



| | |
|----------|---------------|
| Session: | 1/67 |
| Date: | 19 April 2024 |
| No: | 63 |

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

FRIDAY, 19 APRIL 2024

[10:21 a.m.]

[S. MacEwen in the chair]

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Questions by Members

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

This week, I think we began to get a glimpse of the Premier's idea of government. Like too many Conservatives who preceded him, the Premier seems to believe in the idea of providing a few people taxpayers' resources, with the idea that this wealth will trickle down to everyone. For the most part, I believe this is lazy thinking and reflects a deep unwillingness to do the hard work and invest properly in public services that benefit everyone.

Privatization of health care (further)

Will the minister please tell the House why it is that this government is giving so much money to the private sector to provide long-term care to Islanders?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

I think we've discussed this at length for a number of days now. Our government continues to invest in all aspects of our health care system. Our approach – as a small Island that is growing and with the complex needs in health care that all Islanders are needing access to, we've taken the approach that we need all hands on deck. We need all aspects of our health care working together.

We'll continue to do that. We'll continue to make the record investments that we've made in health, in the public delivery of health, and also those who work to make sure we can deliver it for Islanders, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Yes, we've had lots of discussion, but still no answers on accountability or transparency.

Essentially, this government failed to keep up with the long-term care needs of this province. In 2021, an internal long-term care review said that we needed to increase the number of beds from 1,244 to nearly 1,700.

But do you know what that record is? I mentioned it early in the week. Since that report was issued, there's been one – one – bed added. They went from 1,244 to 1,245, an increase of one bed. And now, they hand over \$25 million to the private sector, and they pat themselves on the back because at some point in the future, the private sector will create 54 beds. That's some record of success.

My question: Premier, when did you approach the private sector with this incredible deal?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Well, Mr. Speaker, I couldn't be more clear.

We brought in the long-term care association to talk about a number of issues, and one of the things while we had them there was to say: "What capacity are we missing within the system? We know we need these beds. What can we do?" They came back to us and said that with a little bit of quick work, we could provide 54 beds, which would help decant the hospital beds that Islanders are in that's costing Islanders somewhere in the vicinity of \$1,100 a day to keep them in there.

There's better care for them in a facility like a long-term care facility that we can offer. So, we worked together, as I said, at an incredible speed, and we came up with the 54 beds which the minister announced. That's just the start.

[10:25 a.m.]

We need to continue to build more. We're going to build more in our public sector, we're going to build more with our long-term care association, and keep working

every day until there's a bed for everybody who needs it in our province.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

It's our information that this government basically got in a panic. Then, someone from the Premier's office went to the private long-term care operators and said: "How much do you want?" From what I heard, the operators didn't know what to say. They were amazed – a blank cheque? After they got there, through their amazement, they came back with a ridiculous number and the government said, "Here you go. Deal."

My question to the Premier: Who made the decision that \$25 million was the right price to pay to the private operators?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Mr. Speaker, I would have to say that everything in that preamble was fundamentally wrong and false. That's not how it happened at all.

We have been working along the way with our long-term care providers following up on the Dorsey report, which talked about the need for us to invest in the increasing of wages and to bring more parity within the sector. That was part of these discussions as well. So, everything he said was patently false, but I think that seems to be par for the course in here, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: I won't even touch that one, Mr. Speaker, because the questions I have been asking him and the Minister of Health this week, it's really, really hard to follow.

On February 14th of 2024, this year, the most senior government representatives from long-term care appeared before the Standing Committee on Health. At that meeting, the public servants said there would be up to 16 new beds in 2024, but that depended on finding staff.

Then, on February 27th, the Premier said 54 beds will miraculously appear. So, Premier, was this \$25 million payout government's idea or did it come from the private operators?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Again, I think for the seventeenth time, we brought in the long-term care association and many of their partners and we asked a very simple question: What is the capacity that you have that we can develop more beds so we can help our emergency rooms, to get our people who are in beds who don't need to be there and aren't getting the best treatment and the best quality of life – they can get a better quality of life in long-term care – how can we work together? That's what we did. I would call that a good collaboration. I would call that trying to utilize all of the resources that we have.

