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

FOR

WEDNESDAY, 20 DECEMBER 2017

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Mr. Speaker, during the 2015 election campaign, the Premier stated that a moratorium may come through the *Water Act* process on fracking. Section 19 of the *Water Act*, subsection (3), gives Cabinet the power to bypass the *Water Act* and allow hydraulic fracturing.

Approval of fracking in *Water Act*

A question to the Premier: Premier, why have you deliberately left such a massive loophole that allows Cabinet to approve fracking?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the *Water Act*, our first in the history of our province to deal with this important issue so comprehensively, has come out of a very substantial engagement process with interested Islanders, interested community-based organizations, watershed groups, and the reaching the point where the prohibition on fracking or moratorium on fracking was – is in the legislation, is a major achievement, and I think we should all recognize it for what it is. It's a very big step for our province and for our environment.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Mr. Speaker, Islanders took this Premier and his words at face value, but we're all finding out over time that the devil is in the details.

The *Water Act*, as written, allows the ban on fracking to be completely overturned by Cabinet without any public consultation.

Full and complete ban on fracking on PEI

A question again to the Premier: Premier, why is your government refusing to put a full and complete ban on fracking here on PEI?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, this matter has been discussed while the bill has been in committee, and we've heard the minister say in many ways, and on a number of occasions, that any consultation that's to take place, any further action that's to take place under this bill, which we hope through the process of this legislative sitting will become an act, will mirror the engagement and consultation and evidence-based action that has led to the development of the bill, and we stand by that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Mr. Speaker, the section that I referred to on fracking contains no teeth and no true protection for Island groundwater. I believe, in protecting our water and our Island through a full ban on fracking here on PEI.

A question again to the Premier: Premier, who has lobbied your government to not have a complete ban on fracking here on PEI?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to say that as of late afternoon yesterday, our province now has at least (Indistinct) past second reading, a *Lobbyist Registration Act*. Our government is committed to a regime moving forward where people will know on an everyday basis who's lobbying the province.

To my knowledge, no one has lobbied in favour of any sort of action along the lines of what the Leader of the Opposition is saying. But let me say that this bill is still

before the House. We are still in – and well into, I might say – the Christmas season, and you never know what might come up before the end of the day.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Premier refers to the lobbyist act, which here on this side of the room we feel is just as weak as his section in the *Water Act* with regards to a ban on fracturing.

Nova Scotia and New Brunswick both have fracturing moratoriums in place. In fact, Quebec is also looking to put one in place on Anticosti Island in the Saint Lawrence.

Question again to the Premier: Premier, why is your government against an outright ban on fracking here on PEI?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Communities, Land and Environment.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Certainly, as has been indicated by the Premier, there has been a significant amount of collaboration with Islanders, with non-governmental organizations, with members of watershed groups all over Prince Edward Island in discussion on this very important issue.

Earlier in the draft act we weren't able to incorporate that, but time over the summer has allowed us to take a second view at that and we're very pleased and proud that it's now forming part of the act.

As discussed by the Premier, we've had great debate on that act. We'll have great debate in the very near future. We'll have more discussion on that to follow, again, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

During the public meetings in the spring the minister of environment stated fracking would be dealt with in the regulations. Islanders raised concerns, many concerns that regulations could easily be adjusted.

Now, government has put this phony moratorium right into the act.

Water Act regulations

Question again to the Premier: Premier, if this was crafted as part of the regulations, then (Indistinct) will you confirm that the *Water Act* regulations have already been written?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, let me first challenge the use of the word 'phony'. I don't think there's anything whatsoever that's – other than straight-up, collab and positive about the environment that is represented in this bill. We stand by that and I'm sure that Islanders see that and support it.

Of course, the regulations have not been written. It's very clear in all of the discussions that have taken place that that is a process to come. There would be no point whatsoever in starting or undertaking that process until the bill has been passed.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

On numerous occasions during questioning on this bill, government's answer has been: That issue is dealt with in the regulations.

It's clear to me that this government has already crafted the regulations, and this is why they refused my suggestion to have a special committee, a balanced committee, of all parties, a special standing committee that could author these regulations.

