

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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[*Translation*]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. As always, I wish you a wonderful afternoon.

[*Original*]

Madam Speaker, health care is in crisis in this province. The facts are all around us, but all this government can do is put out narratives, misinformation, and spin. Truth matters on the floor of this House, Madam Speaker. This government promised balanced budgets and 30 new collaborative care clinics. We have received neither. Just ask the people waiting for a doctor. When I asked the Premier in December whether 14 000 people were really taken off the primary care wait list as she claimed, she doubled down on that number. By January, the truth was revealed. There were actually 40 000 more people added to the list, bringing the total to 238 000 New Brunswickers waiting for attachment to a primary care provider. In the estimates process, the Minister of Health still could not provide concrete numbers for who was on the wait list. Will the Premier walk back the erroneous claim she made? Can the Premier share with the House whether she's aware of what the actual number is? Right now, is she still—

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much for the question.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

To the member opposite, I am always happy to get up and talk about the work that our government is doing. Already, only 18 months into our mandate, we have achieved half of the collaborative care clinics we committed to. Some 15 collaborative care clinics have been set up in New Brunswick, and each of those clinics is taking people off the wait list for care.

(Interjections.)

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): Member.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): People continue to come onto the wait list for care. So far, actually, as people get attached to these 15 clinics that we have announced, the figure for people coming off the wait list is up to 20 000. That is good news for the people of Fredericton North, the people of Carleton North, and the people of Perth-Andover. Everyone in that last attachment

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area is going to be able to get service from the 15th clinic that we announced. Our government is not stopping, Madam Speaker.

[*Translation*]

We know that access to health care is New Brunswickers' top priority. Our government is focusing on that priority. We're opening clinics. We're ensuring that patients are taken care of. We're proceeding as quickly as possible.

[*Original*]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): It's nice that the Premier actually got up after not getting up for 30 questions on vet services and Agropur. Madam Speaker, this government promised everything to everyone, and it promised to do that with balanced budgets in all four years—promise broken. The Holt government is 18 months in, and what do we have? We have historic deficits, a health care system in crisis, increasing numbers of people waiting for attachment to a health care provider, people giving birth on the side of highways, multiple hospitals unable to offer obstetric care, record numbers of seniors in ALC beds waiting for placements in nursing homes, and workers experiencing burnout due to staff shortages. These are facts, Madam Speaker. This is what people are experiencing every single day while this government tries to spin, saying everything is so wonderful. Does the Premier deny that any of these are facts? Can she defend her failures to the people who believed her? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Madam Speaker, there is no question that our health care system is challenged, and that's because it experienced years of underinvestment from the previous government. We had a government that disrespected nurses, disrespected doctors, couldn't attract people to this province, and watched as the list of people waiting for care grew and grew and grew and grew. Our government got after the task on day one. We promised retention payments to nurses, and we delivered them, and then we signed a contract with the nurses. They accepted the contract, and we didn't get into the labour strife that the previous government was familiar with. We have also reduced the waiting list for long-term care, a fact that the member opposite should check.

Our government is out there doing different things to make sure that seniors have a choice in where and how they receive care. We're getting new nursing home beds, and we have attracted more net new doctors to this province this year than in any previous year because we are out there doing the work to improve the health care system for New Brunswickers. The previous government created a mess and left it for us to fix.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): There are 40 000 more people on the wait list, Madam Speaker. Where are those doctors? Where are they? For all the Premier's bragging and efforts to spin a narrative, the reality is that we have no results for the extra spending of this government. Last year's \$1.33-billion deficit and this year's



