

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

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GASOLINE PRICES

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Good afternoon.

[*Original*]

Madam Speaker, New Brunswickers are frustrated. They're frustrated by the litany of broken promises of this government. One that I hear about the most when I'm out and about is the broken promise to provide immediate relief at the pumps. This is something that was promised to happen immediately, but New Brunswickers have received nothing. People are suffering under affordability measures, and they're not getting anything out of this government. The government has completely failed.

Now, because government members say they like to be transparent, they have an opportunity. They like to take credit for everything, so I would like to know who is going to take credit for this broken and blown promise. Is it going to be the Premier of broken promises or the EUB expert of natural resources? Which one of them wants to take credit for this broken promise? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I share the member opposite's frustration and that of New Brunswickers. Our government committed to removing the cost of carbon adjustor. We did that, and it didn't deliver the relief that we wanted to see for New Brunswickers. However, we have been frustrated at every step in this work. We were frustrated by the opposition, which voted against the move. We called to bring the legislation to committee and expand the conversation. The members of the opposition didn't want to see it go through. They wanted to make sure that the price of gas stays high because, to quote one of the members opposite: What's 4¢ per litre? That's not going to make a difference to anyone.

We believe that every penny saved for New Brunswickers makes a difference to someone, and our government is going to continue to work to make sure that New Brunswickers don't pay a penny more for gas than they should. We would love to be doing that in partnership with every member of this House who is looking out for New Brunswickers' bottom line, but instead, we have been frustrated at every step by the Conservatives who put this adjustor in place and wish it had stayed there.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, you know, Madam Speaker, I find it almost humorous that this Premier likes to talk about saving New Brunswickers pennies when it's going to cost them dollar after dollar after dollar to cover

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the costs of the Liberals' expensive campaign promises. They can talk about pennies. We're going to talk about the dollars that not only we but also our kids are going to have to pay for those promises.

If the Premier doesn't want to be transparent about who actually decided on this promise that has clearly been broken, then let's talk a little bit about regulation, Madam Speaker. Because the government members couldn't write good legislation to get this done... The Premier is frustrated that they couldn't get it done. They're in government. They could have written the legislation, but they failed. So now, they talk about deregulation. This is going to impact small businesses. They count on that margin. It's not profit, but they count on that margin for their businesses. This government is looking at taking that away, so I'd like the members to give us the timeline of when they're going to deregulate and take this away from small businesses.

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Madam Speaker, I'm very confused as to why the member opposite continues to defend this formula when, by all indications, the sector likely over-recovered for the past three years. To illustrate that, the sector is suggesting that the current 8¢ is kind of what it needs to cover its costs for the Clean Fuel Regulations. We know that the Clean Fuel Regulations become more arduous over time. If that covers the costs today, it would have covered the costs and more last year, and it would have covered the costs times two for the year before that. I would suggest that the member opposite should support a proper EUB process that ensures the cost of compliance is based on costs and not this formula, so that New Brunswickers won't pay a penny more.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm glad that the Minister of Natural Resources and former member of the EUB for a decade is getting on his feet. Maybe he would like to explain exactly how this true cost isn't being revealed. He was on the board for a decade. He spent years under this formula. He should know better than anybody in this House, so he should explain it to New Brunswickers.

You allege that the true cost is not known. Please explain to New Brunswickers how exactly this true cost is not known so that we can have a common place to start from.

All he is going to say is this: Oh, the true cost, the true cost... Prove to New Brunswickers that they are not getting the true cost with the formula. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Just to correct the timeline a little bit, I will say that, from when this cost of compliance formula was brought in on a temporary basis, I was a member of the EUB for only three more months. I just want to set the record straight on that particular point.

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Again, that first decision said that this temporary formula was only going to be in place until the arrival of a tradeable permit regime. We also know that the tradeable permit regime does not exist at the moment. Given that we're three years in, we're urging the EUB to follow good regulatory practice where the onus is always on the sector to come forward and prove its costs. In this case, it is the cost of compliance with the CFR. The EUB would determine whether that is just and reasonable.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. It's almost as though I knew exactly what the minister would answer, because my next question goes right into that. I mean, you can guess this stuff before it even comes out. He called this bad regulatory policy, yet the EUB implemented it. When the government members took out the cost of carbon adjustor, the EUB had to put in its own adjustor to offset it because the charge would have threatened the fuel supply. The EUB accepted one change and rejected theirs. Can the Minister of Natural Resources and former expert EUB member explain why their policy, if it was good, was overturned by the EUB?