Again, question to the Premier: Premier, why can't your government just come clean for once?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, really anybody who sits –

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Premier MacLauchlan: – in this House and passes legislation that's to become the law understands that if there is a power to make regulations first it's in the future. Though, whatever the Leader of the Opposition was saying is in the regulations. That's: is to be done through regulation.

Any regulation that has ever been done through the power of legislation in this House is done through Executive Council, often through processes of engagement, which we have already committed to.

The notion that you would somehow kind of put that back to a committee of the House, one that may well be created or intended for a stalemate is not consistent with the whole process of responsible –

Mr. Myers: Oh, so we can't work together.

Premier MacLauchlan: – government as we've known it –

Mr. Myers: So we can't work together.

Premier MacLauchlan: – so, if there are others, who want to form a government and get rid of Cabinet then, I suppose, we can look forward to debating –

Mr. Myers: We can work together –

Premier MacLauchlan: – that issue.

Mr. Myers: – we all nod our heads to you –

Premier MacLauchlan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Myers: – working together.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, poverty manifests itself in many visible ways here on PEI. The most recent 2016 census data is out from Stats Canada.

Island children in low-income households

Premier: What percentage of Island children are living in low-income households?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

And you don't have a heartbeat if you don't feel pain when you hear stories like that. We work with families each and every day to overcome the barriers that they are facing in their lives every day. We do help them overcome those barriers. We have programs and we have services there that do help families each and every day, including children.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, the answer is 21.7%; that is over one in five children living in low-income.

Child poverty and Island students

Can the minister of education tell us the affect child poverty is having on young Island students and what he's doing to address it?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. J. Brown: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

This is something that really we're just scratching the surface on in terms of education systems across Canada.

What I can tell you that we are doing here is we have one of the best early years programs in all of our country, and probably in North America, to try and pull out disparities amongst children; in particular, vulnerable children, and this is a big part of what the bilateral agreement with the federal government did this spring and it's something that we have set out to continue to work on.

It's an issue that certainly does need to be addressed and we're doing what we can every day, Mr. Speaker, to address that issue.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's clearly not enough. One in five children here on PEI are living in poverty right now.

Child poverty and food insecurity

Can the minister in this House – is harming so many Island children. We see it in our communities each and every day. Can the minister of agriculture tell this House what affect child poverty and food insecurity is having on Canada's Food Island and what he's doing to address it?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Mr. McIsaac: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

It's an excellent question and an issue that we are dealing with. We are working with

the department of education, department of health, and several groups; with our local farm Community Food Security and Food Education Program.

As I announced earlier in the session, we started this program, gave out grants upwards of \$10,000 to different groups. One of them is a school in your area, Queen Elizabeth high or Queen Elizabeth Elementary there, that are looking at this very project.

Growing food, showing the young students how they can grow food and things like that; how to handle it, prepare it, that sort of thing.

It is an issue that we have gotten a lot of kudos for starting this off. It's a pilot-project at this time, but we hope to expand it very much. We're continuing to work with all partners in that to make this program and the food issue thing work very well for all students across the province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, for Canada's Food Island we are suffering from major food insecurity and poverty.

Child poverty and Island students (further)

Can the minister of advanced learning tell us the affect poverty is having on Island students trying to further their education and why he is failing to address it?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning.

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our department does everything in their power to help Island students get an education with the least burden to them financially, whichever way we can help.

This Career Connect program is going to put

almost \$4 million into students' pockets. This is a wonderful program.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, one in five children on PEI are living in poverty. It's clearly not enough. The fourth annual Report Card on Child and Family Poverty on PEI was released just after this House opened.

It shows that low-income families are falling further behind in funding gaps between \$7,700 to almost \$10,000. These gaps are from the poverty line based on household size and what support this government gives them.

Island families below poverty line

Premier: Why is your government continuing to leave so many Island families and children underfunded and below the poverty line?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Something that I noted when I read that report, and, in fact, when we saw the census data, is how important it is to keep up with developments as things move forward.

One very big development in our province over the past, not quite, two years, is the new Canada Child Benefit. Twenty-five million dollars in families' budgets and to help children directly in this province and our province made a commitment that nothing we would do would impinge on or claw-back that funding.

