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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
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RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

TUESDAY, 13 DECEMBER 2016

Responses to Questions Taken As Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Gas price consumer safeguards

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Last week we spoke about the potential financial impacts the new carbon tax would bring. At the same time, Islanders were hit with a \$0.5 increase to gas and petroleum prices unexpectedly.

Question to the Premier: What consumer safeguards will be in your government's energy strategy to protect Islanders from sticker shock gas prices?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, I'm happy to report to the House that on Friday the federal government and the provinces and territories concluded a pan-Canadian framework on clean growth and climate change.

The words "clean growth" are really aimed at taking advantage of the opportunities for Islanders that come with addressing the way in which we use energy, the amount of carbon we are emitting. One of the numbers that I keep in mind is that on an annual basis Prince Edward Islanders spend out-of-province \$435 million on energy and fuel.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Gas price and job growth

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

On an average, a carbon tax would drive the pump price even higher. A \$30 a ton carbon adds at least \$0.6 to \$0.7 more per litre of gas.

Question to the Premier. This government likes to talk about job growth. How much

growth will be unlocked with an extra \$0.6 to \$0.7 charged at the pumps?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, I thank the Leader of the Opposition for mentioning job growth because there should be job growth.

When you think about that \$435 million, if we can reduce the amount of fuel that we're paying for out-of-province – and it's not just the carbon price that we're talking about but the total price per litre or ultimately per ton of these greenhouse gases. That's how our government and I hope everyone in this House, and Islanders all across the province, will go at this, is to look for opportunities so that we can end up with more money in our pockets and to gain opportunities through the commitment to clean growth and climate change.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I love talking petroleum because all your high taxes are doing are driving people across and off the island to buy cheaper gas.

Transportation plays a key, big role in this province in growth. That's why transportation is one of the two biggest sources of carbon emissions. Most of our exports are moved by road.

Question to the Premier: What good is spending \$65 million for a three-minute shortcut in the name of growth if people can't afford to put gas in their tanks?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, let me speak to the question of the Trans-Canada Highway completion that's been raised here.

This is completing a project that started in the late 1970s. Really, what we're going to have is a proper highway from Tea Hill to DeSable that is going to allow us to continue

to compete in the world economy. In 2014 and 2015 alone, in those two years, we reduced our balance of trade deficit by \$230 million, and that's what we're after is clean growth and prosperity for Prince Edward Islanders.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Fuel tax relief

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'm really concerned about Islanders and how they're going to be able to pay for your new tax, Mr. Premier. Government can help. They can influence the amount Islanders pay for fuel. They can control the level of taxes you take.

Question to the Premier: What action on fuel tax relief will your government take to shield Island consumers from volatile price swings and a carbon tax?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, as members will know, the benchmark price that the federal government will require under the pan-Canadian framework will kick in the first of January 2018.

That gives us some time to design the most effective mechanism and to deal with some of the issues raised by the hon. Leader of the Opposition, to which we're very sensitive, including, and especially the impact on low-income Islanders, and how we can design instruments that go with this whole package that will enable low-income Islanders to consume less fuel.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Pan-Canadian framework and provincial benefits

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

As we've heard today, on Friday the Premier attended meetings in Ottawa where a national climate change plan was developed, the referred to Pan-Canadian framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change.

This is a question for the Premier: Mr. Premier, what extra benefits were you able to secure for Prince Edward Island because of the steps PEI has already taken to address climate change?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker let me point to one, which is of course the transmission cables that are now in place between Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, and the considerable shared investment between the federal government and our province that enables Prince Edward Island to now build on the achievements that have been made in renewable energy for our province and will be able to invest further in renewable energy for both export and especially for local consumption.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We, as Islanders, see climate change impacts first hand. For example, as storm surges erode the Island shoreline. Islanders, being the proactive group that we are, have already proven leadership in reducing carbon emissions. Close to a third of our electricity comes from wind energy today. Because of this, Islanders contribute only 0.2% of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions.

Question for the Premier: Mr. Premier, why didn't you secure any extra benefits for Islanders for the steps we've already taken to address climate change?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, that was one of the strong points by which Prince Edward Island arrived at those meetings and entered into the pan-Canadian framework.

