

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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PHYSICIANS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, we learned at public accounts last month that a New Brunswick doctor had to move to another province due to provincial requirements that limited her desire to work in a community practice. Doctor recruitment advocates believe that the provincial requirements should be changed to attract doctors and that the requirements are too rigid, offering no flexibility and causing doctors to choose other provinces when they are out for recruitment.

For example, New Brunswick is the only province that requires family doctors to make rounds in hospitals in order to bill Medicare for the work that they have done in their family practices. While the provincial government has been trying to ease this requirement by hiring more hospitalists, it continues to be a problem, hampering recruitment efforts. Mr. Speaker, we have 180 physician vacancies right now. We have doctors choosing to go elsewhere because the system is too rigid. I want to know whether this minister is working on this file and what he is doing to loosen up restrictions to make sure that we are not being too picky and we are getting the doctors that we need.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question here this morning. I can say that not only am I working to try to alleviate and reduce the stress and strain that we have in the health care system but also my colleagues sitting next to me and behind me are all working to try to make sure that the people in New Brunswick receive the care that they need when they are looking to the health care system. I can start with the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour. We have increased the number of physician seats here in New Brunswick so that we can have more doctors coming here into the province and studying to become physicians.

Mr. Speaker, I can look at the credentialing that we have worked on with respect to some of the other provinces. We have worked to try to give easier access to get physicians through the credentialing. We could look at the internationally trained physicians or nurses. We have navigators to help them get through the system and be able to practice here in New Brunswick. That is real work that is being done.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister can talk about his team working on this file. It was the member for Saint Croix who raised the issue of the doctor who could not set up practice in her hometown because the system is too rigid. That doctor chose to go elsewhere.

The government has been talking about different initiatives. I know that last week, the Minister of Health talked about ribbon cutting after ribbon cutting, but the facts are clear: In the five years of this government, it has had net losses of physicians year after year after year. We have 180 physician vacancies in the system right now because there are too many

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obstacles for doctors to come into New Brunswick to set up practice. We have been calling for this government to move more rapidly toward community-based care systems. What is this minister doing to work on changing the system in terms of the scope of practice, how doctors can set up practice, and the fee model to ensure that we are not losing more doctors to other provinces?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, it is very interesting that the member opposite would push for that particular model. As a matter of fact, in this particular budget, there is \$10.5 million to increase that—exactly, right?—and to make sure that there are carrots and incentives for doctors to move to that type of collaborative practice. We have been working with the RHAs and the trustees to move that forward. As a matter of fact, on Saturday morning at 8:30 a.m., some of the officials from the Department of Health and I actually met with the New Brunswick Medical Society to talk about the rollout of increasing the family practice model and the collaborative care model. A number of the doctors on the call were actually supportive of the pathway forward that we suggested in this budget.

When I get to the estimates, I know that the member will be asking more questions. But we have, in this budget, actually increased the amount of money that we are going to use to promote family collaborative practices.

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, how does the minister suggest we fulfill this commitment with the meagre investments he is proposing? There is \$10.4 million in the budget to move us toward collaborative practice in family medicine. They were very vague comments, Mr. Speaker.

Even today, the minister does not want to give us the details. He always says that we have to wait for the estimates. We will certainly have questions, but we want to know the facts and details, Mr. Speaker.

Even if we know that professionals want team-based community practices, how will we get them? Young professional graduates want this sort of practice. We know that the Horizon Health Network trustee stated last month that there would be a new strategy to create a new system. Based on what the trustee told us, it would be a systemic change. How will we achieve a systemic change with a meagre investment of \$10.4 million, Mr. Speaker?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, it is pretty easy to be in opposition right now. All that this opposition seems to say is, well, you should have done more, you could do more, and it is not enough.

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Mr. Speaker, this is a significant investment on top of the investments that are being made right now to entice doctors to move to collaborative family practices. It is just one of the items that I spoke about here today. Part of it is to help move the doctors forward to make that decision, whether they are coming out of grad school or are existing doctors working for salary or on a fee-for-service basis.

