

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



October 28, 2022

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HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, we heard some statements this morning about the new private clinics that are going to be set up. I know the minister is ready to answer some questions on that this morning. I know that in the summertime, the Premier was musing about privatizing some health care services. He hosted Doug Ford here to talk about that plan, but we still do not really, fully know what the government's plan is. Government proposed amendments with Bill 3, which was brought forward. The cataract pilot project that is on the table—we applauded that. The doctor in that case could not find hospital space to perform the surgeries that would allow him to cut down the wait list.

What is this government's plan when it comes to privatization? I know that on Wednesday, the minister talked about knees, hips, and other procedures. He was a little bit squeamish to talk about it. But today, I am asking him this: Can the minister put on the table his plans for moving forward with privatization? What areas of practice are going to be targeted?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, there was a lot said in that question. I am glad to have this opportunity to discuss some of the great plans that are going on.

The one thing that I do not understand about opposition members is that, now, they are standing up... Are they supporting it, or are they not supporting it? I know that two of their MLAs jumped in the picture when we were cutting the ribbon. I think the leader on the floor today—and the leader from above—has to tell us this: Are opposition members really in support of new and innovative ideas that will reduce wait times and bring health care to the people of New Brunswick in a reasonable fashion, or are they against them and just trying to score cheap political points?

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Look, Mr. Speaker, I do not know what is so funny over there. I told government members that we had looked at that decision positively. They are cutting down wait times. The doctor in that case could not find space in the local hospital, so he is going to be able to provide that service elsewhere.

But there are still outstanding questions. There are questions that merit being asked and getting some answers on, such as those around the business model. What is the business model? Is it going to be done in doctors' offices and existing clinics, or will there be new for-profit entities? Will it be a corporation setting up surgical suites here in New Brunswick? I think that we need to know exactly how this business model will be set up, what kind of billing there will be, whether the charge will more than what you see performed in hospitals, and who will be responsible for staffing these facilities. Can the minister give us a little bit of information around the business model that he envisions for these private clinics?

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Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am surprised that the leader on the floor did not ask the MLAs on his side who were at the clinic applauding it, supporting it, and talking to Dr. Javidi. There was an excellent, excellent dialogue going on.

They are clinics that are billed by the individual, and the government is going to pay for the procedures. It is public health care. You are not paying with your credit card. You are paying with your Medicare care. This is the future. This is the way things are going.

Actually, the surgical time that was tied up in the hospital—two days per week—is now freed up to do other surgeries. We are not only tackling the wait list for cataracts. This also means that there is now more space for hip replacements. There is more space in the hospital for knee surgery. There is more space in the hospital for cancer treatments...

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I want to know... The minister said that the clinics will be billed by the individual. Does that mean that the doctor or surgeon performing the service will be the one who is receiving payment—a fee-for-service type of arrangement—and then that person is responsible for the facilities, such as paying rent and staff? Those are the types of questions that I want to hear answers to today.

You know, there are some people out there who are concerned that mega international corporations will come here, set up for-profit entities, and rip off the taxpayer, charging more than what a hospital procedure might cost. So can the minister tell us whether the business model that he envisions will be fee-for-service? Will it be a corporate model? We deserve answers, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am going to give the member opposite a mulligan today for what he said about doctors ripping off the public. I am going to give you a mulligan and allow you to take that back.

All the fee-for-service doctors here in the province are basically paying for their own staff. They are paying for their accommodations, either renting or paying for their own building, and they are receiving a fee for the services that they provide—fee-for-service. That is the model that has been providing health care for years and years and years here in New Brunswick. So this is an expansion of that, an opening of more opportunities in a clinical setting to provide services for people here in the province.

Better access to primary care and surgery was one of the five platforms in our health plan. So, Mr. Speaker, we are moving forward, and we are moving forward in a responsible way. Oh shoot—I am out of time.