We made tax changes on the order of \$3.5 million. We have the Generic Drug Program. There are many other programs that our government has undertaken that are

directly to the benefit of poor families and, in particular, to children in poor families.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There's been a lot of discussion this House sitting about housing and, in particular, affordable housing. On November 30th, the Minister of Family and Human Services stated to us that there would be RFPs for new seniors' housing for Charlottetown and Summerside.

RFPs for new seniors' housing

Could the minister explain to me where those RFPs are and when are they going to happen?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I've stated in this House numerous times that we do believe that affordable housing is one of the most important social infrastructures that a government, that a community, that a province can have. We have committed to 50 new seniors' units. In both, there's 30 in the Charlottetown area and 20 in the Summerside area. Those RFPs do take time to produce and once we have them done, within hopefully the next couple of weeks, we will be rolling them out. But in the meantime, we have been sitting down with developers, we have been sitting down with NGOs, we have been sitting down with our co-design teams and determining what exactly the need is and we will be moving forward with a housing strategy – a provincial housing strategy – the first ever seen on Prince Edward Island and we are engaged and we are excited and I'm very much looking forward –

Speaker: Thank you.

Ms. Mundy: – the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We've been waiting for the RFP announcement since May. The announcement was made back in May.

A recent CMHC report found that Charlottetown's apartment vacancy rate fell below 1% in October, the lowest recorded rate ever. In Summerside, the apartment vacancy rate fell by nearly half to 2.5%.

Steep decline in vacancy rate for rentals

Question to the minister: What is being done to address the steep decline the vacancy rate availability is for rentals?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our economy has been growing. Our population is growing and in certain parts of the province, because of the benefit of the population growth strategy and the economy growing, there are pressures on certain areas of the Island. Charlottetown and Summerside being two of those because they are the most populated areas. We have a housing supply task force that we will be actually announcing very shortly and they will be looking at Island-wide – what the need is out there. They will be working with our co-design or our co-development team on the needs and identifying new and emerging trends and we will address those as we move forward with the provincial housing strategy.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

A funding agreement has finally been reached with Island municipalities after the province clawed back tens of millions of dollars over the last decade. That claw back hasn't helped increased the supply of social housing units available where residents pay a set percentage of their monthly income as rent.

Social housing options

Was your department involved at all in these negotiations to encourage that some of the revenue be earmarked towards projects that increase social housing options?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm glad that you brought up municipalities because, actually, with the new provincial housing strategy, we will be looking to municipalities to have some kind of input and to come to the table. Actually, I have already sat down and had two very, very positive discussions with the city of Summerside around affordable housing and how they could be at the table and how they can be involved. As we know, government alone is not going to be able to address the housing issue on Prince Edward Island; we are going to need input from municipalities, from NGOs, from developers, and from communities.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

One factor cited in the CMHC report was that immigration remains the key driver for rental demand throughout the province, although more immigration is a positive outcome, we all know that, it has basically provided a disruptive impact on the housing market, especially for affordable rentals. We've seen your government dip into the immigration deposit dividends to pave runways and hire teachers.

Gaps in housing market and dividends

Will your government look at the directing of some of those dividends to help address the gaps in the housing market?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

These are all great questions and they are questions that will be answered with the housing strategy. We cannot make one-off decisions. Every time we have something happen within government, we need to have thorough, comprehensive discussions. We need to bring the right people to the table to address these issues and we will, Mr. Speaker, with our housing strategy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

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

When I was first elected to this House, I publicly decried the level of decorum in the Legislature and made it my mission to help raise the tone of debate here. Since then, I have become acutely aware of some other troubling issues with the quality of debate, especially when passing legislation.

It's often apparent from the questions asked, particularly during committee of the whole, that some members have not read the legislation and are ill-prepared to contribute to meaningful debate. I think this issue could be addressed, in part, if the sponsors of legislation provided detailed research and briefing documents, including full jurisdictional scans and public feedback well in advance of a second reading.

Providing of information for legislation

A question to the Premier: In future, will you commit to providing this information for every single piece of government legislation?

