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of Prince Edward Island**

**Responses to Questions and
Oral Question Period**

(Preliminary Proceedings)

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No. 13

The Honourable Sidney MacEwen, Speaker

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[1:18 p.m.]

[Hon. S. MacEwen in the chair]

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

We asked questions yesterday and the Premier couldn't answer them. Now, you'd think if we were introducing a sweeping trade bill, the first thing you would do or would know is what you're changing, but the Premier couldn't even tell us how many trade restrictions this bill will eliminate. So, I'm going to ask again.

Interprovincial Trade and Mobility Act (further)

Can the Premier tell Islanders how many and which trade restrictions he's actually planning to get rid of with Bill 15?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

I would start by saying all of them. I think that's the goal across the country. The momentum has been moving towards removing interprovincial trade barriers. But we have the flexibility to carve out exceptions and exemptions of any kind in the legislation that we're proposing.

The point is there has been a patchwork of regulations and laws across this country forever that block the trade of goods and services across provincial boundaries, and for 30 years, the feds and the provincial governments have been trying to make progress on that. We've introduced a bill that can quickly make progress, just as our colleagues in other provinces and territories are in the process of doing right now.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Mr. Speaker, I don't have much confidence in that response. He said all of them, then he backstepped and said that they can make some changes.

[1:20 p.m.]

This government says it wants to remove barriers and boost trade, and so do we, but this Premier can't even list the barriers that he's talking about. It's not policymaking; it's guesswork that's dressed up like leadership, basically.

Will the Premier commit right now to bringing back a full list of all the trade restrictions that will be eliminated by this bill?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

The bill we're introducing – primarily, the initial effect will be around labour mobility and recognition of credentials. There will be a process where the federal government needs to come to the table, where some restrictions on, for instance, the movement of food between provinces could be enabled through changes, for instance, to the role of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

There's a partnership that needs to be in place here between the provinces and the federal government. We're doing our part with bringing this bill to the table. We expect the other provinces to do their part. We expect the federal government to come to the table and do their part. So, I'm looking forward to further debate on the bill that we have before us on the floor today.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

So, therein lies my concern: introducing a sweeping trade bill and he doesn't even know what they're changing in it. I've asked this question several times today and yesterday.

Yesterday, the Premier called Bill 15 for second reading, and already, the cracks are showing in this quick and dirty legislation. He promised transparency, but when asked who was actually consulted, all he offered was a vague reference to an email. Now, that's not consultation; that's a contact list.

Question to the Premier: Will you table the full list of people and organizations that your government emailed about this bill, or are you planning to stall and hide that too?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

In fact, he didn't ask me that question yesterday, he asked my deputy who was here on the floor, and I think he received a positive response from her. In fact, I spoke to her this morning and she's compiling that information. It's not just emails.

She explained to him that there were in-person consultations; some of them in person, some of them by virtual meeting, some of them were received by submission through email. That's a regular consultation process. We're compiling a summary for him, and we committed to give that to him here yesterday, so I'm puzzled by the question, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Your being puzzled doesn't surprise me. Yesterday, the question was asked to you. You were the promoter...

[Interjections]

Hon. H. Perry: Yesterday, I asked a question to the promoter....

[Interjections]

Hon. H. Perry: We are here to ask questions, not to listen to you. You'll have your time, Minister of Agriculture.

Premier, you were asked a question yesterday twice; you refused to answer it. I'm asking you again. I asked you again for the third time; you refused it. So, it's astonishing that this Premier can get away with that.

He introduced Bill 15, and asked when asked for feedback, neither him nor his department said anything. This is basic, but we are here with a Premier pushing a bill that he can't even explain. That's not leadership, that's recklessness. I'll take a moment here to educate the Premier, who is the promoter of this bill, as I said: when you bring a bill to the floor, you should know who you talked to and what they told you.

Will the Premier finally provide a summary of the feedback received from his so-called consultation here and now, and will he table it in the House?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. R. Lantz: Mr. Speaker, I refer back to my previous answer, which was in response to the exact same question.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

But he didn't answer that question. We've been waiting for takebacks from this government for six years – continuous; six years.