Unlike the hon. member, I believe that the care that you get at the John Gillis Lodge or the Whisperwood Villa or the Mount Continuing Care facility is a first-class care. Those are Islanders providing care to Islanders. We need more of that if we're going to actually deliver the best health care we can for Islanders.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Nowhere did I ever question the ability of the service that was provided by any long-term care, whether it's private or public in this province. What I'm talking about is accountability and transparency.

Now, it's one thing to work with the private sector and it's another thing to just write blank cheques. It appears from this timeline that the public servants were left out of these discussions and this deal.

What bargaining position did the Premier take when he handed over the \$25 million? Because I hear the bargaining was: "How much do you want?"

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Again, I don't put a whole lot of credence into when I hear "I hear" or "somebody said." That's usually code for this is a good way to deliver a message that may or may not be factual.

As I said, I explained the process. We brought in the operators. We asked what their capacity was, what their needs would be, and how quickly we could access and open up more beds.

I think if someone would be upset that we would be offering more beds to our seniors when the preamble to the first question talked about the vacancy that we have and that we need to be moving more quickly to do that.... Again, it wasn't, "Here's a blank cheque; fill it out." It was: Let's work together so we can make sure we can adjust the pay scales for those based on the recommendations from the Dorsey report so we can pay Islanders more and we can provide the quality health care for those individuals who muchly deserve it, those seniors who have paved the way for us to get us to today.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That's exactly what we're looking for: accountability and transparency.

We know that the Premier and the Minister of Health met with the long-term care association somewhere between February 14th and February 27th, and at some point in that time, the Premier and his minister decided to hand over \$25 million to a handful of private businesses. I assume there is paperwork that would accompany that \$25 million handout.

[10:30 a.m.]

Will the Premier commit to tabling the contracts that he and his minister signed with the private operators?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Mr. Speaker, hon. Leader of the Opposition, I think there's this false narrative that's being created that somehow nobody can access this money. We did use this Legislature to pass the "follow the

dollar" legislation so that money can be tracked at any time if need be through our Auditor General's office. We know where the money is going all the time. We're very open and honest with the spending of taxpayers' dollars.

We've increased the spending of health care delivery by 60 percent since we came in here. I have said time and again, it isn't about money. If there's money that needs to be found to invest in the health care delivery and to make it better for Islanders, I'm prepared to do it, and I'm prepared to do it today, tomorrow, and every other day I'm in this Chair.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Maybe I need to rephrase the question. Are there contracts governing the \$25 million handout, or was it just done on the back of an envelope?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Obviously, there would be contracts. I would say that everything that we do from a government perspective would be available. We would certainly be open and would make it available.

Again, to classify this as a handout, this has to be taken as very, very offensive to the people who provide this care each and every day for Islanders. As I say, if you go to South Shore Villa, I don't think that they would consider the RCWs and the LNAs getting more money would be considered some kind of undermined handout on the back of an envelope. I think that would be, and should be, very offensive to everybody who's providing care to...

[Interjections]

Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, the Premier has the floor. It's over and over and over.

Hon. D. King: ...every Islander who's providing care to Islanders – to the seniors who paved the way for us to get here for now – to call that a handout, I think we've

probably stayed in here too long this session, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Okay, Mr. Speaker, let's change it up.

As I've said before, we appear to be at a point where this government is no longer updating the patient registry. A few years ago, the registry was updated weekly, and now it seems Islanders only get updates when the minister and his new CEO feel like sharing this information.

Premier, it's been six weeks – six weeks ago – that it has been updated. That was on March 4th.

Update to patient registry (further)

Question to the Premier: Since you have failed to meet your own targets to reduce the number of Islanders on the registry, was it your decision to stop updating it, or was it Health PEI's new CEO's idea, or is it more of a political direction from your staff and your office? Can you please explain?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: I would say it's no to all three of those scenarios, Mr. Speaker.

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

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Educating our students is a wonderful career, and the staff of the PSB and CSLF are highly skilled and dedicated staff that inspire students every day.