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Madam Speaker, regulators are traditionally loath to award interim rate increases, largely due to mechanisms that can be quite complicated with respect to recovering whatever costs might need to be recovered if the final decision turns out to be lower than the interim rate. In this case, there is no logical mechanism.

I suggest that my colleagues at the EUB had a range of options in place. I would suggest that if they wanted to go and do that interim rate, they could have considered not actually using the full formula. That is not what they decided. I'm suggesting that there were other options that the EUB could have chosen.

I would like the honourable member to support this. We want to know how much money the sector may have over recovered in year one, year two, and year three.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Madam Speaker, all I know is this: The Liberals failed with the stroke of a pen. They failed with their legislation. They failed at every single opportunity. They failed immediately, and they failed on December 8. Now, we're going to wait until February, and New Brunswickers are still waiting. We have a minister who is skating. I asked him very, very clearly to explain. He said: Oh, well, I was only there for three months.

The minister was on the board for 10 years. He knows how this stuff works. Maybe he didn't work on the adjustor for the entire time, but he was there when it was implemented. Why didn't he disapprove of the cost of carbon adjustor then? He could have, but he didn't. Why didn't the minister suggest solutions then? He could have raised alarm bells, but he didn't. Why is this minister trying to make it sound to New Brunswickers that this government has a solution when it has clearly failed?

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This is the reality that New Brunswickers are living in. At the end of the day, the minister says he has a solution, but he clearly doesn't. Now we're asking him to—

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Madam Speaker, I would just like to raise two points in response to the honourable member's questions. One is in terms of the... I'm sorry he hasn't had the opportunity to actually read the EUB's initial decision. It was signed by two members, not three. My friend, the Chair, passed away during the deliberations on that particular decision. I think the honourable member is very well aware that it was a temporary initiative. The honourable member is very much aware that three times—three times—the decision states that, if another solution or more evidence comes forward, the review should be done before six months are up, if not sooner.

Here is the other thing I don't understand. The temporary formula is based on the blending of biodiesel in California. It doesn't even relate to gasoline. It was a surrogate. It was a proxy. Does the honourable member agree that the adjustor should be based on costs? Or should it be based on this esoteric formula?

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): The minister still hasn't proven whether he, as an EUB member, even understands what that cost is. This is something.

You know, Madam Speaker, small independent businesses, the small independent retailers who offer gas in this province, are the ones most threatened by the change that this government wants to bring in. We know that their margins will be completely lost if we deregulate the system. They won't have any predictability when it comes to their costs.

One of two things is going to happen. Those retailers are either going to shut down, or they're going to be taken over by larger corporations. These are homegrown family businesses that we will lose as a result of the decisions made by this government. Is the Minister of Natural Resources okay with losing independent businesses to closure or to corporate takeovers? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): There are a couple of points to unpack, if I could. One is with respect to deregulated and regulated marketplaces. Over the past 16 years, the average profit margin difference between unregulated markets and regulated markets across Canada is 0.3¢. That is one third of a penny. That's all there is. There are small stations throughout Canada that work in a deregulated situation as well.

In this particular case right now, given that we are before a EUB process, all we're suggesting is that we ensure New Brunswickers don't pay a penny more than they should. I want the honourable members to support us. We don't believe New Brunswickers should pay a penny more than the true cost of compliance with the CFR. Doesn't the honourable

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member agree that it should be based on cost—real cost—which is good regulatory practice, or does he want to use the blending of biodiesel in California instead?

FOREST INDUSTRY

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. We're well aware here in this province that we have taken a serious hit from the U.S. tariffs on softwood lumber. We know jobs are threatened. We know there is a lot of anxiety within the sector in relation to investment and current production in those mills. We know that, back in October, the Premier gave an update projecting that there would be a 0.6% GDP loss because of the tariffs on the sector. She talked about a \$3.5-billion economic hit. This was back in October. Again, we're still in this place of uncertainty. People in the sector are nervous. They don't feel that this provincial government is working hard enough to help them navigate that. The federal government is not doing enough to negotiate on a bigger scale for the industry. Can the Minister of Natural Resources please tell us if the numbers from that projection are still correct or if they need to be updated?