I'm going to be very clear with this, Premier. I believe in free trade, and I believe...

[Interjections]

Hon. H. Perry: ...in fair trade, and I know that healthy trading relationships are the lifeblood of all modern economies. But I also know this: there are at least two parties in every trade, and that means you need to be very careful. Yesterday, the Premier admitted that his trade bill is "quick and dirty." Now, that's a direct quote from the Premier.

Premier, why do you want to compromise with a quick and dirty trade deal?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

[1:25 p.m.]

I used a figure of speech that, obviously, we all know refers to getting something done quickly and simply, and that's exactly what this bill is. That's why people in our position have struggled for decades to make any progress on this, because it was approached from the perspective primarily of trying to harmonize regulations and laws across jurisdictions. This is a simple approach of mutual recognition that will advance free trade across this country in the simplest way possible and the quickest way possible.

I stand by what I said, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

See, I believe that we should get this right, and we should get it right first. We are living in a very, very dangerous time, and I'm quite certain that quick and dirty is not the way to go. I would consider two different words: smart and careful.

There are concerns about the Premier's trade deal. On this side of the House, we want free trade between provinces, but we want a good arrangement and, quite frankly, I want our Island to come out as winners, not as a province that signed up for some quick and dirty deal to make Nova Scotia Premier Tim Houston happy.

Will the Premier consider some way to stop the effort to ram this bill through the House, take a little time, and measure twice before cutting the deal?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

The Leader of the Opposition went on about what a free trader he is and how great it is, and then tries to suggest that there are winners and losers.

In this case, all of our provinces are advancing quickly on this front. As we speak, I understand that Premier Ford is tabling legislation in the Ontario Legislature.

We look forward to working with partners across the country to benefit mutually from increased freer trade across our nation. I know that all of our partners are working towards that same goal.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

I want Islanders to come out as winners.

Yesterday, the Premier supported a third party motion to amend this bill. Sadly, for the Premier, it appears that only two members of his caucus supported that amendment; a sad commentary, but it shows the Premier's open to changing Bill 15.

Earlier today, I tabled a motion in the House. This motion is obviously debatable, and it will refer to sending Bill 15 to the Standing Committee on Education and Economic Growth.

Will the Premier pause the debate on Bill No. 15, agree to unanimous consent on this motion this afternoon, and get this into committee where we can hear from Islanders, business sectors, and trade experts?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

I'm looking forward to getting the bill back on the floor this afternoon for debate. I don't want to debate the bill in Question Period here. I would like to get the bill through the Legislature. If it's the will of the Legislature to bring it to a committee at that point, so be it, but we have the opportunity to go through the bill section by section here within the hour, and I look forward to doing that and hearing debate from the other side.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Even this Premier cannot learn what happened over in Nova Scotia when they put the bill on the floor.

Yesterday, we debated the bill in this House. Back in 2020, in the early days of COVID – it was a terrible bill. It was an attempt to go around Parliament and give Cabinet the power to make laws with absolutely no oversight. It was probably the worst bill that was ever tabled in this House, in modern history, at least.

See, the government was panicked. They were not thinking straight. The Minister of Justice at that time even said this power-grab bill would save lives. Now, this was utter nonsense. The bill went to committee. We heard from the public, and guess what? The bill died.

Now, in this case, I don't want the bill to die. I want it to be much, much better. There is no real panic. There is plenty of time to meet the July 1st deadline mentioned by the Premier.

Can we not just take a deep breath and get this right, Premier?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

I think it's important to note that the bill itself is really the framework for how our trade relationships will look in the future. As I've said multiple times here, it's very dependent on the

regulations that are developed to support the bill. There will be lots of ongoing work after we're able to get this bill through the Legislature to build the regulations around it.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: But therein lies the problem. There's no scrutiny. You guys can make a decision on what regulations you want to do in it.

As the Premier said on April 11th, it's perfectly normal to send bills to committee. That was April 11th. That was last week.

Premier, why is Bill 15 different?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

[1:30 p.m.]