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\$1.4-billion projected deficit, have left us with almost \$3 billion in extra spending above budget in its first two years alone, with nothing significant to show for it. This government campaigned on health care. It is failing. Our health care system is on life support. Government members have achieved no results, despite all their bragging and all their announcements. They have not lived up to what they promised. They have saddled future generations with crippling debt and unsustainable levels of spending, and there are no results. How does the Premier defend her government's spending when everything in health care is going in the wrong direction?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Madam Speaker, I'll present the members opposite with some facts about the improvements we've seen in health care, because our government has done what their government wasn't able to do. We prioritized the care of New Brunswickers, and we prioritized caring for the people who care for us. Because of that, the three quarters of New Brunswickers who have access to a nurse practitioner or a family doctor are now getting appointments more quickly than they had been before. We set a target of 31% of people having access within five days, and we beat that target in our first year on the job, with a new result of 34% of people getting access in less than five days. Those results are improving. We set a target of holding the wait list for long-term care at 1 088, and today, that number is 1 076, so we are bringing that number down. Those are two positive results, because our government was prepared to invest in New Brunswickers and their health care and the people who deliver it. We now have good relationships with nurses and good relationships with doctors. We have the most attractive environment for people to come practice in, and we will continue—

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): What did I just say, Madam Speaker? Spin and narrative. There are 40 000 more on the wait list. Oh, trust us, she says. Things will get better. They've spent \$3 billion over budget, and nothing is better. There is unsustainable spending, health care is worse, our education system is worse, homelessness is worse, there are record wait lists for housing, and drug addiction and crime are worse. You see it in our cities every day, and Fredericton is not fine. We've seen strategy after strategy deliver nothing in this mandate. We've seen study after study and pilot programs with no data.

This government has threatened universities with closure, caused young people to leave again, put our food security at risk, increased fees, increased electricity rates, failed at affordability, closed our parks and heritage sites, and given money to companies to cut jobs. New Brunswickers are not feeling any benefit from the Holt government. This government is drowning in its own ineptitude. How does the Premier defend the hole she has put us in for no results?

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[*Translation*]

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I'm certainly willing to talk about the results we got from the actions the former government never wanted to take. We invested in New Brunswickers to improve their lives, and we got results.

Even though our mandate began only 18 months ago, we have already gotten positive results in several of the areas the member opposite is talking about. The literacy results of students in our Anglophone school system have improved. Housing construction results have improved. With respect to the cost of living, people wanted a rent cap when rents were increasing with the former government. People living in apartments had increases of over 10% because of the former government. Our government protected them with a rent cap and a property tax freeze. Our government cares about affordability, unlike the member opposite, who wants to add...

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): The approach this government never stops repeating is to avoid responsibility and blame others, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

I ask you, Madam Speaker, what is better? Nothing is better. More New Brunswickers are waiting for primary health care. More New Brunswickers are falling behind in affordability. This government has increased fees and licences, raking in millions in extra taxes on the backs of New Brunswickers while people fall further behind every single day, struggling to keep up with costs. This government will blame anyone and everything for its own financial woes.

Our economy is stable, and the GDP is stable. What is not stable is this government's spending. That is what has changed. Because the government has backed itself into a financial corner, it cannot adapt and adjust when needed. The government has maxed out the credit card, spent until the cupboard was bare, and mortgaged our financial future with no results for New Brunswickers. People are suffering now, and it's getting worse. There has been \$3 billion in overspending, and affordability is worse. What does the Premier have to say to New Brunswickers who are falling further behind?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I am certainly happy to talk about affordability because the member opposite is right. New Brunswickers are struggling with the cost of living. For too long, they had a government that wasn't willing to do anything about it.

When our government came to power, we prioritized affordability. One of the first actions we took was to put a rent cap in place to help make that better for people living in

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apartments. That's helped numerous people. The next thing we did was take 10% off electricity bills. That saves people \$20 or \$30 per month. Then, we put in place a school breakfast program, and that saves families about \$800 per year. Then, we acted to freeze property tax assessments, which actually resulted in a decrease in property taxes for a number of New Brunswickers. Now we are going through an overhaul of that process. We also made RSV vaccines free for some of our most vulnerable people.

We continue to do the work to make sure that families who are having a hard time get help. This is unlike the member opposite, the leader-in-waiting, who said he wanted to add a levy to people's—

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Again, the Premier can't defend her record without blaming somebody else. Take responsibility for your own decisions. In life, when you spend money on something, you are supposed to get something commensurate or equal in value to what you spent. The Finance Minister with the worst financial track record in the history of our province says: "We spend money for New Brunswickers, and we won't stop doing it".

