

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



November 23, 2022

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HOMELESSNESS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am going to start with the story that came out of Moncton this week with regard to the issue of homelessness, which is not being addressed by this government. I would say that this is a government that is out of touch with reality and out of touch with New Brunswickers' needs. It is bragging about a surplus—a \$774-million surplus—but neglecting those who are in need, such as the homeless.

Moncton city council has joined the chorus of those calling for the province to immediately address this issue. They talk about over 500 people now living rough in Moncton. That is up from just a few months ago, in the summertime, when the number was 400. This figure is only going to get worse unless this government addresses the problem. Mr. Speaker, I would submit that the investments this government has made to address homelessness fall far short of what is needed. I would like to hear from the minister about what she will do to address this immediate and severe problem.

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, as you know, in almost every city in this province, we are seeing a very visible homeless population, which has grown. So we have taken action, and I want to assure the members opposite that we are working strategically with local stakeholders on the ground and also with people across government departments. This is a very important end priority for this government.

Look, first of all, you said that we have done nothing, so I really need to say that in the last three years, we have housed—permanently housed—over 800 homeless individuals. Only a month ago, we announced a doubling of the shelter budget. So, Mr. Speaker, an additional \$8 million is going to be put into this over the next three years, and there are more efforts being put forward. I would be happy to talk about those.

HOMELESS SHELTERS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the government members talk about taking action and they talk about housing, but we know that the wait-list under Social Development has only grown—significantly—since they came into office, going from something like 5 000 to over 8 000 now. They talk about \$8 million for shelters over three years, but they have not provided any details about how or where that money will be spent or used.

Is the money actually being allocated? Or is it making a difference for the issue? It is certainly not making a difference in Moncton, as we are seeing. The Mayor of Moncton is

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pleading with the province to step up for more targeted spending to specifically address this issue in the community. They are talking about seniors and youth and about the working poor—individuals who are living in their cars and who are not getting a leg up, Mr. Speaker, and it is only getting worse.

The minister has yet to provide any details around this \$8 million. Could she provide us with the details around the money that is being directed toward emergency shelters in the city?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, on the day that we issued the press release, I was in Moncton. I actually met in person and spoke with people from Harvest House, House of Nazareth, and ReConnect, which are three incredible agencies that are providing services on the ground. Those are people that we rely on to bring us information and to tell us what their needs are. All those organizations, including the faith-based community, are working together and contributing to help provide the services that are coming.

We are into the cold weather, Mr. Speaker. We know, when the temperature hits -10°, that individuals are at severe risk of being impacted. I am not going to give a detailed analysis today because contracts are being finalized and being put in place with all the stakeholders in these communities, in Saint John, Moncton, Fredericton, Bathurst, and Miramichi. We are working on the ground to ensure that we are giving as much as we can to these local communities. We are helping individuals on the ground. We have invested...

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister is telling us that she is working on this file. She told the Mayor of Moncton that she is working on this file, but we do not see this work on the ground. It is nothing but words, Mr. Speaker.

Why can the minister not give us details on this \$8 million for shelters in the province? What we are being told is that, even with the investments that have not yet been made public . . . The Mayor revealed Monday evening that they will not even be enough to solve the problem. We are told that 225 shelter beds might be added in the city, but there are more than 500 people in need right now.

The mayor is pleading with the government and asking that the \$774-million surplus be used to solve the problem. Come to us with real action, Mr. Speaker. Does the minister realize that, if she does not solve this problem, others will die on the streets?

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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): Mr. Speaker, I worry about that every single night. I am going to caution the member opposite to try to be part of the solution. We want the opposition's help. And the municipalities... We absolutely want to work with our municipalities, not only on homelessness but also on housing.

In fact, ours is the first government in decades to invest \$100 million in public housing, to increase the 14 000-plus units we already have. We know that there is a lot being done, and we know that more can be done. We want to support those who are living rough—those who are homeless and those who are struggling with mental health and addictions.

All these components come together. We know that every government department has a responsibility to help us, and we are doing that. I urge every mayor in this province to work with us, to have that reaching hand, to tell us what they can do to help us—offer us buildings, offer us support—and to tell us what they want to do. We will do everything we can to support them, Mr. Speaker.