Shortage of qualified teachers

Question to the minister: The PEITF recently shared an open statement voicing their concerns over teacher shortages, and I'll table that later. Minister, while I know you have created positions, they are not all filled. What are you and your team doing to recruit teachers to permanently fill these important positions?

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

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

You're absolutely right. Our teachers serve a tremendous role in ensuring that our children get the best start in life, so thank you to all of our teachers across the Island. Also, the hon. member mentioned the historical investments we've made in education. We've added more frontline staff to help support our education system, so I think we can all be really proud of that.

Currently, to date, we really have been able to fill all of our positions, and I want to give a big thank you to both boards who work very hard to ensure that those positions are filled at the beginning of each year. That being said, I recognize that there are challenges across the country, and we need to be prepared for the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

G. McNeilly: As the number of teachers go up, which is needed because of population growth, so do the amount of substitute teachers that we need, and there's a massive shortage. There were over 1,000 unfilled absences last year.

Question to the minister: What are you doing to recruit qualified substitutes who can fill in on short notice to ensure that students can have a continuous learning experience?

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

Hon. N. Jameson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[10:35 a.m.]

Yes, recognizing substitutes, it is a challenge, especially in the more rural areas, and especially as it relates to French teachers. That being said, there have been significant efforts made over the last couple of years, especially through COVID and post-COVID, to ensure that we do have

some strong sub pools. In looking at the numbers that were provided to me this morning, we have about 550 in the sub pool for the PSB, and around 50 at the CSLF. So again, I understand that there are, at times, challenges, and there are some early mornings for folks who are trying to juggle schedules and ensure those vacancies are filled, but the teams do their best, and most times, they're mostly always successful.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

G. McNeilly: I'm hearing different information there. A lot of times we're having to move resource teachers, and a lot of times principals are having to go and do this.

The PEITF also noted that sometimes we're relying on unqualified community members to work in the PSB and CSLF without an education degree, and as the minister said, the situation is further worsening up west. This, of course, impacts the quality of learning experience for our students.

Minister: Is this a suitable solution, to have our students learn in a classroom by well-meaning, but not educated in the aspects needed to optimize student learning?

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

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

It's certainly not ideal. Absolutely, we would like to ensure that all of our subs are certified. Over the last couple of years, we have added itinerant subs to our system. Those are full-time permanent staff who help support a number of different schools, and they move based on vacancies, depending on the day.

That model has really helped address some of our sub shortages and the challenges associated with it, and I think that's an area that we can continue to look at and ensure that we have a really strong itinerant sub model, and to look at other creative ways to help support the system as a whole.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

G. McNeilly: Yeah, I think we all want what's best for our students. I'll quote the president of the PEITF: "Our students' success hinges on well-trained and educated teachers. It would be immensely unfortunate...if the response to this shortage is to lower the bar and standards for becoming a teacher."

Question: Will you confirm now, minister, that you will not lower the standard, that our students will continue to receive the highest quality learning they need to be successful in their future aspirations?

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

Hon. N. Jameson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think we can all be very proud of the education system we have here on Prince Edward Island. We have incredible folks on the front line who are delivering high-quality educational services to our students and supporting their families, so I do want to thank them.

No, it's certainly not our intent to draw back on any of those requirements. I meet regularly with the union, I meet with both boards, I meet with the department of education at UPEI, and I think collectively, we're all on the same page. We want to make sure that our system remains of quality, and certainly, we'll continue to meet in the months ahead and ensure that we're there to address the future of education.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

R. Henderson: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

Yesterday, the Minister of Energy answered a number of my questions regarding the Na'ku'set solar project in Mount Pleasant. The Minister of Energy told the House that the lease agreement that needs to be signed with the Lennox Island First Nations has been held up because of the duty-to-consult

arrangement with the provincial government.

This is their project. Who do you expect the Lennox Island First Nation to consult with, themselves?