It is indeed to get credit for the fact that we have, against a commitment to reduce by 2030, 30% of our greenhouse gas emissions relative to 2005, to acknowledge that we've already achieved a third of that – that's to say 10% of our emissions have already been reduced – and that is a very significant achievement in the context of the pan-Canadian framework, and a basis on which we can come forward with credibility and continue to show the leadership that Prince Edward Islanders take pride in, Madam Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Financial credit for electricity usage

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Premier has mentioned the \$435 million that we spend on energy and fuel, that's money that goes directly out-of-province. But right now New Brunswick receives the benefit for lower carbon emissions when Islanders use less electricity.

Question for the Premier: Under this national climate change agreement, who would receive the financial credit if Prince Edward Island lowers its electricity usage, Prince Edward Island or New Brunswick?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, it is a good question.

In fact, between now and, let me say, the end of January or into the first quarter of the new year, we intend to have that very direct discussion with New Brunswick in partnership as the province with which we have the closest relationship, as we, together as provinces and territories and the federal government, address the commitments of the pan-Canadian framework. We are very alert to the issues regionally both in terms of opportunity and in terms of the commercial relationship that we have with the Province of New Brunswick.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Financial incentive re: local production of renewable energy

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

There are many Islanders that are passionate about producing energy locally.

Question for the Premier: Mr. Premier, what financial incentive will there be to increase the amount of renewable energy locally produced on PEI under the deal that you agreed to?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Let's remember that what was agreed to on Friday is a framework. There are many initiatives, many instruments, many relationships, and many funding initiatives that will roll out pursuant to that framework and pursuant to the commitment that we have through to 2030 and 2050 with our partners in Confederation and internationally.

I believe Prince Edward Islanders are very keen to pursue exactly the kind of initiatives that are being suggested here and that's something that we all look forward to working on as we refine the steps. No doubt those are steps that we can look forward to seeing in greater detail when we have our 2017-2018 budget next spring.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

HST and carbon emissions (further)

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Under the plan agreed to in Ottawa a price of \$50 per ton of carbon emissions will be charged to consumers, farmers, fishers, and businesses by 2022. At our current carbon emission levels that'll be \$90 million a year from Islanders. That's even more money than what the Premier hoped to rake in from egaming.

This Premier is fine with taking an extra \$90 million a year in taxes from Islanders to fight climate change, but yet charges watershed groups for tree seedlings.

Question to the Premier: Mr. Premier, do you still intend to add the HST to home heating fuel as part of your government's energy strategy and climate change strategy?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker let me correct one of the main points that was put forward in the question, and that is, with the first \$10 a ton, which is under the federal benchmark, that would generate, with the scope of the tax anticipated, same as the British Columbia tax, not more than \$10 million annually.

By the time that you get out to the fifth year it's our firm intention, between the price and other measures that will be taken, that Islanders will be consuming less fuel and will thereby see an increase by the fifth year of less than what they'll see in the first year, and that's exactly the plan that we have in mind.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Madam Speaker, I've been hearing from Islanders that they can't believe that we're not more frustrated here on the opposition side because we're not getting answers to questions, and it's clear to see that that's happening again today.

The Premier flew to Ottawa, Vancouver, and Paris to talk about climate change, but he's still not even giving answers to Islanders right here on PEI. A legislative committee has recommended removing the HST from all sources of home heating to encourage more renewable methods and protect vulnerable Islanders.

Question for the Premier: With the millions in carbon tax revenues you stand to take in from Islanders, do you really need to add the HST to home heating fuel?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, let me repeat one of the answers that I gave to Islanders and that's to request that the members opposite stop talking about \$90 million and trying to scare Islanders about this.

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct).

Premier MacLauchlan: Islanders are committed to dealing with climate change, to reducing our carbon footprint, and, Madam Speaker, we are committed to reducing the amount of home heating fuel that all Islanders consume, and to assisting low-income Islanders in particular with reducing their consumption.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

It's obvious that this government is putting the cart before the horse. They have no plan. I didn't say \$9 million, I said millions and millions, (Indistinct) in my last question I did not say \$9 million.

Islanders can see what's going on here. This government can't wait to get its hands on Islanders' wallets yet once again, and addressing climate change will be taking a backseat to getting the money.

Question to the Premier: Will you commit today that Islanders will not end up paying both a carbon tax and HST on home heating fuel as part of your government's climate change plan?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, I will commit today that one of the very first measures that we will take, and that I hope this House will support, will be a program of home retrofits for, in particular, low-income Islanders that will enable them to not only avoid the extra price on carbon, but the total price of carbon.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Carbon tax and vulnerable Islanders

Mr. LaVie: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

My question will be to the Premier. Premier, you're talking about carbon tax and climate change, but I think you're forgetting something here, Premier, there's something you are forgetting.