Hon. R. Lantz: This will be the second time I can refer back to a previous answer. I said if it's the will of this Legislature, then the bill may go to a committee, but the first step here is to have a fulsome debate on the bill on the floor of the Legislature, and I look forward to getting down to business here in very short order.

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

R. Henderson: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

My question is for the minister responsible for PEI's tobacco settlement.

I had questions for the Minister of Justice and Public Safety in the fall sitting regarding how much money the PEI government would be getting from the \$32 billion tobacco settlement with the Canadian provinces. We know New Brunswick is getting \$147 million as its portion of the settlement. It is expected that the Province of PEI will get \$60 million over a period of years, depending on the tobacco company's profits.

In the recent budget tabled in this Legislature, under revenue from provincial sources, PEI is receiving a \$36.4 million windfall for tobacco litigation.

Tobacco settlement

Question to the Minister of Justice and Public Safety: This money seems to be going to general

revenue, but I can't find any budget lines that say how that money goes to families of smokers who had health-related deaths from tobacco. How do families claim that money?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice, Public Safety and Attorney General.

Hon. B. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question.

This picks up from our question last fall when it hadn't happened yet, but it has happened; the money has come. The money is designated for the health care system to help deal with the situations from smoking over the years. It will be a great help to our health care system.

There is a way that individuals can apply for some money. I would be happy to table the procedure on how individuals can apply for that here today or tomorrow.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

R. Henderson: Well, that is appreciated because, once again, families are reaching out and wanting to know what's going on with this situation. They need more clarity. But once again – maybe this question might be a bit more to the Minister of Health.

Minister, the Cancer Society and the PEI tobacco-free spaces have been advocating for increased funding for enhanced smoking reduction programming, yet I see that in the Department of Health and Wellness budget, under health promotion, grants have been reduced over last year's allotment.

Minister of Health: Will these groups receive any funding from the tobacco settlement dollars to PEI?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, hon. member, for the question.

To kind of go back a little bit, there is Tobacco Claims Canada for individuals that can claim damages against the tobacco companies on an individual basis, so that's where they go to start

that process. There are some criteria here that I could read off, but that's another question.

We continue to have discussions with the Canadian Cancer Society. We've made improvements to the smoking cessation program, and it's now available through pharmacies on PEI. So, a preventative measure is certainly one of the first steps that we're using with this extra funding in order to help support Islanders.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

R. Henderson: Okay, I'm going to go back to the Minister of Justice on this.

Minister of Justice, embedded in the New Brunswick settlement was a 3.6 allotment for the settlement to the lawyers representing their provinces. What percentage of those representing PEI's interests in those negotiations – how much will they be getting, and when will they be getting their money?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice, Public Safety and Attorney General.

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

I don't have that information in front of me, but I'd be happy to bring that back to this House.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

R. Henderson: That's appreciated. I've got a feeling that they're going to get their money before the families are going to get their money, the way things are going here.

Minister, this money would be considered a windfall. If PEI had not received the listed \$36.4 million this fiscal year, the PEI budget deficit would have exceeded \$200 million. Why did those funds go to general revenue and not have a specific budget line to compensate Island families who were impacted by the tobacco causing health issues? Minister of Justice and Public...

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

With the settlement that we received, that's a lot of money, actually, to spend on those initiatives in year 1. So, it does go into general revenues, like every other province in Canada, to continue to improve smoking cessation programs, and we talked about the lung screening program, that those investments will go towards in the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

R. Henderson: Well, the problem I'm having with all of this is that you've got all this money that you've taken in, but you're not putting it out as an expenditure. But this is money that actually should be designated to Island families that have been impacted.

[1:35 p.m.]

Minister of Health: The aforementioned groups continue to advocate for smoke and vape reduction programs. Will there be money and significant funding in the budget for smoking cessation programs, regardless of the group administering the program? Because once again, if I look at your health promotions, there's no extra money there.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you.

It is important to note that individuals can make a claim against the tobacco companies. I'm not sure what the date is, but they can do that. They are important revenues that we'll use toward our health care system like we use the revenues from the tourism industry to fund education and health care.