An Hon. Member: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: I think this is something that might be better taken up in, perhaps, the rules committee or the appropriate committee of the House. There may also be some –

An Hon. Member: Send the question to me.

Premier MacLauchlan: – there may also be some concerns about the way private member's bills come forward –

An Hon. Member: Just like (Indistinct).

Premier MacLauchlan: – and the amount of notice we have of the implications of those bills. So if there's a move to have this taken up by a committee, then I'm sure they'll have an opportunity to consider it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party, your first supplementary.

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

Another issue that I find deeply troubling is the lack of independent thought among ministers and government members when voting on legislation.

Some Hon. Members: Oh.

Dr. Bevan-Baker: It seems as if every single vote is whipped, to the point that a couple of times yesterday, government members were prepared to vote down my amendments before they'd even read them and before they were tabled.

Democratic process and meaningful debate

A question to the Premier: Do you think it is good democratic practice to use your majority to block meaningful debate?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, it's my recollection that those amendments were circulated late last week and we appreciated the member circulating them, but to my knowledge, anyone on our side who casts a vote is doing it with consideration and doing it with appropriate forethought.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party, your second supplementary question.

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

Indeed, my amendments were circulated last week, but there were amendments that came forward yesterday from the official opposition which were voted down before they even reached the members on the other side.

PEI is one of the few parliamentary jurisdictions where every piece of legislation is debated in committee of the whole. Most other jurisdictions send their legislations to standing committees, where a diverse range of witnesses can be called and truly informed debate is conducted.

Legislative committee to debate legislation

A question to the Premier: Will you support a legislative committee with two representatives from each party to conduct a full review of all legislative practices, including the necessity of evening sessions, of sitting dates, and of the manner in which we debate legislation?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, in an earlier response, I made reference to the rules committee and we have committees of this House that have functioned over many governments, over many assemblies, over many – even decades. It seems to me that this all comes out of the traditions of responsible government that have been built up in this Legislature and it's certainly not for me, on a second supplemental question, on what might even be the last day of the sitting, to stand up here and say: Well, let's start doing it on some different basis

entirely. If this is something that a committee of this House wants to suggest, and they may do so – but let me say, I don't think we should apologize, any of us, whatever side we're on, for the fact that we do as much work as we do in committee of the whole and the fact that we consider estimates in a committee of the whole – that is a hallmark and something we should be proud of in this Assembly.

Thank you very much.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Gender mix at provincial correctional facility

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question is for the Premier, who is the Minister of Justice and Public Safety.

In the past, we have seen a problem with overcrowding at the provincial correctional facility that is located on the Sleepy Hollow Road in my district.

Can the Premier inform the Legislature what the current gender mix is at the provincial correctional facility?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As the hon. member and others will know, our Capital Budget and Estimates included an expansion of the Provincial Correctional Centre to better accommodate women offenders. When that facility was designed, there was an expectation that there'd be four; at least, accommodations were made for four offenders in any day of the year.

At the present time, we have more than four women in custody, and many times it may be from 12 to 19, so there's a great need for an expansion of that, and an upgrading of that facility, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from West Royalty-Springvale, your first supplementary.

Programming at correctional centre for women

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I understand that the planned addition to the correctional centre will be set aside for female population within the facility. How is your department utilizing this to improve programs for the female population?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We all appreciate that women offenders have unique needs, that there is programming that is appropriate in terms of reintegration into the community, and then within the female offender population there's a great benefit to being able to separate those who have a greater probability of being successfully reintegrated from those who may be, I might say, more serious offenders. That's the nature of correctional programming, and with the expanded facility, we look forward to being able to have the female offenders in a proper accommodation in the first place, which is not currently the case, to be separated from male offenders, and to be able to separate different categories, I'll say, of female offenders and to build programming around that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from West Royalty-Springvale, your second supplementary question.

