

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY



Speaker: Hon. Darlene Compton

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[The Legislature sat at 1:02 p.m.]

[S. MacEwen in the chair]

Matters of Privilege and Recognition of
Guests

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Welcome back to my colleagues in the Legislature for another day of debate. Exciting day; budget day, of course. Always exciting in our province and in this Legislature.

I want to welcome all those who are tuned in watching it at home, and those who have joined us in the public gallery; of course, the most prominent being the mayor of Kensington, Rowan Caseley, a great community-minded individual who cares deeply for his community and lobbies hard and aggressively for the citizens of Kensington. Welcome, Rowan. I hope you enjoy the proceedings today.

When I wrote this note this morning, spring was in the air. It might have changed a little bit out there but with the warmer weather, some rain today, it gets us thinking a little bit about the theme of spring, so just a reminder that this is the last day to pre-order the infamous Vanco tulips in support of the QEH Foundation during their annual tulip fundraiser. As a reminder, if you haven't done so already, get your orders in if you'd like to contribute to this worthwhile cause and see some beautiful tulips on your desk or in your home. It's a great fundraiser.

It was also announced this morning that Team PEI at the national Special Olympics in Calgary have brought home some medals already. Three gold medals when to Callum McEwen in figure skating. Alyssa Chapman in figure skating, as well, won a gold, and Ellen MacNearney for cross country skiing. Prince Edward Island also had a silver medal by Rhonda Fall in snowshoeing. Congratulations to the winners and keep up the great work out there. We look forward to seeing more hardware come back to PEI following the Special Olympics in Calgary.

Also, it was exciting to hear that the biggest event of the 2024 Grand Slam of Curling season will take place in Charlottetown here next October at the Bell Aliant Centre, where we'll see 32 of the best curling teams in the men's and women's division gather in Charlottetown to compete at a Grand Slam event at the Bell Aliant Centre. Good work by the City of Charlottetown and to Curling PEI who, I know, will host a tremendous event.

[1:05 p.m.]

Mr. Speaker, I have to admit I didn't get a whole lot of sleep last night. I was – like many in here, I'm sure – tossing and turning, thinking about someone who is no stranger to here, and someone who means a great deal to all of us here.

Yesterday evening, we got the horrible news that our colleague, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, a friend to all of us, lost her beloved daughter Katie; only 42 years old, taken from us far too early.

She had so much left to give to this world, but in her short time taught us so much about resilience, and perseverance, and strength, and how to smile in the face of difficult challenge.

To Madam Speaker, Darlene; to Russ; to Alex, her husband; to Glen, Carolyn, and Rory; they lost a daughter, a sister, a wife, a friend.

I was thinking that, not that long ago, Katie and Alex were home and Darlene took them in to my office. I got the opportunity to see firsthand the love and admiration that couple had for each other, and the special twinkle that Darlene had in her eye for Katie. It was special to be part of that.

You know, you reflect on a lot of things, and as a parent, it's hard to imagine dealing with this. No parent wants to be in a position to be holding their child's hand and saying goodbye. It's supposed to work the other way around.

I was in contact with Darlene last night and the family is coping the best they can. They're going through a range of emotions, as you can imagine. But I wanted her to know I would share this on her behalf with

Islanders, and that we love her and their family.

With your indulgence and the indulgence of the House, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to ask everyone to stand for a moment of silence for Katie.

[The House observed a moment of silence.]

Hon. D. King: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. Premier, for that.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I'd like to welcome everyone who is watching online, and of course Mayor Caseley, who is in the gallery today.

I, too, want to extend my sincere condolences to Speaker Darlene and to her family, and just let them know that they're all in our thoughts and prayers.

Thank you.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I, too, would like to welcome Mayor Caseley into the gallery, and to everyone tuning in from all over the Island, and would also like to extend my sincere condolences to the Speaker.

I guess there are not many words to say right now, except that all of our hearts are with her and her family right now. Sincere condolences.

I also would love to give a shout-out to Mr. Robbie Burt who is currently on foot, walking from Tignish to Hunter River today, raising money for homelessness. I know today isn't much of an easy walk for him. He was on the news this morning giving us an update. So, just thinking of you, Robbie, on your walk, and cheering you on.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

B. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I just wanted to start off, as well, with offering my condolences to Speaker Darlene and her family. I can't imagine what it's like to lose a child; no matter how much you prepare, it's not enough. They're in my thoughts and prayers, for sure.

I wanted to welcome Mayor Rowan Caseley from Kensington to the gallery, and I wanted to say hello to constituents watching from District 18 Rustico-Emerald.

With the thaw, our clay roads are knee-deep in mud. The Queens County crew is doing a fantastic job managing the water and the roads. If it gets icy, it could be treacherous. We do have some issues on the Prince County side. I have a lady who is stuck in her house, who has medical appointments she's got to get to. She was stuck last spring. The roads weren't improved in the summer; she's stuck now. She can't get out. I'm hoping the minister can help me get her to her appointments.

[1:10 p.m.]

Lastly, tonight, the popular music program at Bluefield is holding a concert in at the Pourhouse, up on top of the Old Triangle. Our Page Emmeline Stanley is performing – she told me she's going to be doing an Elvis number – and my daughter, Annika Trivers. So, I wanted to wish them all: “break a leg.”

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

R. Croucher: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I, as well, would like to offer my condolences to Madam Speaker and her family at this sad time.

I'd also like to wish all Team PEI athletes participating in the Special Olympics Canada Winter Games in Calgary this week the best of luck. I would especially like to wish all the best to District 1's very own Shelby McInnis and Rhonda Fall. We're all rooting for you.

Thank you.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

T. DesRoches: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'd like to start off and wish my condolences to Madam Speaker's family.

I also rose today to shine a light on what the Leader of the Third Party already mentioned: Robbie Burt.

Robbie was a neighbour of mine for probably 15 years before I moved; he's next door to my father's house. Robbie is an unbelievable human being. He's legally blind, but it doesn't hold him back one bit. He's doing this walk; I did get a message that he stopped just outside of Kensington. Weather didn't permit. He trucked through the rain and snow all night, but he's going to start back up on Saturday and continue on with his journey to raise awareness for homelessness.

The second reason I rose today is to shine a light on the grade 8 cohort at Athena Consolidated School. They are exploring solutions to the housing market, including some groups exploring homeless solutions. They have their model scales on display and they're available to be viewed in the foyer at Athena on March 6th from 9:45 to 10:15 and March 7th from 9:15 to 9:45 and 10:15 to 10:45.

Lastly, I'd just like to give a shout-out to a resident of District 21 who watches every day. She calls me weekly and gives me updates and tells me what we're doing wrong and what we could be doing better. I appreciate every conversation I have with her. So, I'd just like to give a shout-out to Joan and thank her for watching.

Statements by Members

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I just want to start by passing on my own condolences and thank the Premier for your beautiful words this morning. Premier, you spoke for all of us.

PEI Housing Strategy

There's massive irony in the opening section of the recently released Housing Strategy: the fact that it's called the Importance of Taking Action. For a government that, for five years, has sat on its hands when it comes to the housing crisis, a far more appropriate title would be "The Consequences of Not Taking Action."

Almost five years ago, in 2019, the Green Party caucus released a white paper on what we called, even back then, the PEI housing crisis. All of the problems that were brewing then have gotten worse – much, much worse – as a result of the dithering of this government and their trademark lack of vision, lack of planning, and lack of ambition.

Don't get me wrong, I'm glad that we finally have a housing strategy; I just wish that it had appeared five years ago. In the meantime, during a period when we had unprecedented population growth – which for, of course, this government did similarly no planning – we failed hopelessly to build the houses that we needed to keep up.

Let's look at a couple elements of this strategy that are so shockingly and unforgivably late.

Firstly, investing in government-owned housing. Absolutely, of course, this is needed, and it was needed five years ago. So, why then did this government repeatedly turn down opportunities to invest using federal funds specifically given to target housing, the Rapid Housing Initiative, and more recently, the Housing Accelerator Fund? So many opportunities to build lots and lots of cost-shared public housing.

[1:15 p.m.]

Secondly, streamlining the permitting process. The irony here is that for anyone who wants to build a house now on Prince Edward Island, you don't need one permit, you need three: a development permit, a building permit, and an occupancy permit. This government has actually added a bunch of red tape, and consequently, delays.

Thirdly, investing in workforce and immigration strategies to attract and retain

skilled workers. Again, absolutely, of course; we needed this as we did five years ago. But instead, for every construction worker that we brought to PEI, this government over that time brought in 17 food service and accommodation employees. Once again, things are much, much worse as a result of the decisions and policies made by this government that not only failed to combat the housing crisis but made it worse.

This government's signature has become no vision, no planning, and no ambition. They are simply not getting the necessary things done. Worse than that, they've made choices that are hurting Islanders and moving us in exactly the opposite direction from where we should be headed.

But even as this government continues at not being good at taking action, Islanders themselves seem to have figured out the importance of taking action, as they just did so unequivocally in District 19.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe.

February – Heart Month

Z. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

February is Heart Month, and although we are at the end of the extended month this year, each year I do love to remind Islanders of the great work that Heart and Stroke, and the group's manager of Health Policy and Systems – a constituent of mine – Sarah Crozier does to help raise awareness of the importance of bystanders knowing CPR and how to use an AED to improve survival rates of cardiac arrest outside a hospital setting.

According to new analysis done by the Heart and Stroke Foundation, these out-of-hospital cardiac arrests are much more frequent than previous estimates. They happen every nine minutes across our country and are fatal nine times out of 10.

Cardiac arrest is different from a heart attack. A cardiac arrest is when the heart suddenly and unexpectedly stops beating. It can happen to anyone at any age, and often

without warning. The incidence of out-of-hospital cardiac arrest in PEI has been increasing. It's up 33 percent compared to 2019. In PEI, almost 40 percent of hospital cardiac arrest occurs among those under 65 years of age.

CPR is easy to learn and it's simple to do. AEDs actually talk you through how to use them at every step. There is no reason why every person in PEI cannot learn these simple skills to help save a life.

I rise today to encourage and thank my colleagues in their support of Heart and Stroke's efforts to increase awareness of the urgent need for improved bystander response to cardiac arrest. I also want to thank members from all three caucuses for recently taking part in the Cardiac Crash Program put on by Heart and Stroke.

Heart and Stroke offers many different ways to learn how to do CPR and use an AED. I encourage everyone in PEI to visit the Heart and Stroke website for more information on CPR learning.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Award Winners from District 1

R. Croucher: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

District 1 is full of champions, and the month of February produced many of them. I had the privilege of attending the prestigious O'Brien Awards honouring the very best in the harness racing industry, which was held on February 5th of this month.