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I will take the minister up on her offer. This is what I would like this government to do. The government members talk about addressing this issue now. They have been in government for four years, and the homelessness situation—in Moncton, Fredericton, other cities, and rural New Brunswick—is getting worse.

What the government has in its Addiction and Mental Health Action Plan is supportive housing. We are throwing money at projects. Yes, they are making little differences here and there, but the complex cases of individuals on the streets with complex needs are not being addressed. They need concrete services. They need wraparound services and supportive housing with case managers to monitor progress in order to get them ahead, to get them transitioned to the next stage, where we have housing available to them through projects being worked on. But we have to get them ready to transition into those units. If the government is not going to address supportive housing, which is in its action plan... This is something that has been brought up for decades, but we have not seen action. Is this government ready to move forward on that action item?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I realize that when you are in opposition, you are not always intimately involved in what is happening behind the scenes. So let me try to draw a picture of what has been happening. Not only has the government been working on increasing our housing stock... The Leader of the Opposition talked about wraparound services. You know, that is what the

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12 Neighbours project is all about. That is what Rising Tide in Moncton is all about. That is what the Outflow Ministry in Saint John has been working on for so long that I cannot even remember. We understand that mental health and addictions have to be addressed as well, and in order for us to succeed, we must have wraparound services.

Mr. Speaker, we have been doing the work. We are putting these programs in place to help individuals transition from living on the streets to potentially living in shelters for a very short time and then progressing them on to transitional housing. There has been a lot of investment done, and that will continue to be done. We are going to grow that program.

[Translation]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I feel myself repeating the same thing again and again like an old broken record, but I have been asking the Premier the same question for a long time: When will he release his response to the review of the *Official Languages Act*? Listen, the last time he said he would do it in the fall.

I went to Tunisia with two ministers who, by the way, did a good job there. However, while we were away, some rather worrisome things were brewing here, from what I have heard. We are afraid that, if the Premier keeps his word about responding in the fall—December 16 being technically considered fall—that he will wait until the very last minute to provide his response and will not give the opposition or anybody else a chance to discuss it. The only thing we will be able to do is talk about it over the Christmas turkey. Will the Premier act now and provide a response immediately? Thank you.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, you know, I have said all along that we will get that done this fall. I do not see it coming on the last day of the session—no, I do not. I see our having it ready in the next few weeks.

You know, the member opposite will carry on and talk about innuendos and talk about how they have heard this and they think that. The speculation continues. But I want to say that we have looked at and are continuing to very seriously look at a response that continues to protect the constitutional rights and continues to enshrine the rights and the freedoms that we expect in a bilingual province such as New Brunswick. I have said over and over again that we will not infringe upon or decrease anyone's rights in any way, shape, or form. I would like to think that there would be some solace taken in that.

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Our goal is to ensure, as we go forward, that we have a society that is progressing and working together, that we are respecting all the rights, and that we build a province that will continue to grow at a record pace, as it is today. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I mean, that is a nice answer from the Premier. However, there are a few discrepancies that I would like to raise. First of all, the end of the session is in a little over three weeks. When he says in a “few weeks”, if it is not the last day, I am hoping that it is not two or three days before. We need enough time to talk about this in the Legislature and in society before the Christmas break.

The other thing is that, when the Premier says that the law is enshrined, he is absolutely right. However, when we look at the actions of this government, when we look at what it is doing with French immersion, and when we look at what it is talking about with regard to bilingual school buses and having students transported on public transit, we see that it is clearly in violation of constitutional rights. So, the Premier just said something, yet he acts in a different way. Can the Premier do what he says and make sure that those rights are protected? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I have continued to say that we will ensure that all rights are protected, and they will be reflected in any decisions that are made, without question. What is interesting here is that the member opposite would continue to speculate on any discussions that we might have. He is basically saying that we should not talk about anything, that we should not try to have Anglophones speak more French, and that we should not try to improve the outcomes of our Anglophone system.