When you were in Ottawa making this carbon tax deal, did you think about the most vulnerable people on the Island?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, I will be tabling later the actual pan-Canadian framework including the annex that Prince Edward Island submitted which makes specific reference, and with a lot of consideration, to how our work in this area can pay particular attention to the impact on, and the benefits to, low-income Islanders.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Mr. LaVie: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The carbon tax will be a lot like the HST. It will hurt the most vulnerable Islanders out there. I am not the only one in my district that sees this. We see seniors going with jerry cans. We see kids going to school hungry. We see that our food banks are up. And this carbon tax, you're taxing on top of tax, Premier.

How do you expect Islanders struggling to get by now to dig deep and find more tax money for you to spend?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, I hope that all members of this House will have a particular attention to the very Islanders that are implied by this question, the people who are challenged economically, people who may have homes that could benefit – people who have homes that may benefit from a retrofit, insulation, better windows, other ways in which their homes can be improved, perhaps even conversion away from fuel.

There may be, in particular, work opportunities for Islanders to become part of a growth industry in making our homes more energy-efficient.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Mr. LaVie: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Premier, you've got the people on Prince Edward Island to a point they can't afford windmills, they can't afford heat pumps. You've got no job creation. You've got no industry on PEI and you're taxing them again. These people can't afford these carbon taxes.

You brought in the HST, now you're putting carbon taxes on top of that. You (Indistinct) reaching in one pocket, now you're reaching in the second pocket, Premier. People can't afford it!

Don't you see that the same thing will happen on a carbon tax, or do you just not care about the vulnerable people on Prince Edward Island?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, everything that we've said from the time the pan-Canadian framework has been first discussed has been with a complete priority for how the impact will not fall on those who are vulnerable and where we can find opportunities.

I think that's really the point, is that all of us should be looking for opportunities to come out better, to come out further ahead because of our commitment.

Let me contrast the situation on Prince Edward Island with this \$435 million that we're spending out of the province with some of the western provinces which, in fact, are making money on energy exports. If we can't get ahead on this, it's because we haven't worked hard enough at it, Madam Speaker, and we intend to work at it.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Mr. LaVie: No, Premier, when the HST came, your government took millions out of the pockets of the most vulnerable Islanders and you put pennies back in. Now that doesn't make much sense. Take millions out and put pennies in for the most vulnerable Islanders out there.

Premier, how do you plan to protect the vulnerable Islanders from this tax that will punish the poor?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, two very important respects.

One, we intend for this to lead to clean growth, which is exactly the title of the framework and two, we will come forward with measures that are designed to ensure that the impact does not fall on the most vulnerable Islanders.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Mr. LaVie: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

This Premier is not getting it. You've got no job growth. You've got no industry coming to PEI. You've got people hungry now on PEI. You've got seniors going with jerry cans. I've seen it, Premier, and you fellows have seen it in your own districts too. I'm not the only one. Your food banks are up across Prince Edward Island. Kids are going to school hungry, and you're putting another tax on top of a tax. The most vulnerable people can't afford it, Premier.

Premier, how will you make poor Islanders pay more tax money they don't have, reduce poverty in our communities?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, I've said, and will be held to this, that we will design these measures to ensure that the impact does not fall on those who are most vulnerable.

But let me say something else. We are seeing growth, and you can see it in the district of the hon. Member from Souris-Elmira. The figures are out today on the lobster fishery, \$42 million extra at the wharf. The farmers, the farm gate, are doing well. Tourism has done well.

We are for prosperity, and that's how Islanders are going to get ahead.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

Election finance legislation

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Thank you so much, Madam Speaker.

Last spring the Premier committed to introducing legislation this fall updating our election finance laws to, among other things, set annual donation limits and eliminate contributions from businesses and unions.

A question to the Premier: If government does indeed still intend to make these changes and reforms, when can we expect to see that legislation?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, I was reminded after the Leader of the Third Party asked me last week whoever gets to see me in my office that we, in fact – he and I – had met, as the Leader of the Opposition and I, on November 7th to discuss this.