Stockade Seelster took home his second consecutive O'Brien Award this year in the three-year-old pacer class. Stockade Seelster is owned by Sally MacDonald of Souris and Paul MacDonald, and is trained by Trainer of the Year Dr. Ian Moore, another PEI native. Stockade Seelster was sired by another horse owned by Sally and Paul MacDonald, State Treasurer, a hall of famer that has also left his mark on the industry.

I've known Sally and her husband, Allan, as well as Allan's father, Gerard MacDonald,

for a very long time. I remember Gerard telling me one day many years ago that Allan had an eye for picking a horse. Well, judging by the past couple, if Allan had anything to do with it, he was certainly right. Congratulations to Sally and Allan MacDonald, as well as Paul, on their success.

The PEISAA Powerlifting Championships were held last week with some of our students in District 1 taking home some serious hardware:

- Renée Chapman of Little Harbour, first overall in her weight class;
- Olivia Allen of Chepstow, first in her weight class;
- Addison Chaisson of Rollo Bay, first in her weight class;
- Alexa Paquet of Souris River, second in her weight class; and
- Marc Chapman of Little Harbour taking home fifth in his weight class.

Our international student, Lorenzo Martin, who most of you have met here at the Legislature last sitting, also walked away fifth in his weight class, which is impressive in itself given he only started powerlifting three months ago under trainer Larry LeBlanc.

[1:20 p.m.]

Although we haven't pioneered any left-hand turning lanes, and I concur that Mel's does have great coffee, there are lots of reasons to be proud of the talent in District 1. Congratulations to you all.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Questions by Members

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Since 2019, life has gotten a lot more expensive under this Conservative government. Housing prices are through the roof – no pun intended – food prices remain high, and the list goes on. Government

should be focused on making life more affordable and putting more money back into Islanders' pockets, but this government just doesn't seem to be up to the job.

Recycling policy and practices

Question to the Minister of Environment: Does your department track how many bottles and cans are returned to recycling centres annually, and if so, can you tell me how much is paid back to Islanders for their recycling efforts?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think it's like, 78 percent get returned out of it all, and the whole program I think is \$8.5 million. So, we figure about \$7.5 million goes back and the other million doesn't go back, though – the Finance minister probably might not like to hear me say this, but I'll say it anyway – I'd like to see it all go back because that would mean it's not in ditches or in places it shouldn't be. I think that, as the population grows, that 20 percent is a growing number of cans and bottles that we can't account for that are somewhere on the Island.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the minister for that response.

Islanders understand the importance of protecting our environment, and when our former Liberal government phased out plastic bags, Islanders got fully on board at that time; no questions asked.

Question to the minister: When it comes to the recycling of bottles and cans, what initiatives are in place to continue to promote proper recycling practices with the goal of keeping more and more recyclable materials out of waste and landfills?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I guess the short answer is: probably not enough. But I know when we did the litter survey last year, and we found the number of cans that were in the ditches and the types of cans and where they're coming from, and those types of things, we went back and we started doing a public outreach. So, you might see us on social media talking more about it now. We did some radio ads about it. We're trying to re-engage Islanders in that we can still return our bottles.

I think that one of the things that I've been saying is I'm not sure that the five cents per can and bottle is necessarily enough anymore to encourage – you know, in the time that you and I were both young, we probably picked bottles in the ditch because you could make money with them, and the price really hasn't changed. It's actually gone – it's less than it probably was when I was a kid picking bottles.

So, we don't have anybody out doing it because they can be entrepreneurial with it, so I've asked our staff to maybe look at that. I think that's an angle that we can encourage people, if we made the value of a can or a bottle worth more, that we could get a higher return rate.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

That's great news to hear. It's great to hear that you understand that maybe that price should go up, because in New Brunswick recently, they announced that they would be doubling the amount that individuals receive in compensation for returning their bottles and cans to a recycling centre.

Now, we all know that incentivizing environmentally sustainable practices results in clearer results, and this would have the added benefit of putting more money in people's pockets; especially those who grapple with the cost of living crisis we're presently in.

Question to the minister: Has your government examined what it would cost if the Province of PEI followed New

Brunswick's lead and doubled the amount for bottle and can returns?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Actually, we're looking at tripling it. So, we're....

[Interjections]

Hon. S. Myers: Yeah. So, not to one-up New Brunswick – we didn't know New Brunswick was doing it – but we're going through the process now of what that would look like. We only charge 10 cents on a can or a bottle now, so to do it, we'd have to move the deposit to 20 cents to give 15 cents back to Islanders.

We're quite cognizant of the fact that there are rising cost issues here, right across the country, and we don't want to contribute more to that. So, we're kind of walking a very ginger path here, as we try to figure out what the best path is to make it so that people will return their bottles, but we don't want to put them into some sort of hardship if they're purchasing a high volume of them now and having to sit on....

So, what I'll say to you is this: my hope is to have the return tripled by late this summer.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

[1:25 p.m.]

Hon. H. Perry: That is awesome news, and I'll tell you why it's good news. Because it was brought to attention to me by one of my constituents who are grandparents raising their grandson. They would take him out and they would collect bottles. It was kind of a family event, but they were teaching him so much at that age. But they were saving for his educational fund, so that they knew that – they were getting older, – that there would be money for that.

I was asking for doubling, but if you're looking at tripling, that's even an added

bonus to that. I really do appreciate that you're looking into it.

I know my question was going to be – he kind of answered it – but when Islanders should expect this, but can you give us a little tighter timeline on when Islanders may be able to see this happen?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We are looking at August to implement it, but we're doing a study right now on the New Brunswick model. We're looking at the model they did where they basically made the producer responsible for the collection of it. We're trying to figure out, how is that model going to work in New Brunswick? Do you take your bottles back to Sobeys? Because I know at one point, that was a thing. And what does it do to the small businesspeople that are on Prince Edward Island who are currently in the business of collecting and returning bottles for us?

We don't want to put anybody out of business when we do it, so we're first looking at that model. If all else fails, we'll just increase the deposit and make it so Islanders get more money back. I'm going to give you the timeline of August at this time.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much. That's wonderful news and I will I guess keep your feet at the fire.

Hope Air has an agreement with the Province to assist Islanders in need of medical travel assistance. Essentially, Islanders can apply to Hope Air to have their travel costs covered should they need the service in other provinces. The Province provides the funds to Hope Air and Hope Air distributes it to those who apply.

The problem is that this does not do anything to support Islanders who may need immediate attention off-Island. They can only get reimbursed after the fact for the expenses that are associated with travel.

Medical travel assistance

A question to the Minister of Health: What are Islanders who can't afford to shoulder the upfront costs to do about this if they can't carry the costs until they can be reimbursed? Or are they expected to go without?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank the hon. member for the question.

We do recognize that travel costs are a significant burden for Islanders. We have engaged a firm to do a full, comprehensive review. I'm pretty sure it's in my mandate letter, actually, to improve our travel services and supports to Islanders.

Thank you for bringing up the issue. We will continue to work on it. We hope to have something soon.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Question to the same minister: How many applications for funding through Hope Air are processed in an average year and how much is paid out, on average, per patient or application?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank the member for the question.

I don't have that data right at my fingertips. I know we have had given additional supports to Hope Air because of the cost increases that are associated with it, but I'm sure I could grab that information and bring it back.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Question to the Minister of Housing. This is about Charlotte Court. Just today, I got an email message from somebody in that building. I'll read it to you:

Our basement is flooded again. We have no sump pumps. The big banks of snow between us and Hunt Court melted, plus the rest of the rain, and now we have water once again. Most of our storage units are down there. They are working on pumping it out, but it's not going to happen soon.

Can you ask the Housing minister to get sump pumps sometime? Things are wet again, just like after the hurricane; dragging wet things up and out to dry. We need someone looking out for us and we really don't have a voice.

This is happening time and time again. You have residents in there that you support. It's owned by another third-party organization.

Public housing repairs and maintenance

Minister, will you get sump pumps at Charlotte Court?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

He just talked about a private owner? A building? I'm not sure which building he's talking about. I assume the publicly owned housing at Charlotte Court.

I do get emails occasionally from people at our public housing units about maintenance issues and we ensure that we get them looked after immediately. I'm confident that if our staff have been made aware, that they're there and trying to deal with the issue. But I do occasionally get emails like this and we ensure that staff are there to address these issues immediately.

[1:30 p.m.]

I'm sure it's not the only wet basement in the province today and I'm sure that we'll get to it as quickly as we can. We know that some of our buildings are problematic. They're old, they need maintenance, but

we're investing heavily in preventative maintenance, and I hope that we can get this addressed for the residents there very quickly.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Your partnership is with Killam, so you better check out with Killam before. You should know that.

Spring is right around the corner, and each spring, our senior facilities have issues with garbage, and in the summer. It was atrocious; this year, between Charlotte Court and Hunt Court, the garbage was atrocious, and our community had to step up to get that out because obviously you weren't on top of the contract because that garbage stayed around for a long time.

Minister, is this going to happen again this spring and summer? What are you doing to control the garbage in that facility, in that area?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yes, I'm aware that we have a unit there with Killam, but there's also a unit that's fully owned and operated by the PEI Housing Corporation right behind it, so I wasn't sure which one you were talking about.

Occasionally, just yesterday in fact, I had a similar message about garbage. We do have some trouble at some of our housing units. Not everyone is diligent with sorting their garbage the way it should be. We do our best to help train people, to educate them a bit, but it is an ongoing problem. Occasionally, we send in a private contractor, as I did at one point this summer at Charlotte Court to have garbage removed.

It's something we deal with, something we try to help educate our residents on, but yes, it is an ongoing concern, and we'll do what we can to address it.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thanks for that response, and it is a problem, so I'm glad the minister is on top of it.

Question to the same minister.

It seems like there is a fumigation problem around, especially around Charlottetown. It's happening at various – Duvar Court, Hunt Court – there are various different facilities that have to go through the fumigation process. In the spring and summer, it was a big issue there.

Your staff has done a great job of communicating, but it's becoming an issue. How do we mitigate it? Because when you're a senior having to leave your facility for a certain amount of time, it creates a great deal of stress. Minister, what are you doing to mitigate any issues around fumigation in the future with these buildings?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yes, I understand it's a very disruptive process for tenants to have to go through, but considering the reason we're going through that process, it's very much worth the effort. But I understand that it's so disruptive, and in many cases, a lot of furniture and belongings need to be moved around. It can be difficult for some of our elderly people in our seniors buildings.

When we can, we have housing staff on site to help with those issues, and I think we've actually had private contractors in to assist with that, and even some of the pest control companies have gone above and beyond to help assist with tenants that require help.