My question is for the Premier. This is her mess, she is the head of government, and she will have to bear responsibility for this mess in the next election. At not quite the halfway point in her mandate, after she promised balanced budgets in all four years then overspent by \$3 billion, what has New Brunswick received that is equivalent in value to what the Premier has spent? If an election were held today, what excuse would she give New Brunswick voters for her failure to deliver anything equivalent to the government's \$3 billion in overspending?

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. As I said, I'm happy to speak about how our government is investing in New Brunswickers and their priorities. New Brunswickers told us that they wanted to see their health care system strengthened, so the first thing we did was stabilize it. Nurses in the health care system had been told they needed to go to Alberta. We delivered retention payments that saw the rate of nurse retention skyrocket. Our nurse turnover rate is now less than 1%. That means we have fewer problems in our emergency rooms.

The wait times are still long. However, because we have opened 15 collaborative care clinics and because we have signed the best contract for primary care providers in the country, we have doctors coming to New Brunswick in greater numbers than they ever had before. Those people are coming to New Brunswick, setting up clinics, attaching patients, and keeping people out of emergency rooms. We are doing all this with the best credit rating in the country. It is on par with Saskatchewan. We're using our means to take the pressure off New Brunswickers.

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EDUCATION

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Last fall, from August through November, the Department of Education undertook a consultation effort for the 10-year education plan. Thousands of responses came from the Anglophone sector, and thousands of responses came from the Francophone sector. Parents, teachers, early learning professionals, and school district representatives all took the time to attend sessions, complete surveys, and submit written feedback because they were told that their voices would shape a 10-year education plan. The only timeline provided by the minister was that the plan would be released sometime in the spring.

Here is my question for the Minister of Education. Spring is nearly over. In roughly four weeks, summer will begin and the school year will come to an end. Is the 10-year education plan finalized? Yes or no? If yes, what is the specific release date? If not, what is causing the delay?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, I am very excited to stand up today and talk about the education plan that will be released very soon—in the next couple of weeks. This is a very good plan. We consulted so many people. Some 14 000 people wanted to be part of this plan. As the member opposite mentioned, we had in-person and virtual meetings and online surveys. People were coming out to contribute to this beautiful plan. We will be sharing it soon. We're going to share our long-term vision for education, and in it will be shorter term action plans to make sure that we are meeting our targets. We will release the plan very soon. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I really don't know what the word "soon" means in terms of time frames, but New Brunswickers were promised a 10-year education plan that would chart a new direction for the next decade.

Let's just be honest. Districts can't plan staffing and programming at a moment's notice. Principals can't adjust schedules or resources without knowing direction. It puts strain on teachers, and families can't understand what's coming in September. Districts and schools build their plans for September in March and April.

The minister promised that a 10-year education plan would be released in the spring. By delaying it even longer, she's giving school districts less time, or no time, to absorb or implement a decade-defining strategy. Does the minister expect schools and districts to be prepared for major changes when she is giving them little to no time, no clarity, no runway, and nothing to help them implement any responsibilities?

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[Translation]

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, district officials participated in the consultations. They are well aware of the plan. We are working continually with them. A plan is a continuum; it's a vision that started and will continue. We will continue to work on it with our partners. It is still spring and will be for six more weeks. I will tell you, by then, we will make our education plans public, and we will be delighted to do so. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. Although reports have been released that summarize the public consultation on the 10-year education plan, most stakeholders have told us that they haven't yet seen a framework or a summary of how their contributions are shaping or have shaped the plan. How can you claim that this is a meaningful, evidence-based plan or road map when the engagement of the people who participated hasn't even been visible?

My question is this: Since the department has updated its digital literacy framework and AI-use guidelines for schools, can the minister guarantee that no AI system, generative or analytical, was used to summarize, filter, or interpret public feedback from the consultations on the 10-year education plan? If it was, will the minister table the risk assessments proving that AI did not override or dilute what parents, teachers, and students actually said?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The member opposite is absolutely correct. We have released a *What We Heard* report. We did that in February. Stakeholders have been engaged ever since in developing the education plan with us. There's been a lot of back and forth, a lot of feedback, and a lot of validation. We've heard good things from stakeholders. We're really excited to keep collaborating with them as we fine-tune the last details.