It's good that, finally, after multi-years of negotiations, we have settled this number, and finally, tobacco companies are paying this fine.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

G. McNeilly: Mr. Speaker, access to child care remains a major concern for Island families and for families considering a move to PEI.

Yesterday, we heard from the Minister of Workforce that the system is “complicated.” It’s not that complicated. We are talking about international child care workers who want to stay in PEI and continue supporting Island children and families.

Early childhood educators (further)

Question to the Minister of Education and Early Years. Your department certified these important international workers. If they aren’t eligible for the permanent residence stream, they’ll leave, taking with them up to 30 percent of the workforce. As minister responsible for this sector, are you prepared to see early learning centres scrambling for staff, reducing spaces, or even closing altogether?

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

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

Member, immigration is just one of several levers that our operators have and can pursue for their workforce needs. Our workforce investments have improved working conditions significantly. That is helping to attract and retain staff. We have provincial partnerships, like I spoke on yesterday, with Holland College, universities, ECDA on Steps for Success. We’ve graduated 51 ECEs from Holland College this spring.

The Province is investing in attracting workforce here, in retaining our workforce, with the investments that we’re making in making it a more attractive workplace. We’re going to continue to do that. We’ll work with all of the folks in the sector to help them upskill to the levels required to work in our centres; we’ll continue to do that.

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

G. McNeilly: Well, you’re not. You’re throwing out words like stabilization. These folks cannot get in, and nobody is committed to this.

Yesterday, the Minister of Early Years said that the system is based on three pillars: affordability, accessibility, and quality. Thanks to the federal government, child care is affordable. We addressed the issue of accessibility yesterday, so let’s talk about quality.

Question to the Minister of Education.

Yesterday, minister, you appeared to suggest that only level 3 child care educators provide “quality care.” That message was disheartening for many early child care associates who heard directly from their own minister that their qualifications and daily contributions are not valid.

Question to the minister: Can you please clarify these comments?

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

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

The member across the floor is playing with words. We were speaking specifically on the upskilling to ECE 3s. I’d just like to take this opportunity to thank all of our ECEs, our ECAs, and our ECIs for the important work that they do in this province when caring for our most vulnerable Islanders.

Thank you.

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

G. McNeilly: Mr. Speaker, let’s be clear, Canadian level 2 child care workers are allowed to work in our centres, but international level 2 workers are not considered good enough to qualify for permanent residency.

Question to the minister: How do you justify denying PR eligibility to level 2 workers who have years of experience, spotless records, and strong support from both parents and operators? We saw it yesterday with over 500 people signing a petition, minister.

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

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

Look, I don’t set the requirements for the designation and the qualifications for each one of those levels. We have ECE 3s; they need to be trained to the level of ECE 3s. Our ECAs; same thing. Our ECIs; the same thing.

Whether you’re an immigrant worker or a local here in this province, whatever you may be, if you meet those qualifications and everything else is equal, then we welcome you.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[1:40 p.m.]

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The hon. Premier, just this afternoon in response to questions from the Leader of the Opposition, indicated that the *Interprovincial Trade and Mobility Act* is a simple approach, but in reality, that legislation is an incredibly consequential bill. The expert on the floor yesterday admitted she was only reasonably confident that this act will not negatively impact the protections on our land under the *Lands Protection Act, P.E.I.*

The *Lands Protection Act, P.E.I.* is one of our most unique and important pieces of legislation. Other provinces don't have anything like it, so it's up to this government to ensure nothing is removed from our critically important protections on land.

Interprovincial Trade and Mobility Act (further)

Question to the Premier: Do you honestly believe, Mr. Premier, that Islanders are comfortable with your government gambling one of our most sacred pieces of legislation on a reasonable hunch?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

The member rightly describes it as consequential legislation. That's what we hope it will be. The whole country is trying to move toward freer, open interprovincial trade.

