpluses. I want the Premier to explain to us, to New Brunswickers, how it can justify these enormous surpluses while New Brunswickers are falling behind.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the method or the direction that the Leader of the Opposition—or the Interim Leader of the Opposition—is moving in today. We have made significant investments—significant investments in health care and significant investments in recruitment. We know that the recruitment of health care professionals right across the continuum, whether it be for doctors, nurses,



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nurse practitioners, or LPNs and even for the support staff around them, is something that is global, and we have invested in that.

We made adjustments with the sexual assault nurses, and we are going to, again, task the CEO to get the feedback on what is needed to make sure that the coverage is there when it is needed within the RHAs. Mr. Speaker, when it comes to making sure that there are enough RNs available to ensure that the services are met, we are doing the recruitment. I went through a list yesterday, and I am prepared to do it again today.

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

HOUSING

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the Health Minister can go through a list of the things that they have done, but it is obviously not working. Two years ago, they had plans to close ERs permanently. They backtracked. That was not a good plan. Then, last year, they had their plan to stabilize health care, *Stabilizing Health Care: An Urgent Call to Action*. Apparently, that did not work out. They had to fire the CEO and suspend the boards. So, I do not know whether what they are doing is actually working.

I asked how the government can justify these mega surpluses—leaving money on the table when New Brunswickers are struggling. People are struggling when it comes to housing. There is a serious need for affordable housing, Mr. Speaker. Rents are going to go up if there is nothing done about the rent cap moving forward. If they are not going to make investments in affordable housing, the rent cap will continue to be necessary. I am wondering whether this government can explain today what its plan is. The government needs a comprehensive plan for housing moving forward. What work is being done to address this issue?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite seems to be ignoring some of the facts that we put on the table here today, and that is unfortunate because, again, the list is real. The list that I talked about is real, and I am going to add to it today. Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to announce that because of the need that we have with recruitment right across the spectrum and the various sectors that are looking after it, including Vitalité, Horizon, the medial society... I mentioned yesterday that Vitalité recruiters were in London yesterday. I think that they are probably moving on to Brussels today or to some other country too.

I am pleased that the Department of Health... It is interesting that we have been talking about this and the member opposite is saying that we are doing nothing. I am pleased to announce today that Kelsey MacDonald has been hired by the Department of Health as the executive director of the Health Workforce Planning Branch. She will be the human resources recruitment coordinator for the province of New Brunswick.

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I know that he is the former housing minister. He is answering questions about health care today while I am asking questions about housing, but if he wants to know the facts, under his watch as the housing minister, the wait list for affordable housing went from about 5 000 households to, now, over 8 000 and it is growing, Mr. Speaker. There are a number of public housing units owned and maintained by the province that have stayed essentially the same since 2019. The wait list has gone up by 3 000, and the number of available units has just stayed the same, Mr. Speaker.

Not only that, but do you want to know the facts? There are 250 units that are sitting and available month after month, because this government is sitting on surpluses and not putting money into repairing those units. People with needs are sitting on wait lists for years. Is this government ready to invest in affordable housing to get people off the wait lists?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Look, I am more than happy to talk about affordable housing, Mr. Speaker. Yes, when I was the minister responsible for housing, we did a significant amount of investment in affordable housing here in New Brunswick.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): As a matter of fact—I know that opposition can yell that it is not enough—we are helping people day in and day out.

We know that the needs are great and the needs continue to grow. At the end of last year, with some of the surplus that was left, we rehabilitated almost 50 houses that were out of commission. That was 50 more than the original plan that we had put in place.

We work with the federal government, municipalities, and this government to make sure that we are doing as much as we can with the money invested, and we are not done yet, Mr. Speaker. I am quite confident that, as time goes on, these members will be impressed. They are hard to impress as they are the critics, but they are going to hear some announcements on substantial investments that we are going to make in various sectors.

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

[*Translation*]

RENTS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister can talk to us about plans, numbers, and the fact that this government has created

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this and that, but its latest three-year plan aimed to create 151 units. This plan is ending soon. Even though we were told in the House that some 172 units had been created, after a little digging, we found out that only 42 units had been created.

Mr. Speaker, if the government does not invest in affordable housing, the problem will worsen. It is known that, in New Brunswick, we have one of the lowest rates of affordable apartments in the country. Rent control measures put in place by this government are coming to an end this year. Extending the cap on rental increases should be considered, because this government is not making the necessary investments to solve this crisis. These measures will be necessary for as long as we are not investing.