But I take your point that it's very disruptive and we should assist in any way we can.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Yeah, thank you, minister.

Recently, I've been in 501 Queen, which isn't in my district, it's in another MLA's district, but I was in there, and I've been contacted repeatedly by friends at 501

Queen. Just recently, they had an enormous amount of problems with the hurricane and the stuff that they've been through with furniture. Now recently, I see on Facebook – and I was contacted – about just simple tables. They just need tables. This is a building that you do own.

Minister, can we not get card tables – it promotes wellness, it promotes togetherness – and furniture in there? What are we doing at 501 Queen? They've been through so much. Can we at least get them 10 card tables?

Thank you.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I think this is a good news story. Although I think it used to be in the member's district, it's now in mine. I represent 501 Queen. I appreciate that the member tagged me on Facebook to make me aware of the issue. [Laughter]

I've passed along the request to my staff, and I think it's a reasonable request. We do, from time to time, refresh the furniture in the common areas. I think that the Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park and I visited one of the senior residents in her district with their brand-new furniture in their common area. I think that they were appreciative of that.

The least we can do at 501 Queen is refresh the card tables so that they can sit comfortably and enjoy themselves as they play cards.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

[1:35 p.m.]

G. McNeilly: I'll let you off the hook now, minister. Thank you for that, and I look forward to seeing those tables in there.

Just a question to the Minister of Health.

Brecken House is a facility that does day programming for people who need respite,

and they go in there. It's an incredible facility. It's attached to PE Home.

I want to ensure that the minister looks into this; I've sent a message off to him and people in your staff. They're having trouble with transportation. There are transportation cost issues around going to Brecken House. I've heard this from a 90-year-old who wanted to go; couldn't afford the taxi.

Access to respite day programs

Minister, can you look into making sure that people have access to get to Brecken House if they want to socialize during the day? It's a very important program, and I want to say a big shout-out to the staff there. Look into the transportation at Brecken House because the staff are doing a great job. We don't want people to have to pay to go there.

Thank you.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, and thank the member for his advocacy. He's a great property manager for a lot of our properties that we have on PEI, so I do appreciate that.

We have invested more in transportation east and west, but obviously that doesn't help Brecken House or those who use it. So, again, it's important, I think, that for socializing, for our seniors, that they have access to these services. So, we'll have some discussions in the department and see what kind of plan that we can come up with for programming.

Some of our meetings with the Nursing Homes Association, we talk a lot about the socialization and how important it is to engage our seniors to decrease loneliness.

Thank you for the question.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Everybody knows, as you're well aware, O'Leary, PEI, is a proud hockey town, home

to the O'Leary Maroons, the Prince County Warriors, many male and female minor hockey, and local rec teams.

So, we took great interest when this current government made the recent announcement of giving the NHL \$2.5 million of taxpayers' hard-earned money to be designated as the preferred destination of the National Hockey League. And I want to point out that O'Leary is the only PEI community to have been recognized by the NHL as Hockeyville Canada 2017.

Tourism partnership with NHL

Question to the Minister of Tourism: With this \$2.5 million contract that your department signed with the NHL, what are we getting for this money, and can you estimate how many visitors O'Leary should expect to welcome this year because of your purchase of promotion of NHL advertisements on TV networks, boards, and tourism brochures?

Z. Bell: (Indistinct) hockey (Indistinct)

R. Henderson: Yeah, we're the mecca of hockey in PEI.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. C. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I guess I would say that since 2009, this is the first time we've seen an increase to the marketing budget in Tourism PEI. Not even the former minister across the floor...

[Interjections]

Hon. C. Deagle: ...could get such an increase.

This deal has been about 18 months in the making, and industry is quite excited for this announcement. We get to align Tourism PEI's brand with the NHL brand, which is a worldwide renowned brand and we're extremely excited about that.

The member did mention, how many people are you going to see come to PEI? Well, that's our goal, obviously. Part of our tourism strategy is trying to attract tourists from the New England states, which is why

we've partnered with the Boston Bruins to target that area; also, target people from Ontario and Quebec too, because those people can get here the easiest. They have air access and they can easily drive here. So, those are the markets we are targeting.

In terms of visitors, the market lift I guess is what you would be referencing. It's extremely hard to measure that, but we think we'll have a huge increase in visitors coming to PEI and spending money in PEI. The industry is worth 7 percent of our GDP; generates half a billion dollars in economic activity each year.

So, we're very excited for this announcement.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

And I appreciate the minister investing in the Boston Bruins; very good choice. I think they'll have a long season. You'll see lots of advertisements going across the boards, I'm quite certain of that.

But as the minister would be well aware, O'Leary is known for potatoes and hockey. The town already sees 16,000 to 20,000 visitors every summer touring our Canadian Potato Museum. This district is also home to many fantastic beaches at West Point, and further to that, it has the highest occupancy rate of any campground on Prince Edward Island, at Cedar Dunes Park.

Question to the minister: Will your department be offering Canada's Hockeyville community – a potential destination as the hockey capital – any funding so our tourism operators can offer a variety of tourism packages as they will be able to take advantage of a massive influx of hockey fans that will want to spend the night in Hockeyville Canada, in O'Leary?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

[1:40 p.m.]

Hon. C. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I wish I could tell the hon. member how many exact people are going to go to O'Leary this summer. I hope a lot, and I hope they spend lots of money up there.

As part of this partnership, one of the big aspects of this is to actually boost meetings and conventions because that industry has been slumping since COVID – and it's actually right across Canada lately – but we feel very confident that we'll actually be able to attract a number of the other partners of the NHL to host corporate retreats, getaways, whatnot, in PEI.

Actually, I think we've had a dozen of them already reach out to us wanting to host events here on PEI, which actually generates a significant amount of money in the local economy. So, huge kudos to the team at Tourism PEI who spent well over a year putting this deal together. I know the industry is extremely excited.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: Thanks.

I really appreciate the comment there, minister, in regard to your press release, and mentioning that PEI will be hosting a hockey summit. Very exciting news; happy to know that.

I certainly want to point out that O'Leary and West Prince would be an especially great location to host this hockey summit. We already host the Boys and Girls Club hockey celebrity golf tournament at Mill River, and O'Leary has a rich history of hosting the NHL training camps of the Philadelphia Flyers, the Ottawa Senators, and the Florida Panthers. So, we've got a success rate and a track record in doing that.

Minister, can you share the particulars with this Legislature of how many people or delegates we'll see coming to Prince Edward Island for this particular hockey summit, and would you be interested at all in even tabling the agreement so we can know and prepare? And maybe West Prince can be the host for this hockey summit. We have a great tourism product in western PEI.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. C. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In the particulars of the summit, we don't know the exact details yet, but part of our goal would be to actually get those folks and individuals out across PEI and show them all of Prince Edward Island, not just simply in Charlottetown. We're extremely excited for that.

I think you mentioned the agreement on the summit. Is that what you're...?

R. Henderson: I'd like to see a copy of the agreement.

Hon. C. Deagle: The agreement, yeah. That agreement is with a third party and the NHL, and there are confidentiality concerns there as well with the NHL, but we can certainly go back, take a look, and see what we can provide the hon. member.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As part of its 2023 operating budget, government promised \$5.2 million this fiscal year for an up-to-\$1,500-a-month primary caregiver grant. I've consistently heard from a number of Islanders who are anxiously awaiting this support. I will reiterate that this was in the last budget. Now we have a whole new budget coming, and not one single Islander has benefitted from this program. Announcing programs and not being prepared to deliver is harmful.

Primary caregiver grant

A question to the Minister of Health and Wellness: A new budget is being tabled today, and you've yet to spend a dime of the \$5.2 million promised to Islanders. When will this program be available?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank the hon. member for her question.

You're right; there is a lot of interest in the home caregiver benefit, and it's taking a lot of work for our department to put this together. It is only the second one in the

country; Nova Scotia offers a \$400-a-month benefit. So, we don't have a lot of history in order to build this program. We have worked with Social Development and Seniors for the payment part of it.

At this time, actually, we're waiting for a ruling from Revenue Canada about the taxability of the benefit itself.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: You knew it was going to be a challenge right at the start, yet you decided to announce it before you had any details. This grant was promised to Islanders who want to care for their family members requiring extra care, but they need and deserve the financial support to do so. At a time when our hospitals are full of patients awaiting long-term care beds, a program like this could provide much needed support to our health care system. It was promised by your government a year ago and you still have not delivered.

Question to the minister: You say you're looking for solutions to the health care crisis. Why don't you follow through on the ones you've already promised?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank the hon. member for the question.

It's good to talk about this program. Again, it is going to be targeted on long-term eligible clients first, and what we term as long-term supportive. I know the public is very eager to see how this program rolls out, and this will be phase 1. I think it's important to note that it will be a phased-in approach. Also, when we launch the program very soon, we will actually backdate it to January of this year.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

[1:45 p.m.]

K. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Sick of talking about it, I guess. Islanders are sick of asking for it.

Many Islanders are already caring for their loved ones and are offered no support from this government, and they are struggling; another example of this government offloading their work onto Islanders with empty promises and no real support.

The minister mentioned that they were going to offer backpay until January. Why would you only go back to January when you've offered this – this money is in your budget. Will you commit to spending every cent from last year's budget which you haven't put out the door yet to backpay Islanders, regardless of how far back that goes?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It is a complex program. We have consulted with over 600 caregivers on Prince Edward Island to understand their needs. I think it's important that it's very clear on who will be eligible in the program. We don't want to have any grey areas.

We are going to focus on long-term eligible clients first, and then the next class is what they call long-term care supportive, which is an assessment tool that we use through interRAI.

It is a very important program. It will help our long-term care pressures, so we're excited to get it off the ground.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The recently appointed Forestry Commission, which I know is doing excellent work on behalf of Islanders, released their most recent report last month entitled *Towards a New Forestry Policy*. The title suggests that the existing or old forestry policy is problematic, which is an opinion that is definitely shared by the

Auditor General, whose report from January last year told us that government is not following its own policies when it comes to managing public forests.

Forestry policy and funding

My question is for the Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action: Your mandate letter, minister, hardly mentions the forest industry at all, and the Auditor General and Forestry Commission have expressed deep concerns. Does the government, minister, actually care about our Island forests at all?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's kind of a weird question considering I was the one that struck the commission, got the people who were to be an independent source to go out and do this for us, accepted the report without question, said we would implement every recommendation in it. I don't know how I could prove more that I care about the industry than everything that I've done so far on this file.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It seems perhaps the minister has lost sight of the forest for the trees. The main program, which provides public money to manage, maintain, and rebuild our forests, is called the Forestry Enhancement Program. It's been cut almost in half in the last 20 years. It's only a third of what it was in the 1980s.

