

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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[Translation]

GASOLINE PRICES

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Good afternoon to you. It's true that I don't know how to skate, but maybe I need to start learning.

[Original]

Today, I'm going to talk about affordability, this government's promise about the cost of carbon adjustor, and its failure on that promise. The government promised immediate relief at the pump. It's been six months. People are still paying for the cost of carbon adjustor. It's a promise not kept. It was purely a political promise, Madam Speaker, but the government members boxed themselves in. Taking the adjustor off would impact rural gas stations. It would make accessing fuel in rural areas impossible or difficult if the stations close. If government leaves the adjustor on, New Brunswickers are not getting the relief that it promised. So, the question is this: What are you going to do to resolve the situation that your poorly thought-out political promise has created? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I very much appreciate the question because the issue of affordability solutions for New Brunswickers has been on our minds, day in and day out, since we built the platform. We have been looking for ways to provide relief to New Brunswickers. That was one of the reasons we asked the former government to remove this cost of carbon adjustor. Then its members were the ones who said: No, no. It's going to hurt small retailers. So, we looked at taking 10% off NB Power bills. We had asked the previous government to do that. It wouldn't do it. We delivered that affordability measure with our government.

The school food program that we're looking forward to launching in September of this year is going to deliver some affordability support to New Brunswickers. The move the Minister of Energy just made to remove the 2029 deadline is going to take some pressure off NB Power for its next rate application. We continue to look for ways that we could provide affordability to New Brunswickers, with more to come. We're working that bill on the cost of carbon adjustor through the House. I would like nothing more than to provide—

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. This was a key affordability plank in the government's platform, and it is still undelivered. The government has not delivered affordability at the pump, as promised. It's been six months, Madam Speaker. The Premier just admitted that they knew why this had to flow through the way that it does, yet they made the promise. So, here we are, six months in, and New Brunswickers are still paying this cost of carbon adjustor that the federal government imposed at the pump. So, I will ask the Premier this, more specifically:

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When? When can New Brunswickers expect this government to deliver the promised affordability at the pump, which it promised would happen immediately? It's now been six months. When can New Brunswickers expect this break at the pump? What are you going to do to fix the situation that you created?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. As I said, I appreciate the question. We would love to deliver that kind of relief at the pump to New Brunswickers. We're working through the process that this Legislature demands. We're looking for all the ways in which we might be able to do that as we talk with the folks at the EUB and as we consider the report from the law amendments committee that had witnesses here to provide insight on the potential impacts in the communities. We're looking for ways because it is our objective to deliver that relief. We want to find a way to do it.

I'd be interested to know whether the member opposite and his team are going to support the removal of that cost of carbon adjustor for New Brunswickers. Are the opposition members going to help us deliver that kind of affordability relief? We need to find solutions for New Brunswickers. We both agree on that. We want to make life more affordable. We want to make transportation more affordable.

So I encourage the member opposite to work with us to find those solutions to make gas less expensive for New Brunswickers.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I just admitted in French that I don't know how to skate, but I think the Premier is giving me a lesson.

The government members have said that they're looking at all options. They're looking at deregulation, but the reason this cost of carbon adjustor had to be put in place is that we have a regulated environment. We are concerned that deregulation will mean that our New Brunswick gas customers, people who buy fuel, are going to be exposed to those wildly variable and fluctuating prices. That was the whole point of regulation in the first place. The government members have indicated in the past that they are interested in looking at that. I would like to know this: If they can't make this cost of carbon adjustor go away and put rural gas stations at risk, are they looking at deregulation? And have they figured out what it could mean for New Brunswick consumers at the pump if they take away regulation? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Legacy (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister responsible for Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's an interesting conversation. I want to reiterate the excellent work that was done in the law amendments committee. I think it was a very interesting afternoon, and a lot of good information came out of it, highlighting some of the situations.

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Now, specifically on deregulation, I find it very interesting that this is coming from the member opposite, because the previous government actually commissioned a study on deregulation. I found this out just recently because, essentially, they buried it. It's never come out. They had a full study done by a consultant on this. I still think it is an interesting concept to look at. I hope the members from the other parties will also look at it seriously. We are a very small part of the continent, and we are the only area that's regulated. That causes problems every time that something changes in these issues. I think it would be very wise of us to look at this more closely and maybe have a better discussion on it.