So, my question is this: Will this government extend rent control measures?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I will remind the member opposite that last year, we did make that commitment. We exceeded the commitment in our three-year plan, and from the standpoint of the budget, our housing budget last year was increased by 20%—20%. Those are real dollars and real investments that the opposition is trying to minimize here today.

We know that the need is great, and that is why we have not been alone in the Department of Social Development, when I was minister and now with the new minister. We know that there are different departments working together on the whole continuum of housing, because we have had success in increasing the population. That is a good-news story. The opposition does not want to hear about that.

Mr. Speaker, yes, the finances in the province have turned around substantially. That is something that members of the opposition, when they were in government, never dreamed of.

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

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): That is funny, Mr. Speaker. The minister tells us that it is something we dream of, but, in fact, we had a surplus in the last year of our mandate, which created the good fiscal situation that this government inherited. Mr. Speaker, the topic is the continuum of housing and investments that are being made. We have made the most investments in affordable housing in the history of New Brunswick.

This government seems content with the current situation, and that is shameful, Mr. Speaker, because there are currently 400 people in the streets of Moncton who have no

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fixed address. There are more than 50 tent sites scattered across the city, but this government seems fine with the situation, which is worsening year after year. Meanwhile, it is lining its pockets and sending money to bankers in New York as surpluses are run. What are you doing to resolve the housing problem for the homeless?

[*Original*]

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

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): We hear the Leader of the Opposition sort of crowing. It is like when the sun comes up and the rooster takes credit for the sun coming up.

Mr. Speaker, the surpluses under our watch are things that, again, go along with significant investment in the province of New Brunswick. The Health budget itself last year was \$3.2 billion, which was an increase of 6%. That is its biggest increase. It is an increase that opposition members never even dreamed about.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I hear the chirping across the way, and that is fine.

I know that the work is being done. I know that there is more work to be done. That is why this government is committed to continue making the investments—the investments that are needed exactly where they are. I know that the homeless file is another one that is very important to everybody on this side, regardless of what community it is in.

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

[*Translation*]

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, the AFMNB has indicated that, with the phasing out of core funding, RSCs will be competing for project funding. Not only will that increase costs for project management, but there will also be a lot of uncertainty about the way projects are approved.

My question for the minister is this: What criteria will be used in the decision-making process? Who will decide which projects get approved in a way that ensures political considerations are not promoted? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The bill we tabled yesterday provides

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transparency, simplicity, and predictable and more stable action. That is what associations and municipalities were looking for. In fact, they were seeking stability, because they want to know what will happen over the next five years.

Yes, the associations certainly have their say. The three associations did not see things the same way. So, we are providing stability. At the end of the day, that is what matters. The amount of equalization will not change; it is entirely funded. This is the 2.0 version of the Equal Opportunity program. Equalization is fully funded. That is what matters. We have listened to the people. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, I think that the minister is trying to say that the association wanted transparency and predictability for its liability in the future as it moves forward with this new reform.

Mr. Speaker, Alex Scholten, President of the Union of Municipalities of New Brunswick, indicated that the municipalities believed that there would be funding to cover additional costs. They were shocked to find out that this is not the case and that changes to the equalization formula will hit them as well, forcing them to raise taxes. In light of the growing anger and dissatisfaction with the community funding reforms, my question to the minister is this: Why will the minister not hit the pause button until a fairer system can be put in place? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, obviously, the MLA for Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé did not participate in the consultations that we held for a full year. Again, these mandated services for the RSCs did not come out of thin air. It was the municipalities that were asking for them. In the Acadian Peninsula, before this reform process had started, the regional service commission had been working on the tourism file. It was already collaborating.

So, Mr. Speaker, is everybody happy? No, but we found a way to be transparent, to have a simple formula, and to make predictability and stability part of this process. That is what the municipalities have been asking for. We are listening to the municipalities, and we work with the municipalities because it is important. We are doing the biggest reform in 25 years, and we want to make it happen. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, the government wants to make it happen on the backs of the taxpayers of New Brunswick. That is the problem here. The minister likes to say that he has given up tax room in the nonresidential tax base rate to allow local governments to raise more property tax revenue. For many local governments without a heavy industrial or commercial base, this is not going to help them at all. Does the minister have figures for what each of these local governments will be able to raise through these increases?