There are a number of opportunities that we can move forward to make sure that these collaborative practices increase the access to primary care here in New Brunswick. That can come with the capitalization of patients. That can come with some of the negotiations of the related fees to see patients virtually—online—or at walk-in clinics or in the office. That is just the start. We have \$3.6 billion to invest here to help the...

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

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, what we know is that there are many obstacles in the system. We see doctors that we recruit choosing to go elsewhere. That happened in the Saint Croix riding. The family doctor chose another province because there were too many obstacles.

We know that, in its pre-budget submission, the New Brunswick Medical Society also asked for significant investments in multidisciplinary collaborative practice, but I still wonder how we will make a systemic change with a meagre investment of \$10.4 million, Mr. Speaker.

The Horizon Health Network trustee told us that the strategy is coming, but I wonder when we will see it, because the government is working on this file at a snail's pace. New Brunswickers are the ones suffering. When are we going to see a strategic plan, Mr. Speaker?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I will tell you this: The \$10.4-million investment is a lot more than the Gallant government ever put toward this file.

You know, Mr. Speaker, we have already been moving. We have already had the RHAs meet with groups of family doctors in various locations, and we have a strategy for 0 to 6 months and for 6 months to 12 months. But I know, as a matter of fact, that there are a number of doctors who are very, very anxious to move toward this practice. That is why we are ready to make the investment. We rolled it out to the New Brunswick Medical Society, the full board, on Saturday. There were some very, very good questions, and we answered them. It

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is very important that we continue to make that investment for primary care here in New Brunswick.

Once again, I know that the member opposite was not there for the Gallant government's debacle when it came to health care, but we are making sure that we are making the investments where they are needed to increase access to care.

BUDGET

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week, the Minister of Finance presented his budget document. In it, he included that at the end of this year, we are going to make \$6.4 billion from taxes. He anticipates that next year we are going to go down to \$5.7 billion in taxes. Then he proceeded to title this document *Growth and Opportunity*. While I would find it interesting to delve into the mind of someone who sees a \$700-million decrease in revenue and calls it growth, I fear that we do not have the time to go that far. I would instead have him enlighten us on what he feels are the causes for this decrease in tax revenue for the year.

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much, and thank you for the question. Do you know what? When we talk about *Growth and Opportunity*... When we talk about opportunity and raising the taxes for taxpayers in New Brunswick, I think that it is a great opportunity. There you go. I am sure that we will talk more about that.

But you know what, Mr. Speaker? I did not have a chance last week to congratulate the Premier once again for, in particular, the headline, which counts toward today's budget. Today is the federal budget day, right? I love this headline: "Trudeau could learn from Higgs". That is a wonderful headline. "Trudeau could learn from Higgs". We hope that he does. The article states: "The New Brunswick budget was a prudent plan for the future rather than a mad dash to spend money for the sake of spending it."

So when we talk about growth and opportunity, we are talking about tax reductions, we are talking about future generations, and we are talking about spending and saving for the future and spending money strategically for the future.

Building on the sweeping income tax cuts his government introduced last fall, Premier Blaine Higgs chose to target new spending in key sectors while leaving more money in New Brunswickers' wallets.

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

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, apparently the minister does not read Francophone media. I am sure that was not a headline.

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He talks about tax cuts. Let's look at one specific line. It is anticipated that this year we are going to have \$955 million in corporate income tax. He is anticipating a 35%—or 34% with a few dots—decrease. Are you considering tax cuts for corporations, or are there other explanations? Because we have yet to hear anything except vague platitudes about things going down and things not happening. What are the reasons for this revenue going down by \$700 million in a year?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question. You know what? Tax cuts are the reason that the revenue is going down—tax cuts. Now that I have explained that to the members of the opposition, I will go back to quoting this article, because it is a fabulous article that everybody should read. Jay Goldberg is with the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. Let's go on. This is a commentary from Jay:

Given that the Higgs government came to power in the fall of 2018 and led the province throughout the pandemic, the fact that the government can boast of lowering the debt by \$2 billion shows the seriousness with which this government has taken its financial responsibilities.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford came to power in the same year as Higgs. Ontario's debt has grown by nearly 20 per cent since

And New Brunswick's debt has shrunk by about the same amount, Mr. Speaker. That is growth. That is opportunity. That is working for the New Brunswick taxpayers.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, I do not remember the debate about a \$700-million tax cut. I just do not. I must have missed it. I am sure it was not. I dare anybody in here—anybody in here—to walk into a board room and announce a \$700-million reduction in revenue and see the reaction of the people. I have done that with a lot fewer zeros, and let me tell you, usually somebody orders lunch and dinner in and somebody walks out of that room without a job. That is usually the way it is.