To the same minister: Since taking office in 2019 under this government, the program has continued to shrink, and the latest figures from 2022 show us that it's at its lowest level ever. If your government truly cared about our forests as you allege, wouldn't this program have received at least as much – if not more – funding, then, over the last five years?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

If you follow along, we've had a great partnership with the federal government on its forestry file. We're part of their 2 Billion Trees Program. They've given us a considerable amount of money to increase the amount of (Indistinct) stock or small trees out of our nursery. We've built a brand-new nursery. I think we've pretty near tripled the size of the number of trees we can put into it.

We know we need to do more. It's why we struck the commission. It's why we made them independent. It's why, when they sent the report to us, I said I accept all the recommendations and government will work towards the implementation of them. It's because we know that we need to do more. We care about our future. We care about where we're going. We had been hearing for a number of times that there had been stresses on the forest. Our *State of the Forest Report* shows varied information on how the forest itself has been reduced in size.

Obviously, we have a number of concerns about how we do it.

[1:50 p.m.]

The budgeting process isn't the only thing that we need to look at when we're looking at how we implement improvements in our forests. It's the relationships we're trying to build with the independent woodlot owners. It's the fact that we're involved with trying to help create a carbon credit system so that there's a value in allowing your forest to grow, that you take care of it properly, and that we could put real value into it so it's not being clear-cutted for housing, so it's not being clear-cutted for agricultural purposes, so that it's there for our future, it's there for future generations for our children and, quite frankly, so it's there for environment.

Thank you.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The minister, in his response, touched on the nursery and carbon capture, which obviously is crucial for our forestry to fulfill the carbon

role that it can. The existing forest policies, which date from 2006, talk very clearly about shifting the emphasis in our seedling production and moving away from planting softwoods to hardwoods, yet our hardwood seedling production has plummeted from a high of 9.3 percent in 2014 to 3.7 percent in the most recent figures in 2022.

To the same minister: If the government cared about our forests, why has the number of hardwoods we're producing and planted gone down substantially since you came to office?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: So, if I don't grow maple trees, I don't care about the forest. If we haven't tripled the amount of trees that we're growing in our nursery, I don't care about the forest....

[Interjections]

Hon. S. Myers: Listen, I'm not a lawyer. I'm not a mathematician either, and neither are you, because your math is wrong.

We're doubling the trees, we've tripled the trees, we're planting trees everywhere....

[Interjections]

Hon. S. Myers: ...participating with us. We have communities that are participating with us. We have the federal government fawning over us and throwing money at us because we know how to spend it. We're environmentally leaders in the entire world. We're leaders in the entire world...

[Interjections]

Hon. S. Myers: You know what, Mr. Speaker? It's high time the Green Party of Prince Edward Island gets back to their environmental roots and starts caring about the environment again because they haven't showed a cent of it in the last five years.

[Interjections]

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe.

Z. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As you know, I'm a very proud coach and an even prouder father. I also love youth sports and youth being physically active.

Our sports and recreational facilities are a vital part of our Island community, and they help make our Island healthy and create vibrant communities. They provide a platform for youth and adults to pursue healthy lifestyles, improve their mental health, build community, and also foster economic growth through special events like tournaments. We have the Charlottetown-Winsloe soccer club right smack dab in the middle of District 10.

Supports for sport and rec facilities

Question to the Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture: How do you and your department work with Island communities to support capacity for sports and recreational facilities?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. C. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I guess, in short, we would have the rural development. We have a fund that we can help assist a number of facilities with – but also just community projects in general. We usually partner with municipalities and non-profits if they need assistance in maintaining sport fields or whatnot, or if they need to build new ones. I guess that's how we would partner with minor sports in PEI.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe.

Z. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That is actually great to hear because here in the capital city of Charlottetown, a number of amateur sport groups are being hamstrung through a lack of facilities. We've seen that the Charlottetown curling club is closed. The tennis up at the Royalty Crossing or the Charlottetown Mall, and now minor football, are among the local sports groups that are scrambling to find appropriate facilities for their athletes to practice their sports.

Question to the same minister: Has the City of Charlottetown engaged with you or your

department about the challenges that these and other sports groups are facing to find appropriate facilities in our capital city?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. C. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I actually had this conversation yesterday with the Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty, and also the Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere. The City hasn't reached out to me directly, but I do know that there is a concern with the number of sports that are lacking facilities, especially in the capital area. If they want to reach out to me, they're more than welcome to. We'd certainly work with them.

It kind of has to be a project led by the City. I'm sure we'd be a partner with them on that if we need to build more facilities and fields for youth. If they want to reach out, I'm more than willing to meet with them.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe.

Z. Bell: That's great, also, to hear. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

These sports do cover a wide spectrum, drawing participants from many ages. I'm going to reference specifically the Charlottetown Privateers. I think they have around 200 participants in their development programs, and I do want to thank a constituent in District 10, Colleen Henderson, for all the work that she's done in Winsloe to help grow the sport of football in PEI.

[1:55 p.m.]

Question to the same minister: I know that the Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere as well as the Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty have long advocated – more specifically, the Belvedere member – retrofitting, possibly, the Stonepark bowl and using that as more of a sporting – because it hasn't been used in many years.

Minister, will you maybe commit to meeting with the Education department as well as Transportation to look at the feasibility of the Stonepark School being a good area for

these kids in Charlottetown, for the football program that might not have a spot to play this spring?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

Hon. C. Deagle: Yes, Mr. Speaker, we can commit to doing that. I can't speak necessarily for the Public Schools Branch or whatnot, but if they're looking for a home and they need it by this spring and if the Stonepark bowl, as it's called, is suitable for that and we need to put a little bit of money into it to help kind of rejuvenate it, then yes, we'd certainly do that so the kids have a place to play.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

S. Dillon: Oh, my goodness, it feels like Christmas in here today. Thank you, hon. member.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

After years of concerns about declining student populations in our province, we are faced with the opposite problem: how best to absorb the steady growth in our student population.

School bus route planning

Question to the Minister of Education: How often are school bus routes reviewed for the capacity and efficiency issues like overcrowding or delayed run times? How frequently do our school boards look at those types of things?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

Hon. N. Jameson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, hon. member, for the question.

Certainly, I'm going to start by thanking all of our tremendous bus drivers out there who do such a great job ensuring our children are transported to and from school in a safe manner. A big thanks to them, and all the folks at the board who work so hard on the routes and are navigating all kinds of different weather-related issues and all. It's

a busy job. So, again, a big thank you to all of them.

Typically, in the summer, leading into the beginning of the school year, that's where you'd see the most amount of planning. Obviously, we see families and children coming in throughout the year, so we do have to adjust routes accordingly throughout the year, but the majority of the planning would happen prior to the beginning of the school year.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

S. Dillon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

And I do agree that our bus drivers do a great job. There are days when the weather poses to be quite a challenge for some of our roads, especially our clay roads in the province.

Over the last number of years, more electric school buses have been added to the fleet as part of an effort to reduce carbon emissions in transportation, the largest source of carbon emissions produced in our province.

At standing committee, we've heard concerns from school bus drivers about the operational limitations of electric buses.

Question to the Minister of Education: Given that we have a hybrid school bus fleet, and both diesel and electric buses, how is that factored into school bus route planning?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

Hon. N. Jameson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and again, hon. member, thank you for the question.

Certainly, Prince Edward Island is leading the way in the electrification of our school bus fleet. I'm really proud of these efforts and I have to salute a lot of colleagues who were part of this undertaking, and again, all the folks at the board level, as well as our bus drivers.

Typically, most of our electric school buses are able to get about 100 to 150 kilometres per charge. So, generally, you would see our electric school buses on some of our shorter routes and our diesel buses would typically take some of our longer routes, but they'll adjust accordingly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

S. Dillon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Increasingly, there's a trend towards having increased housing density in our Island communities. We're also seeing a steady climb in our student population; both important factors to consider when transportation planning.

Question the Minister of Education: When will school bus routes next be reviewed with these reviews more frequently in future to adapt to our growing population?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

Hon. N. Jameson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and again, thank you for the question.

Absolutely, our population continues to grow, and it is diverse, and some communities are growing faster than others. I see it in my own community that I represent, in East Royalty. It's growing in leaps and bounds.

[2:00 p.m.]

I know the folks at both boards; they work diligently to ensure that the routes are up to date and that the drivers are well aware of any changes as they come forward. This is sort of a never-ending task throughout the school year, I have to say, and I give them a lot of credit for the work that they do. I don't think it'll ever end, especially as our population continues to increase. And we'll work, of course, as it relates to projecting trends.

I look forward to working with my colleague, the Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population, with regards to those projections and ensuring

that we have the best available data to ensure we are planning accordingly for the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition, final question.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

In the past sitting, I brought forward legislation of paid sick days for Island workers that eventually passed, but for some reason that still hasn't been fully explained to Islanders, the Minister of Workforce saw fit to lead a charge in gutting the intent of that bill, reducing the number of days that workers could receive, eliminating financial supports for businesses, and increasing the amount of time workers would have to be on the job before qualifying for any sick leave. I do not believe that Islanders should have to choose between their paycheque and their health.

Even after gutting the legislation to reduce the paid sick leave benefits to the minimum possible, government cannot even be bothered to include a proclamation date; therefore, workers wouldn't even qualify for the minimum paid sick days despite this minister's professed support for workers. Without a proclamation date, employers have no idea what timeline they will prepare for.

Paid sick leave

So, my question is to the Minister of Workforce: Do you really believe that one paid sick day is adequate for Island workers facing the decision to prioritize work over their health? Will you finally take action, buck your leader and backroom masters, and bring paid sick leave into effect, or will you continue to demonstrate that you are just not up to the job of putting Island workers first?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question.

We're certainly working diligently on that right now in our department. We do care a great deal about our workers and our employers. Once we have further work done, we will definitely bring it to the House.

Thank you.

Deputy Speaker: End of Question Period.

Members, I'll remind those who are asking questions in the House that when you're asking those questions, we do not reflect on a vote or a decision previously made in the House.

Statements by Ministers

Presenting and Receiving Petitions

Tabling of Documents

Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, pursuant to section 16 of the *Audit Act*, I wish to advise that I have received the 2024 Annual Report of the Office of the Auditor General. I move that the report be received and do lie on the table.

Shall it carry? Carried.

Reports by Committees

Introduction of Government Bills

Government Motions

Hon. D. King: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I present herewith a message from Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor, which said message is signed by Her Honour.

Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I shall ask the Clerk to read the message from Her Honour.

Hon. members will please stand while this message is being read.