My plan is, and here you've stolen my thunder, Leader of the Third Party, tomorrow I will have a letter addressed to the leaders of the parties expanding on those discussions and on the statements that I made last spring.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

Rural broadband and ISPs

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Thank you so much, Madam Speaker.

As I brought up recently in standing committee, Bell Aliant has donated over \$46,000 to the Liberal Party and over \$24,000 to the Tory party over the last few years.

We've had much discussion recently in this House about a new initiative to improve rural broadband, a process in which various Internet service providers on the Island have a real interest.

Given that Bell Aliant is a major funder to the governing party, how can government remain impartial in this process and treat all ISPs equally?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, a two-part answer to the question.

One, as hon. members will know, we've indicated that we intend for there to be caps on donations, including by corporations. But more fundamentally, our commitment in terms of service to rural Islanders and to all Islanders with Internet service is competition.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

Political reform and public funds

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

A simple way for this government to reduce the perception of conflict of interest and improve transparency would be for political parties to stop taking any money at all from businesses, as you yourself promised, Mr. Premier.

A question to the Premier: Will you bring in the political finance reforms you promised before giving out major public funds on projects like rural broadband and the Cornwall bypass?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Madam Speaker, the timetable anticipated by the reforms that

have been discussed would see them come into effect on January 1st, 2018.

I don't think we would intend to stop government in that 14 months between now and then.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Evangeline-Miscouche.

School evacuation response

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

My question today is for the Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture. In light of the recent emergency evacuation of all Island schools last September as a result of a perceived threat, schools were forced to make a nasty evacuation.

Is your department comfortable that there was a consistent evacuation response to the schools across the province?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

All 62 schools in the Province of Prince Edward Island have plans, school action for emergencies. As the minister who communicated regularly during that day, we're very pleased with the Island-wide evacuation that did take place, and that safety is always of the utmost importance to all of us here, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Evangeline-Miscouche.

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

My supplementary question is to the same minister: Mr. Minister, can you please advise the House to any changes in evacuation protocol as a result of this evacuation experience in September?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

On September 21st when the bomb threat was received by the national security threats registry in Ottawa we acted quickly in Island schools. The plans that are in place were activated. Very pleased with that day.

Since that day there's been debriefs, we've been meeting with EMO, and we've been looking at ways that we can continue to improve communications with parents, effective student evacuation sites.

Anytime you go through a process and an evacuation with such magnitude that involved 20,000 students there's certainly always ways that we continue to improve and to continue to reassure Islanders and parents and students and staff that safety is the top priority.

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

Guaranteed Income Supplement enhancements

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

My question is to the Minister of Family and Human Services. The new Liberal federal government has introduced new enhancements to the Guaranteed Income Supplement.

Would the minister outline what those enhancements would be?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Family and Human Services.

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Guaranteed Income Supplement provides financial assistance to low-income seniors who are receiving the Old Age Security. As minister responsible for seniors, I was very intrigued and excited to hear in the 2016 federal budget that, number one, they were restoring the old age and the GIS from 67 to 65. They were also going to be increasing the GIS approximately 10%.

For seniors single receiving the full GIS supplement, they would be receiving approximately \$947 extra per year. That increase happened in July, just this past summer. Approximately 4,200 Island seniors will be receiving that full benefit.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The federal government, when you get to the old age pension, automatically apply that to senior citizens. My understanding is that if you want the supplement or if you are – if the supplement is something that you can access you have to apply three months before your 65th birthday.

I'd like to know: Is the minister doing anything to ensure that senior citizens do not take advantage of this supplement?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Family and Human Services.

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

That's a great question. Actually, Family and Human Services is very involved and very active in outreach to the senior population. For example, the 2016 Seniors' Guide, we did have information about the GIS supplement, and those guides are handed out to seniors' conferences across the Island.

We also have information that was shared in the PEI Senior Citizens' Federation conference, as well as the *Voice for Island Seniors*.

Probably the best program or outreach that we have right now is collaboration between my department, the Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning, and the Canada Revenue Agency. That is an initiative called: Be Aware and Get Your Share.

It's an outreach program where we're going out into the community and making sure that Islanders are receiving the federal and provincial benefits that they are intended to receive.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Would the minister contact the federal government in regards to see that this could become automatic for deserving constituents, just like the old age pension is applied, that it would come automatic, that supplement?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Family and Human Services.