Na'ku'set solar project (further)

Question to the Premier, who is responsible for Indigenous Affairs: Since the Lennox Island First Nation is proposing to lease the land from the provincial government, why would a lease be subject to the duty-to-consult agreement in this instance?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: I thank the hon. member for the question.

I think the process through this has taken a number of different turns. Our full intention would be, as the First Nation has identified this land – we would love to go through the process as quickly as possible to actually give them title to the land to do what they want to do with it.

I think the challenge is, while we're working with L'nuey – which is the representative group for both First Nations in terms of our future land initiatives and conversations – I think our staff, having identified property by the First Nations, granted title to them as quickly as possible, and then to make sure that would count for whatever the future arrangement would end up being, when and whenever it could happen.

[10:40 a.m.]

I think there is a hesitation with their internal processes for that process to happen, so as the minister said, we're trying to find ways to work around that to the best extent we can. We'd like to see the project move forward. I've had nothing but a real positive relationship with both First Nations since 2019.

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

R. Henderson: Premier, it's been three years they've been working on this project.

If the Na'ku'set solar project cannot secure land that is suitable, their project could be in jeopardy. They've already applied to the federal government's Smart Renewables and Electrification Pathways Program. Already, the delays have impacted funding possibilities through the geotechnical planning fund.

A question to the Premier, responsible for Indigenous Affairs: Premier, there are four provincial departments that could have a role in this worthwhile project, yet one doesn't seem to know what the other is doing. The Minister Responsible for Indigenous Affairs, the Department of Transportation, the Minister of Environment and Energy, and the Minister of Innovation – what department is the lead department in navigating this project to a successful conclusion?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Thank you, and thank you for the question.

As the hon. member would know from spending a considerable amount of time in government and working in various Cabinet portfolios, oftentimes there are issues that arise that require department-to-department involvement. All of the departments are trying to work together, as I say, and in my responsibility as the Minister Responsible for Indigenous Affairs, I'm trying to make sure that we can come to the quickest conclusion we can.

But as I say, there are some circumstances that we're trying to work through and find our way forward. The Minister of Environment has been pushing very, very hard. He would like to get this project going, as I would, and as I say, it's taken many different entities along the way, but we're hopeful we can do something as quickly as possible and get it rolling.

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

R. Henderson: Well, I could go quick here, Mr. Speaker. Actually, the interesting part in all this is that the Lennox Island First Nation believes it's your department, actually, that's been the holdup, and has suggested an outright rejection of this particular project.

Can you shed some light on why your department seems to be the barrier?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Yeah, I don't know if I would use the word "barrier," but as I say, the conversations that we're having – which are very, very complex – around the negotiation process and all the future negotiation processes, we're trying to make sure there are some – "rules of engagement" wouldn't be the right, proper term, but that there are some agreed-upon terms that we could all move forward on.

There is land in the Speaker's district which is also – we would like to move quickly on, and we would like to transfer as quickly as possible. As I say, we're just trying to find, through the negotiating process – which, as you can attest to, it's complicated; it's very long term in its thinking.

At the end of the day, I want to be making as many positive moves as I can to transfer land to our First Nations, particularly around the development opportunities that you talk about. I just want to make sure there's a process that we can agree to going forward, whenever this gets to the end, years and years in advance, that we could say X is the amount but we've already transferred this much along the way.

It's complicated. I'm sorry for the long, drawn-out process, but it is a complicated – and it's a national issue, not just one in PEI. We're all trying to figure out what the best process is to get this done along the way.

Thank you very much.

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

K. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Every time the Minister of Education has been asked a question on teachers over the past year, she has provided us with some very comforting words describing a system that is well staffed and running efficiently, and the record investments her government has made. Unfortunately, what we hear from the front line paints a very different picture.

But she's not alone. This seems to be a common trend across this government. As in my member's statement yesterday: nothing to see here; everything is fine.

Shortage of qualified teachers (further)

Question to the Minister of Education: Should Islanders believe you when you say our schools are well staffed, or should they believe the teachers who show up every day and are faced with the shortages?

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.

I think when I rise, I'm always honest in my responses. I think our education system – I look at it and I think that we are leading the way in the country. I think we're doing a tremendous job. We've got tremendous staff in the department and both boards. So, yes, I think we're in a good state.

