

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

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LITERACY

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the latest report from the Child and Youth Advocate warns about a shocking decline in children's literacy rates. A decline in literacy rates of almost 30% in 10 years is alarming, to say the least, and should focus the attention of the department. The Child and Youth Advocate called for urgent action to stop the decline, suggesting steps to ensure consistent school improvement. Using literacy specialists, ensuring that tools are in place for the early detection and assessment of learning and behavioural challenges, and addressing family literacy by providing community resources are just a few of the suggestions that the Child and Youth Advocate outlined.

This is serious, Mr. Speaker. Last year, 40% of Grade 4 children did not meet literacy standards, and we are seeing the lowest rates in 18 years. So will the minister advise as to what specific measures have been taken to address this most serious issue and what other initiatives are under consideration?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the question. I was at the presentation last week and I did agree with Mr. Lamrock. I think one of the things he said that struck me the most was that, from K to 2, we teach children to read and that, from Grade 3 onward, they read to learn. So I would agree wholeheartedly with that. We need to look at where we were—what we were doing when we had great success with reading. I happened to be at the elementary level during that time, and we had literacy mentors working directly in the classrooms on the Anglophone side, working with teachers and taking students out in small groups for catch-up.

As for the recent results from the Francophone side, when I investigated those, I found that they were primarily due to the pandemic. We have had a drop in reading scores because of that. If you look prior to the pandemic on the Francophone side, you see that the reading scores were on the rise. There is no reason to believe that that will not continue when returning to our previous practice on the Francophone side. Thank you.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is good to hear that the minister does agree with the Child and Youth Advocate, but we also need to heed the warning from the Child and Youth Advocate. He is saying that we are seeing the lowest rates in 18 years and showing us solutions to address the problem. We know that this minister has a hard time listening to teachers and parents who are offering advice, but he has to listen to those who are on the front lines.

We know that children are suffering after being left out of classrooms for the past couple of years because of COVID-19, which has contributed to these literacy rates. We have been calling for the minister to bring forward a comprehensive plan to address the catch-up that

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we need in our schools—addressing literacy at the same time. So where are those resources? Where are the resources to give students the best chance of success and to do the assessments necessary for behavioural challenges and learning difficulties? When can we see a comprehensive strategy from this government to address those issues?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you kindly, Mr. Speaker. The question from the opposite side is certainly interesting. It is refreshing to see the new Liberal Party. It sounds a lot like the old one under Brian Gallant. Being the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development for just a little over five weeks now, I am not quite sure how anybody could conclude, since I just started, that I do not listen to teachers or to parents for that matter. I think that is a wee bit of a stretch.

One size does not fit all. I certainly know that the former President of the New Brunswick Teachers' Association has a lot to say on the subject. You know, if he has stuff to suggest, he can do that with me after. However, one size does not fit all our students. We are looking at where we need to provide catch-up across the board, not just in reading and writing, and we are going to continue to do that and to support our students individually, to best meet their needs. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

EDUCATION

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, this minister has been in his position for five weeks, yes, but this government has been in office for four years. That is four years of inaction from this government, Mr. Speaker. Our children must not fall behind academically, and that should be the number one priority, instead of the elimination of programs and other things. Efforts should be focused on catching up on schooling for our children. The NBTA warned that teachers were subjected to stress because of the pandemic and the staff shortage. However, we are asking them to do more while giving them fewer resources, Mr. Speaker.

As I have said, this government is eliminating effective education programs. It is running huge surpluses, but it is not investing to make sure we have enough teachers and other education specialists to deal with this crisis. We need these specialists for our children. The minister should change his focus. Instead of eliminating programs, he should be investing in making a truly good program...

[*Original*]

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



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[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I thank the member for his question, but I wonder who writes these questions. I have not been minister for four years; I have been minister for just a little over five weeks.