SERVICE DELIVERY

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Well, it looks like a postal strike is coming on May 22. Last fall, there was a postal strike. We all remember that. Last fall, we learned that the minister and her department ignored repeated offers from the union to deliver social assistance cheques. People wound up having to drive a long way in some cases, or they had to find a drive or go to another temporary location with two pieces of ID. If they could not do these things, they had to contact their case manager. Vulnerable New Brunswickers just do not seem to be a priority for this government. Can the minister advise the House as to whether the Holt government is planning to get it right this time? In the event of a strike, how will social assistance cheques be delivered?

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Madam Speaker, through you to the member opposite, on behalf of the team at Social Development, I will say that no one ignored the postal strike. No one ignored it whatsoever, and I really, really do reject the premise that the staff of Social Development ignored the postal strike coming.

The team at Social Development is well aware of what could be coming, and they are making accommodations now. They're reaching out to stay connected to folks and to ensure that they get the cheques they need in hand. As we did last time, the team at Social Development made the decision not to utilize the Canada Post option that was put in front of us because it couldn't be guaranteed that the cheques would get there in time. Our staff members at Social Development stay connected to the folks who need those cheques. We're making those accommodations now. Staff are in contact with them, and I have full confidence that the team at Social Development will ensure that vulnerable New Brunswickers get those cheques when they need them.

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, for that. Certainly, we heard a lot of worst-case scenarios last time. Is the minister saying that she did it right last time?

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Madam Speaker,

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through you to the member opposite, the team at Social Development care deeply, and they are going to do their absolute very best to make sure that every person has that cheque in their hands. The team does it by reaching out. They do it by calling. They've already been reaching out by email. If folks can't be reached that way, the team will make those personal connections to ensure that we can get those cheques in those hands. If, for some reason, that doesn't happen—if someone can't be reached because their address or email address has changed—then, with those connections with folks on the ground, our team at Social Development will do all they can to ensure that those cheques get into folks' hands.

Information has already gone out to people to make sure that they know how to connect with their regional offices and their case managers. The team at Social Development is well ahead of the game on this one. Thank you.

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I can appreciate that the department cares deeply, and I am sure the minister cares deeply. I will tell you that we also care deeply. We have constituents in all our communities who rely on these cheques to eat, for goodness sakes, or to pay their bills. It's very important. Since the minister says the department is ahead of the game, perhaps she can tell us what that game is. We need to have assurances. The people who rely on these cheques need to have assurances. Could the minister please tell us the details of the plan?

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Madam Speaker, through you to the member opposite, I will say it once again. I just said it in the answer to the last question. Case managers are connecting with folks. Folks know to reach out to the regional offices. They've reached out and they're making personal connections. A wonderful thing about being MLAs is that we also have that opportunity to connect with folks in our departments and in our constituency offices. I encourage everyone, please, to pass it along to the folks at Social Development as well if a constituent reaches out. I have full confidence in the team at Social Development and the work that they are doing to get ahead of the game with the upcoming strike. Thank you.

EDUCATION

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In a CBC article dated way back in March, there was information about the proposed calendar changes to make a four-day school week. A spokesperson from the department is quoted as saying:

"They decided not to move forward with that option and will instead be exploring more viable options that will be brought forward"

The article goes on to say:

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Aside from the four-day week proposal, another option from the department involved keeping students home for two days every month in order to carve out professional development days for teachers.

Can the honourable Minister of Education confirm or deny whether that second option is still being considered? Have additional days been considered for parents who would need daycare for those couple of days in the month? The parents in my riding would like to know.

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the opportunity to talk about how important professional development is for our teachers. That is the reason for that pilot study—to be able to consider how we will deliver professional development to our teachers. Yes, one of the ideas floating around is to have two professional development days a month. We're looking at what that would look like and how we can support all the partners. This includes teachers, parents, and the children who need to be cared for while their teachers are getting the information and training that they need to best deliver literacy and numeracy to them in the schools. Thank you.