But on the issue of the *Lands Protection Act, P.E.I.*, I was clear about it yesterday. I will never compromise our *Lands Protection Act, P.E.I.*

[Interjections]

Hon. R. Lantz: It's a party specific exemption in the Canadian Free Trade Agreement. We will never give that up. I would go as far as using the notwithstanding clause to protect our *Lands Protection Act, P.E.I.* here in Prince Edward Island. If they're suggesting anything otherwise, I'd disagree wholeheartedly. We'll stand for that act.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: I appreciate...

[Interjections]

M. MacFarlane: ...Mr. Speaker, that the Premier is vehement in his assertions, but the legislation is before us to get it right. We need to get it right.

[Interjections]

M. MacFarlane: ...what the Premier said, I'm not 100 percent confident, Islanders are not 100 percent confident, and this is too important to leave up to the courts or to fate.

The Premier has access to top legal advice and top civil servants, and Islanders expect the Premier to ensure, without a shadow of a doubt, that our lands protection laws are going to be secure.

I'm going to ask the Premier another question. To hear an expert on the bill say they were only reasonably confident that this bill won't undermine our *Lands Protection Act, P.E.I.* is not reassuring, Premier; in fact, it's alarming.

Will you commit to reviewing this legislation to unequivocally guarantee that no part of it can override or weaken our land protection?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. R. Lantz: Yes, I do, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Premier, in his earlier response, made reference to the federal free trade agreement, that the Island's lands protection laws are protected and therefore this provincial act cannot override that. Unfortunately, Prime Minister Mark Carney stated last month: "We are committing to removing all federal exemptions under the Canada Free Trade Agreement."

Question to the Premier: Are you willing to gamble...

[Interjections]

M. MacFarlane: ...the protection of our land just so you can be first out of the gate on this?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

I have heard the federal government, the Prime Minister, and the Trade minister commit to removing federal exemptions from the Canada Free Trade Agreement. I have heard provincial Premiers talk about removing all of their party-specific exemptions from the Canada Free Trade Agreement. You haven't heard me say that. I just told you, I will not remove the *Lands Protection Act, P.E.I.* from our exemptions of the Canada Free Trade Agreement.

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

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

A few weeks ago, and out of the blue, Islanders were told that the solar panel rebate program – a hugely successful and popular initiative – is being reviewed and has been paused. This has left homeowners and installation companies stranded as projects that were already planned, approved, and in some cases partially paid for had to be suddenly abandoned, or put on hold.

Solar panel rebate program

Question to the Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action. I have absolutely no issue, by the way, minister, with government reviewing programs. In fact, I don't think we do it often enough. But why have you created the chaos and anxiety for people by pausing it before the outcome of the review is even known?

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

Hon. G. Arseneault: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, hon. member, for the question.

I'll repeat what I said last week as well. Anybody that's in the program that has been preapproved by our program will be honoured.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

P. Bevan-Baker: That's one thing; I'll get to that in a second, minister.

[1:45 p.m.]

But this wasteful and aimless government has, for years, had no problem finding and spending money on all manner of projects and programs. It never seemed to be an issue to find cash. It was often issued through special warrants for things that appeal to the folks in charge.

Here, we have a program that isn't a pet project. This is really excellent policy. This is the envy of other provinces. It's helping us meet our climate targets. It's lowering the cost of energy for Island families, and it's allowing greater energy independence and diversity onto our grid.

A question to the same minister: Why is it never a problem to find money for extensions to NHL deals or private health care providers, but this program is suddenly paused, leaving Islanders in the lurch?

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

Hon. G. Arseneault: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As I stated, it is extremely important to have programs to help out Islanders. We will continue with the program. It's been on pause for a number of weeks. We will honour everyone that's been preapproved who has a preapproval letter. We will make sure that they are looked after, so nobody will have any investments made that we're not going to be looking after.

The program will continue, and I'll be happy to give you more information when we get to the budget, if you let us pass budget.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

P. Bevan-Baker: Oh my gosh, already; okay.

Interesting that the minister tells us that for those who are preapproved, it's not going to be a problem, but there are a whole bunch of people who have an application in, who had assumed –

because the program was going to stay as it was – that they would be able to carry on through that process.