Clerk: Honourable Darlene Compton
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly
197 Richmond Street
Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island

Dear Madam Speaker:

Her Honour, the Honourable Antoinette Perry, Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Prince Edward Island, hereby transmits the Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure required to carry on the public services of the Province for the Fiscal Year ending March 31, 2025, and also until the passage of the estimates for the Fiscal Year ending March 31, 2026.

In accordance with the provisions of the *Constitution Act, 1867* and the Prince Edward Island Terms of Union, Her Honour recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly.

By Command

Jamie A. Aiken
Clerk of the Executive Council
and Secretary to Cabinet

Honourable Antoinette Perry
Lieutenant Governor

At Government House, Charlottetown
Prince Edward Island
this 22nd day of February 2024

Deputy Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Mr. Speaker, by Command of Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor, I present herewith the Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure required to carry on the public services of the Province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025, and I move, seconded by the hon. Minister of Finance, that said estimates be now received and do lie on the Table.

[2:05 p.m.]

Deputy Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Mr. Speaker, I move, seconded by the hon. Minister of Finance, that consideration of the Estimates in Committee of the Whole House be added to the orders of the day until such time as they are despatched.

Deputy Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

The hon. Minister of Finance.

Hon. J. Burridge: Mr. Speaker, I move, seconded by the hon. Premier, that Motion No. 87 be now read.

Deputy Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

Clerk: Motion No. 87: Budgetary Policy.

The hon. Minister of Finance moves, seconded by the hon. Premier, the following motion:

BE IT RESOLVED that this House approves, in general, the Budgetary Policy of the Government.

Hon. J. Burridge: Good afternoon.
Bonjour. 'Kwe.

Mr. Speaker, Members of the Legislative Assembly, and guests:

It is once again my honour to present the 2024-2025 operating budget.

Government's budget is a signal to the people they serve on where they will spend their time, money, and energy in the year ahead. It signals priorities, areas of focus, and insight into what's to come. And no one in this Chamber – or Islanders from tip to tip – will be surprised about the priorities the government will continue to focus on throughout the upcoming fiscal year.

Health care, housing, and affordability measures continue to be our government's central focus; the things we wake up every day and think about. More importantly, these are the areas where we will spend our time and energy to make advancements for the betterment of all Islanders.

A lot of preparation and discussion happens before we present the Budget here today. A part of budget planning is to reflect on what came before. We look back and celebrate things that have been done.

Earlier this week, we opened the province's first ever mental health and addictions emergency department, the first of its kind in Atlantic Canada.

Just last week, we added an additional \$2.7 million of annual funding to clients of the Social Assistance and AccessAbility Supports programs.

We are helping with the rising cost of home heating for the 8,000 Islanders who received a free heat pump since the program began.

We have completed three successful international recruitment missions and issued 113 job offers for RNs to come to PEI to live and work in our health care system.

We are thankful for the privilege of helping make the lives of Islanders better.

But true insight comes from looking at the problems that still need our attention. True change comes from honest reflection. Many Islanders are still struggling and are telling us they need our help.

We need to make health care available to everyone. It must be timely. It must be effective. We need to make it affordable to live in Prince Edward Island. We need to protect our way of life for generations to come, while investing in the young people who will lead our future.

This is humbling work. It's not easy. But we are not people who give up. We keep going. When Islanders struggle, we never have to struggle alone. Our neighbours show up to help. It is in our nature, and it is our way of life. We rally together to do better.

This government is not shying away from the problems. We are here today to face them head on, and to be part of the solutions. We are here to help.

We will improve health care in Prince Edward Island.

We will improve services for seniors.

We will grow our housing supply.

We will be there to help people access housing and social supports.

We will make life in PEI more affordable.

We will invest in our communities and our industries.

This will mean doing things differently, like in our health care system.

This will mean sticking to our values, like helping every child get off to the right start in life; like investing in the people who help our children every day.

This will mean being patient, as good ideas take time to become a reality. And this means listening. It means adjusting when we need to.

But, no matter what, we will never stop working for Islanders. That is our promise to Islanders.

Today's Budget includes \$140 million in new spending, bringing the total expenditure to just over \$3.2 billion. This reflects a 4.5 percent increase over last year.

Our revenues have grown by \$152 million, or 5.1 percent over last year as well.

This means our projected deficit for 2024-25 will stand at \$85 million.

With your indulgence, I would like to share more details of our plan to do more for Islanders.

[2:10 p.m.]

Improving Your Health Care

We know health care is top of mind, and for good reasons. It's a service we all rely on and care so deeply about. I need Islanders to know, you're being heard, and we're taking action.

But to improve health care, we need to reflect on what we are doing and what we aren't doing. It will require change, and change is hard. There is no silver bullet. There is no simple solution. It will take ideas large and small, simple and complex, easy and hard, to move the system forward.

One thing is certain: we need more health care providers to improve the system. Part of that solution lies in how we recruit workers to this province.

So, to start, we will invest \$6.2 million in recruitment and retention. This investment will support the relocation and integration

efforts of internationally educated nurses and the allied health professional incentive. This includes \$1.75 million for staff resources to support recruitment and retention of health care workers.

It's been said many times before, and I'm here to say it again: we need to adopt new ways of doing things in order to change our health care system.

Back in 2022, we launched our first five patient medical homes in PEI. It brought together primary health care providers and allied health providers to work collaboratively to provide the right care, by the right provider, at the right time. It was groundbreaking, to say the least.

Since then, our patient medical home model of care has been touted from coast to coast as being the gold standard for primary care in this country.

Since then, we've launched 12 additional patient medical homes, bringing the total to 17, with the goal to get to 30 established by next spring. We are far ahead of our provincial counterparts in implementing this model and we have no plans to slow down anytime soon.

This year alone, we are investing \$25.8 million in patient medical homes, an increase of \$10.5 million.

This will allow us to roll out new patient medical homes and optimize existing medical homes to allow Islanders without access to primary care to become affiliated in this new, collaborative, and innovative model of care.

While we have surpassed the halfway point of implementing this model of care, I would be remiss if I did not recognize the hardworking professionals that have worked hard to establish these homes and the practitioners who work within.

While in preliminary stages of implementing this model, there was a focus on bringing together existing practices to work in these homes, but now we are at a point where we can add new practitioners and focus on expanding care to those who currently do not have a primary care provider.

And, as our Minister of Health reminds us of often, this model of care is key to recruiting new physicians and gives us a competitive advantage to be a top choice for new physicians.

In addition, we are investing a further \$5.3 million in primary care services. This includes an additional \$680,000 in virtual care options for Islanders to access care and to use online tools like self-scheduling and reminders.

Just over a month ago, we officially launched midwifery services in this province, a long-awaited service for many Islanders, but it was implemented with engagement and collaborations from all areas of the health care system.

This year, we will invest an additional \$300,000 to enhance the rollout of midwifery services to ensure stability for years to come. In addition, \$800,000 will be invested to expand sexual health options and reproductive services. Further, there is an additional \$1 million to increase supports for cancer screenings and care.

And while there is a lot of chatter about the future of a national pharmacare program in our federation, our province won't be pulling back waiting for bilateral agreements to be signed with our federal government.

This year, our government will be investing an additional \$800,000 to expand the eligibility for the diabetes insulin pump program and support diabetes foot clinics, bringing our total investment for diabetes supports and programs to \$2.7 million.

Our health innovation team has been at ground zero for many of our recent accomplishments. They were instrumental in implementing Pharmacy Plus, Virtual Hallways, Skip the Waiting Room, primary care access clinics, and many other new innovations that have provided better access to care.

[2:15 p.m.]

This Budget provides over \$9.1 million towards these health innovation projects for this fiscal year to ensure we continue to innovate and find new ways for Islanders to get the care they want and deserve. The

project that is next on the horizon is our mobile X-ray service for seniors in residential care. We will launch the first phase of this innovative service to provide on-site X-rays for individuals in long-term care by investing \$536,000 this fiscal year.

Our government will also be launching a Children's Vision Care program, investing over \$700,000 to provide elementary school aged children with annual eye examinations by a licensed optometrist and two pairs of glasses.

This will build on the Eye See, Eye Learn program by ensuring children of all ages without private coverage have the financial support to ensure eye tests and eyewear do not become a choice when we all know they are a necessity for those who need them. This program will also help with early intervention and assessments for learning disabilities.

Altogether, this Budget contains over \$16.1 million in additional funding this year for primary care, bringing the total investment to over \$58 million, a new record high for investing in primary care for Islanders.

We will also be investing in new physicians. This year alone, we will increase the budget for physicians and physicians supports by \$6.6 million while adding an additional \$2.4 million to integrate physician assistants and associate physicians as care providers in our health care system.

To add two additional family residency seats, our government will be investing \$534,000 in the PEI Family Medicine Resident Program. Our plan is to continue to invest in residency seats in the years to come to prepare our system for medical learners.

When we talk about investing in training, there is no greater example than our commitment to growing our health care team than the investment we are making to establish a medical school right here on PEI.

Starting as a satellite campus of Memorial University, this new program will finally even the playing field for our bright young Islanders who want to become doctors but are at a distinct disadvantage of having a one-in-11 chance of being accepted to medical school, while elsewhere in the

country, applicants have a one-in-two chance. This year, we will invest an additional \$9.9 million, for a total of \$36.2 million over the next year, to have the ability to train doctors right here on PEI.

We will also invest \$2.2 million to continue creating upskilling opportunities for LPNs to become RNs, provide bridging programs for internationally educated nurses, support advanced care paramedics working to full scope with critically ill patients, as well as continue training more RCWs, LPNs, paramedics, and RNs on PEI.

This will include continuing to provide free tuition for RCWs, LPNs, and paramedics who train on PEI and commit to a return in service for two years. When combined with an investment from last year, this results in \$3.4 million in training and upskilling funds for health care workers in the upcoming year.

With nearly 36,000 seniors living on the Island, making up 21 percent of our province's population, senior care is a crucial component of the health care system.

We are investing \$4.9 million to continue enhancing and streamlining services for seniors, including programs such as COACH, Care at Home, and Urgent Home-Based Respite, as well as supports for an additional physiotherapist, occupational therapist, nurse practitioner resources, and other allied health professionals. In addition, we will be introducing home-based restorative care.

But as you already heard, the problem extends past just having services available in the community.

The reality is, with our population growth, we need more beds throughout the province. We are working with the Prince Edward Island Private Nursing Home Association to license beds immediately, with a strong focus on decanting our hospitals of those who are awaiting placement in long-term care, which will result in more capacity and better patient flow in our Island health care system.

[2:20 p.m.]

This Budget also signals a mid- and long-term plan to ensure that our community care and long-term care facilities keep pace with our population growth. One of the next steps in the plan is for our government to launch a low-interest financing option for operators to complete capital builds to create more long-term care in our system.