Supports from non-government organizations for female offenders

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

What is the role of non-government organizations in supporting service to female offenders?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the – our provincial correctional centre and our correctional facilities are well known, and we can be proud of this for the high degree of participation and contribution by community-based organizations. I reminded a group of provincial court judges who met in Prince Edward Island this summer, I glibly, or I might say, in a sort of a jocular fashion, that we probably have the only correctional facility in the known world that's known as Sleepy Hollow, but there are indeed community organizations that contribute to a great extent to women programs and to the rehabilitation and integration into the community, and among those, the two that would stand out would be the open door ministries and the John Howard Society, and we certainly appreciate the role that those organizations play.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

Mr. R. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In 2011, our government and Maritime Electric signed the PEI Energy Accord, which at the time lowered power rates for Islanders by 14% and it stabled the rates for the next five years, and I was proud to be the minister –

Mr. Myers: You signed it.

Mr. R. Brown: I was proud to be a part of that signing ceremony at the time.

One of the other things in the energy accord was the office of energy efficiency expansion, and to make things more efficient, and the best way to save energy is to consume less energy.

Energy management

My question to the minister in charge of energy: What is your department doing in terms of now that you're taking the energy management back over from Maritime Electric, which I think is a great idea, what is your department going to be doing in order to ensure that we use less power on Prince Edward Island?

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As was mentioned, we made amendments during this sitting of the House to the *Electric Power Act* so that efficiencyPEI will be in charge of the demand-side management to introduce a suite of programs that will help Islanders save energy costs, and I would like to actually note that this year we've had, as part of our education on those programs, a 30% increase in our programs for rebates this past year, specifically the HELP program this fiscal year to date was 382; last year it was 100. The rebate programs, also this year, have been 657, and last year it was 586.

Mr. Myers: Somebody's getting (Indistinct)

Ms. Biggar: In particular, our free low-income program has seen a 400% increase in the program uptake, so as you can see, we've already surpassed our dates for the fiscal year and we still have three months to go, and finally I would like to note that I think that's in part through the fact that for low-income families now, they have the option of having the rebate paid directly to the contractors so they don't have to put that up front.

Mr. R. Brown: Great.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Recently, I was approached by a young mother looking for employment. She provided me with a resume, and it was excellent all the way around. However, she did the math, and when she looked at the wages that she could get, other than government jobs, she calculated it was not worth it to work full-time year round, but better to do just enough to qualify for EI and stay home.

Staying at home on EI vs. working year round

So this question's up for grabs: Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning, Minister of Economic Development and Tourism, Minister of Family and Human Services, what are you doing to address this issue?

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm glad you asked that question, because I hear it every day, and they need to understand that there are programs there that can help. We made changes to our child care subsidy program. If she is, as a single mom, working a minimum-wage job, she now no longer has to pay for child care.

Her Canada child benefit, that's money in her pocket. We do not include that in any of our calculations. She qualifies for low-income housing. There are so many benefits for single moms out there, for them to get out into the workforce; an increase in minimum wage, as well.

So we have to combat that myth out there. There are programs and there are services, and there is a reason for them to get out there and work, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

She's not a single mom, and she was making more than minimum wage, so likely she probably doesn't qualify.

Qualifying for social assistance

But this summer, I met a couple with four children and their own business, making around \$30,000 per year, but they are struggling to make ends meet. They did the calculations, and given the supports available, they're considering closing their business to go on social assistance.

So a question to the Minister of Family and Human Services: What are you doing to address this issue?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, another myth that is out there –

Mr. Trivers: It's not a myth.

Ms. Mundy: There are so many programs and services out there. The Canada child benefit, if they are making under \$30,000 and they have three children, there's an extra \$15-16,000 that they will be getting that is not taxed. That is money in their pocket.

If they're making under \$30,000, is what you said, they qualify for free child care now. There is no parent contribution.

We have our generic drug program out there. So if they have drugs and medication that any of the family have to take, they qualify for a flat rate for those drugs. We have low-income tax reductions. We have social housing. There are so many programs out there to help families.

The Premier stood yesterday, and since 2015, we have upwards of 40 – between \$40-45 million worth of new programs, provincially and federally, that are designated for low-income families Mr. Speaker –

Speaker: Thank you.

Ms. Mundy: Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Indeed, there's a dazzlingly complex array of program available out there, which – none of which this family thought that they were able to qualify for when they (Indistinct) worked with their social worker.