We are not eliminating programs. More specifically, yesterday, I had a meeting with the superintendents in the Francophone sector. We talked about the deficits they ran because of the pandemic, inflation, and several other reasons. We assured them we would pay their costs. We are moving forward; we are not eliminating any programs. We are continuing to do the work that is required to meet the needs of our students and enhance their learning. The goal is to create a great education system here in New Brunswick. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

FRENCH IMMERSION

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, with the proposed French-for-all program expected to replace early French immersion, the minister and the Premier want all students to have a conversational level of French. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages identifies four settings for the conversational use of French, and they are: in a personal setting, such as between family and friends, where there is no great concern about fluency or accuracy; in a public setting, where you can be understood and are not too concerned about accuracy; in a work-related setting, using French in a job or profession where fluency and accuracy are important; and, finally, in an educational setting, where you are speaking with educated French speakers with confidence, fluency, and accuracy. For which of these settings will the new French-for-all program prepare our students?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you kindly, again, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. It is a little ironic to hear criticisms about the decline in language arts and literacy skills and not meeting those targets, yet referring to French immersion... It is referring to conversational French as where we want to be.

We are looking at improving the Anglophone school system. We are looking at implementing a universal immersive program for all our students. In doing that, we are going to address streaming and the issues created by streaming in our Anglophone school system. We are going to level the playing field for all our students so that they can all have an equal chance and an equal opportunity to achieve. This idea that we are somehow watering down a program is simply false. I wish that the members opposite would stop doing that.

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Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, yes, level the playing field, but we do not know what the field looks like.

We are hearing that the minister's plan is for kindergarten and Grade 1 students to receive 90 minutes of French per day as second language instruction. Is it the intention of this government to prepare future generations to be confident speakers in their second language, or is it simply for them to be able to have limited interaction with family and friends?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, you know, we want to create a bilingual population in our province. We want to start in Grade 1 next year. Hopefully, eventually, it will be kindergarten, Grade 1, Grade 2, and right on through the system. We are going to have a universal program, an immersive French experience. I do not know where the member opposite gets 90 minutes per day. The exact percentage has yet to be determined. That will be rolled out in December.

You know, this is something that we are serious about. We want the best for all our children. We want the best for all our Anglophone students. We want to create a universal, world-class education system to give our students the best chance at success that they could possibly have in the world. Whether that be a conversational level of French wherever they are working... Through school, students will have the opportunity to specialize, as they would with any other subject, such as math or science. To improve their French skills, we will look at language...

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

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, about 14% of students are currently exempt from French classes in Anglophone schools. What exemption rate will be allowed under the new program?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, when we launch a universal program, it means "universal". So, this program will be intended for all our students. We will not leave some students out because they cannot participate in the program. Everyone can speak and learn French like any other language.

Personally, I did not speak French in high school. It is a language that I only learned in university—at St. Thomas University and Université Laval—and I have used it throughout my life. As I have said before in the House, even though I do not speak perfect French, I believe I can communicate well with others. There was a time when I wrote in French daily,

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and I did it well. However, I have not done so in a very long time, so I have a hard time writing in French. It is important to practice after graduating from school.

[Original]

GOVERNMENT FINANCES

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, a budget is an interesting tool. It is more than just numbers and columns. A budget is a plan. It tells a story—a story that shows what the intentions are of a team, an organization, or even a government. In the last case, a budget should also reflect how it will impact the quality of life for its target audience. For example, the province is now anticipating another large surplus for the end of the year, but for many people in New Brunswick, this surplus will bring them very little relief or help.

In this context, we would anticipate that one of the departments that would see the most increased spending is Social Development, where the need is greatest. Yet in his Q1 update, the Minister of Finance predicted that by year-end, this department was going to spend \$1.497 billion. Three months later, he now anticipates that the same department will spend \$1.477 billion, which is a full \$20 million less. Can the Minister of Finance explain why he anticipates spending less money as the need continues to grow?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, to the member across the way for the question. Do you know what? What we plan to do with our budget and with every budget is to serve New Brunswickers. That is what we plan to do. We have had a lot of talk today about children and the education system. Yes, we plan to budget. We plan to budget for the next generation. You have heard me say that before, and it is absolutely true.

We plan to budget more for Social Development and for health care, as we have in the past. Under this government, social assistance rates increased out of this budget. The health plan was financed over this budget. We continue to help New Brunswickers in Social Development and in Education, with the health plan, and throughout our student population with PETL and by helping out with no-interest loans on... Student loans—I do not know why I could not think of that. Money is not the only solution, but it is the tool that we have in Finance and Treasury Board. We continue to help New Brunswickers, and we will continue to help New Brunswickers in the future.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): There you go, Mr. Speaker. Yes, the government is going to spend more money. I looked at Q2 predictions, and the government is going to spend a little bit more because things cost more in Environment, Finance, Health, Justice and Public Safety, DNR, Opportunities New Brunswick, and PETL. But the government is not planning to spend in Social Development, as he just said. There is \$20 million less. Is Social Development not subject to inflation?