It isn't just spaces and beds we are investing in when it comes to community care and long-term care. We also must invest in the staff who provide the tremendous care that residents get at these facilities. These essential staff take care of our loved ones 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Actioning the recommendation from the Long-term Care Review, we will invest \$4.5 million to support moving towards wage parity between private community care and long-term care homes relative to government-owned facilities.

Government will work with the industry on a multi-year, phased-in approach that focuses on retaining and recruiting staff who provide important care to our seniors. This historic investment will help increase wages for all non-management staff in these facilities including RNs, LPNs, RCWs, PCWs, program support, cooks, housekeeping, and maintenance.

Our government also remains committed to the Medical Transportation Assistance Program by investing an additional \$350,000 to expand support for those who have to travel out of the province for health services.

We are continuing to invest in enhancing our mental health services with this Budget containing nearly \$3 million in new funding.

This includes \$1.5 million to support the opening of the new mental health and addictions emergency department and short-stay unit at the QEH, and \$1.2 million for staffing of addiction treatment and transition programs, as well as staff to support the new and existing mental health facilities, including social workers, addiction workers, dietitians, psychologists, RNs, RCWs, and support workers.

These investments are in addition to the long-term investments we made last year, and the investments our government has

made in the four years prior. And, while we constantly remind ourselves it takes more than just money to solve the challenges we face in health care, I'm proud to say that this government has increased the health budget by 59 percent in the last five years, bringing the total investment in health to \$1.1 billion, which equates to 35 percent of our provincial expenditures.

Building Together

Talking about health goes hand in hand with housing.

A house is much more than four walls and a roof. It is a source of security, dignity, and identity.

By prioritizing housing, we are prioritizing the health of all Islanders and the social and economic wellbeing of our communities.

Just last week, our government launched PEI's housing strategy for the next five years.

The strategy is extensive. It speaks to the need to grow our construction workforce, it talks about accelerating development, it talks about adding housing units in all areas of the housing continuum, and it speaks to the need to innovate and do things differently.

Previous housing strategies focused on one dimension of the housing continuum. When anyone said the word "housing" in provincial government years ago, it was always in the context of social housing. That was the only area of responsibility for the provincial government.

Today, that is no longer the case. Our government is making investments in all dimensions of the housing continuum. This broadened mandate for the Department of Housing, Land and Communities has required a whole new approach; it requires collaboration with all levels of government, NGOs, community partners, non-profits, cooperatives, and developers.

The new approach is built on the Housing First model, a model that focuses on ending homelessness by providing the most appropriate housing option, coupled with the most appropriate supports, which will result

in the best health outcomes for the individual. And after the recent launch of our housing strategy, now when you say housing in our government, it comes with the acknowledgement that the government has a role to play in all dimensions of housing.

To best support the development of all dimensions of the housing continuum, it's forced us to develop and launch programs throughout the entirety of the continuum. And, like the strategy suggests, we will be investing across the housing spectrum in this Budget.

To start, we will help Islanders most in need, by investing \$6.9 million to continue providing emergency shelter supports, outreach services, and residential support services in transitional and supportive housing.

[2:25 p.m.]

In addition to our record investment in our capital budget this past fall where we committed to building or acquiring 560 new social housing units over five years, this Budget contains \$1.6 million to provide the necessary funding to operate newly constructed or acquired housing units.

We will also be launching a new \$10 million Community Housing Expansion Program to support near-market affordable housing.

This program will work in collaboration with non-profits and cooperatives to create new and acquire existing affordable housing units and to keep them that way in perpetuity. We anticipate in the first year alone, this program will result in creating and keeping over 120 units affordable in PEI.

When it comes to supporting market housing, we will continue to offer over \$6.7 million in tax rebates for newly constructed multi-unit residential buildings, including rebates of HST and property tax rebates through the Residential Unit Development Incentive program that provides financial support to encourage the development of new rental units.

To help speed up construction of market units, we will invest \$300,000 to hire four

new housing development positions, including electrical inspectors and client services to reduce wait times for building permits.

And last, but certainly not least, I am proud to say we will invest an additional \$200,000 to create PEI's land use plan, with a total investment of \$450,000 for this upcoming year.

These investments are just the tip of the iceberg in our efforts to improve housing in our province. We will also be continuing with programs to support pathways to home ownership for Islanders, such as the closing cost assistance program, the down payment assistance program, and the rent-to-own program.

And while we have had a large year between our capital budget last fall and this historic investment in housing for the upcoming year, this government has a clear track record of investing in housing for many years. In fact, since April 2019, this government has increased annual spending on housing by \$51.5 million. That's an increase of 243 percent overall.

Helping with Everyday Costs

Everyday Islanders are doing their best to make ends meet. Significant events, whether they're happening here or around the world, are all impacting the cost of living.

Over the past few years, our government has responded with an unprecedented package of programs and supports targeted to help those in need. We have no plans on stopping now, as these challenges continue to affect our province.

In fact, while making record investments in supporting Islanders every year since 2019, this government has also introduced tax cuts for Islanders each year for the last five years as well. And I am not going to end that tradition here today.

This Budget includes almost \$15 million in tax cuts that will leave more money in the pockets of Islanders. As committed last spring, we will continue to increase the basic personal amount to \$14,250. And again, as we committed last spring, we will continue to reform our tax system by raising the

thresholds of each tax bracket and lowering the tax rates for the first four brackets, which will result in over 90,000 Islanders paying less tax next year.

Also, starting in January 2025 with an initial investment of \$1.1 million, we will introduce a new PEI Children's Benefit. With a total annual investment of \$4.4 million per year, this will support families from West Point to East Point, and all areas in between.

This monthly benefit will help families with costs associated with their children, like food, sports, child care, and clothing. This benefit will be scaled to support those who need it the most. For example, a family with two children with a net household income of up to \$45,000 will receive \$720 per year. Families with incomes between \$45,000 and \$80,000 will also receive a prorated benefit.

The PEI Children's Benefit will be administered through CRA. This benefit will be reviewed annually.

[2:30 p.m.]

We will also invest \$175,000 in KidSport, increasing the income threshold to expand the number of families who can receive up to \$600 per child to participate in sport and recreation activities.

To help Island residents save on home costs and reach our goal of net zero, we will invest an additional \$7.3 million in free heat pumps, electric hot water heaters, and insulation programs, bringing our total investment in these efficiency programs to \$33 million.

A further investment of \$1 million will go into the Island-wide transit system to add more routes and keep fares low at \$2 per ride, \$20 for monthly passes, and \$10 for students and seniors.

With \$3.1 million, we will support the annualization of the increase to Social Assistance and Accessibility Supports clients. Funding will also be provided for a review of the AccessAbility Supports program.

To support our non-profit and community organizations that do tremendous work in

communities large and small, rural and urban, the Department of Social Development and Seniors will be increasing operational grants by \$1.32 million to support the Islanders these organizations serve on a daily basis.

To support seniors living in their own homes, we will invest \$380,000 in the Seniors Independence Initiative, increasing the annual support to a maximum of \$1,800 for practical services, like grass cutting, snow removal, and housekeeping.

Learning and Growing

Cutting costs shouldn't have to compete when it comes to getting an education. Our government is committed to providing supports so that everyone can afford to learn and have a prosperous future.

To support post-secondary students and their aspiring careers, we will invest \$940,000 to increase the annual George Coles Bursary to \$3,200. We will also expand this program to include those studying off-Island in targeted health care training programs.

We know when children get the nutrition they need, they can focus better on learning. That is why we are providing \$55,000 in additional funding to the school breakfast program and investing an additional \$1 million annually to support the pay-what-you-can school provincial lunch program for all students in public schools across PEI.

With an investment of \$4.3 million, we will continue the implementation of \$10 a day child care and provide support for operators to create more child care spaces, with a commitment of 30 percent of new spaces allocated to infants. This brings the total investment in support of reducing fees to \$12.3 million.

We can't speak about learning without recognizing those who work in our education system. Every staff member at our Island schools plays a crucial role in our children's development. We know they need support with our growing population, so we will be investing \$7 million to add more frontline staff such as teachers, school counsellors, educational assistants, youth workers, and bus drivers.

This government has increased investments by a record \$161 million in our education system since April 2019, resulting in an overall increase of 61 percent. Again, another historic investment in education and early learning in recent history.

Safer Communities and Strengthening Industries

I'd like to think we're all proud to call PEI our home.

I also think it's okay to admit this place isn't perfect and that we have work to do.

With support from the federal government, we will be investing \$2.4 million to create a gender-based violence action plan that focuses on enhanced services, resources, and support to people experiencing gender-based violence or de-escalation support to those at risk of perpetuating gender-based violence.

[2:35 p.m.]

There will be \$75,000 in additional funding for anti-racism grants for non-profit organizations to develop and deliver anti-racism activities that benefit and impact racialized and Indigenous communities.

We will also invest \$773,000 to further build law enforcement capacity to detect and enforce impaired driving and promote awareness of impaired driving harms and countermeasures.

Our bioscience sector continues to grow, and we have become a global player in the industry. With \$2 million, we will continue to invest in this sector through the development of the second incubator space.

Support for our primary industries remains strong, with an investment of \$1 million to pilot the PEI Agriculture Energy Systems Program and create a land purchase support program for new farmers. This investment also includes support for educating our youth about agriculture and veterinary education opportunities, including an additional seat for an Island student at the Atlantic Vet College.

To support the development of the next generation of fishers, government will launch the Future Shellfish Fishers Program

with an investment of \$65,000 to provide a program that will be modeled after the Future Fishers Program and will be developed with industry and stakeholder input.

One of the greatest things about living in PEI is that we live on an island. This makes us an attractive destination and we encourage tourists to visit any time of the year. With an investment of \$500,000 to the Tourism Season Expansion program, we are continuing our efforts to make PEI a year-round destination by supporting tourism operators with product development for the shoulder seasons.

We also learned from Dorian and Fiona that sometimes living on an island can make us particularly vulnerable to the impact of climate change. With an investment of \$500,000, we will begin the development of shoreline management plans for our regional coastal areas. This plan is a direct response to UPEI's *Interim Coastal Policy Recommendations Report* released in November 2023.

Government is taking steps to protect our land. Island Nature Trust will receive an additional \$200,000, for a total of \$950,000, to support land acquisitions in pursuit of the provincial protected areas target of 7 percent.

There is also funding of \$190,000 for additional staffing to ensure there are timely assessments of the potential impacts of proposed developments upon watercourses and wetlands.

Together, as we work to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, we will invest \$1 million to fund the operating costs of new EV chargers and existing chargers in the province's EV network.

And lastly, to preserve our Island's rich history, we will provide \$167,000 of additional funding to the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation for the operation of heritage sites across the province.