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Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the mulligan. I do not play golf, but I appreciate the mulligan. But I am not looking for a mulligan. I did not say that our doctors here in New Brunswick are ripping off the citizens. I said, Can the minister assure us that mega international health corporations are prevented from setting up shop in New Brunswick and ripping off the taxpayers, charging more than what we would get in a public facility, in a hospital?

From what I am hearing, it sounds as though it will be a fee-for-service type of arrangement. The surgeon or the doctor will get a payment for service and will be responsible to staff and pay for the facilities, similar to how we see fee-for-service physicians, family physicians, operating. It is the type of facility about which it is said: Oh, well, no, we have had private models all the time. You know, family doctors are a business. Corporations have been set up.

Is this the type of model that we are going to have, or are we going to have mega international health corporations setting up shop here and ripping off the taxpayer?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): That is just terrible. Mr. Speaker, I know that the member opposite may want to be a judge someday, but he should not prejudge things that have not happened just yet. I am appalled that he would accuse—he would accuse—corporations of ripping off the taxpayers here in the province, corporations that are providing health care that is overseen, regulated, and inspected by the RHAs.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, when it comes to these entities or these business... When it comes to these opportunities for corporations or individuals to provide access to health care, primary care, and surgeries here in New Brunswick, we will look at all business cases. We are going to turn over every stone to try to provide the best service for the people of New Brunswick today and in the future. We are now looking at business plans that, again, will...

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, this minister is now—what?—taking personal potshots across the floor. That is making a mockery of democracy. I am here trying to get real answers to the real questions facing the future of health care in our province. It is really shameful what this minister is talking about over there.

Another issue with these private clinics, if the minister is going to be able to answer questions... I mean, he is not answering anything today, really. But another issue is whether

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these clinics are going to be staffed with public nurses and public health care providers or whether staff will come from the private sector. How is this going to be set up? We already see a shortage in the public system. Are we going to then have new private facilities taking away from the public system, where we see low morale and see that people are burned out? They might look for better working conditions. How is this minister going to set up the staffing of these private clinics?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I really appreciate the opportunity to answer that question, as I have been doing all morning. When it comes to how the model works, again, his members were there when we opened the clinic up in Bathurst. I talked to the RNs. I talked with the RNs who were assisting Dr. Javidi. They are people who were out of the system or had retired, and they came back into the system because, as they said: This model is something we believe in. This model is something we want to help with. This model of providing access to surgery and primary care in this environment is something that we want to do.

Contrary to what the member across the floor is saying, this will actually—possibly—improve working conditions so that more RNs will be staying in the health care facilities and in the health care field helping the people of New Brunswick, just as, on this side, we are helping New Brunswickers instead of spreading doom and gloom right across the province.

[*Translation*]

SMALL BUSINESSES

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, in an op-ed published last week, the Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business praised small businesses and boasted about the important role they play in the economy.

Could the minister explain why she supports a sole-source contract for heat pump distribution, while small business owners have said that it will have a devastating effect on them? Mr. Speaker, the question to be asked today is this: Is this the new way for the government and the minister to energize the private sector, as was announced in the throne speech this week? Ultimately, is the new energized system about giving an opportunity to a single business and leaving all the others without hope?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, it is a pleasure to stand and talk about our vibrant small business sector in New Brunswick. It is a pleasure to talk about the engagement we have had with it over the course of the rollout of this program. We determined that we needed to bring efficiency and allow New Brunswickers to get a benefit and a relief from

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the rising cost of energy throughout the globe, and we acted on that. We acted on that very quickly, and we rolled out a program.

In the course of doing that and in the process of determining where there are gaps and what we need to do, I am very proud of the fact that, as a government and as a shareholder of NB Power... We only fund the program, but I am very proud of the fact that NB Power realized that there are some gaps and has been spending a significant amount of time, up to and including this afternoon, meeting and very clearly hearing where those gaps are. I am very proud of the fact that NB Power has moved toward fixing those gaps and ensuring that that vibrant sector is going to participate and bring that efficiency to New Brunswickers.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, I understand that the Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business is ashamed to answer the question today because the issue is clear. What is happening is that she is ensuring that small and medium-sized businesses throughout the province pay a price. So, we clearly understand that, today, the goal of the Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, who was claiming to be a champion for SMEs, is not to help them.