That being said, I recognize that there are challenges, and unfortunately, there are some gaps as it relates to substitutes. That's been an issue, unfortunately, over the years. That's not a new issue, and that's why we are addressing it. We've got staff that understand the data, and they are looking at it and trying to find creative ways of addressing it moving forward.

[10:45 a.m.]

We will be working on a workforce strategy here in the fall, and this relates both to teachers as well as our EAs, our custodians, our bus drivers; a very holistic approach to ensure, again, our education system is well staffed to meet the needs and the demand of the future of our Island.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

K. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We do have tremendous people in these positions, and it's challenging to hear we're

leading the way when we hear from the front line such a different story.

The Island education system has become an unattractive system for many new graduates. The PEITF found that UPEI graduated 17 French immersion teachers, of which only three stayed to teach at Island schools. If this is the kind of retention our education system has, I'm seriously concerned to find out how many of the 20 medical students we graduate on PEI will actually stay in PEI.

Question to the Minister of Education: With more than 25 percent of our students in French immersion, we need these teachers to stay. What changes are you implementing to retain these new graduates?

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

Hon. N. Jameson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The release had just gone out yesterday, and I haven't really had the opportunity to dig into the numbers with regards to the retention rates.

I do understand that the majority of those individuals who were taking the program were from away. So, they had come here to take the program and then they left. They didn't stay on the Island; they weren't Islanders, unlike the medical school where we will be taking in Islanders, and hopefully we'll be able to retain them here on the Island.

Certainly, there are a number of initiatives underway to help support our French teachers. We are recruiting intensely within our high schools. We are recruiting specifically in our Atlantic region. There is some focused energy on the retention side of it, and lots of supports around the language, ensuring that the language is maintained and of quality to be able to teach that French language within the school system.

So, there's a lot of work underway, and I'm really pleased. We've had a great partnership with the federal government. We do receive a couple million dollars each year to help support these efforts.

We'll continue to work hard on this, recognizing that it is important, and it's not

easy – it's never going to be and it never was – but I am committed, as minister, to ensuring that we keep the foot on the pedal and keep the efforts going.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

K. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That letter came out yesterday, but this issue was certainly not new, and as far as residency seats, they're not even on the Island, unlike this program.

Substitute teachers play a critical role in the education system, as well as in the retention of teachers. Substitute teachers allow teachers to take sick days, make appointments, and so on.

In response to a lack of teachers, government has lowered standards for substitute teachers, and that is not the right response. The PEITF said that this year, there are unqualified community members working as teachers in Island schools. This is about ensuring quality education for our Island students.

Question to the minister: Will you commit to ensuring teachers and substitute teachers have appropriate levels of training, and provide pay and other incentives to make PEI an attractive place for teachers to work?

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

Hon. N. Jameson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think PEI is a very attractive place to work. I think that, again, that's why we've been successful in filling all of our new positions. We've added historical numbers in terms of frontline staff, and we've been able to successfully fill those at both boards. So, big kudos to all those who are working hard.

I do want to stress, again, the importance of our itinerant sub model. That has been incredibly successful, and I think there is an opportunity to really build on that and hire more into those permanent, full-time positions to help support those gaps when they exist in those vacancies. But again,

willing to always look at creative solutions. I know that's what the boards are continuously doing. Appreciate the hon. member's questions.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

K. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Change things up a bit here. A little while ago, I asked questions about the alternative caregiver program. The minister told the House that the amount of financial support given to grandparents is the same as that given to foster parents.

Supports for children in care (further)

A question to the Minister of Social Development and Seniors: Do you stand by that statement?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you for that question.

I do stand by it because it's the grandparents alternative program plus – and it is equal to the kinship foster care program. Those are equal. The other program that's supported with foster care is a different level of – yeah. So, I may have misunderstood, but it's the kinship foster care that's the same as the grandparent foster care.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

[10:50 a.m.]