We are not getting any explanation for this revenue decrease. There is more concern. Do you know what I think? I think that the revenue is there. The minister just does not want to put it on paper because he does not want to have an honest discussion with New Brunswickers. They have needs right now and want help, but the government does not want to put it out there. Come clean and say that the revenue is there or tell us where it has gone.

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): I have been telling you all along that the drop in revenue is due to tax cuts. There you go. Please, take that to heart.

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Back to the article that I was reading—it is fascinating reading, Mr. Speaker. It is fascinating reading. It is hard to get away from it. It says that New Brunswick is “the only province in Canada that can say that it has a lower debt load than it did five years ago”. New Brunswick is the only one. We have a lower debt load now than we had five years ago when this government took over. It says: “Higgs’ recent income tax cuts are saving families real money. A taxpayer earning \$75,000 in New Brunswick today pays \$664 less in provincial income taxes than that same taxpayer would living in Nova Scotia.” We are doing that much better than Nova Scotia. Once again, if you are making \$75 000, you are paying “\$664 less in provincial income taxes than that same taxpayer would living in Nova Scotia”. Welcome to New Brunswick. We will save you money. We will save you taxes.

PAY EQUITY

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister responsible for Women’s Equality, you have been in the government for five years now. Is reaching pay equity still a priority of yours?

Hon. Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, Minister responsible for Women’s Equality, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Absolutely, we achieve pay equity within the government. We do not, as most provinces do not, legislate pay equity in the private sector, but I will tell you that there is absolutely a lot of work being done. It is a priority to work with these groups to ensure that companies are able to pay women a fair wage. They deserve to have a fair wage. We have had 750 companies go through the training that we offer, and last year alone, 900 civil servant employees across GNB received gender-based training.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, I think that pay equity is still an issue. There is no question about that. I think that we have a lot of work to do to continue to encourage our girls into careers that offer them more.

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Well, it does not seem that you want to take ownership of this. What exactly is your plan?

Hon. Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, Minister responsible for Women’s Equality, PC): Thank you. I will tell you that our plan is to continue working with the Coalition for Pay Equity. These are conversations that we have regularly. We are always making progress. In fact, we are providing a gender-based analysis on all the decisions that we make across GNB. The difference . . . With this budget, Mr. Speaker, this is the third time that we have provided a gender-based analysis. It had not been done before. Absolutely, it does highlight some shortcomings. We are not hiding behind that. It is very important to us that women receive a fair wage in this province. We are continuing to work with our companies. We are offering more training. We are training within GNB, and we are really looking at opportunities to promote new

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careers to girls. We are never going to pretend that there is not an issue in the private sector.

[Translation]

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Gender-based analysis is good, but, in fact, it has nothing to do with pay equity. Stakeholders have been asking for five-year plans for five years now. They are specifically asking for a health care sector plan. So, I would like to see what concrete actions the government has taken over the past five years.

[Original]

Hon. Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, Minister responsible for Women's Equality, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I am not sure whether the member opposite is now talking specifically about a health plan for women or whether we are still on the pay equity question. I will say that we most certainly talk to our stakeholders. I am very much connected to women and the stakeholders involved. The Coalition for Pay Equity and the Women's Equality Branch are entirely focused. We have the Pay Equity Bureau. This is something that we are absolutely looking at all the time when it comes to women and the workforce and ways to elevate those women and ensure that they are given the support and the pay that they deserve. There is no question about that. Thank you.