Ultimately, the question to be asked is this: Did the Premier and the government tell the Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business not to be proactive in advocating for people throughout the province who need to make a living, while putting hundreds and thousands of New Brunswickers to work?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, PC): I want to thank the member opposite for the question and clarify something. In terms of making sure that we advocate for new jobs in the province, as Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, I can tell you that we have signed over 80 deals, which include 2 000 new jobs in the province.

However, I do like to make a habit of actually answering the question, and I am going to answer the question for you. I think it is a very valid question with respect to how this actually occurred. I can tell you that I am advocating, and I know that the Premier is also concerned about this. We are going to get under the hood and find out how this process actually unfolded. I can tell you that we will be back here talking about exactly why that happened and how it happened. We are concerned on this side as well, and we are going to get to the bottom of it.

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[*Translation*]

NEW BRUNSWICK MUSEUM

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the Canada — New Brunswick Agreement for the Infrastructure Program, there is still about \$350 million that has to be invested by March 31, 2023. Four years ago, when it took office, the Conservative government canceled construction of the new New Brunswick Museum in Saint John. Two years ago, the New Brunswick Museum was forced to close because the building was falling apart. Today, we all know that construction costs have doubled, if not tripled, and we are still waiting to see what this government's plan is. So my question for the Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture is this: What have you done in the past four years besides watching the building collapse?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. You know, I think that if the member opposite knew more about the condition of the museum—not only the condition of the original museum but also the condition of where the artifacts were being stored in Market Square... It had actually been shut down for a couple of years because the roof was leaking and the artifacts had to be covered up with plastic. The artifacts have been relocated in order to protect them. They will be protected and be able to be on display.

Further to that, regarding the idea in terms of what we are doing next and the next step for the museum, I am excited about where we are going with that and about the opportunity to actually see the New Brunswick Museum, located in Saint John, become a vibrant reality, Mr. Speaker. I have talked about that in the past several months, and the difference between then and now is that we can afford to proceed. In the past, the government would do whatever to get elected. It was not a matter of whether the government could or could not manage it. So, there is a different concept on this side of the House. It is doing things at the right time for the taxpayers of this province and getting it done, Mr. Speaker.

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L) : Doing the right thing at the right time.

[*Translation*]

Well, just know, Mr. Premier, through you, Mr. Speaker, that, while your minister is roaming around the world, there are people at the New Brunswick Museum wrapping up artifacts and taking them to a warehouse for storage because this Conservative government has been inactive for four years. It cannot tell us what the plan is. It cannot tell us where this new museum will be. Have you consulted the public? This government cannot answer any questions. I would like to understand the reason for that.

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[Original]

You have a man that is obsessed with money. He becomes the Premier. First thing, he cancels this infrastructure project, and then he does nothing for four years, leaving people in the dark. Then we will have to build a new museum for, what, double or triple the price?

[Translation]

What kind of management is that?

[Original]

It reminds me of the courthouse in Fredericton.

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): So, Mr. Speaker, do you know what the museum was four years ago? An election promise. It was an artist's conception of an election promise: Oh, quick, let's get this out. There is an election that we are on. There is \$1.6 billion worth of more election promises that we want to get out too.

How did that work out for you? I guess the point is that we will have a plan. I am excited about that plan. There will be lots of involvement from communities around this new structure, but it will reflect New Brunswick in a way that it has never been reflected before—pride in our province in every sector—First Nations, Acadian culture, Loyalist culture, and Black culture. We are looking at showing how New Brunswick has become the promise and the strength that it is today, and I am excited for what is on the horizon, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

HOMELESS SHELTERS

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week, there was an announcement made about shelters. It is very important and near and dear to the hearts of everybody here. We woke up this morning, and it was 1°C, so we know what is coming. This is an occasion to give hope to people who really need it and do not get a lot of it.