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I feel the love of Christmas coming because I've been getting a lot of attention from my friends opposite over the course of the day in that regard.

I do want to suggest one thing: This has been problematic in the softwood lumber sector across the country. We've seen curtailments across the country already. We have not seen that situation in New Brunswick just yet. I would suggest that the honourable member consult with the New Brunswick lumber commission regarding how engaged and supportive this government is in the softwood lumber sector. I think you'd see an abundance of support. I do share the member opposite's concern. We need a negotiated settlement. It's vital to the competitiveness of the country and particularly this province, where the value chain from the forestry sector is the greatest contributor to the tax base of the province. I thank him for the question. I share his concerns.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the engagement from the minister, you know, in relation to this issue, but engagement and results are two different things. New Brunswickers need results. When we look across different departments, we see a lot of committees, task forces, studies, and reviews, but we're not seeing the tangible results we need to see. I mean, look, we're looking at 26 000 direct and indirect jobs in softwood lumber. We're talking about 1 in 17 New Brunswickers working in this sector who are affected. I think it's very important that we get the results we need to ensure this sector doesn't just survive but also thrives in the midst of all these uncertainties. Considering that we're now looking at 35% or more in tariffs on top of what we've...

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(Interjections.)

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): With the 10%, it's 45%. Thank you, Premier. I'm glad you acknowledged that.

Can I ask you what this government is doing to help the industry now to navigate these tariffs?

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm very grateful to the Premier for helping my member opposite with respect to the additional percentage, which makes it even more problematic.

I want to underscore this: This Premier has put softwood lumber front and centre as a priority with our federal officials. When Prime Minister Carney was here, softwood lumber was at the top of the trade docket in terms of level of importance. Again, the honourable member speaks about results. It is a very problematic situation across the country. Look at British Columbia. They've had curtailments in British Columbia. The best result we have right now is that all those machines are still turning today. They're still turning. They're still making a contribution to the whole value chain. There's \$653 million in tax revenue coming from our forestry sector value chain, and lumber is a key component of that.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Madam Speaker, again, we're looking at the forestry sector, which is at the top for GDP here in New Brunswick. It's one of the biggest producers of our province. Again, 26 000 direct and indirect jobs...

One of the biggest mills, Grand Lake Timber, is in my riding. I can tell you that there are a couple of hundred jobs there—probably several hundred indirect jobs—that directly affect that mill. I'm hearing from people in my area, and I can tell you that they're nervous, they're anxious, and they're not convinced that this government is fighting hard enough. I believe it takes more than a kitchen party in Ottawa to get the federal government to actually move with the U.S. administration to remove these tariffs and to ensure that our products can be freely exported to the United States.

Again, I need to ask the minister: When we talk about U.S. markets, what is this government doing to push the federal government to ensure that the U.S. markets remain open, or reopen, and to ensure that these tariffs are gone so that our workers can keep working and producing for New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Herron (Hampton-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Natural Resources, L): Again, Madam Speaker, I find the honourable member's question very helpful. I think it's very helpful for us to have this discussion on what I'm going to suggest is the most important sector in the province from an economic perspective.

I suggest that the honourable member even check with the ownership of that large mill to ask how engaged this government is with respect to the lumber sector itself. I think we're

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all concerned. I'm concerned. The members are concerned. Those workers are clearly concerned. So is the owner of that particular mill. However, I want to underscore that we are engaged. It is an ongoing relationship.

Specifically, New Brunswick has played a role with British Columbia and Minister Parmar. For the first time, Canada has a pan-Canadian type of position from which we could actually negotiate with the Americans. It might actually result in a quota system across the country. Traditionally, Canada has had about a 30% market share. We'd be okay if it were 25% tariff free. We can have a pan-Canadian position because of the position New Brunswick has...