To the same minister: Will you commit, today in this House, to all of those Islanders and the installation companies who've been blindsided this decision, that all of the applications that were received before the recent pause, that meet the rules that existed at the time – not that they were preapproved, but that meet the rules and were in before the pause – that they will, too, be honoured?

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

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

To the hon. member, that's why we have an application process. We go through an application process, and if you're preapproved, you've got information from our department that's gone out. We will look after those people. For the ones that are in the queue when the program resumes, we'll be looking after those people with that in mind.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

T. DesRoches: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

You know, the warm weather that is upon us is very much welcome by a large number of Islanders, and it's not just for the sunlight and the warmth. It's for the opportunity to have a break in their power bills. Some Islanders have noted that their electric bills jumped drastically. All you had to do was open social media over the last couple of months, and you would've seen this on everybody's platforms. Some residents shut everything off to a bare minimum, went away for weeks at a time, came back, and their consumption was higher than the previous year.

So, let's go to the Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action. Minister, we have all seen people posting on their stories, on social media, and have received calls and e-mails from constituents. One electrical engineer recently told me that when there is a big load on the system, he doesn't believe that smart meters read correctly.

Smart meters

Has your department looked into any of these claims or increased electric bills that people are complaining about?

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

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for being a great advocate for your constituents.

The smart meters – it's the way that we're going to be moving. It's a wise way of moving forward. For the hon. member, we're looking at – right now, 70 percent of our Canadian homes are operating with smart meters, and the province will move in that direction.

I do know the Summerside utility has 1,100 members that are now with smart metering. If there are any issues with that process, I would encourage them to go to the City. If they don't get satisfaction at that level, they can move it on to IRAC, as well.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

T. DesRoches: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Not really the answer that myself or a lot of the residents were looking for. I kind of thought it might have been a little bit different. Let's go back to that same minister for a different angle.

[1:50 p.m.]

Minister, this is not the first report of smart meters coming into use and consumers seeing high bills. We saw our neighbours, New Brunswick, in 2023 have countless problems with it. In 2012, B.C. had a bunch of issues with it. In 2014, Ontario introduced smart meters, and an audit found that they did not function properly in certain situations.

Minister, Quebec went one step further and had an opt-out program where you could pay to have an analog meter and have it read. Would you and your department be willing to look into this for the Islanders that want to stay on analog meters?

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

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you very much.

I do realize that we do have some provinces that have an opt-out clause. Here in PEI, we're hopeful that we'll have a deeper dive into this and that we would be able to entertain this as a possibility.

We do look forward to the future and getting more people on smart metering. We do realize that 70 percent of our Canadian homes are on that pathway. We do realize that it's a wise way of using electricity, and it does have a benefit to our grid. We will have a deeper dive and see what we can do on that front.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

T. DesRoches: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Now, there's an answer that we all love and can appreciate. Right to the point.

Back to that same minister. Minister, no matter what we do or say, it will not put the money back in the pockets of the residents from the high bills. But we can ease their minds going forward and make them feel a little better. If an audit was done, this would alleviate a lot of the issues.

Minister, will you commit to this House to getting an independent company to do an audit of the smart meter usage on Prince Edward Island?

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

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Whether it's customers from the city of Summerside or with Maritime Electric, there is a process in place that we have right now. If we're talking about residents in the city of Summerside, well, their first step is obviously to go to the City as they control their own utilities in Summerside. If there is no satisfaction to that level, they can make an appeal to IRAC. At that time, if it's still not satisfactory, I'd be able to look into it a little deeper at that time. But there

is a process in place, and I encourage them to use the process.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

S. Dillon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

When someone is experiencing a mental health crisis, access to immediate care can make a significant difference in their recovery. Mobile mental health services are designed to provide timely and on-the-ground support, particularly for individuals in distress in our province. Ensuring that mobile mental health teams can reach those in need quickly and effectively is crucial to preventing crises from escalating. This important tool also helps in reducing the burden on emergency rooms and law enforcement.