[Translation]

We have heard concerns, and I would like the minister to have an opportunity to clarify all that, please. The concerns we heard, on this side of the House, were that details were missing from the announcement. Now, we will try to clarify that for the people listening to us, who will be able to get answers to their questions.

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Municipalities and non-profit organizations feel... I do not want to say that they feel forgotten, but we have not talked about them enough. So, there are some question marks. Now, can the minister answer me this: Will municipalities and non-profit organizations be able to know what is happening in their backyards regarding shelters for people living in the street? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I really appreciate this question because it is a very important one. As the member opposite has said, temperatures are falling, and they fell fast from yesterday to today. We can feel it, and we know that those who are living rough can feel it as well.

Mr. Speaker, I am very proud of this announcement because we have essentially doubled the budget for shelters and for homelessness. That is really important, and here is why: It is because we need our shelter system to evolve. We need our stakeholders... Those on the front lines are very much involved in this restructuring or structuring evolution of our shelter system. In fact, when we did the picture for the news release in Moncton, we had House of Nazareth, Harvest House, and ReConnect all talking together. You know, Mr. Speaker, they are joining forces to create a system that supports not only each other in their organizations but also their community that needs the help. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We appreciate all that was said. Two weeks ago, since we did not come back to the House last week for question period, I had talked to the minister about the possibility of hiring night security guards in these shelters. I have personally visited them, and I know that security is lacking at night and that it is something people really need.

Two hours after the announcement of \$8 million for shelters, a person living on the street in Moncton went to Radio-Canada and said on air that he does not go to those shelters. Regardless of the amount—we are talking about money well invested—this person does not go to shelters because, without security at night, he sometimes gets attacked, and there are drugs circulating. That is why this person would rather spend winter in a tent.

It would not take a huge portion of the \$8 million to ensure there are security guards so that no one sleeps in the streets when it is 30° below zero this winter. Thank you very much.

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[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think the member opposite also knows that nothing is a switch. All of this takes times and a whole lot of effort. In the same week, we also announced \$110 million for public housing. That is the first investment in public housing since the late Nancy Clark Teed was sitting in this House.

But let's get back to the shelters. We know that some regions need more assistance than others right now, so this first bit of doubling the budget will go to help bolster areas that need some additional help. The shelter system needs to evolve, and we need to put housing first. I agree with what the member said with regard to security in our shelters. That is why we are working with partners in the community—to help bolster the system so that they help each other. Those details are going to be coming out very soon and will be supported by the frontline workers who are working on this.

HYDRAULIC FRACTURING

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, as I see successive IPCC reports sound the alarm bells even louder on the climate crisis, as I see the number of degrees of expected warming by the year 2100 creep up from the stated goal of 1.5 to Stay Alive to well over 2°C, and as I see the number of COPs go up, now, with the 27th Conference of the Parties about to meet, I see that the sense of climate dread and eco-anxiety is increasing too. And yet, this government wants to frack. Not only do we face a climate crisis... We should not be investing in any new fossil fuel infrastructure. Fracking puts our water at risk and pollutes our air. To frack is to ignore science. My question is this: How can the Minister of Environment and Climate Change justify fracking?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, the more I hear the member from Memramcook ask questions in the House, the more it seems evident that she has never had to meet a payroll or be accountable to a bottom line. Here in New Brunswick, those of us who were in the House in 2018 remember that we clearly identified in our platform, which we ran and won on, that we were going to be committed to the development of our natural resources in a responsible fashion. “Responsible” is absent from any of the comments from the member opposite.

We are committed to that exploration. In fact, if a private-sector company anywhere was responsible to shareholders and saw that there were opportunities but did not explore them, it would be held accountable for that. Especially as it relates to energy futures, as we see what is taking place in the global energy crisis, we will explore all avenues to explore our natural resources in a responsible way and we will not do that with any kind of shame coming from anybody else, because we have to do that and we have to do it right.



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(Interjections.)