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We are always open to partnerships with our federal counterparts. One example of a federal partnership is this tax season we will be partnering with the Canada Revenue Agency to hold volunteer income tax clinics at many of our seniors' homes.

One of the best ways to get the information out there is sitting right here in this room. There are 27 MLAs who are on the ground each and every day and in contact almost each and every day with their constituents. I think that each and every one of us should make it part of our conversation each and every day to everyone – coffee shops; speaking engagements – to make sure that Islanders are aware of the federal and provincial benefits that are out there, and that they are receiving what they are entitled to.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

PISA grade 10 exclusions

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

My question is to the Premier and the co-chair of the Learning Partners Advisory Council: Why are there twice as many grade 10 students excluded from writing the PISA test here as there were excluded in the rest of Canada?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

I just want to reiterate how proud I am of the success of our 15-year-olds in Island schools. I think a reason for all of us to be

proud of the successes that our 15-year-olds had on the rigorous PISA assessments that were conducted with over 500,000 students globally in the OECD countries, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

This is the same government that was cheering for a deficit here two weeks ago.

PEI's exclusion rate is 14.3% and that's double the national average, which was 6.9%.

Question to the Premier and the co-chair of the Learning Partners Advisory Council: Premier, shouldn't PEI's much higher exclusion rate have set off alarm bells somewhere along the way?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

As a department, as the minister, we recognize Prince Edward Island, along with British Columbia and Alberta, were three provinces that saw their exclusion rates rise. One province, Newfoundland, saw the exclusion rates fall since 2012.

But I do want to add that Prince Edward Island has the highest participation, all students are part of the sample, and all schools participate. There's no other province in Canada that can identify with an all-in approach to the PISA assessments.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I know the minister is looking for a bit of a smoke screen. He's getting beat up pretty bad over this and he's getting pretty touchy about it. I think we've all probably had an opportunity to read his guest opinion in the *Guardian*. We all probably had the same chuckle while we read it.

I've listened to the minister talk highly about Prince Edward Island's inclusive school system and the reason why so many students were excluded.

Question to the minister: How are we a model of inclusion if we excluded so many students from writing the PISA test?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

I, as the minister, am extremely proud of our inclusion practices. I responded to a barrage of questions on the importance of supporting children with unique needs in Island schools on Friday.

I want to reiterate that part of the sample process and once the names refer back to the schools, there are children that all across the world don't participate in PISA, and that's those who would be identified with intellectual or physical disabilities, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

It's common knowledge amongst the school students, too, who were in that age category. The talk around some of the schools – and I've talked to students that are this age, as you can imagine having one who is this age at home – the talk was that only the smart kids wrote the test.

Question to the minister of education: How do you think that made the rest of the students feel?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

I take exception to the questions from the Member from Georgetown-St. Peters because I have great confidence in the educators and the administrators that provide oversight for the responsibility of this rigorous international assessment, and

have great confidence back in 2015 that – I, too, have a 15-year-old that participated in PISA.

Have great confidence in the process and the policies and the guidelines that principals have to provide oversight to make sure that we take the responsibility of the implementation of PISA very seriously.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I hope that the minister of education isn't inferring that the students that I talked to weren't telling me the truth because that's not the case, and if I were to believe one or the other, I'd believe the students. Trust me on that one.

PISA challenge

In October 2014 the minister's department and two school boards at the time rolled out a strategy to prepare for the 2015 PISA test.

Question to the minister: Are you familiar with something called the PISA challenge?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I, too, am very proud of our 15-year-olds. I must say I was taken back after the announcement when I had nine students who participated in the PISA results, and I must say that I was quite embarrassed by the response from the Member from Georgetown-St. Peters and the Leader of the Third Party in respect to the comments when we had nine 15-year-olds that were extremely excited, who drove down to the Assembly to participate in the announcement.

Will continue to stand firm on our 15-year-olds and the results, and we continue to improve and evaluate how we implement and perform on PISA.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I, too, was really embarrassed that day. While the Leader of the Third Party was trying to respond to you, you rushed for the door to get your picture taken with the students that you dragged down here. You should be embarrassed. There's no one else in this Chamber should be embarrassed but you for the way you acted that day.

This isn't a photo op. These are our children. Do you understand –

Speaker: Do you have a question, hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters?

Mr. Myers: – how important this is?