(Interjections.)

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Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): I am getting it from the Finance Minister's report right here. You should read it. It is really interesting. It says nothing.

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): I did not hear a question at the end of that, but we will continue talking about what we are doing right. We are doing tons of stuff right, ladies and gentlemen, here in the House. We are planning for the future, as I said. We are helping people. We added more money to housing. We are lowering taxes. For personal income taxes, we are raising the basic personal amount.

Mr. Speaker, we continue to budget appropriately, rolling out that new health plan. The debt is going down. Our net debt-to-GDP is well below 30% now. It is around about 26%. We think that we can have it down to 24%. That means paying less to service the debt. That means more money available to help New Brunswickers. That is what this government does. You talk about a surplus. It is a surplus that is being used to help New Brunswickers. That is what this government does.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, the question is: Why are you spending less on the Department of Social Development? You had a plan at the beginning of the year to spend a certain amount, with all kinds of programs and intentions to spend. Things have gone up. The Premier and the minister always tell us how things are costing more now because of inflation. They cannot not be subject to this. So there are more costs, and things are more expensive.

Why are you predicting to spend less in the Department of Social Development when all the other departments are going to have more? I say less for Social Development because there is an outcry in New Brunswick for more help. Everybody wants more help. This government keeps saying that it is going to bring forward more help, and it puts on paper that it is going to pay less money. Where are you going to get the money, if it is not from that department? Minister, why is it less?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): It is interesting to see the shallow questions and shallow comments continue. Mr. Speaker, their view would be to say, okay, if we just put more money into it, everything will be fine. Well, they have proven over and over and over again that it does not work.

But we have said that everywhere we put money, we expect your tax dollars to work for you—work for us, Mr. Speaker. There is the housing program that is out, the change in the social assistance programs, and the reduction in taxes so that more people will want to work, and there are the reductions in interest rates that protect our future generations because we will not be paying more and more as interest rates go up.

Mr. Speaker, I know that the members opposite have no future in mind but their own and that they would put out money just to have a headline. But it is so shallow to look at a Q2

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report with such a minor increment and say, oh, this is down a little bit. Well, Mr. Speaker, let me tell you what is up. The results are up. We will continue to get results, and everybody living in our province sees that. And, yes, the economy is booming.

[*Translation*]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, bilingualism is a good thing. Other Canadian provinces envy us in New Brunswick, where different people decide to work together, hand in hand, to grow and build a better province. Language—language—is a tool that should be used to build, and not a weapon used to destroy or to divide.

Now, on both sides of this House, we are accusing each other of being divisive. I will be very clear: We do not want anyone to lose anything; we want everyone to gain. Let me tell you: When you start taking away vested rights, you are heading for chaos, anarchy, and conflict.

My question is for the Minister of Public Safety: In committee, will you use your voice to ensure that no one loses ground when it comes to official languages, because, on our side, we refuse to back down even an inch? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Minister of Public Safety, Solicitor General, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I find it very interesting that the only one who is talking about dividing this province is on the other side of the aisle.

We have said repeatedly and I have said repeatedly that I fully support the right of both Francophones and Anglophones to receive service in their language of choice. I have requested and I have pushed that it be done in a fair and equitable manner. Now, if the members opposite do not understand what fair and equitable is, that is on them—google it. At the end of the day, this is about New Brunswickers, French and English alike, coming together, regardless of what language you speak, and prospering and having a future in this province.

It is a division that is caused by the members opposite that continue to fuel this issue rather than deal with what really matters to New Brunswickers in ensuring that constitutional rights are respected. To the member opposite's question, I can assure you that I have never and I never will do anything to reduce constitutional rights for Anglophones or Francophones in this province.

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[Translation]

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you for the answer. I will move on to my next question. On January 15, 2021, to be exact, the current Minister of Public Safety talked to CBC about what ideally should be done on the official languages file. He said that all of the different political parties should be involved in the process in the House to debate the issue.

