

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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PUBLIC SERVICE LABOUR RELATIONS ACT

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, after spending the weekend watching what is happening with labour relations in Ontario, I cannot help but think of what is to come in our own province. Let's not forget that, not too long ago, our Premier paid Premier Doug Ford a visit to trade notes. The Higgs government has a dismal record when it comes to labour relations. Let's not forget what we saw last year—the animosity and the strike. It was no better with the nursing home workers in 2019. What is to come next?

Now, in the speech from the throne, we are seeing threatening language when it comes to labour relations, such as talking about strike votes, lockouts, designated workers, and the like. To me, this signals that we are going to see another hard line on negotiations in the upcoming round with, in this case, the teachers. Why is the Premier proposing changes to the *Public Service Labour Relations Act* in advance of the next round of negotiations?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Now, Mr. Speaker, the fearmongering starts. Or does it ever end? We put that in the discussion of the speech from the throne in order to have clarity on an outdated Act that has been around for decades. The idea is to see whether we can avoid altercations such as those we have seen in the past and whether we can develop a system that actually works for both the employees and the employer. I do not think that this is any reason to start pontificating on what could or might come.

We want an effective labour relations program, and we want to have effective agreements because we have a province that is on the move. We have a province that, in every sector, is growing, thriving, and going well beyond expectations. But we have challenges that go with that—challenges in health care, in housing, and with the homeless and challenges in the ways of work that work for everyone. So what we want is a team that works together to find solutions, and that means good agreements.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier is speaking about all of these challenges. All of these challenges could be remedied by fair wages for the people that he is negotiating with, but he continues this hard line. It is not fearmongering. He did meet with Premier Ford just a few weeks ago, and Premier Ford is now introducing legislation that is the exact same as the Premier suggested in his throne speech, except Premier Ford's government is going one step further with the notwithstanding clause. Will we see that here as well? The government has done it before, Mr. Speaker.

The government has a duty to bargain in good faith, and that is what we are asking for. This is not good faith bargaining. Government members can present their position and stand firm behind it. That does not go against the principle of good faith. But when they are using

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threatening language with respect to making amendments to the *Public Service Labour Relations Act*, that is not good faith, Mr. Speaker. Will the Premier explain what specific measures will be taken to restrict the right to strike in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Now, Mr. Speaker, I know that the speech was difficult to hear, but I assume that the member opposite actually read it because there was no threatening language there. It was actually about updating an outdated Act and about having consultations with the different labour groups to do what is right, fair, and reasonable.

To try and make a connection between my visit with Premier Ford... I mean, that is a real stretch, Mr. Speaker. I know that it might help the narrative. Whatever might catch—that is the typical process that we have seen for many years from the Liberal Party.

Mr. Speaker, the fact is that we want to have an open and frank dialogue on consultations that will allow us to have a path forward for labour relations because we do not need to have disruptions in our province. We do not need to have disruptions in any aspect of the services we deliver because people are depending on us. Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? There are more and more people every year—every minute, actually. I think that we are up to 820 000 right now. It is in the range of 50 000 more than it was two years ago. That is quite amazing, and we do not want to disrupt any of that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier talks about strike votes, notice periods, and designated workers; he is threatening to make changes to the Act. He talks about having an open dialogue, so why not have a dialogue about these points? Why not negotiate? Why does the Premier come here with the idea of implementing an act without negotiating these things with the people involved?

We know that the Premier wants to use legislation to avoid negotiating in good faith. Teachers have gone without a contract since February 2021. They deserve the respect of this government. Why use the throne speech to threaten to make changes? I ask the Premier to have an open dialogue to negotiate; is he prepared to do that?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As the Minister of Labour in this province, I want to state very clearly that on this side of the House, we understand that free and collective bargaining is a right and one that is not to be messed with. We have said that from day one.

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The only thing that was in the throne speech was talk about modernization and clarification. That is all that was in there, Mr. Speaker. We have constitutional responsibilities with respect to free collective bargaining, and we have to consult with both sides. As the Premier just said a minute ago, this is about making sure that we have a balanced approach for both employers and employees. That is my job as the Minister of Labour. I can assure the members in the House that it is exactly what is going to happen.

[*Translation*]

FRENCH IMMERSION

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I now have a question for the Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform. How does the member for Moncton East feel about the government's willingness to eliminate French immersion?