Yes, humans are doing the work because humans are working at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. I can guarantee that they're the ones who have been working on the education plan. They're the ones who are going to share the education plan and implement it. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

POWER RATES

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): It's my turn, finally. Madam Speaker, as the cost of living goes up and the cost of electricity continues to increase, more and more New Brunswickers just can't make ends meet, yet CBC's Robert Jones reports that this government is spending more than \$2 million every month to lower the power bills of the highest-income earners in this province. That's \$36 million doled out to the 70 000 households with incomes above \$130 000 since the rebate program began. That's

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\$36 million to those who don't need it. This is double the \$18 million in assistance provided to New Brunswick's 70 000 lowest-income households, which desperately need help. Because the well-off are getting unneeded electricity assistance, lower-income families are not getting enough relief. Will the Minister of Finance redirect assistance from those who don't need it to those who do need it before the next heating season?

Hon. Mr. Legacy (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister of Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Yes, we did see the article. Actually, as was mentioned before, we are working with Social Development on an affordability package. It's not just energy affordability that's impacted. It's food affordability, gas affordability, and housing affordability. Everything is impacted.

We decided to give a 10% rebate because the previous government misled... It did not mislead. It did some erroneous calculations to try to get NB Power to push a plan that wasn't feasible. NB Power had to go to ratepayers to get the increases it needed. We needed to provide quick relief. It was a simplified way of doing it. We are looking at maybe going with income-tested methods that would provide that kind of relief. That should be coming soon. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

M. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, energy poverty keeps getting worse in our province. The New Brunswick Energy and Utilities Board has recommended that the provincial government provide targeted assistance, as Randy Hatfield from the Human Development Council said. Assistance with paying power bills should be directed toward the people who need it the most.

[*Original*]

I'm glad to hear the minister is considering this.

[*Translation*]

The government has already spent \$130 million on the power bill rebate to help people who are having difficulty paying their bills, but it is failing. Most of the money hasn't been allocated to the people who are having difficulty paying their power bills. The government has had lots of time to rethink its power bill payment assistance program so that it benefits those who need it the most. Why hasn't it managed to do so?

[*Original*]

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

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you to the member opposite, thank you for the opportunity to talk about affordability. Affordability is a priority for this government and every single member on this team and floor. Any single one of us could get up and talk about this, but I'm going to. Affordability measures need to create noticeable financial relief for families, renters, seniors, people on fixed incomes, and those from vulnerable households. That's why we are serious about these affordability measures. We're focusing on real structural pressures that make a difference for vulnerable New Brunswickers, things like housing supply, energy costs, income supports, and wages. It's why we're building an affordability framework. There hasn't been one before. That's why we're doing it in partnership with every single department in this government. We are focused on targeted relief and are implementing things like a rent cap and a rebate on electricity use.

COST OF LIVING

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. New Brunswickers are feeling the staggering effects of the cost of living, with prices continuing to rise in every sector. New Brunswick is tied for the highest inflation in the country. According to Canada's Food Price Report, we are facing higher prices for groceries than the national average. We see it in the 55% increase in food bank usage in just the last year. Electricity rates have increased by 25% since this government took office, with more increases to come. This is the government's solution to the cost of living: introduce a tone-deaf bill that gives millionaires an increased tax break on their investments. My question is for the Minister of Finance and Minister of Energy. What's he doing to reduce the cost of living for the other 99.9% of the population?

Hon. Mr. Legacy (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister of Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): Madam Speaker, I'm rising to answer this question, I guess, or statement. I'm in a bit of a state of disbelief. Everyone in this room agrees that helping small businesses in this province is the right path to take. For the member opposite to try to confuse the issue and take that away from our small business owners in this province is absolutely shameful—shameful. We're finally providing some help to a program that is first in its class in this country. We are making it better, as we should. We're coming up and trying to find some... Anyway, these are ridiculous accusations about us trying to support people. We've been having this discussion over the last few days. I think it's time for the member to actually look at what the bill is about. It's about small businesses and getting some capital to them. It's about getting small businesses the help they need to get their workers and their companies in a better position. That's what that bill is about, and it's time he maybe read it.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Maybe the minister should be up front with the people in New Brunswick and help them realize that the people who invest \$1 million are going to get a greater tax break. I don't know a whole lot of people who have \$1 million



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lying around. This is at a cost to taxpayers of almost \$5 million a year for the next three years. But let's go on to a different topic.