[Translation]

HOMELESSNESS

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

[Original]

Despite the Housing Minister highlighting his capital budget, with a 70% increase for affordable housing, this budget doesn't appear to include any funding to have NB Housing build complex care housing for the homeless population. This is something I first proposed here in the Legislature two years ago to ensure there is housing for the homeless with wraparound services, including health care and other services. The need now is even more urgent than before. Providing complex care housing with wraparound services, such as mental health support, addiction treatment, employment assistance, and case management, can help people with complex needs tremendously. Given the urgency of the need for this to be done by government now and not downloaded to community groups, why hasn't the minister of housing included funding to build publicly owned and operated complex care housing to address the homelessness crisis in his capital budget?

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It is an important priority for us to build resiliency at every stage of the housing continuum. We know that we need support not only in shelters and independent public housing but also along every stage of the continuum to make sure that people can be supported in the way they need to be and in the communities in which they live.

That's why we've championed new projects for bridge housing to make sure we can get people out of homelessness and keep them out of homelessness while transitioning them into permanent housing. It's also why we're going to keep making sure that our capital public housing investment funding supports that. We will also make sure that the work we do in communities through our operational budget continues to support our community partners, who are leading the vast majority of our non-profit work in communities, so that

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they are able to lead and own that bridge housing and drive better results for the communities where people are and where we see the need in the population.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Given the urgency of the homelessness crisis, this government can't put the burden of building housing to respond on community partners. Complex care housing in B.C. is built by BC Housing. NB Housing should build complex care housing as part of its public housing portfolio.

The minister said the Forest Hill sleeping cabins project is "bridge housing", but at the moment, it's a bridge to nowhere. It provides much-needed secure and private emergency shelter for those out in the cold who otherwise might be living in tents, yes. Who can say no to that?

However, there isn't supportive housing for them to move into. What is the minister responsible for housing's plan to actually build complex care housing with wraparound support services to address the needs of those in the homeless population when they are supposed to cross the bridge into new housing?

Hon. Mr. Hickey (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. One of the reasons we are in this crisis is that we haven't had support across every level of housing on the housing continuum. One of the main reasons we've seen the number of homeless people increase as much as it has is that governments of the day did not invest in the right housing supports. They did not make sure that folks with complex care needs were represented in those numbers. That's why we've transformed the way we do that work. That's why we've announced bridge housing projects in order to get people out of homelessness and into independent public housing living and have made clear commitments, such as our commitment to build 1 760 new affordable housing units in the province within our mandate. We will continue to make sure that we prioritize spreading that across the housing continuum. We will make sure that is represented in every community that needs it. For the time being, we continue to invest in bridge housing. I encourage the member opposite to get on board with us in doing that.

PHYSICIANS

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. On Friday, I asked the Minister of Health a question, and I got an answer from the Premier. After the advertisement, the Premier said:

We then signed a phenomenal contract with the Medical Society to make sure surgeons would be attracted to places like the Upper River Valley Hospital. We're working to make New Brunswick an attractive place for doctors. We have increased our emphasis on recruitment and how we recruit specialists to rural areas, to the Upper River Valley Hospital, to look at

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how we support a surgeon who is alone to become a member of a team so that we now have multiple surgeons coming to deliver health care to—

I'm assuming that is "to" the Upper River Valley Hospital. I'd like to know what the Premier is doing to recruit more surgeons to the Upper River Valley Hospital. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, I relish this opportunity. At almost 20 years old, the Upper River Valley Hospital is the newest gem in our group of hospitals. We are very supportive of what happens in that community. In fact, I've worked there. We've had very capable surgeons there, but we've had a hard time keeping two surgeons there. Two is the optimal number.

As of very recently, we have assigned a talent recruitment person to that community specifically to look after not only primary care but also surgical care. Sometimes we have to do that. We are looking at being able to speak about why surgeons leave. I have been able to conduct exit interviews with surgeons and talk to colleagues. We are very supportive of acute care surgery in the Upper River Valley. There will be opportunities for the surgeons who work there to also work with surgeons from the Dr. Everett Chalmers Hospital.