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, it is great to see the Leader of the Opposition talk about Ontario when we are talking about New Brunswick day in and day out—day in and day out.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker, we have wanted to do something about local governance for 25 years. We ended up working with municipalities, elected officials, and volunteers to move the local governance reform forward. I am proud of this government. On my team, we have worked together. Governance reform is so important that people in municipalities and LSDs want it, Mr. Speaker. So, for that reason, I am very proud that we are moving forward on the local governance file. As a province, we will be innovative and work with municipalities so that they are better positioned for the future and generations to come. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, that validates our fears. The minister is not rising to defend the French immersion program. He is not rising to defend the Francophonie in New Brunswick. This is what I want to know: How does he really feel about his government's willingness to eliminate the French immersion program?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, the politics of division, to no end—to no end. This is a Leader of the Opposition who takes orders from the gallery and does not... These are probably the weakest questions that we have seen in question period in probably 25 years, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

I will tell you this, Mr. Speaker. Regarding French immersion, I have full confidence in the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. Bill Hogan is someone who will consult people—the member for Carleton. I apologize, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is someone who will consult and work with people. As you know, this is a difficult file, because education is not an easy area. However, Mr. Speaker...

[Original]

Mr. Speaker, there is not one solution from the other side. They want to let it go. We have a province that, day in and day out, is growing. We are pro-growth. In Education and Health, we are taking care of those files, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That confirms our fears that the minister supports his government's decision to eliminate this program.

However, since the minister mentioned health care, I am going to go back to questions about health care. The federal government transferred \$41 million to get through the backlog of surgeries in the province—\$41 million, Mr. Speaker.

(Interjection.)

[Original]

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

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): We learned from the first quarter report that the \$41 million has not been touched and is still recorded in the

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books. We are talking about wait times. The government is talking about a pilot project. This is what I want to know specifically: What has the government done with the \$41 million from the federal government in the last eight months, and how much of it is left?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, if the member opposite had been paying attention, he would have seen that that money is being deployed. That money is being deployed to provide the service to the people in the province.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, when it comes to some of the announcements that have been made, we have seen Horizon increasing its ability to do surgeries. That announcement was made the other week. We have seen more and more services being provided to people. I was very excited to attend the first class, the opening class, for EMTs in the Moncton area. That is a new initiative that will have EMTs in the ambulances probably by the first of next year, in January. It was interesting that those individuals were aged 19 to 62—people starting their careers and people having second or third careers. The money is being invested, and it is being invested in the people of New Brunswick. We are getting the job done.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, it sounds as though the minister is having a hard time telling us where the money is being invested. He is talking about different announcements, but we want to know whether the money they are getting from the federal government is going toward the initiatives it is meant to or whether they are just padding their surpluses.

Now, while our Premier is out meeting with Premier Ford, they are united and are talking about getting 35% from the federal government to cover health care budgets. They want 35%. That represents \$200 million more in New Brunswick, but the government members cannot tell us what they are doing with \$41 million. This is while they have record surpluses of \$400 million and \$700 million over those announced. At Q1, they had \$20 million unallocated in their own health care budget.

Can the minister or the Premier tell us what the government plans to do with the extra money from the federal government, or is it just going to pad the surplus even more?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, once again, the member from the opposition is trying to go to a number of different topics, hoping that he will get a

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headline or a tweet from somewhere. Here is the reality: We are investing this money in the people of New Brunswick to improve their health care. That is the bottom line.

When you look at the capital budget that is going to come out and some of the moves that will be made shortly from some of the announcements that I have made, you can see that the money is being invested wisely and is getting results. I have a statement coming up about the NB Health Link, which is connecting patients who do not have a family doctor with primary care providers. Those primary care providers offer people a service that can track them, help them, and improve their health so that they do not end up in the emergency room. This government is working to solve the problems.

[Translation]

FRENCH IMMERSION

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are unique in New Brunswick, and we are extremely fortunate to be the only officially bilingual province in Canada. Our two linguistic communities are unique and recognized by an Act. We stand out, and we reap huge benefits from it, both economically and socially.

While the English language is easy to learn through contact with the Anglophone community, learning the French language is mainly done through French immersion, and the majority of students who complete the program at least achieve a level of conversational French that is often higher. So, what evidence have you that shows that eliminating French immersion will result in a better success rate in attaining a conversational level of French?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I fully agree with the member for Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston. We live in such a unique province. We live in the only province in Canada that is officially bilingual.

In my family, both of my grandmothers are from Tracadie: the Paulin and Losier families. So, I acknowledge that we are in a bilingual province. It is not right to say that we are going to eliminate French immersion. We are going to transform our system into a universal and inclusive system for all our students.

I cannot believe that opposition members want to maintain a program that only produces good results for a small number of students. The former president of the New Brunswick Teachers' Association often talked about classroom composition and problems created by French immersion.

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[Original]

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In their *Report on second-language learning*, Commissioners Finn and McLaughlin state that a “common program for all would logically offer less time studying French than the current French immersion model”. Can the minister explain how Anglophone students spending less time studying French would provide a better opportunity for them to become more proficient in their second official language?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member from the other side for the question. It is a very good question. We will look at the French immersion program, but first, before I get into that, I want to make it clear that French instruction will continue next year for all our students in English schools. We are not eliminating French instruction.