PISA prep work

Question to the minister: Is the minister familiar with the prep work done by the departments for the PISA test?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I would like to reassure the Member from Georgetown-St. Peters that there was no photo taken outside of the gallery. I went out to apologize for some of the language and some of the terminology and the disrespect to that group of nine students who drove down here to hear the announcement.

I want to reiterate –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct) announced it.

Mr. Currie: Madam Speaker, I just want to reiterate, over the last 10 years our government has put public education as a top priority.

What we're seeing with the PISA results is a prime example of a rigorous, focused commitment to improving outcomes in learning with stronger collaboration, more targeted gaps in learning, and more focus on precision instruction in this province. We're seeing the results and I'm really proud of the commitment by our teachers and our students in this province.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

PISA challenge (further)

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The PISA challenge put out by your department to prep students into taking this test talked about scoring. Your department said that the real PISA test answers were either full, partial or no credit. Your department suggested that parents and students should carefully look at the posted solutions to recognize the difference between a full credit, partial credit or no credit.

Question to the minister: Isn't this just another example of government teaching to the test?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I have great confidence. This is an international assessment with rigorous guidelines and expectations that is participated in over 72 countries. I continue to stand firm and take pride in the results and the outcomes and the hard work by educators, and the responsibilities and the integrity and the credibility of administrators, and the minister of the day as well who provided oversight when PISA was written.

I am extremely confident that this was done with the utmost credibility and integrity, and have full confidence, and will continue to move forward and look at our exclusionary rates and evaluate and continue to respond to our responsibilities with PISA.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

[A cell phone rang]

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Home and School federation had questions about this approach, too. One director commented that: I am confused.

Will just selected students write the test?
Selected by whom and how?

Speaker: Hon. member?

Mr. Myers: Yes?

Speaker: Whose phone is ringing?

Mr. Aylward: Madam Speaker, I apologize, it's my phone, I'm having technical problems with it and (Indistinct).

Speaker: Okay. Maybe, hon. member, you could leave it outside the Chamber so that it doesn't disturb.

Mr. Aylward: I will do that.

Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you.

The director from the Home and School federation said: I am confused. Will just selected students write the test? Selected by whom and how? And will they be prepped for the test? Is the Eastern Language School Board not attempting to skew the results favorably?

Question to the minister: Isn't that exactly what happened?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

I have great confidence in the administrators that follow the protocol. There are exclusionary practices. There are codes that identify students who do not participate.

I also want to share that Kathryn O'Grady, who's the lead person with the responsibility for PISA in Canada, says this about Prince Edward Island:

PISA 2015 results are recognized as valid and reliable by the PISA consortium. Prince Edward Island has showed significant improvement compared to previous PISA administrations. Three provinces were

identified as not meeting the school response rates. PEI has a rigorous process in place to investigate potential bias and this was conducted for these provinces. Prince Edward Island is not one of these provinces.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

It's a concern that I've heard a lot from teachers and one that I share. I think now we might be getting to the issue of why the minister has been so touchy and continues to be touchy today about this. They wanted better scores, they had a plan to get better scores, and they would do it by any means necessary, excluding students, teaching to the test, and all those things.

PISA results

Question to the minister: What's more bothersome, that the PISA results didn't become a good news story or that the PISA results exposed a bunch of problems about how this government runs its school system?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

This government and government's that I've been part of – and this, I must say, is my second go-around as the minister of education. After a 20-year career in the public education system – and I'm extremely proud of the commitment. Back in 2000 when I was an educator in the system I remember the first participation with PISA. It was not a good day for education in the province. Since then, there's been a tremendous focus, a tremendous commitment, and hard work by all Island educators, and students and families, to continue to raise the bar on the quality of public education, and this is a direct reflection of that, Madam Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters, final question.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The government twitter accounts have been on overdrive chirping the party line. You had softball questions by your backbenchers last week, you even penned your own op-ed for the *Guardian*.

Question to the minister of education: When did a better headline for government become more important than student achievement in this province?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

I'll tell you what's really important. It's really important that all Members of the Legislative Assembly and this public realize that anyone who would make an assumption or assume that there was – and challenge the credibility and the integrity of the process and the educators that had that responsibility back in 2015, I take great exception to that.

I take great exception to the fact that we're not standing tall as legislators and as an Island and celebrating success after a long time of focused, committed hard work by all educators and students of the Province of Prince Edward Island.

I continue to stand firm and tall on the results and very proud as we continue to move and improve the quality of public education in this province.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[End of Question Period]