Mr. Speaker, we are trying to be as good as the Francophone system. We are trying to have 95% of students graduate and not only be able to speak both official languages but also have higher capabilities in academia, in terms of math and sciences and in literacy of all kinds. So, Mr. Speaker, I just do not understand why the members opposite think that it is acceptable that 72% of our Anglophone kids are graduating and are not speaking both official languages. I do not understand how they can discount 72% of the Anglophones in our province.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, the Premier is right. It is not acceptable. However, where we fundamentally disagree with this Premier and this government is not with the fact that they should expand on French language in the Anglophone sector. They absolutely should. They should not, however, disband the French immersion program that exists now. You build on it. You do not destroy it and try something new again. That is the issue that I have with this, but there are other things.

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[Translation]

Also, there is another thing, Mr. Speaker. It has been said—we heard some rather strong and worrisome rumours last week when we were in Tunisia—that the government wants to weaken the role of the Commissioner of Official Languages and abolish 10-year reviews of the *Official Languages Act*. Things like that are cause for concern. Yesterday, I heard that the Premier said he did not want to change these two things. However, I want him to say it today in the House to reassure us that his words will be followed by actions. Thank you very much.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, rumours, innuendo, and gossip, probably between each other, about what might, what could, what may... Mr. Speaker, I would think that decisions or opinions would be based on substance and actual actions, not on innuendos as to how we can fearmonger through this process. I would say to the member opposite that we are going through it, we will have it out, and it will not be done on the last day. I will tell him right now that it will not be done on the last day.

The concept here is how to look and grow together, how to become a bilingual society in our province unlike any other province in the country, how to think bigger and longer and bolder about how great we can be as a province, and how to not be afraid to hear anybody's opinions, because it takes all of us to build a united province. It does not take separation. It takes all of us. I am not afraid to listen to everyone—everyone here and everyone outside of here. That is how we get greater.

NEW BRUNSWICK MUSEUM

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Yes, sure, I am anxious to see how he is going to unite the province. That is a good one.

Mr. Speaker, last week my colleague asked the Minister of Tourism why the construction of the New Brunswick Museum will not be following the construction Act. The minister responded by saying: "Absolutely, legislation will be followed by the board members." Let's read section 10.1 of the minister's own legislation. It says: "The *Crown Construction Contracts Act* and the regulations under the Act do not apply to any agreement made by the Board." My question to the minister is: Will it follow the *Crown Construction Contracts Act* or not?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, in relation to the New Brunswick Museum project, we have seen examples of this. The art gallery right across the road from here is a classic example. It is a case of a board managing the project, working with the private sector, looking at private-

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sector investment, working with best practices, following the tendering process, and ensuring that we have a fair and equitable position for everyone to participate in a construction of this size. There are numerous examples of the government funding projects, be they federal or provincial. The Pays de la Sagouine would be another example of that.

I do not think that there is anything untoward in any way, shape, or form. In fact, I think it is a way to have the full participation of the community all around this province because this is about the New Brunswick Museum. It is a place where First Nations, Black communities, Acadian communities, and Loyalist communities are all represented as well as any other community that has had a part in building our province to what it is today. Thank you.

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Seeing that I did not get an answer, I am just going to take it that we will not be following the *Crown Construction Contracts Act*. By the minister's own admission, because the government would be tripping over red tape—its own red tape—it would take five to seven years to complete the project if the government were to do so. This government is removing a whole layer of accountability by bypassing the *Crown Construction Contracts Act*. How is this going to affect the tendering process? How will it affect land procurement? Who will be accountable for how taxpayers' money is spent? Can the minister shed some light on these questions?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, first, it is really quite exciting to have the honourable member opposite actually utter those words: Who will be accountable for how money is being spent? That is not a new phrase. That must have been written down and highlighted, I would guess.

The point is, what I refer to here is that we have examples of this. We have an example right across the road—I have said this before—of how the procedures are followed and the board is accountable. There are people on the board from all over the province who reflect the best interest and who will build, in this case, a museum that reflects the entire population of our province. We have examples in other boards. I mentioned the Pays de la Sagouine. It is the same situation—federal and provincial support to build a community that is built by the community.

I do not think that there is anything here that the member opposite can particularly find to question that has not already been proven in practice, but I am sure that he will continue. Let's focus on getting value for money. I understand that concept, and that is what we have been talking about with everything that we do. Let's put in more money, let's get more results, and let's make a difference.