Well, that is what we have been asking for over the past few weeks. It would be a great idea. We would get all the views from across the province. All parties would be represented. All members would have the opportunity to add their voice to the debate. That is what the current Minister of Public Safety said last year, in 2021, to CBC. I want to ask him this: Does he still believe the same thing today?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Minister of Public Safety, Solicitor General, PC): Mr. Speaker, I have always believed that the best way democracy works is when committees are formed, when people come together and discuss policy and discuss ideas, and then they come out with some decisions from those discussions. At the point when those decisions are made, if the official opposition then wants to criticize the decisions or applaud the decisions, that is fair game. But to come out and say that certain people should not sit on a committee... That is nothing about the final decisions. That is simply all about canceling or muzzling any opposite voice. I have always said that in order to have the best policy and the best decisions at the end of the day, you have to have all voices at the table.

Now, we all agree on the same thing in relation to constitutional rights. How we implement bilingualism in a way that is effective for both Francophones and Anglophones is a discussion we need to have in this province. We have been doing it for 50 years. We talk about immersion and we talk about the education system. We have to talk about the *Official Languages Act* and ensure that those rights are...

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

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last Friday, CBC broadcast drone footage of homes in Caraquet that are now teetering on the edge of a cliff above Chaleur Bay, thanks to the erosion caused by climatic upheaval. Jacqueline Mallet's front yard has already fallen into the sea. Up the shore from Caraquet, the First Nations community of Eel River Bar has already had to demolish some homes and relocate others because of sea erosion. Here in the south, Bruce and Monica Hughes have lost their backyard and garage into the Keswick River. Their house is next.



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The UN Secretary-General says that we are on the highway to climate hell with our foot on the accelerator. Will the Minister of Environment and Climate Change at least establish a fund to help New Brunswickers relocate their homes that are teetering on the road to ruin?

Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, to the member across the way for the question. There is money available right now, going through the mitigation—I believe federal and provincial. The member used some examples from across the province that are true. They are real. We will be attacking those and identifying them, as we have been.

Regarding the assessments across the province—just for an update, member—the government is committed to completing a province-wide risk assessment. Having said that, work on this action plan has begun. The staff have been meeting with other jurisdictions to learn about the experiences in Caraquet and in other parts of the province. You mentioned the Hughes family as well. I believe that they have moved recently. It is terrible when you lose your home. When the water is coming down the stream, the banks give way, and they do not hold up as they used to.

It is important to understand that while a lot of work has gone into the complete provincial risk assessment, adaptation has always been at the forefront—and for future mitigation, too. We need to make plans for future development to identify flood areas. Climate change is here and is not going to get any better in the very near future, so we need to adapt and be ready for it.

[*Translation*]

FOOD

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, urgent action is needed to protect New Brunswickers from the consequences of climate disruptions. We must secure not only our coasts and shores, but also our food supply. Our volatile climate has reduced the production of American corn, tomatoes, rice, and wheat that we import. That drives up the costs of food today, and will reduce the supply of food imports in the future. We need to work with our neighbouring provinces to become more food self-sufficient. Mr. Speaker, has the Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries set targets and a timeline to reduce our dependence on food imports by increasing our local food supply?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Well, if the member opposite had listened to the throne speech, he would have heard that we have an increase in exports second only to Alberta—\$14.7 billion. This is the highest that we have had in over a decade. Seafood alone is at an all-time high at



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\$2.2 billion. We have had challenges—yes—but we continue to work for our sectors, finding new markets for our world-leading commodities.

We are working with the Department of Health. We have seen a 24% increase in vegetable production and 41 new greenhouses to promote year-round growth. We are working with ONB to extend fruit and vegetable production. We are working with 10 communities that are looking at food action grants, which have been put into action 22 times. Some 1 100 New Brunswickers have joined the Food For All NB bilingual network. We have promoted 12 additional abattoir and local meat projects. We have worked with the Department of Health to encourage healthy food in hospitals, food banks, and soup kitchens, and with the Department of Education to ensure local, healthy foods for our children and our Indigenous communities. We work with the Department of Health to encourage...