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The closure of school libraries because of government budget cuts is devastating for all the dedicated library workers and for the students they help. Library workers have built relationships with students in our schools. They are part of the team with teachers and educational assistants (EAs), all of whom promote literacy and help students who want to read. Several things are true. We need more teachers, we need EAs in the classroom, and we need libraries and those people who help students find books that are interesting and who encourage them to read.

My question to the Minister of Education is: When asking a district to redirect a portion of their budget to the classroom, are there any stipulations about from where the money should not be taken? How does forcing a district to reallocate funds and to make a decision to take away library workers help the provincial assessment results in literacy?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the opportunity to talk about how we're redirecting resources. Absolutely, in our discussion with the districts, we are looking at all options. Where should the resources come from? Where should the resources go? Time and time again, we have come to the conclusion that the resources should be in the classroom, around the students. That is why we are investing in academic support teachers, in behavioural intervention mentors, and in educational assistants.

I would also like to take this opportunity to reiterate that library spaces are still going to be available because we recognize how important those spaces are. Yes, we are rethinking the

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way we're going to organize ourselves in the schools to best deliver these resources to our students, and we are going to measure outcomes. We're going to measure—

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. School districts have been mandated to jointly save \$43 million. The goal is to redistribute resources to classrooms. In response to this, one school district has eliminated approximately 30 librarian positions. I'm sure other districts also fear job losses. Some school community coordinators, in addition to the librarians, are now learning that their positions are being eliminated. Contrary to government statements, not all are being reassigned. An individual recently said that the district has not offered her another job. She said: They haven't offered me anything in the organization, in the classroom, or to help students. They haven't even offered me access to internal recruitment services.

However, the Minister of Education stated that the employees would be reassigned within the district. To the Minister of Education, what is being said and what is happening seem to be two different things. Can she confirm that all employees will be reassigned, or is she now going to augment that statement and refer to a specific group of individuals?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the opportunity to talk about how we are planning this right now. We're talking to the districts, we're talking to teachers, and we're hearing parents. We are organizing things. We're trying things, and we are going to be working with our partners to make sure that the resources are where we want them to be. That includes thinking about who can best deliver these services to our students. We've invested in targeted places to make sure every dollar spent will have the best outcome to meet literacy and numeracy rates and to combat chronic absenteeism. In doing that, yes, we need to do things differently, and, yes, that can be hard and sometimes uncomfortable. So, we're working with people to make sure we're transitioning well. This is happening right now, but we have to work together to make this—

NB LIQUOR

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Yesterday, the Minister responsible for NB Liquor was unable to provide an answer to the question of how much money is represented in U.S. liquor sitting in a warehouse. I was asking questions about the drop in profits despite a rise in sales at NB Liquor. With all the people, technology, and computer programs at their disposal, I'm hoping the minister has returned to the House today and is able to tell us how much taxpayer money is sitting in a warehouse in U.S. liquor. Will the minister agree to take my question under advisement and return to this House with an answer? How much money? I do remember him saying \$14 million, and then he dropped it to \$4 million, so I'm still a little bit confused on how much money is represented there.

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Hon. Mr. Randall (Fredericton North, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business; Minister responsible for NB Liquor and Cannabis NB, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the question. I believe I stood in the House yesterday and gave a framework for how many dollars' worth of U.S. products are sitting in ANBL warehouses and stores. I gave an answer on how we'll be delivering solutions for the province of New Brunswick and shareholders, the people of New Brunswick. In the corporation, we have, give or take, \$4 million ; we need to work with our channel partners to deliver that value back to the people of New Brunswick. In terms of profitability, ANBL is delivering on a plan that was actually enacted during the previous government to upgrade its systems. We continue to support the productivity improvements of ANBL. I look forward to working with ANBL and its shareholders, the people of New Brunswick, to deliver on a more profitable organization. Thank you.

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you, through you, to the minister. In a press release, the liquor corporation reported \$106.9 million in sales for the 13-week quarter, a rise of 0.2% compared with the same time last year, but with a big drop in profits.