I'm glad that the member opposite raised this. This is a very positive time. Thank you very much for encouraging people to write to us about supporting the surgical activities at the Upper River Valley Hospital. Thank—

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I thank the minister. That almost sounds encouraging. I hope he gets many more emails from the tens of thousands of people who have watched the video. People are concerned about the health care services that are not being provided in the Upper River Valley, which covers up to Plaster Rock, especially when it comes to people's lives and emergency and acute care surgery.

I have a letter from a local physician. He says that they've advocated for a local physician recruiter and for a posting for a general surgery physician. To date, neither have transpired. If you go on the NB Health Link jobs and career page, you won't see either of those postings on there.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): It's nice to see a new Liberal Party that doesn't squawk. Thank you, Premier.

I'd like to ask the minister this: Where are these jobs posted so that I can see that we're actually looking for a new surgeon?

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Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, yes, it is good news. Yes, we are posting for another surgeon in the Upper River Valley. I've been reassured of that by the CEO this morning. Yes, we have assigned a talent recruitment person to the Upper River Valley. That is occurring as we speak.

You spoke about the services that are not provided, but I'd like to talk about the services that are provided in this community. We have a group of physicians who are on the verge of establishing a collaborative care clinic in this community. These people have strong potential to help people before they need care. However, when people do get sick in the ER, we are committed to providing surgical services on site. For in-house surgery, we have a cadre of people who come from other communities to work there. We have obstetricians who come from other communities to help with this. It is a very positive environment, as you pointed out. I think we have room to grow that. I am very glad to support it.

I was wondering why I received these emails. Now I know why. Thank you very much for the video.

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The honourable minister is welcome. In terms of the video, when I have something positive to report back, I will certainly do that. I look forward to looking at the jobs board this afternoon or tomorrow to see a posting for a new surgeon for the Upper River Valley Hospital in Woodstock.

If I look back at the history in Woodstock, I see that we've had two and a half surgeons for the length of time that we have had a hospital. It's not necessarily a new thing, and we've been served by a number of locums. One of the challenges that we've had is that locums for surgery have been refused at the Upper River Valley Hospital. I want to know whether that decision has also been reversed. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker to the member opposite, locum physicians are transient. They include people who get credentialled and then leave again. Our priority has always been to have full-time physicians in this area, and we have succeeded. Up until March of this year, we had a second surgeon there who was very well regarded by the local staff, by the surgeon who was there, and by others. The second surgeon chose to leave.

We know that the community can support a second surgeon. The funding for this is very appropriate. We have a new funding arrangement that addresses surgeons, family doctors, and hospitalists in your community, and they welcome that. In fact, we are recruiting two more hospitalists in the Upper River Valley.

The environment is changing. Our government is bringing a very positive response to the needs of the Upper River Valley folks, a response that serves First Nations in Meductic as

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well. We aren't ignorant of that. We want to provide service to the whole community. It is very worthwhile. Thank you for drawing the issue to our attention today.

TAXATION

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. We all know Liberal governments have never seen a taxpayer dollar they couldn't spend. This government has a record deficit coming onto the books. Right now, it's at \$835 million. It's expected to surpass \$1 billion. On top of that, this government promised balanced books every year of its mandate. Now we see that, by the end of this fiscal year, \$100 million of New Brunswickers' taxes will go toward servicing the debt repayments for this spending.

On a number of occasions, I have asked the Premier: Will she not raise taxes? However, I'd like to ask the Minister of Finance whether he will get on his feet because somebody will have to pay the bill for this. We and our kids and grandkids will have to pay for this. To the Minister of Finance, will the government commit to not raising taxes in this mandate? Thank you.

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, budgets are interesting documents. They are far beyond just numbers to look at on the page. Budgets tell a story. The Auditor General came out with a report today. The Auditor General has lots of ratios and different analyses to see what that story is.

I found a ratio that was very interesting. It's called the capital assets-to-cost of capital assets. When this ratio goes on a negative trend, it means that provincial assets are depreciating. It means they are being used at a faster rate than the rate at which they are being replaced. During the tenure of the previous government, that ratio went down by 11%. The previous government used our provincial assets and did not replace them. It left that for future generations. Did it not believe that somebody would have to pay for that someday?

We just introduced a capital budget that will reverse that, because we know that we will leave a better New Brunswick for New Brunswickers when we're done.

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