Islanders help their neighbours. Everyone in this room has seen benefits that are organized by communities to help their fellow Islanders in need. However, it has come to my attention that if a benefit is held for a person or family on social assistance then the social assistance is immediately clawed back in the same amount.

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Mr. LaVie: Yes it is.

Mr. Trivers: What are you doing to address this issue?

Mr. LaVie: It's been done.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

An Hon. Member: Asked the same question three years ago.

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

Mr. LaVie: Yes you do.

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

If there is a donation made to assist a family, our department will work with that family. If it is to help the family, in many cases it is exempt. We do not claw back the finances –

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct) been there, done that.

Ms. Mundy: – if it is there to help the family, and if you have a particular family in mind or that you're dealing with, reach out to us and let us work with you –

Mr. LaVie: One in five children are hungry.

Ms. Mundy: – because we do not want –

Mr. LaVie: One in five.

Ms. Mundy: – to see families suffer.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Social assistance policies

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This government's social assistance policies and regulations are a complex web of rules and exceptions that are difficult to navigate and often open to interpretation. There are over 80 separate policy documents on this government's social assistance policies webpage. This causes confusion, and it's not always clear if individuals are getting all the support they may be eligible for.

Mr. LaVie: No.

Mr. Trivers: Minister of Family and Human Services: What are you doing to address this issue?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As has been mentioned and referenced in this House many times, we are undergoing a comprehensive, thorough poverty reduction strategy and part of that poverty reduction strategy will be having a look at the social assistance program and a transformation of the social assistance program. We have been reviewing all of my programs within my department and we have been making considerable changes.

Our disability support program is almost complete. We had a review of the childcare subsidy program. We are partnering with our other government departments and implementing new programs. We are working hard –

Mr. LaVie: Balancing the books on the backs of (Indistinct)

Ms. Mundy: – to address poverty on Prince Edward Island and we will do it collaboratively within government and with our NGO partners, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

EI claw back and winter work

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Many seasonal workers who draw EI would like to work in the winter, but their EI is clawed back if they do. Of course, we all know that some do anyway and simply don't claim the income and that's not good for anyone.

Question to the Minister of Finance: What are you doing to address this issue?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. R. Brown: (Indistinct) Islanders (Indistinct)

Ms. Biggar: (Indistinct)

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I have a lot of faith in the workers in Prince Edward Island and we're all aware that there are seasonal jobs on Prince Edward Island that hard-working Islanders rely on –

Mr. LaVie: Don't try to turn it around.

Mr. Roach: – and I certainly support those people –

Mr. LaVie: We've got one in five kids hungry.

Mr. Roach: – that go out year after year –

Mr. LaVie: Don't try to turn it around.

Mr. Roach: – and take those seasonal jobs and work as hard as they can and they're totally entitled to receiving those benefits that come from the federal government.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Minister of Finance once again has his head inserted completely in the sand.

Mr. LaVie: Not in the sand (Indistinct)

Mr. Trivers: All of these issues mentioned in my questions have the potential to be addressed by a universal basic income.

An Hon. Member: Hear, hear!

Progress on universal basic income initiative

Mr. Trivers: A universal basic income gives control back to the people; let's them control their own spending, take personal responsibility, work themselves out of poverty and contribute the maximum they can to Island communities and the Island economy.

Motion 83 called for government to pursue a partnership with the federal government to establish a universal basic income pilot for Prince Edward Island and update the Legislature on the progress of this initiative at each sitting. It passed unanimously on December 6th of last year.

Question for the minister: What progress has been made on the universal basic income initiative since the spring sitting of the Legislature?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I know that everybody, at least, on this side of the House has a lot more faith in Islanders than what there appears to be from this member, at least. We have a tremendous, great population here. We have some of the people that when there's work there, they'll take that work up. We have one of the best records for that in the country.

Our wage growth is the best wage growth in the country today.

Mr. R. Brown: Great.

Mr. Roach: We're number one.

Mr. R. Brown: Great.

Leader of the Opposition: Answer the question.

Mr. Roach: I believe that –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Mr. Roach: – with the programs that we currently have in this province, and with the will of our great workers in this province and with the strategy that is forthcoming, that we will enable Islanders to stand on their own two feet the way that they want to.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. R. Brown: That's right on.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm not sure if the minister just didn't hear the question or what the deal is.