When profits drop so alarmingly, there must be a reason or reasons. When NB Liquor had its internet failure, there were no fewer than four different spokespersons out in the media. Can the minister advise us of how many staff were added at NB Liquor and Cannabis NB during the quarter in question? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Randall (Fredericton North, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business; Minister responsible for NB Liquor and Cannabis NB, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite. What I can say is that, in large part, the profitability of ANBL remains very close to what we predicted. Project Galileo is a huge investment to make the long-term viability of ANBL stronger. It is an ERP process that will help ANBL deliver on the results that New Brunswickers expect for health, education, and all the things that New Brunswickers asked us for as they were speaking to us at the doors.

What I will say is that ANBL is a very lean organization. It has the number of staff that is required to deliver the services that New Brunswickers want. I have full confidence in my executive team to make those decisions on behalf of the province, and I have full confidence in the board of ANBL. I thank them for their service.

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm not sure that the minister answered my question. This was my question: Can he advise us of how many staff were added at NB Liquor and Cannabis NB during the quarter in question?

Hon. Mr. Randall (Fredericton North, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business; Minister responsible for NB Liquor and Cannabis NB, L): I just want to thank the member opposite for her question.

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These are operational questions. I have full confidence in the board of ANBL and the executive team to make the right decisions in terms of what is best for the corporation. I'm very much looking forward to representing the good work that ANBL and CNB are doing here in the House.

Certainly, we are a very transparent organization. Annual statements are available on the website. I look forward to continuing to put my confidence in the executive team and the board at ANBL and the staff on the ground who serve us every day in the stores, representing local products, and representing really strong service for the people of New Brunswick. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

NURSES

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

We've been hearing from the official opposition that nurses are being moved out of the community from public health and maybe mental health to backfill vacancies in our hospitals. Is that true? I don't know. It sounds familiar to what is happening in our education system, with subject-matter teachers at the district level being moved out of their roles to support classroom teachers in their classrooms. In either case, has government shed light on exactly what the plan is?

It has come to my attention that, despite a shortage of nurses, Horizon Health has instituted a hiring freeze. Maybe this is why we're hearing that community-based nursing is perhaps being hollowed out to fill hospital vacancies. Can the Minister of Health confirm that Horizon Health has instituted a hiring freeze?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, I do want to remind folks that, while the Horizon Health authority made some changes to the IV therapy teams earlier this year, the plans for community health nurses, public health nurses, and other groups of people are not currently happening. We are waiting for our RHAs to present plans, at which we, as a government, will look. At this point in time, I won't presuppose what they will do. It's premature for me to comment on what may or may not happen. It's all speculation at this point. Thank you.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, I didn't hear in that answer whether Horizon has frozen hiring right now, but let's continue. The Premier has accused the Leader of the Official Opposition of fearmongering over health care. The Leader of the Official Opposition has accused the Premier of, well, all sorts of things. This fails to shed any light on what the plan is that government seems to be rolling out in our health care system.

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In fact, the demeanour of the members during question period is beginning to feel a little bit like the demeanour of those in the House of Commons before Pierre Poilievre lost his job.

Are our public health, community health, and mental health units being raided for their nurses to backfill vacancies in our hospitals or not? Madam Speaker, that is the question. Can the Minister of Health please tell us what the plan is for registered nurses currently working for the regional health authorities? Are those with special expertise in public health being considered for transfers out of their jobs and into hospitals?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, we value our staff, LPNs, and nurses. We are committed to having the right person at the right time. We also value our nurses. We have put into place retention payments of \$10 000 and another \$5 000. This is how much value we put on our team.

I am not going to speak on the specifics of management because we don't know at this point in time. Our RHAs will share a plan with us that will put the right people in the right place at the right time. I can commit to that. We are very keen on bringing nurses to work in our hospitals. We have increased the training spots available for nurses—and physicians, for that matter. I am not going to presuppose what the plan might look like until we see the plan. Thank you very much.