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

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, members opposite should be ashamed. Talking about shareholders, talking about profits over people—over the future of our children and our grandchildren and future generations—this is ridiculous. And talking about LNG and trying to send this gas elsewhere... It will not even meet the needs that Europe has right now. It is absolutely unacceptable to put profits over people.

Mr. Speaker, I remind this government that I stand here and we stand here on the unceded and unsundered Wolastoqey territory and that I live on unceded and unsundered Mi'kmaw territory. I also remind this government that we are all treaty people. We are governed by the Peace and Friendship Treaties. I quote Chief Rebecca Knockwood of Amlamog when referring to the throne speech:

“All we heard ... was a recycled and an inaccurate argument that the natural gas under this unceded and unsundered Wabanaki land is less harmful for the environment,”

“There is no evidence this province can develop this natural gas supply responsibly”

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

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, that sounded quite harsh, and I failed to hear a question from it. But I will explain a few things as it relates to the file of Natural Resources.

We are accountable to a bottom line when we form a government in the province of New Brunswick, and it is irresponsible for somebody who has never done that to make statements such as those, because we have to be responsible in all forms. We are not talking about just the development of natural gas. We are not talking about just the development of natural resources. Responsibility will be the key behind that.

She referred to the First Nations. We understand completely the need to be with the First Nations as it relates to the development of natural resources. We understand completely the need to be responsible with environmental stewardship when it comes to the development of any of these resources. To stand there and talk about it just in a fashion that is not productive or proactive or even collaborative, that is irresponsible. I will take the approach of doing it responsibly all day long, Mr. Speaker.

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[*Translation*]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will come back with questions for the Minister of Health about private clinics. I am asking specific questions today. He accuses us of not taking a stand, but the details are vague.

The government has introduced a three-page bill that will allow private clinics to be opened in the province. However, there are still questions that have not been answered. What is the business model? What will the requested amount be? Who will be responsible for starting the business? How will clinics be staffed? Are we going to transfer staff from the public system into private clinics?

These are real questions, and we need real answers. Then, we will take a position. We are absolutely in favour of initiatives that will reduce wait lists and wait times. Can the minister give us the details we are looking for? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that the member opposite took a position a long time ago. There were two of his members, up north, when we were in Bathurst, who jumped into the photo while we were cutting the ribbon, while we were doing that. That was a pretty strong position to take. Now, unless they have one song in the north and one song in the south . . . I do not think that they would do that, would they?

Mr. Speaker, these are fee-for-service arrangements that can now be made outside the four walls or the bricks and mortar of a hospital. The RHAs have the oversight. The RHAs are Vitalité... It is basically an extension of the services, an extension of the fee-for-services for a doctor. Fee-for-service doctors have been in New Brunswick for years and years and years. But the restraint has been that the RHA Act that we are amending would not allow payment to be made for procedures outside the bricks and mortar of those hospitals. This is innovative, this is getting it done, and this is helping the people of New Brunswick.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Finally, after five or six questions, the minister has given me the details. I wanted to know whether international companies would be involved, or if we will in fact be using the fee-for-service model that we are already seeing in the province.

This assures us that this system can work, but there is also the issue of staff. How are we going to fill the gaps that we see now and address the labour shortage in the public sector?

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Will these new private facilities take staff from the public sector? How are we going to find staff, Mr. Speaker?

This is also a question to which we need answers. How will this government establish these new private facilities with staff who will complement the public system?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, once again, the services that have been provided by fee-for-service doctors in New Brunswick for years and years and years are almost a mirror to what we are doing here. Fee-for-service doctors pay for their own space. They pay for their own staff, be it an RN, an assistant, or whatever. This is the same idea, with the expansion of the ability to pay for services outside the walls of the hospitals, in the RHAs, which offer oversight and inspection.

Mr. Speaker, again, this service is something that will actually have that same type of model that has been going on in New Brunswick for many, many years. The doctors will hire and pay for their staff, and that is part of the whole arrangement. That fee-for-service model is something that is enabling taking those wait lines, such as for cataracts...

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