HOUSING

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, we all know too well that the housing crisis in this province has been simmering for many years now and that it has been particularly boiling for the past two or three years. We know that this government has been pressured by us and by many other organizations to act with clear and decisive action. In the past, the government did a few things on the matter, including coming out in 2021 with an interdepartmental report with some recommendations. Some of those recommendations have been implemented. Last year, the government also announced a one-year rent cap. However, that rent cap is now over and gone, with very little hope of seeing it again. With time passing by, not only has the crisis not tapered but also it has gotten significantly worse.

We now have a Minister responsible for Housing, but concrete measures coming out of this government have been few and far between. On the specific case of social housing, the Premier stated last week that the government is still studying the issue. Really? Can this government finally realize the urgency of the matter and get moving with concrete and effective changes and do more than what was announced last year? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have done nothing but talk about

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housing and what we are doing in moving forward to help with the housing crisis here in New Brunswick. I am a little . . . I am just unsure how to answer your question because I have been available and have been talking to the stakeholders. I introduced measures within legislation last year. I promised more this year.

We have been working with the stakeholders. We had the first stage of a housing summit in February. We will have a second one in May. We are not presupposing our answer until we complete our discussions with the stakeholders to understand the entire landscape across the province. We are looking at regionality and all the issues that we have related to housing. For a decision to be made without completing our exercise of talking to the stakeholders and understanding what the issues are and how to solve them... We are not going to do that, Mr. Speaker. It does not make sense. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister did say a lot, and therein lies the problem. There has been a lot of speechifying, but we want to see more concrete and faster action. This crisis has persisted for a long time, so things must move forward.

The rent cap, which no longer exists, must be borne in mind. Many New Brunswick renters are worried about being forced out of their apartments because rent is becoming too high. What is even worse is that they will not be able to find other housing, because it is even more expensive. As a result, they will be out on the street.

This housing crisis is a real emergency. However, again last week, the Premier said that it was important to study the issue. In addition, the Minister responsible for Housing says that the issue must be studied. I understand that it is important to have solid responses, but, at some point, action must be taken.

If the department's previous actions are any indication, the future is not very promising. We want concrete action, Mr. Speaker. Will this government act quickly and effectively?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am wondering whether the member opposite was not part of the government in the past. Every decision that gets made takes time. I would like to challenge the member opposite and ask whether he has ever heard of a government that took hold of a problem and, within six months, released a report with new programs in place and new funding to support it. It is unbelievable that we are putting this in place within six months. To even begin to say that we are not taking this seriously and are not moving fast is not as accurate as it could be.

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I can tell you that if we just went in and did a whole bunch of things without discussing them with the stakeholders, we would be having a very different conversation here today. It is important to involve New Brunswickers in decisions that affect New Brunswickers, and that is what we are doing. I would challenge the member opposite to be part of the discussion rather than sitting over there and talking to us as he is. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, this morning, I was joined by patients and families who are suffering from atypical neurological decline. What I clearly heard is that they want to know what is making them and/or their family members sick, but the provincial government is blocking key research from being carried out.

In a letter written to Public Health Canada and Public Health New Brunswick on January 30, Dr. Alier Marrero once again raised his concerns about the unexpectedly high number of early onset or young onset progressive neurological syndromes in New Brunswick. Over the past year, he has been following 147 cases of patients suffering from neurological symptoms. These include 57 early onset cases and 41 young onset cases. Will the Minister of Health get out of the way and allow the Public Health Agency of Canada to launch an investigation?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question here today, and I appreciate the individuals and their families who are involved in this situation. I can understand their frustration. Obviously, they are here today to express that, and I appreciate that.

This was one of the files that I saw when I inherited the Department of Health. The department dove into it quite extensively. That letter has been received by me, by the department. Public Health is reviewing the contents of that letter and is drafting a response. If there is additional information that Public Health needs from the doctor in question, it would go back and ask those questions. Certainly, the question today on the floor of the Legislature is such that the request and those findings have been turned over to Public Health for a review and a response.