Mr. C. Chiasson (Victoria-La Vallée, L): So the Premier has no idea who will be accountable. Not only is the construction of the New Brunswick Museum many years late and three times over the cost of the original plan, but we now also find out that it is not following the

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Crown Construction Contracts Act. Basically, this government is just going to hand over \$160 million to a board that it appoints and give it carte blanche to spend the money as it sees fit with no government oversight whatsoever. Is that correct?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): No, Mr. Speaker, that is not correct, and I doubt that the member opposite is going to understand this in any case.

We have talked about how the boards work in the other projects. That is exactly how they work. We want to talk about an empty thought process? Mr. Speaker, in the election of 2018, guess what came up! It was said: Oh, we need to put a new building in Saint John. We need to build a new museum. Let's announce that on the way through. Do you know what it was? It was an empty box. There were no facts behind it—not a thing. There was just a stop for the election bus and a picture. That is all there was—nothing.

Well, I will ensure the member opposite that what we will know here is a plan, a project, and the details of what it is going to take and how long it is going to take, and my bet is that it will come in on budget, unlike anything that the previous Liberal government members ever built in their life because they do not know what a budget means.

RENTS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Well, Mr. Speaker, winter is coming on, and many tenants have received notices of rent increases for 2023 that would render their apartments unaffordable and force them out of their homes. Outreach workers in Fredericton have, for the first time, seen people sleeping rough and homeless thanks to renovictions. Let's not drive more people onto the streets because of unaffordable rents.

Rent caps keep people housed—"point final"—and time and time again, they have been proven to keep housing affordable. Mr. Speaker, there are only seven sitting days remaining in which the Minister responsible for Housing can introduce a bill to renew the rent cap for 2023 in time to have it become law before Christmas. Will the Minister responsible for Housing table a bill in this House within those next seven days to renew the rent cap?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Tenants have received rent increases. We know this because they have come to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal, which is a separate body that can mediate between tenants and landlords. The Residential Tenancies Tribunal takes a look at the unit, the condition of the unit, and the location of the unit, and makes a determination on whether the rent increase is fair and appropriate for that particular unit.

We need all tenants to come to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal if they receive rent increases that they do not believe are fair and equitable. Only then will we have the



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information about what these rent increases are that you are discussing and be able to make decisions about appropriate measures to assist tenants and landlords in the province. Yet again, I say this: Please have the people who are talking to you go to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, during his media scrum, the Premier told journalists that he and the Minister responsible for Housing had met with major apartment building owners. The Integrity Commissioner's registry of lobbyists does not list any apartment building owners or their agents as lobbyists. My question for the Minister responsible for Housing is simply this: Can the minister name the businesses represented at the meeting that she and the Premier attended?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since being made the Minister responsible for Housing, I have met with many, many stakeholders. These stakeholders include landlords. There is a landlords' association. I have met with it. I have met with tenants' groups. I have met with ACORN. I have met with the municipalities. I have met with various stakeholders all related to housing in New Brunswick, and I am not done yet. I have a lot of meetings left.

So, specifically, to name each company that I have met with, I would be happy to provide you with that later. There was a representation of the landowners' association. They were all members. There are many, many members of the landlords' association. I continue to meet, and I will do that going forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I take the minister's comments as suggesting that she will supply the names of those companies to the House.

Housing is widely recognized as a human right, but really, that right is meaningless if you cannot afford to pay the rent. The Premier and his Cabinet have a choice either to deregulate rent increases, as will happen automatically unless a bill is tabled in the House within the next seven sitting days, or table that bill to keep people housed. I have a fundamental question: Will the Minister responsible for Housing respect the fundamental human right to be housed, or will she let the market decide who has a home and who is going to end up on the streets? Will she bring in that rent cap?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the Minister responsible for Housing, it is my responsibility to weigh the needs of the tenants as well as those of the landlords. I am doing that.



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I am also working with the Residential Tenancies Tribunal, which is an arm's length group that can evaluate whether rent increases proposed by landlords are appropriate for the unit and for the location and then work with the tenants or the landlords to approve, disapprove, or change what the rent increase is. There is a reason that this group is at arm's length. It cannot be interfered with by the government or by outside parties. It is a mediation group, and it is extremely important in this whole process.