We are looking at the results from immersion. With the language proficiency structure, the targeted goal for French immersion is Advanced Plus, and 28% of our students reach it. We want all our students in our province to attain a level of conversational proficiency, which is Intermediate, which is what the member opposite is referring to. We are transforming French instruction in Grade 1 so that all our students will achieve that goal. We are not taking anything away.

[Translation]

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, it would be embarrassing if students in Alberta had access to a better education in French than students in New Brunswick. The bar must not be lowered to a mediocre level of French conversation, but rather raised and improved so that more and more New Brunswickers, no matter where they live, can learn this language and access this culture and what makes us unique here in New Brunswick.

Why is this government trying to lower the bar? Mr. Minister, can you share the data that influenced your decision to favour an inferior level of French for everybody, even if it is detrimental to young people who want a more comprehensive learning of French?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Again, I thank the member opposite. We know that the immersion program works very well for a small number of students. These students achieve the expected levels. However, as the member said, the majority of students reach an intermediate level. We want every student to reach at least this level. Over the 12 school years, we will create opportunities for those who want to have a much richer French experience, if they are interested. It is not about taking something and eliminating it. Given that only 30% of New Brunswickers are bilingual, this issue must be addressed.

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[Original]

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

HYDRAULIC FRACTURING

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Mr. Speaker, many New Brunswickers were shocked at the announcement in the throne speech that the government is going to move ahead with shale gas exploration. At a time when governments are looking at how we can all address climate change...

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order, please. Member, please proceed.

[Translation]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

At a time when governments are looking at how we can all address climate change, this seems to be a bit tone-deaf. How does this fit in with the provincial Climate Change Plan that was delivered by the Minister of Environment last week?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, I would like to bring to his attention that he is taking an approach of being concerned about this government moving forward with the discussion around shale gas. I think that he might want to go to the back and have a conversation with his leader, because we can provide him with the links to three different media interviews from 2013 when she was talking about the jobs, the GDP, and the opportunity that this represents for New Brunswick. Were you cross-threaded with your leader on this in the same way that you were cross-threaded with your leader about the development of the SMRs?

Mr. Speaker, I am very confused about the fact that there are inconsistencies within the official opposition. And that is creating distractions for our talking about having conversations about opportunities. Would the member opposite be concerned about the fact that the globe is facing energy crisis issues and we are standing here ready to step in and talk about solutions, not just for New Brunswick but also for the globe?

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[*Translation*]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thought our role was to ask the questions and that of the government was to give the answers. That is what question period is. However, I think that government members have misunderstood the concept. If you want to be in the opposition, cross the floor and come sit here; I will sit there.

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Mr. Speaker...

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you.

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Mr. Speaker, there is in place a moratorium on shale gas exploration with certain conditions that must be met prior to lifting the moratorium. One of these conditions is clear and credible information about the impacts of hydraulic fracturing on our health, environment, and water, allowing us to develop a country-leading regulatory regime with sufficient enforcement capabilities. What has been done by the Minister of Environment and Climate Change and his department to address this condition?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, we are going to have a conversation about the aspects of shale gas development and natural gas development and the moratorium that was put in place. That moratorium that was put in place by a government whose advisor was the existing leader, who was pro-shale gas in 2013. Let's never lose sight of the fact that that is very, very much of a conflict for us.

When we are talking about concerns about the moratorium and the conditions to it, is the member opposite concerned at all that, based on the circumstances that we have seen with the changing energy futures and the issues that we have had... The member for



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Memramcook-Tantramar talked last week about being ashamed of the discussion on natural gas. Is anybody ashamed of the fact that there are jurisdictions in this world that are facing the return to coal this winter—the return to coal this winter? Are you worried about the environment, or are you just worried about your backyard?

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, we have a retention and recruitment crisis in our health care sector. This has resulted in emergency room closures in rural hospitals such as in my hometown of Sackville. People are being asked to avoid emergency rooms in urban hospitals. There are shortages of physicians, nurses, radiation technologists, and anesthesiologists within our public health care system.

This makes me deeply concerned about the Minister of Health's plan to create private sector competition for our public health care system. Last week, I received a letter signed by almost 100 New Brunswickers who are concerned about the further erosion of our public health care system, including by the virtual care company eVisitNB and the Acadie-Bathurst Ophthalmology Center. We have already seen a trend of privatizing management with Medavie Health Services managing more things, from Ambulance New Brunswick to NB Health Link.