K. Bernard: Minister, with all due respect, now there are three programs? That's not at all what you said. We were talking about the foster parent program and the alternative caregiver program. What is this new kinship program you speak of? That was not part of our conversation.

The amount of those who receive support through the alternative caregiver program is \$700 a month. For foster parents, it varies,

depending on the age of the child and level of maintenance fee applied to the base amount, but it is at least \$1,100 and goes up to \$2,400 per month. The Canada Child Benefit, a federal program, is indeed available to grandparents who are primary caregivers, but many of them do not apply for it to avoid confrontation with biological parents.

To the same minister: Will you table the documents that validate your statement that support payments are the same for both groups?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I believe I just corrected that. I can certainly table some documents to say that the kinship foster program is the same as the – if I misled that, it was a mistake on my part because I wasn't familiar with the two different costs.

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

K. Bernard: Mr. Speaker, this is rich. It's very shocking to me and very, very upsetting.

One significant barrier to grandparents accessing the alternative caregiver program is the fact that the children must be involved with Child Protection Services. Many grandparents are the primary caregivers for their grandchildren but cannot access the program because Child Protection Services is not involved.

These grandparents are doing the exact same work, providing the same love and support, but are ineligible for any financial relief at all. They get nothing.

To the same minister: Why is this barrier still in place, despite years of advocacy from Don Avery with GRAND-Families and others? And will you table the policy, finally, later today during estimates, which states this restriction as nobody – myself, Don, or anyone else – has ever seen it?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The grandparent program is through child protection, so it's a whole separate program. If children are not in that program, then the funds are not available. But there are funds, of course, available through Social Services for grandparents and children who are not involved in the child protection program.

Thank you.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

H. MacLennan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Agriculture is one of the country's largest industries, and it's the bedrock of rural communities.

Federal budget for agriculture

Question to the Minister of Agriculture: Earlier this week, the federal government tabled its new budget. Were there any noteworthy new announcements in the federal budget to support farmers on Prince Edward Island?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture.

Hon. B. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank the Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke for his question.

We haven't really had a deep dive into that. We have a meeting scheduled Tuesday with the federal partners to discuss that, but on our first look, agriculture wasn't mentioned a whole lot in that budget.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

H. MacLennan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The federal and provincial governments partner on different programs to support agriculture, and they help the industry to lower its carbon footprint. Your own department saw a funding increase for the coming year in our own provincial budget, tabled back in February.

Question to the Minister of Agriculture: Did the new federal budget contain any new funding to support the ongoing work by Island farmers to lower their costs and carbon footprint?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture.

Hon. B. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

First look – as I said, we're having that meeting Tuesday with the federal partners to discuss that early look. There wasn't a whole lot. We still have the pressures from the carbon tax that are directly going to affect our farming industry here in Canada, but we are taking steps ourselves with our energy efficient pilot program that was a huge success the first round. Hopefully we can get another round of that out.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

H. MacLennan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

One part of the budget that I have heard about from farmers was the changes announced to the capital gains tax. No one likes to shoulder a tax increase, but some of the concern I was hearing was that this could affect retiring farmers.

Question to the Minister of Agriculture: Have you heard similar concerns from farmers, and do you have any worry that these tax changes might have negative impacts on nurturing our next generation of farmers?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture.

Hon. B. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the hon. member.

[10:55 a.m.]

It is concerning. We have to look at this, deep dive into this, because as you said, farmers work a lifetime with no pensions or anything. At the end of the day, their farm is their pension when they go to sell it. So, they don't need to be (Indistinct) taxed on

that. We have to look into that new proposal that came into the budget and see how it will affect our farmers.

Thank you.

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

R. Croucher: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I've been following with some interest a discussion happening in the "Letter to the Editor" around the idea of reducing the number of waste collections from twice monthly to once a month.

IWMC waste collections

Question to the Minister of Transportation: Has Island Waste Management Corporation looked at the idea of reducing the number of waste collections each month?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure.

Hon. E. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I do thank the hon. member for the question.