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Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Had the MLA across the way read the white paper, he would know that it is all in it. All the timelines are there. Part of our white paper was to go with comprehensive tax packages. We want to make sure that municipalities can have that tax room. Why? Because they have been asking for it. It does not come out of thin air. In the consultation, municipalities were asking for that tax room. Can we build more classifications? Yes, we will. We will be working with our municipalities to make sure of this, in coordination with Service New Brunswick. They have been asking for a better assessment program. Let's work on it. Again, we are here to listen and to work with the municipalities. It is important because we are taking the time to make the tough choices. This reform process has been about making tough choices.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker, I can assure you that New Brunswick will be stronger with this reform. Thank you very much.

[*Original*]

ENERGY EFFICIENCY

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, NB Power will file its request for a rate increase this afternoon. I am sure that we are all interested in seeing what that will look like. The minister responsible for NB Power announced his Enhanced Energy Savings Program last week in order to offset the sting of higher power rates for low-income homeowners, but he approved a completely underfunded program. There is only enough in the budget so that 5% of New Brunswick's 40 000 low-income homeowners will receive a heat pump and insulation over the next three years. Mr. Speaker, can the minister responsible for NB Power tell this House how the other 95% of low-income homeowners who will not be funded for heat pumps or insulation are going to afford to pay their power bills?

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Will government increase the budget?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to speak with you today and answer this question.

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[Original]

This is a program that we rolled out after standing here for years and hearing the Leader of the Green Party say that we are not doing enough. To criticize the program... I cannot understand how we can make him happy. Do we work toward efficiency or do we not? We came forward with something that is going to address something and bring energy efficiency and reduced emissions to a very important group in this province. In the event that he had concerns, it would have been great for him to start by saying that it is nice to see us moving in the direction of energy efficiency and in the direction that this government has been going since being elected.

With that being the case, we understand that this is a multiyear program. The particular demographic that we are reaching out to is going to hit about 40 000 homes in the province of New Brunswick. It is a multiyear program where we have announced funding so that we can get started with executing a program that is going to deliver for New Brunswick.

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

[Translation]

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, NB Power has a sole-source contract with a single business for the installation of heat pumps and insulation under the energy efficiency improvement program. This situation is completely unfair to every other business. I want to point out that this is not at all to criticize the business involved, but rather the decision supported by the minister responsible for NB Power to stop every other business in the sector from participating in the program. Mr. Speaker, why did the minister support a sole-source contract when there are qualified contractors from Caraquet to Saint John?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, why on earth is actually executing a program such a problem for members of the opposition? I guess if we do not do anything, they can sit and complain about everything. When we move forward with something, there are complaints about this and complaints about that.

Absolutely, this is a program that needs to expand and move into the contractor base. As a government, we are funding a program that is going to bring energy efficiency and the reduction of emissions to a very important group of people. We will continue to do that and to expand and to make sure that if you are a resident of New Brunswick, you can play your part in reducing emissions and put money back in your pocket.



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At the end of the day, I grow weary of opposition members being five-cent critics of something that is actually going to bring positive change for the climate and for the pocketbooks of the province of New Brunswick. Absolutely, this is a program that we will roll out and that will not discriminate against any contractor that has an opportunity to participate. But I would far sooner get going than sit and talk about it forever.

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

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): There is the lucky 5%, Mr. Speaker, and the unlucky 95%. The Enhanced Energy Savings Program will not provide a heat pump to low-income homeowners who heat with expensive and carbon-emitting fuel oil. The federal program for getting off oil will provide a mere \$120 million for all of Atlantic Canada, to be shared among the four provinces, to help people get off oil heat. The budget of the Enhanced Energy Savings Program must be expanded to reach more households more quickly and end the discrimination against families that are dependent on oil heat. New Brunswick is taking over \$200 million in carbon tax revenue every year, so there are plenty of funds.

Will the Premier agree to increase the budget of the Enhanced Energy Savings Program to \$150 million per year to insulate more New Brunswick families from rapidly rising electricity and fuel oil costs?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am not sure whether there was in that question concern over the program or more criticism of the federal Liberals for not having the foresight to properly fund that initiative here in Atlantic Canada. I feel as though I could join the Leader of the Green Party and admonish the Liberals to go forward and speak to their cousins in Ottawa to ensure that funds are unlocked for that heating oil conversion.