Conclusion

Mr. Speaker, we humbly present this Budget to this Assembly for discussion and debate.

We appreciate the input received from Islanders through written submissions, online survey responses, emails, and public and stakeholder virtual and in-person consultation sessions. We also received input from the official opposition and third party. Your input and good ideas have been shared with all government departments.

This Budget contains initiatives to address a number of suggestions that we received through the consultation process.

We present this Budget to Islanders in hopes we are doing right by them.

We re-commit to facing issues head on. We will celebrate more successes, together.

Most importantly, we are ready to get to work.

Mr. Speaker, thank you for your indulgence.

Thank you. *Merci. Wela'lin.*

[Interjections]

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition to speak to the motion.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[2:40 p.m.]

For about five years now, this government has an annual opportunity to set out a very constructive, progressive agenda to guide the affairs of Prince Edward Island, and our province now truly needs a guiding vision.

For a host of reasons, we are now experiencing a time of great change and great challenge. Population growth is the main source of that change, and the arrival of so many people, so quickly, has tested our capacity and our resources. We see it everywhere: tens of thousands of Islanders without a family doctor, and thousands more people coming to our province every year with no realistic hope of finding a physician; across the Island, people struggle to find an affordable place to live; and for many – too many – hard decision must be made between paying the rent and filling a fridge.

I spoke with a young woman just the other day. She's a single mother with two kids. Those kids just love hockey and music. But sports cost a lot of money, time, and fuel, and a child who wants to excel in music and performing arts requires a lot of support. This young mother does her best and she makes some pretty good choices as a parent.

But when the fuel in the oil tank starts getting low, she starts getting very concerned. Every night in the wintertime, she heads down to the basement, stares at the gauge on the tank, and she worries. She wonders how she is going to find the money to fill that tank just one more time. She tries to figure out which bills to postpone, and then looks through the coupons, searching for a grocery deal wherever she can find one.

But let me be clear, this young woman never complains. She is a very cheerful and hardworking Islander. She loves her community. She spends a ton of time with her parents, and she pays a lot of attention to the world around her. But that oil tank gauge, that darned gauge, weighs on her mind, and it eats away at her because she often feels helpless watching it fall. Night after night and day after day, she hopes for an early spring.

In some ways, that part of the story bothers me the most. All of us should have a huge amount of empathy for another human being whose life is being damaged by worries and fears that erode her confidence and the joy she should take in raising two great kids.

But I wonder sometimes just how much understanding we actually have in this little legislative Chamber. Oh, we debate the big issues and we slap our desks and take pleasures in the miseries of our opponents and the little triumphs that once in a while arrive. But have we become too distant from the day-to-day concerns of the people that we purport to serve?

I listened to the Finance minister's speech, and as I reflected on the story of the young woman, I wondered: What will she think of all the clapping and the pounding and the shrill of self-congratulation of a visionless government?

Then I wondered, as well: How many Islanders are living these lives of quiet desperation? How many among us are watching the oil tank gauge, or the constant creep of interest charges on a credit card bill, the rising cost of groceries, and the constant search for a bargain or soon-to-be-expired package of hamburger?

To my mind, these are the matters that should consume all of us in this House. We are all elected as laypeople. We are not experts, and no one expects high levels of expertise from any of us, and, I can assure, especially not from me.

In my view, we are all elected as the eyes and the ears of Islanders, tasked with a difficult job of keeping an eye on expenditures and helping to guide ideas that will make the lives of everyone as good as we can possibly make them. Part of that role is to enhance our understanding of the pressures felt by those who voted for us, those who voted against us, and most especially, those who have just given up on the whole darned thing.

We all want our government to work, to reflect the real and binding challenges of 2024, but sometimes I wonder.

[2:45 p.m.]

Now, I'm a proud member of the Liberal Party of Prince Edward Island and much of that pride is drawn from a long and historic record of getting things done. I think across the decades and I draw strength from a party that introduced free education; brought a full-day kindergarten; a party that confronted the massive social challenges in the 1970s with a deep and constructive development plan that modernized our Island and pointed the way to a better and more prosperous future; a Liberal Party that, after many social objections, ensured pay equity.

I am proud to be part of a political history that was always guided by vision and that always attempted a true understanding of the promise, capacity, and limitations of government. Certainly, many of those historic innovations drew controversy, argument, agreement, and debate. But importantly, all of those changes were driven by an idea and a full understanding

that government is a great, effective, and distinguished tool for progressive, empathetic, and energetic social and economic change.

Sadly, that approach to government appears to have been abandoned over the last five years. Instead of an overarching vision that attempts to embrace the lives of people that we serve, we see reaction, excuse, and a constant willingness to use duct tape when mortar is needed. Instead of hard work, we now have a government that avoids the big questions and trusts instead that doing nothing will preserve their time in office.

It's such a pity. It's such a squandered opportunity. In the face of the massive change now battering our province, this long period of inaction and excuse may have tragic consequences. Now is a time for an aggressive and bold vision and it must be done soon because too much time has gone to waste.

Every Islander I know is very proud of the fact that so many people from across Canada and the world have identified Prince Edward Island as a great place to live. We've all known that for years and years, decades and centuries. As a matter of fact, we are a welcoming province. We pride ourselves on our hospitality and our friendliness.

But hospitality implies that you are ready for the people you invited to your home, and we simply haven't done that. We have opened our doors, and what's the result? Oh, welcome to the Island. Need a doctor? Too bad. Don't you know that we have the worst performing health care in Canada? Welcome to PEI. Looking for a place to live? Didn't anyone tell you about the housing crisis? Can't afford to heat your home? Here, have a heat pump, but don't forget that our electricity rates are out of control.

That disservice isn't just reserved for the people arriving off the Confederation Bridge or one of those few flights that actually come into Charlottetown. No. Those crises are shared by everyone on the Island because the utter mismanagement of this government has ensured that misery and challenge is widely shared.

When I look at the Budget today, I see a series of measures will have some limited

success in some certain areas, but I also see a failure to understand the scope of change that now confronts us.

Since this government brought in its first budget in 2019, revenues have increased by about \$1 billion. That's a remarkable number. It represents a 50 percent increase in available spending in only five years. But when I think of a young woman that I talked about earlier, her life would be a lot different if her income had risen by 50 percent in the past five years.

Put it another way: Government revenues have increased by nearly \$6,000 per capita; that's for every person on Prince Edward Island. For that young woman and her two kids, that's \$18,000 a year. But is this money following any idea? Does it correspond to a vision that understands the day-to-day struggles of so many? In most cases, no. That is not the case.

[2:50 p.m.]

Affordable housing units: Well, the government crow's about a \$10 million program while thousands of Islanders struggle to pay their rent. Affordability appears to be neglected and while the vast majority of government departments see budgetary increases, the young woman I spoke about should be gratified by a tiny children's benefit that will see less than \$1.2 million spent this year. And do you that \$1.2 million works out, if it's divided among 30,000 Island kids, to be 40 bucks for the year?

Addictions: The rate of increase in addiction services is 10 percent, but for the Premier's office and Executive Council, it's 11.5 percent. Great sense of priorities there. In fact, the increase in the Premier's office and Executive Council is more than is budgeted on this tiny children's benefit announced for this year.

In conclusion, I will repeat my first point: another opportunity to articulate a vision arrived, and once again, that opportunity was neglected. We have so much to be optimistic about on this great Island of ours, but we lack a government that knows how to capture that optimism in a way that will point to a constructive way forward.

We need to find a way to protect everything that we have valued for decades and centuries while embracing the opportunities that will always accompany change. Unfortunately, this government is not up to the job.

Thank you.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I want to start out by taking a moment to thank all of the public servants, from the Department of Finance and beyond across government, who have worked undoubtedly extremely hard over the last few weeks, and no doubt months, to develop this Budget. It's a huge, huge task. I want to recognize the time and the effort and the skill that went into doing that. Thank you to all those who work in our public service who were involved in any way in getting this Budget to us today.

The problems that we faced a year ago when we were presented with the most recent previous operational budget are, for the most part, still very much present today. In many cases, they've gotten worse. In health care, housing, and the cost of living, Islanders have really seen no measurable improvements at all, and in fact in some cases, some real deterioration.

Let's look at health, to start with. We've heard from people across the province who are terribly concerned about health care. They want a primary health care provider who knows them, who cares about them, and who will be an advocate and a champion for their health.

I want to give special kudos, right now, to Dr. Meghan Cameron, who many of us may have seen interviewed on *Compass* last night, who made special mention of the importance of the development of that personal relationship between yourself and a primary care provider, whether that be a nurse practitioner or a GP.

For so many Islanders, the absence of that critical relationship – so many Islanders, the experience of accessing primary health care is to flit from a walk-in clinic to an

emergency room to a different walk-in clinic, and there is never that ability or opportunity to develop the personal relationship which is foundational to providing excellent health care to all Islanders. Thank you to Meghan Cameron for expressing that so clearly last night in her interview.

Right now, we have 36,000 Islanders without a primary health care provider. That's more than one out of every five Islanders. It's the worst in Canada. Just a year ago, when I stood in the House to respond to the budget, the number was nearer to 30,000. It's gotten considerably worse over the last 12 months.

The dire situation in health care was never more clear than during the district 19 by-election. People at the doors told me and my caucus mates that they are terrified that health care just won't be there for them when they need it, and they're shocked by this government's inability and unwillingness to take action and come up with the complex and difficult solutions that we know are required.

[2:55 p.m.]

Islanders want those who care for them when they and their loved ones are sick – nurses and frontline staff – to be valued and treated with respect – it's critical – so that we can keep them in the system, delivering the excellent care that they are known for. But this government has done exactly the opposite. Frontline workers are ignored and not invited to decision-making tables. This government has not consulted with or talked to nurses, to paramedics, to other health care staff on the frontlines during perhaps what was the most challenging year of their professional lives.

Our frontline staff have been forced to put their careers at risk by reaching out publicly for help. This government will pour money into their education, and that's wonderful, but they better get in line once they're hired because any dissent or criticism towards this government is completely unacceptable in government's eyes.

This is the crux of the problem. There are new programs and increases to old programs throughout the Health section of this Budget

and I welcome that. These programs and services are great in theory but they're meaningless to Islanders if we don't have the frontline staff to actually deliver them. We will continue to lose health care staff if government doesn't quickly change their attitude, this know-it-all tune, and actually start listening and consulting with experts on the frontline. What good is a medical home with no doctor or no nurse and no staff? Maybe it's good for a photo op, but it's certainly no good for Islanders.

When it comes to not listening to experts, there's no better example than what we've seen in the medical school over the past year. Everywhere we turn, we hear concerns. Health care workers, academics, policy makers, and high-level bureaucrats: they all agree that we are ramming this idea through against evidence that this is simply not the right time.