This government has introduced numerous policies and legislation to protect both tenants and landlords. We will continue to do that, Mr. Speaker.

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Not unrelated to the issue of housing for New Brunswickers who are struggling to get by is the fact that we are seeing a huge increase in the number of personal bankruptcies in the province. That means that working New Brunswickers are having a harder time to get ahead and they are actually giving up. That is the way it is. That is essentially what they are doing because this government is not there to help them.

The government is not there to provide relief when we have been asking it repeatedly to come to the aid of New Brunswickers. Instead, it is giving tax breaks to the wealthiest while ignoring the needs of the New Brunswickers who are going to have a hard time to put food on the table and to pay the rent, which is, no doubt, going to increase come January 1 when the rent cap is lifted.

Mr. Speaker, I am asking whether the Premier and this government will follow the lead of other provinces, such as Nova Scotia, and come to the aid of New Brunswickers while it has the capacity to do so.

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Yes, we come to the aid of New Brunswickers and New Brunswick businesses all the time. Sustainable growth is what we are about, with \$5 million to accelerate capital investments focused on sustainable growth through Opportunities New Brunswick.

When we talk about insolvencies, absolutely, we know that it is a scary part of doing business. When you are facing those days when you wonder whether you are going to make it or are not going to make it, you pray that if you work hard enough and make smart decisions, you will make it through.

Insolvencies between the first and second quarters of 2022 are down 5% over Q2 of 2021. You should know that. The level is going to remain well below the levels that New Brunswick saw prior to the pandemic as well. It is the same right across Canada. For the opening six months of the year, insolvencies in New Brunswick are down 6% when

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compared to the same period in 2021. They were below prepandemic levels. Yes, there are going to be some insolvencies, but the fact of the matter is that we are doing better than most. It is the same, though, right across Canada.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, it is as though the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board was normalizing New Brunswickers being unable to go on living with financial hardship; it is as though it were normal for him.

The government does not come to the assistance of New Brunswickers. We have long been asking for financial assistance to help the people of our province. We are seeing the inflation rate rising again this year. A 6.9% increase is referred to in the latest report. We are seeing the cost of everything continuing to rise. The same goes for gas prices.

We are asking this government to provide targeted assistance to the people who need it the most. One of the things we offer as a solution would be to eliminate the tax on NB Power bills. It would be a way to help people. It would target low-income individuals. So, here is what we are asking government members: Are they prepared to establish such a program or provide an equivalent rebate to help New Brunswickers?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Once again, I will continue with some thoughts on this.

The increase in insolvencies is not unexpected. Absolutely, we are going through a turbulent time, with a recession possibly around the corner and with inflation. But once again, federal supports have contributed to an increase in levels, as seen in 2020, so we do salute our federal partners as well and the help that they have been giving us. We acknowledge that, and I have acknowledged that all along to the member opposite.

But we are also doing stuff through our own means. There is \$1 million to assist with the settlement, integration, and retention of newcomers, whom the businesses need. We are in desperate need of workers in New Brunswick and newcomers coming here. There is an additional \$200 000 to support international student retention and to retain skilled newcomers as well. That is what we are about. We are about helping new residents, building the province, and helping employers at the same time. They need help with finances, where it is available, and they also need help with the retention of workers, when they can.

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RENTS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I asked this minister and this government for specific relief related to tax on home-heating bills. We are offering other ways that the minister and the government could help New Brunswickers. They could enhance the low-income fuel supplement. They could implement new low-income rent subsidies. They could look at other ways to help low-income New Brunswickers with measures like that, but this government is ignoring the questions.

I would say that this government is going to be judged on how well it takes care of vulnerable New Brunswickers and what it does to improve their lives. I submit that the government is not doing enough. It could do more. It has the fiscal capacity to do more to help New Brunswickers and to help those on fixed incomes and the working poor, who need the most help.

I will push the Finance Minister aside. He does not want to answer my questions, so I am going to go back to the Minister responsible for Housing. We had some questions on the rent cap today. I would like the minister to give us an answer directly—no spin—yes or no. Will the rent cap be lifted on January 1?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is interesting that you have all tried to get me to say what is happening, and I have not answered it yet. I will do it in due time. I have said that I would. The answer will be forthcoming. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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