Leader of the Opposition: Didn't understand it, probably.

Poverty reduction strategy to include universal basic income

Mr. Trivers: But, 21% of Island children are living in poverty. There are people out there that are encouraged to stay home and not work because of government policies, and the policies that do exist are 80-plus just in social assistance alone, it's a web that's so hard to navigate. People in the department don't even know if individuals are getting all the programs – all the support they're entitled to.

Not much progress seems to have been made in the 54 weeks since this House passed Motion 83 for a universal basic income. Earlier in this session, the Minister of Family and Human Services said on universal basic income: We've got side A that says it's a universal basic income guarantee or the system is broken. There is another side that says we just need to give more aid. Over here we say – that's her speaking – maybe there's a plan C and that plan C is our poverty reduction strategy.

Question to the minister: Will you commit today that your much-talked about poverty reduction strategy will include implementation of a universal basic income pilot for PEI?

Mr. MacKay: Good question.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There would be no need for a strategy if I was over here making all the decisions.

Mr. LaVie: You need a strategy to gather up all your strategies.

Ms. Mundy: We have a poverty reduction strategy. We have gone out to the Engage PEI process and we have asked Islanders what they want. Step up to the plate. If you want to be involved and you want to have a say, apply through the Engage PEI process. We've had an overwhelming response and we are now going through the applications so we will put a poverty reduction committee together and they will guide this process.

Not me as minister, and they will come back to me with recommendations. So, I am not going to stand here today and say that – dictate to them what they need to do. If that's what the committee comes back and that's what they recommend, we will look at it. We're listening and we're going to –

Mr. LaVie: No wonder you just got a raise. You should be listening.

Ms. Mundy: – do this together in collaboration with communities, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct)

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald, this will be your final question.

Ottawa's offer of research on universal basic income

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's pretty clear to all Islanders and everyone in this Chamber here today that we have a problem on this Island with poverty and we have a great chance to look at an innovative solution in the form of a universal basic income that could address many, many of these issues. What we need from this government, what we need from this minister, is leadership. That's what we're talking about. You can listen and you can lead at the same time.

In February of this year –

Mr. LaVie: Not listening.

Mr. Trivers: – the province sent a letter to the feds and were told in kind and research support for our universal basic income pilot was available, but no money.

Question to the Minister of Family and Human Services: Did your government follow up on Ottawa's offer of research and data support, at least?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our government has been looking and, I guess, watching intently, at three different –

Mr. Trivers: Talking and walking.

Ms. Mundy: – basic income guarantee pilot projects that are going on; all completely different.

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct)

Ms. Mundy: The one in Quebec that they announced, I think, it was two weeks ago –

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct)

Ms. Mundy: – 84,000 people, persons with disabilities were targeted; came under criticism from so many different groups. It's not enough. It's not going far enough. It's

not doing what it's supposed to. It's not targeting the right people.

The universal basic income guarantee pilot project in Ontario, we've been watching that very closely and gathering information as well; but again, coming under criticism from all kinds of advocates. It's not going far enough. It's too limited in scope.

When poverty advocates can't even agree on how to address and how to tackle poverty, what does the member on the other side of the room think that there's a magical, there's a silver bullet. There is not. It is complex. Poverty is complex. That is why we are –

Mr. Fox: Understatement.

Ms. Mundy: – looking at it differently. We are going to engage our communities for every – you know what? They say, for every one person struggling in poverty there are six people –

Mr. LaVie: Digging a hole.

Ms. Mundy: – in the community that will step up and help –

Mr. Trivers: Leadership not (Indistinct)

An Hon. Member: Hear! Hear!

Ms. Mundy: – can you imagine –

Mr. Fox: Doesn't put food on the table.

Ms. Mundy: – if we harnessed the power of those people in communities, in municipalities, people like Belinda Woods, Rachel Peters, Sue Gallant, who was mentioned today. We harnessed the power of those people –

Speaker: Thank you, minister.

Ms. Mundy: – we'd have a great poverty reduction strategy.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[End of Question Period]