As we have said, we are going to ensure that, with any of those programs, we will seek the funds and make sure that they get delivered. But you have to understand that this was a NB Power initiative. NB Power provides and generates electricity. It does not deal in the home heating oil system. So, once again, rather than have everything figured out for everybody... We have folks who heat with the most inefficient means of delivering heat into your house, the baseboard heater, with electricity that is generated by the utility. Rather than have NB Power look at a broad-based approach and do nothing, we said: Focus on what you provide. Make it better. Make it more efficient, and let's do better by the whole system. That is exactly what we are doing.

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

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[*Translation*]

HOUSING

Mr. Guitard (Restigouche-Chaleur, L): Mr. Speaker, my question this morning is for the Minister of Service New Brunswick. Everyone knows that the government will collect millions of dollars when property assessments increase. People will see significant increases in their rent, especially if they live in housing units. Landlords have no other choice than to pass the bill on to these people. What will the minister do to help these people who live in rental units?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mary Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question, Mr. Speaker. I just want to clarify that what came out in the mail this week are property assessments. Often you will hear people refer to them as tax assessments, but the tax bill comes in March. The housing market, of course, saw significant growth across Canada during COVID-19, and New Brunswick was no exception. The 2023 assessment base is \$81 billion, an increase of \$8 billion from last year, or 10.9%. This increase is, of course, as everybody knows, due to a strong real estate market and new construction.

Assessments are based on the real and true property value as of January 1 of the taxation year. It is what your property would typically sell for in the open market. A spike protection mechanism is in place for most owner-occupied properties that have an increase of greater than 10% in their assessment. This year, this 10% spike protection mechanism was also passed along to...

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guitard (Restigouche-Chaleur, L): I know the minister is used to her answers being written by her department, but I think she has the wrong piece of paper. I am talking about the provincial tax, the provincial portion of the double taxation. You will collect millions of dollars. What will you do with these millions? Will you help people in need? I am talking about the provincial tax, Madam Minister.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mary Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am kind of confused by the question. Certainly, the reduction of the double tax this year, next year, and the year after—a 50% reduction over a three-year period—is a great incentive to encourage developers to build new apartment buildings here in New Brunswick. We are in a very bad position, with

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low inventory. At 1.7%, that is a huge problem. Supply and demand—we need more supply. That will help fix the problem. We are doing our best to encourage developers to get building here in New Brunswick. Bring us more properties so that we can solve this problem.

That 10% spike protection mechanism has also been extended to apartment buildings of four units and up as well as to nonresidential properties, the business sector. These incentives will certainly help going forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. Guitard (Restigouche-Chaleur, L): I realize that this government is running out of ideas. You have an excellent program. It is the low-income assistance program, which provides the infamous \$400 benefit. By the way, in case you did not know this, the program was established by a Liberal government. It was designed specifically for this—to help people who were having a hard time paying their property taxes.

The benefit was frozen at \$400 in 2010 by the Alward government and still sits at \$400 today. Instead of sending money to bankers in New York, maybe you should keep \$25 million or \$30 million. There would still be \$450 million left for bankers in New York. With that \$25 million or \$30 million, you could double the benefit provided under this program.

You should double the benefit. There is no reason not to increase the benefit. A sum of \$800 could help people who will have a hard time paying their property taxes, especially seniors who live in apartments and receive the Guaranteed Income Supplement from the federal government. These people cannot afford the increases. Could you please increase the benefits provided under this program to help people who will have a hard time in April? Thank you, Madam Minister.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, the member was mixing a couple of different items when he talked about seniors' benefits. Again, I have a tremendous list of the things that we have done to improve the livelihood of the people here in New Brunswick. As a matter of fact, October 1... I will tell you about one that I am particularly proud of, which is the clawback of the Canada Pension Plan. People between 60 and 65 who are on social assistance can now keep up to \$200 of what they receive from the Canada Pension Plan. That is a significant program that is helping a significant number of people. When you look at it, that is a new initiative that is, again, helping seniors here in New Brunswick.

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I could go on and on and on, but I know that there is other business here in the House that folks want to get to. I can guarantee that this government continues to work and invest to help the people in New Brunswick day after day after day.

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

The time for question period has expired.