Mobile mental health

Question to the Minister of Health: What measures are in place to ensure mobile mental health services can respond quickly and effectively?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

Yes, mobile mental health is an important service. It blends two components. The main, obviously, is the telephone access line, and then there are field teams that are on the ground.

In 2024, we had over 7,000 calls to that line. We dispatched those units more than 1,100 times. We had about 340 calls to the new 988 line. So, these services are being used, and those teams are responding to people where they're at. I think the number of field visits is probably around 250 of those 7,000 calls, so when there's a crisis, our telephone support line identifies those crises and then deploys our field teams to help those in need.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

S. Dillon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mobile mental health services are a vital component of PEI's mental health care system, but they do not operate in isolation. Effective crisis intervention requires strong coordination with hospitals, community mental health programs, primary care providers, and other support services to ensure individuals will receive appropriate follow-up care.

There is a risk that individuals who access mobile mental health services may not receive the ongoing support they need, leading to repeat crisis. A well-connected system can help ensure that those that are in crisis receive timely and continuous care.

Question to the same minister: How are our mobile mental health services being integrated with other health care services within our province?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

That is a good question. We recently completed the EMR through our community mental health location. Our department is actually looking into how we can have our mobile mental health team access those records for their clinical documentation.

[1:55 p.m.]

One of the things that we actually do with this team, too, is post-discharge follow-up. Our providers are educated to have these teams visit people. These can be a miscarriage or losing a loved one. That's an important part of our health care providers, supporting people when they need it and where they need it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

S. Dillon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

While these teams immediately support Islanders in crisis, their effectiveness also depends on clear communication and operational procedures, as noted in the *Joining Forces* report. Minister, you mentioned last fall that the department engaged a third-party consult to complete an evaluation on the current mental health model in PEI.

Question to the Minister of Health: Can you provide an update on what results you have from the third-party consultation last fall?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you.

A good question. These services are provided throughout the country in different ways, with support from police and without support, and how those functions integrate. So, we did engage a third party who did extensive consultations with our health care teams, our mental health teams, policing. I believe we expect that report to be in the next month or so, to look at how we can modify the mobile mental health.

I think those numbers speak for themselves. There is volume there, we're responding when necessary, so I think it's a service that is very useful to our community, and we should be proud of that mobile mental health team.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Minister of Education told the media yesterday there are about 50 students yet to graduate from the ECE program – you said it again today – but many of them will move into the 2+2 program and become teachers or head into the public school system, which need ECEs or other things or other things in Prince Edward Island.

Early childhood educators (further)

Minister, how can you guarantee that any of these 50 will actually be hired into the early years system?

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

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

I've always been chasing that elusive crystal ball, so to answer that, I'd have to say I cannot guarantee that, member. But I'm going to repeat again: investments that we have made in the working conditions for our workforce are going to help recruit and retain those vital staff. We've

got great programs out there to attract talent. We're going to continue to push those. We're going to continue to work with our partners to graduate even more ECEs into the system.

Again, I'm very proud of this government's efforts and the work that's been done to make this the envy of the country.

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

G. McNeilly: Well, it's not the envy right now, and there are a lot of worried people working in the sector at this time.

Yesterday, the minister rhymed off statistics on new child care spaces created, but we all know that statistics can be misleading. Those numbers included existing centres that simply transitioned into early years centres.

What are the net new spaces created under your government?

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

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

Member, I'll bring that number back to you, and just repeat that we're investing another \$11.6 million into the system to continue to grow it to be the best in the country. But as far as those numbers, I will bring that back to you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty, final question.

G. McNeilly: Minister, moments ago, you said you don't certify early childhood level certifications. Isn't this done by your early learning and childcare board, the one that you oversee?

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

Hon. R. Croucher: Alright, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll play along with the member.

Sure, it's one I oversee, but as you can just imagine, in this portfolio, I don't have my finger on the pulse on every single piece of the puzzle that is Education and Early Years. But again, if you want more information on that, you have my number. My door is always open – always open.

You come in; we'll sit down and we'll talk about it.

[End of Question Period]