As the member I'm sure is quite aware, IWMC is a Crown corporation that operates at arm's length from government. Having said that, occasionally, yes, you hear these – I guess I would almost have to call them rumours. Here, a number of days ago, it was brought forward in the Legislature, a question if IWMC was going to discontinue pickups on private roads. I assured the members of the Legislature here that was not going to be the case.

Again, I thank the member for bringing this question forward. I have heard this, have reached out to IWMC, and what I've got back from IWMC is: absolutely not.

Thank you.

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

R. Croucher: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for the clarification on that.

So, essentially, the idea was that by going from twice-a-month collection to once-a-month collection, there would be less trucking and less carbon emissions created. The counterargument to that would be that it gets pretty darn warm in Prince Edward Island in the summer, and a brimming black bin sitting out for a month and bags of garbage lying around might not sit so well.

Question to the Minister of Transportation: You essentially answered this, but do you or your department have any plans or interest in pursuing this idea?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure.

Hon. E. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and again, thank the hon. member for the follow-up question.

As I had mentioned in answering the first question, IWMC is a Crown corporation operating at arm's length from government. But again, I've received complete assurances from IWMC that there will be no changes to the pickup schedules, either black carts or green carts.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

R. Croucher: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again to the minister.

It's great to clear the air on this topic, and you're answering my questions before I even ask them.

The argument in favour of fewer black bin collections seems to be an environmental one; albeit, the thought of having overflowing bins and garbage bags lying around for an extended period of time each month does not sound environmentally friendly to me, especially from an aesthetics point.

So, my question is to the Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action: What is your take on reducing black bin collections to once a month to reduce carbon emissions?

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

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

We have ambitious targets and we're tackling them with action already. I think that it's great that as we start going down the road, people have their own ideas.

I've always said we didn't have to make changes to meet our targets that were going to intentionally punish people, and we didn't need to do things that were radical. I would say that this idea would be both punishing people and radical, and it would be way outside the scope of how we intend to tackle climate change here in Prince Edward Island.

We view every Islander as a partner. We want them to come along willingly. Quite frankly, I've lived here my whole life, and you do not have to punish Islanders to get them to come on board; you just have to talk sensibly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Supports for children in care (further)

G. McNeilly: Question to the Minister of Social Development: We were just talking about foster families and people in the alternative caregiver program. Can you clarify, and can you talk to my constituents who are in the alternative care program and are not being treated the same way as people in the foster family care program – can you talk to my constituents right now and clarify what you were just talking about?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Well, I would certainly be willing to meet with your constituents at any time, member. Thank you for that question.

[11:00 a.m.]

The difference in the grandparent program is that children are in child protection and children get to go and live with family members. They go and get to be with their

family, which is wonderful. It's proven that children who are brought up with their family members will do better, and children who are in foster care, God love them, go into situations where they're not familiar and the foster parents take children who they don't know and they take them in the middle of the night, they take them for two days, they take them for a month. So, those are the differences in the two programs.

Financially, there are some differences as well. There's not a whole lot of difference, I might add, but there is a difference, and depending on the level of complexity with the children, that really can depend on the skill level that the foster parent has as well. That's the difference.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

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

For the first six weeks of this year, 2024, many people commented that the Premier seemed to be absent most of this time. I had taken a look at the Premier's calendar, and his calendar seems to back up that perception. In fact, the calendar shows that except for a couple of Cabinet meetings, the Premier had a total of 16.5 hours of meetings over a six-week period. All that time, his calendar shows one single hour at a Cabinet committee meeting. One hour, Mr. Speaker. I will table that calendar, because the Premier's caucus colleagues may be interested because I hear that they have a hard time getting meetings with the Premier.

Premier's calendar

Premier, what were you doing all this time?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: I've been doing what I've been doing since April of 2019, and that is waking up every day and going to work and working hard and doing the best I can to make this Island better. When I sit my head down at night, I worry about what we did or what we didn't do, and will continue to do that for as long as I have the privilege to be in here.

If the hon. Leader of the Opposition wanted to job shadow me for a week, he might have to get up a little early. He might have to get up a little earlier than 6:00 in the morning.

[End of Question Period]