Nobody has ever tried to establish a medical school in the midst of a health care system collapse. Despite that, we are absolutely hellbent to ram this through when we have experts at all levels telling government very clearly that this is not the right time. They're not saying it's not the right idea; they're just saying it's not the right time.

In this very House, during committee proceedings, we saw the outgoing CEO of our health care system be attacked for his views opposing the medical system. We saw academics chastised by government backbenchers for their "negativity" towards the medical school. These are not the actions of a government that cares to listen and collaborate. Not at all.

Although there is a very large investment in the medical school, I'd like to remind Islanders that government is making that investment – tens of millions of dollars, taxpayers' dollars – against the advice of experts.

New home care supports, new long-term care beds, the mental health ER – these are all great and they're worthwhile investments, and I thank you for coming forward with that. But again, what are these without proper staff? If you're having a mental health emergency and you go to the new mental health ER and there are no medical staff to help you, we're no further

ahead. In fact, you're further behind because you arrive there in crisis and you are turned away, perhaps, because you cannot be seen. I see no benefit to Islanders here unless we get this stuff together.

This has been a recurring and disappointing pattern from this government that I've only seen grow over the past year. Programs are funded, changes are made, but the people who we need to actually run these programs and implement these changes are left out of the conversation. A banner is made, administration has lengthy discussions and meetings, a report may even be written, but for what? So that we can once again have a service that we can't staff because this government will not make the real investments and put the hard work in retaining our precious frontline health care workers.

Last month, we saw a letter released by 42 doctors who felt that they had no choice at this point but to come forward with a public plea for help to save the second largest hospital on Prince Edward Island. I have never, ever, in all my years on PEI, seen anything like that before. We should not overlook the importance and the seriousness of that letter and what it is telling us; not the content of the letter itself, although it was beautifully written and passionate, but of the fact that over 40 doctors signed their names to that – 40 doctors.

[3:00 p.m.]

Unfortunately, even after that letter was written, the Premier still chose not to attend that public meeting in Summerside to discuss the concerns. In fact, he questions the necessity of a public meeting, a town hall meeting of a community that is in crisis because of this government's inaction. Shame.

Both the third party and the official opposition have asked questions in this young session about the situation at the PCH, and we're met with a minister and Premier who just simply do not seem to understand the seriousness or the urgency of the situation. They continue to provide non-answers to questions that Islanders want real answers to.

What I don't see in this Budget are the promises that the front line specifically asked for. And when I say the front line, I mean all of the frontline workers. We are still seeing the ripple effects of the disastrous retention bonus that gave money to some frontline health care workers and not others.

That terrible decision, which flew in the face of advice that came from top-level civil servants, will haunt – and quite rightly so – this Premier for the rest of his tenure. It's a ridiculous and shameful situation that should have been corrected ages ago.

The Premier boasts that he has all the money in the world for health care, and yet these frontline workers, the ones that were left out of a retention bonus, will see none of it. Shame on you.

They also want a government – these are the frontline workers – who reviews the legislation that governs political meddling and finally takes politics out of health care. They don't want money going into the department to help with recruitment. We don't need to send the minister to more conventions and out-of-country trips to recruit. We need a department that responds to the emails of medical students who are studying just on the other side of the bridge.

Fix this. Fix the *Health Services Act* that was damaged so badly by the previous Liberal government and continues to be ignored by this administration. The two legacy parties, destroying health care for Islanders. Good job.

What I don't see in this Budget are the promises that Islanders want and need. I don't see much of a plan to get us more doctors and better access to care – at least, not in this decade – and I don't see promises to reduce our ER wait times, which are – I remind the House again – the longest wait times in Canada. I don't see promises that will decrease our surgery wait times, which, again, are some of the longest in Canada, and I don't see a plan to meaningfully improve the life of residents in long-term care. Fifty-four new beds in 30 days? I look forward to seeing that. If that happens, I will be the happiest man in this province, but....

[Interjections]

P. Bevan-Baker: Let's move on to housing and affordability. Islanders, of course, are struggling to find housing that is adequate and appropriate. Housing on Prince Edward Island is more expensive than ever, and PEI is currently tied for the lowest vacancy rate in the country. How many metrics can we be the worst of in Canada?

Every day, our office hears from Islanders who are facing rent costs they simply can't afford, and they have nowhere to go. Of course, despite the fact that our caucus has offered actionable solutions dating back five years to help this government support these Islanders, the solutions have either been ignored or they've been met with indifference. So, we continue to hear every day from Islanders whose dream of one day owning a home are all but dashed, some in my own family.

I am discouraged to hear the minister gloat over a record spend in housing, and for her caucus to loudly applaud this. That record spend amounts to a small fraction of the development we need just to keep pace with our growing population and to bring our vacancy rates back into healthy margins.

There was talk in the minister's presentation of Housing First, that wonderful, principled program of providing stable, independent housing and personalized supports for folks who have complex needs. Housing First is something that our caucus has talked about – again, going back five years and more – but to provide Housing First, you first need housing. This government is failing to provide – and has failed for five years to provide – even the most fundamental needs for Islanders.

PEI is failing to build to match our population growth. After reading the population growth framework and how thin on solutions and substance it is, I'm not convinced that the circumstances will improve under this administration.

[3:05 p.m.]

In my member's statement earlier today, I spoke about the cost of not taking action, and how this government's paralysis around the housing file has made the situation worse and worse for Islanders. So, congratulations to those on the other side of

the room for finally admitting that there is a housing crisis, though you're about five years too late for that and you're tens of millions of dollars short.

As the cost of living continues to climb and leave Islanders behind, we're not seeing enough action from this government. While there are some programs announced today that I like the sound of – the eyecare program for primary school children, for example, I think, is a wonderful initiative and expansion on the eyecare – it's difficult to stand here and applaud when programs are budgeted and approved last year, like the caregiver grant, for example, that have yet to be rolled out. So, forgive me if I don't hold my breath waiting for all these to come to fruition.

The PEI Children's Benefit; again, I love the sound of that, but in the best-case scenario – Islanders should know this – it's not actually going to see any money in the pockets of Island families until next January, almost a full year from now.

We have also advocated for the government to intervene on Islanders' behalf when Maritime Electric increases rates again and again and again and again. One of the most common comments I hear from Islanders is just how high their electricity bills are and how every month seems to bring a new record high. Islanders simply cannot continue to line the pockets of this multi-million-dollar private corporation.

Climate change and our environment and precious land here on Prince Edward Island: more Islanders are directly feeling the impacts of climate change, but contrary to what this government seems to believe, heat pumps alone – wonderful though they are – will not save us from the impacts of climate change. Don't get me wrong, I absolutely think that heat pumps are great, and I do applaud this government for being, in some respects, leaders when it comes to our approach to climate change action.

But, my goodness, we desperately need more to be done to protect our shorelines, to protect our waterways, to protect our land, and to make sure that our infrastructure – our critical infrastructure – is able to withstand future events like Fiona. We all know that there are going to be more

frequent and more ferocious storms and we need to spend the money required to protect our precious infrastructure.

Unfortunately, it becomes clearer that this government is willing and ready to sell our Island to the highest bidder, regardless of the impacts that has on our shorelines, on our beaches, and on future generations. The monstrosity that Point Deroche is; the poster child for everything that is wrong with land development rules and decision-making on Prince Edward Island.

If governments permit – and, literally, in this case, I mean issues permits willingly – a developer, whether they're from away or here on Prince Edward Island, to block access to a public beach and let somebody build a mansion far too close to the water, then government must look at the rules it applies. They are clearly out of date, out of touch, and out of line with what is acceptable to Islanders.

We desperately need a land use plan from tip to tip in this province to ensure that new development is sensible, that it protects our environment, while also avoiding the negative consequences that we've seen as the extensive loss of farmland on Prince Edward Island through continued ribbon development.

Farmers need support to keep their land in farmland, and a \$200,000 investment into a land use plan that we needed years ago is absolutely inadequate. It's not nearly enough and it suggests a lack of urgency from this government. We heard, when this government came to power, we would have a land use plan in two years, and then it became three years; \$200,000 is not going to do it. If we are to successfully build housing for all Islanders without actually paving over our previous farmland, we need – it is critical – to have that land use plan. All of these things have to fit together, and \$200,000 is not going to cut it. A tenth of what we're giving to the NHL. Come on, guys.

Hon. D. King: You spent your whole career trying to put farmers out of business, never fighting for them....

P. Bevan-Baker: Oh, come on. Absolutely not. I mean, I've been a great supporter of farmers my whole career.

[Interjections]

[3:10 p.m.]

In fact, the Premier and the Minister of Agriculture in this House said last sitting that – when I asked him a question about farming – “I’m so pleased to hear from this member, who clearly cares as much about the agricultural community as I did.”

[Interjections]

That’s a verbatim quote, Premier, so don’t give me that.

Hon. D. King: ...wasn’t telling you the truth then.

P. Bevan-Baker: Okay. Probably get used to that from your side of the room, I suppose.

Regardless of the inevitable headlines that will boast about this Budget’s increased spending in health or in housing, there are critical pieces of the puzzle missing. There is no plan, there is no vision, there is no ambition, and there is no willingness on this government’s part to work with the experts and the people who can turn these investments into improvements in the lives of Islanders. In short, there is no leadership. That’s the problem. There is....

[Interjections]

P. Bevan-Baker: There is just a government with their fingers in their ears, bulldozing forward, regardless of the cost and regardless of the advice that they get from experts.

So, here we are, on February 29th in this leap year, on this very day that makes it so, and Islanders are being asked to take a leap of faith; a leap of faith that the same government who, for five years, has delayed, dawdled, dithered, and dragged their feet on getting the most important work done, will suddenly get their act together and fix the problems that have all gotten worse under their watch. I believe that that

leap of faith is one that’s just far too far for Islanders to take.

In that sense, it doesn’t really matter what is promised here in this Budget. At the end of the day, the commitments in this Budget require a government that cares enough about Islanders that they will do the hard work even when there are no simple solutions. It will require government to admit when they are wrong and to correct their course. It will require a government that brings all stakeholders to the decision-making table so that the best possible outcomes for Islanders are achieved.

I sincerely hope that, for Islanders’ sake, this begins to change and that we begin to see improvements in the things that matter the most for Islanders.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I move, seconded by the Member from Borden-Kinkora, that debate on the motion be now adjourned.

Deputy Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

M. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, I move, seconded by the hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald, that this House adjourn until Friday, March 1st, at 10:00 a.m.

Deputy Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

Thank you, members.

[The Legislature adjourned until Friday, March 1st, 2024, at 10:00 a.m.]