Why is the Minister of Health creating a private health care sector for Horizon and Vitalité to compete with for human resources?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to talk about some of the successes we have had in New Brunswick. I call them successes because we have increased the contact between the people of New Brunswick and the primary caregivers who can help them with the ailments that they are experiencing on a day-to-day basis. Yes, eVisitNB is a project that is allowing people to get prescriptions renewed, to have rashes looked at, to get referrals to other doctors, and to get appointments. And it is paid for by a person's Medicare card, not by their Visa card. That is public health care. Mr. Speaker, that is public health care that is being paid for by Medicare. When you look at the number of providers right across the province, you see that eVisitNB is the way to increase the access to primary care.

We can talk about the clinic in Bathurst that was actually applauded by many, many people. Actually...

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

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): The Minister of Health did not answer my question, and he is mixing up the issues. We are facing the weakening of the public health care system by the strengthening of the private part. The minister is missing the point, Mr. Speaker. We need to work on the retention of nurses in our public sector so that they will



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want to stay and work within Horizon and Vitalité and are not competing with the private sector.

No profits should be made from the privatization and outsourcing of parts of our health care system, but that is what is happening, Mr. Speaker. New Brunswickers value our public health care system. We expect our surgeries to be done by our doctors who do not work for big corporations. But once you bring corporations into the mix, you have a lot of big companies whose goal it is to try to make a profit. So, Mr. Speaker, why is the Minister of Health opening the door for corporate-owned health care in the province?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that the member opposite would get a number of signatures from a number of the fee-for-service doctors who are here in the province and who have been providing service to the population of New Brunswick for years—years and years. It is the same—the same—model. A doctor charges a fee, and it is paid by Medicare. The doctor looks after the equipment in his office, and the doctor looks after the staff in his office, be it an RN, an administrator, or a scribe.

That is the same—the same—model as we have in the Bathurst area. I would suggest that the member opposite go and visit the clinic and talk to Dr. Javidi so she would understand that this is an extension of the services offered by Vitalité—again, paid for by Medicare, not MasterCard. That is public health care. As a matter of fact, it is actually extending the career of some RNs because...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister. I believe that you have had three questions.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): I do not need to see your sheet.

[*Translation*]

HYDRAULIC FRACTURING

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do not know if I missed something last weekend, but it seems like there has been a Cabinet shuffle, since my questions are for the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, but, each time, the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development rises. So my question is now for the Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

[*Original*]

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

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[*Translation*]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Mr. Speaker, another condition of the moratorium is having a plan that mitigates the impact on our public infrastructure and addresses issues such as waste water disposal. As you know, Nova Scotia will not accept any New Brunswick waste water at all. What progress has been made with the plan from the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, and how has the issue been dealt with by his department and not by the Department of Natural Resources and Energy Development?

[*Original*]

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

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, the Minister of Environment, the Minister of Natural Resources, the Minister of Energy, and the Premier's Office have worked very closely on this. We work in conjunction with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. We are working with all sorts of different departments to discuss the opportunity that lies in front of us.

This goes back to something that we campaigned on in 2018. We said that we were going to stand behind the development, in a responsible fashion, of our natural resources here in New Brunswick—something that is that important, something that could play a role in the global reduction of emissions, and something that could allow jurisdictions that are facing a return to coal to turn to an alternative that has fewer emissions. I would absolutely say that we could get answers from a variety of ministers. When it comes to the development of these resources, we have said that it is all-hands-on-deck and that we are looking at ensuring that the safety, the environmental responsibility, and the economic viability—all things—are considered, Mr. Speaker.

FRENCH IMMERSION

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, I have to stand and talk about what one of the ministers said earlier. When we were talking about French immersion, the Minister of Local Governance said, well, the Liberals are not giving any solutions. I will give the minister a solution: Leave it alone. Do not touch it. It is the best program that works in Canada right now. Leave it as such.

To say that you are not taking anything away by taking Grade 1 away is a grave mistake.

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you for dealing with that kindergarten over there.



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Now, this is just to say that to take away Grade 1 and to say that they are not touching anything is just complete bull.

(Interjections.)

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

[*Translation*]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Now, I have a question for the Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, because he is supposedly the token Francophone of this government. What is he going to do about compliance with the *Official Languages Act*? What is he going to do?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, during the by-elections this summer, a man was elected to represent the riding of Miramichi Bay-Neguac.

The man is from Neguac. Actually, I think it is Lagacéville. He loves New Brunswick. That is why the new Minister Responsible for the Regional Development Corporation is in our caucus.

Also, we could have another by-election if the new Liberal leader could decide in which riding she wants to run, whether it be Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Restigouche-Chaleur, or Dieppe. There are none for the moment; we are still waiting.

Mr. Speaker, I am a proud Francophone. I am a graduate of Université de Moncton. I am an Acadian. I can guarantee you that, when we are going to review the *Official Languages Act*, we will do so as a team for the good of all of New Brunswick. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period has expired.