NB POWER

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. This morning, we spent three hours going over the KPMG report with NB Power and talked about energy consumption, energy rates, and equipment. I know the official opposition's objective was to have one of two outcomes: either there are issues with the process or the equipment that NB Power can correct, or, if everything is kosher and fine, it would instill confidence and trust in ratepayers and customers of NB Power. Unfortunately, Madam Speaker, I'm not sure either objective was accomplished.

My question is for the Minister of Energy. Can the minister please tell us how much this report cost the ratepayers or taxpayers of New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Legacy (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister responsible for Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Actually, I'm quite surprised. This question came up last week. This morning was the perfect opportunity to ask the question to the people who paid the bill. It wasn't brought up.

My understanding is that it cost NB Power approximately \$600 000. I don't have the exact figure. If the member opposite had asked the actual people who were there at the time, he probably would have received a very precise answer. I reached out, and that's

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approximately what was provided. If the member wants more detail, he should ask the question at public accounts when a corporation is in front of him. That's where you usually ask those questions. It's when Crown corporations come around. That's the best I can give the member right now. That's the approximate answer that I got.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Well, Madam Speaker, I'm not shocked that the minister doesn't know how much the report cost. I mean, we see a \$600-million deficit. We just debated a special appropriation of \$218 million. I'm not quite sure why that money was requested in this bill, but it isn't a shock to us on this side.

In terms of the report itself, we looked at what KPMG did. I think KPMG is a fine auditing firm—no shade on them. What it did on the process side was use NB Power's data to conclude that there was nothing there on the billing and charging side. The disappointment comes on the equipment side of the audit. What we see in the report itself is that KPMG did not actually audit, test, or review the equipment. In essence, NB Power tested its own equipment. Why didn't the government just ask NB Power to test its own equipment and save a few hundred thousand dollars?

Hon. Mr. Legacy (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister responsible for Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): Madam Speaker, an audit is a verification of the work completed by an organization. NB Power is bound by certain criteria to check its equipment. That's what KPMG checked. These are very stringent regulations, Canadian regulations, that have to be verified. KPMG just followed along those lines.

I find it interesting that we are talking about a \$200 appropriation being debated. I believe the colleague from Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills brought up this whole... On the 2025 appropriations Act, we can't just pass these bills without checking them. For Bill 32, the appropriations Act for 2023-24, everybody sat on their hands and never said a word.

Let me demystify it for my colleague. The same people spent the same money. You don't need economic policy committee. Just go to an establishment and have a beer with your colleagues and they'll tell you how they spent the money.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Madam Speaker, it's very interesting that the Minister of Finance has the audacity to stand up and talk about special appropriation Acts when we... Yes, we had special appropriation Acts, and, every year, we passed them under balanced budgets. This government, on the other hand, runs deficits, adding to the debt that we tackled and paid down quite significantly. The members opposite don't have the luxury of coming in and talking and trying to school us on special appropriation Acts.

Madam Speaker, I also have to ask a question in relation to NB Power's debt ratio. The government has already lowered the education scores and the education standards for test scores. Instead of helping students to achieve more and pushing them to do better, this government has lowered the scores. Now, this government is doing the same thing with NB

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Power. Rather than tackle its debt, it said: We will just push it off for a few more years so that future generations can pay this debt that we put on New Brunswickers and ratepayers. Why are this minister and this government just continuing to let debt collect and accumulate so that someone else can pay it down the road?

Hon. Mr. Legacy (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister responsible for Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): Madam Speaker, this is another example of the former government celebrating targets. Targets. That's what we are trying to meet. We want to get this done by 2029. In 2020, the ratio was 94%. After four long years of work and effort from the previous government, the ratio was 94%. It was exactly the same. What everybody wants to see is meaningful progress and consequences if targets are not met. That's what we are ringing on.

Now, if we want to talk about deficits... Everybody knows the reason there were surpluses before is revenue.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Legacy (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister responsible for Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): No, it was not because of good management. Not at all. A member brought out Richard Saillant's book. If they kept up with their reading, they would know that last month, the same author said this government reduced spending growth, as opposed to the previous government, which increased it. The problem was revenue. The former government had the benefit of a good, federal government helping its province while it took credit for it. Maybe it's time to clarify that.

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): The time for question period has expired.