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

HEALTH

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, it is very disheartening and alarming that New Brunswick has the second-highest rate of COVID-19 cases in the country. Our health resources are stretched beyond belief, and if case counts continue to rise, our hospital system may soon be overwhelmed even more than it already is. On Friday, I asked questions about what this government is planning if this situation gets worse. Is there a plan to activate New Brunswickers? What would trigger government action? All that the minister could say is that they continue to work day-to-day with the RHAs and with health care providers, but there is no real plan to offer us. While other governments are springing into action, this government seems to be sitting on its hands when it comes to this triple threat that we are seeing. Why is this government not more action-oriented in trying to address this serious public health concern? What is the plan if the situation gets worse?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to stand and answer that question in the Legislature today. On Friday, we had the Acting Chief Medical Officer come out and talk to the media. He was available to media and answered all the questions. I know that, again, from the standpoint of having a plan and working with the RHAs, we are happy to do that. We continue to do that. We know that the system is stressed, and we know that the workers are stressed and that they have been stepping up day in, day out and addressing the issues. Again, on a daily basis, we work. We know that the RHAs, with the CEOs and the trustees and the frontline workers, are working together to make sure that we are ready.

But people can do things on their own to help make sure that we are prepared as well. I went through a list the other day. The Acting Chief Medical Officer went through a list today. There is a list available, whether it is getting your vaccinations, getting boosted, wearing a mask if you wish, coughing into your hand or your sleeve, making sure...



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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, RSV infections are up at least 800% in New Brunswick compared to last year, but Public Health has confirmed that it is not reporting RSV numbers and is uncertain as to whether it will do so in the future. We are bringing this up because it is very important, as we are seeing an increase in cases in young children and in hospitalizations. We must take action. We must have a government that is ready to take action.

While RSV is not a reportable disease, I would suggest that Public Health report these numbers as we need this information to make good public health decisions. This information is important. The minister said that it is important because people need the information to make decisions about protecting themselves and protecting others. There is no downside to having good public baseline data on illnesses. Is the minister prepared to suggest to Public Health that this information be compiled and reported, similar to the flu and the COVID-19 numbers? It is our children's health that is at risk here, Mr. Speaker, and we need some action from this government.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, I appreciate the question. I think that it has been clear all along that Public Health has been available. Public Health has been engaged. It has answered many, many questions from the media. There have been RTIs. The list goes on and on and on. It continues to monitor various diseases such as RSV.

Again, when I see the reports that come out, I am as concerned as anybody else. I have asked for a briefing on this, and I have asked whether it should be reviewed or whether it should be reportable. But, Mr. Speaker, when it comes to people helping themselves, we and the opposition should know what needs to be done to protect ourselves and the people next to us. Make sure that if you are sick, you stay home. Make sure that you get your boosters. Wear a mask if you want to. Cough into your sleeve. If you are feeling ill or have a prolonged temperature or whatnot, take a COVID-19 test. Dial 811. Go to <www.evisitnb.ca>. This list goes...

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian Medical Association is warning of a resurgence of seasonal respiratory virus. As I said about COVID-19, it is very alarming that New Brunswick now has the second-highest number of cases. As I said, our health care resources are being used to the greatest possible extent. We are overwhelmed. Emergency rooms are overwhelmed, Mr. Speaker.

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While other governments are acting and taking immediate measures, this government seems to be doing nothing in the face of the resurgence of the respiratory virus in the province, Mr. Speaker. What is just as alarming is that RSV infections are up at least 800% in New Brunswick over last year. The increase is mostly among young people, and that is concerning to me, because I have young children too, Mr. Speaker. I hope the minister will consider reporting this data.

Once again, though, I am going to ask this: If this unfortunate prediction proves true, what does the government intend to do to reduce the risk of transmission and to prepare for an outbreak?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, I have said it, and I will say it again. That is no problem, Mr. Speaker. The precautions that people can take are evident. Get your children vaccinated. Get yourself vaccinated. Get your flu shot. You should get a shot of flu serum to prevent disease. The list of what people can do to prevent the spread of viruses goes on and on. Again, I am not sure what the members opposite are getting at. If they want a mask mandate to come back, they should just come out and say that. What I have asked my staff to do is to report back to me, do the research, and make sure... If this is something that we need to be doing to protect the public, then let's do it.

Mr. Speaker, from the standpoint of protecting the public, the public itself owns a lot of that power on how to protect itself. I have gone through the list. I was mocked by the opposition over there. That is all right. The fact of the matter is that we are working day in, day out to make sure that people are protected here in New Brunswick.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you. The time for question period is over.