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, that is not good enough.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker, the patients, their families, and all New Brunswickers deserve to know whether environmental factors are the cause. The group of neurologists appointed by the province to examine the cases did not rule out the possibility. In 2021, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research expedited a funding proposal for field research on possible environmental causes for the high incidence of neurological decline in New Brunswick. However, in May of the same year, the New Brunswick government asked that the funding

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request be put on hold for an indeterminate time. The government never gave any valid reason to justify the decision.

I am going to ask the question again: Will the Minister of Health step aside and let the Public Health Agency of Canada launch an investigation?

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): I would remind the visitors in the gallery that they are not to participate in the debate on the floor. Thank you very much. Minister of Health.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): I was just going to say that the inference that the member opposite makes about my standing in the way is incorrect. Mr. Speaker, there is a high degree of cooperation between Public Health New Brunswick and the Public Health Agency of Canada. The Public Health Agency of Canada supported the results of the provincial investigation. That is the fact of the matter, Mr. Speaker.

The feds can investigate if there is reason to believe that there is a cluster of common cases that spans more than one province. They looked at the results of the investigation that was done here in New Brunswick by the experts and concluded similarly. That is why the further investigation stopped. It is because the Public Health Agency of Canada agreed with the findings in New Brunswick. I suggest to the member opposite that I appreciate what she is trying to do here, but Mr. Speaker, those are the facts.

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, what I am trying to do is to get the facts. The New Brunswick government told the Public Health Agency of Canada to stop. It said, No, we do not want your millions of dollars to investigate—stop.

How can the Minister of Health stand here and say no? Where is the urgency from this minister? People have been waiting for answers for years now. People are suffering, with so many young New Brunswickers presenting with early onset or young onset progressive neurological syndromes. You would think that it would be all-hands-on-deck to find out what the cause is, but we have not gotten an answer from the Minister of Health.

I am sure that the Minister of Environment must be concerned about this high rate of disease. When I asked him about this two years ago, he said that his department would help however it could, by including making all data available. Considering this, will the Minister of Environment join me in demanding that the Minister of Health stand aside and allow the Public Health Agency of Canada to launch an investigation into whether environmental factors are involved?

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Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to reiterate that I understand the concern and the frustration of the people present today. But the fact of the matter is that on October 27, 2021, and February 24, 2022, the conclusions of the panel, which was comprised of a number of experts, were made known to the public and also to the members of the families. That is when the Public Health Agency of Canada supported those findings. I have suggested to the member opposite the process that is involved with respect to the Public Health Agency of Canada and New Brunswick Public Health. The letter received earlier this year has been turned over to Public Health. Public Health is drafting a response, and if it needs more information, it will be going back to the doctor in question. Thank you very much.

GOVERNMENT FINANCES

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the credibility of this Finance Minister is nil—nil—when it comes to the province's finances. We have had three years—three years—of underestimating billions of dollars of revenue. He wants to talk about growth and opportunity, and there is a \$700-million reduction in own-source revenues this year. He cannot even explain the reason for such a significant decrease. He is simply focusing on the bottom line of the province's finances and sending millions of dollars to bankers in New York while New Brunswickers are struggling to get by. It has been a recurring theme year after year after year. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice . . . You cannot be fooled again, Mr. Speaker. Having food on the table and a roof over their heads are what New Brunswickers need, and that is not what this government is delivering.

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Can the minister explain what the government is doing for New Brunswickers?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that it would be important for the members of the opposition to have a look at the trends across the country. I think that more than half of the provinces, about 7 out of 10, are putting budgets forward that are showing a reduction in revenue because they see changes coming in the economy. Mr. Speaker, I know that members of the opposition would say, Well, just spend it anyway—whether there are changes or whether there are not—and then have taxes if changes come along.

We are putting record amounts of investment in key areas of Health, Education, and Social Development—key areas. What we are asking for in return are results for the people of this province—results that people can feel, hear, and see every day. That is what is changing. What is changing is that we are seeing improvements. We are seeing people getting

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operations. We are seeing people starting to get primary care. People are going to see more of that as it continues to grow. This is in a time of unprecedented growth for this province. There is growth in population, in the economy, and in investment. Mr. Speaker, the future is bright in New Brunswick, and people—except for those across the hall—know it.

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