GASOLINE PRICES

This government is getting an absolute windfall from the recent spike in gas prices at the pump. If gas prices stay at \$1.92 per litre, they will add \$300 million to the bottom line of this government's general revenue. This will be taken directly from the pockets of struggling taxpayers. What's the Minister of Energy doing to curtail this windfall from those who can't afford electricity and go to work? Will the Minister of Energy reduce the HST on gas prices immediately and give people the help they really need?

Hon. Mr. Legacy (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister of Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): Madam Speaker, I understand what the member is trying to advocate for. The reality is that there was some math done on a napkin, I guess, to figure out what the revenues could be. Well, we know the revenues in this province are already in a delicate position. I understand that he's advocating. Here's the problem with the advocate. In 2022, when gas was at \$2.16 per litre, he was part of a government that was sitting on a \$777-million surplus. That government did nothing. I understand the advocacy. I don't believe the intent.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): You know, Madam Speaker, I've been hearing the tough talk from the government members since the election. Actually, during the campaign, they promised balanced books. Instead, we got historic deficits that will add over \$1 million daily to what the big bankers they love will get. They promised family physicians for patients without a doctor.

Since they took office, tens of thousands of people have been added to that list, which they promised to fix. Premier Holt herself promised to remove the cost of carbon adjustor and save 8¢ per litre, but we just received official word from the EUB yesterday, and we knew this was coming, that that is not going to happen.

With historic deficits, inflation through the roof, food banks overflowing with people, gas prices soaring, electricity rates skyrocketing, and broken promises galore, what other great ideas can this government bring forward to ruin New Brunswick further?

Hon. Mr. Legacy (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister of Energy; Minister responsible for the Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I find it interesting that the member opposite brought up ideas. I'm amazed that he recognizes an idea because the opposition members never brought any in the six years they were in government. In December, by going to E10, we lowered gas prices by 10¢. That E10 existed when the opposition members were in power, but they never looked at it because they didn't want to do anything about it. The cost of carbon adjustor has been removed now, but if it had stayed, then we would have higher



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gas prices right now, almost 9¢ to 12¢ higher. That's what would have happened. We know, and it has been proven over six years, that the opposition members do nothing and did nothing, and if they had the chance, we would still be seeing nothing. Thank God that didn't happen.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, Madam Speaker, compare record spending in health care and balanced books to record deficits and no results. I'd say that's a very clear difference. The Premier has ordered every department to cut 10% to address a ballooning deficit, and the minister has confirmed that health care is no exception. Yet, health spending is tracking 10.7% higher than last year, and the department itself admits that future increases are unavoidable. Meanwhile, New Brunswickers are waiting longer in emergency rooms and are struggling to find a family doctor. Babies are being born on the sides of highways and on sidewalks, and services are disappearing from rural communities. If spending is up by nearly 11% and outcomes are getting worse, not better, then where is the money going? Is this government finally going to admit that the real crisis in health care is not only about dollars but also about failed management, a system that's not working, and a work environment that is failing the doctors, nurses, and health care professionals who show up every day to serve New Brunswickers? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite. It was clear to New Brunswickers that our health care system was in a crisis position. That's why they voted for change. They voted for a government that would invest in their health care and invest in their health care providers. That's why we had to rebuild relationships with nurses and doctors and start the hard work of changing the health care system and how we deliver health care—things the previous government couldn't do.

The members opposite said they wanted to open collaborative care clinics. I think they said they would try four. They didn't get a single one done. In our government's first 18 months, we have opened 15 collaborative care clinics, bringing together teams of people. If I may, I will quote Dr. Kennedy from the Perth-Andover clinic. He said that, before this, he didn't have any hope, but, now that he's engaged with our team and has built a collaborative model that means everyone in Perth-Andover will be attached to care, he finally has hope that things are changing for the better in the primary health care system. Our government is looking out for the betterment—

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): Question period has expired.