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RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

WEDNESDAY, 2 MAY 2018

Responses to Questions Taken As Notice

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. Palmer: Yesterday, the Third Party House Leader had questions about the innovation – about Innovation PEI’s Web Presence Program.

The success of our Island businesses have enabled our government to make investments like \$1.2 million in child care subsidies. We are proud to support PEI businesses. In the 2017-2018, 104 applications came into the Web Presence Program; 95 of those projects were approved at a value of \$45,000 and of the declines that we received six of those were from out of province. It’s clear to see that other businesses would love to be here in PEI and we welcome them to come here if they want.

An internal program review was last completed in March, 2017.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

We’ve all heard, countless times over and over again how long some of our seniors are waiting for a long-term care bed. Meanwhile, they’re occupying a bed in a primary care facility.

Timeline vacancy for nursing home beds

My first question today is to the minister health. I wonder if the minister can advise us: When a nursing home bed becomes vacant in a public facility, how long does it take before that bed is made available to another patient coming in?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I would assume that there would be typical protocols for transitions like that. I don’t

have the exact days that that would be part of, but I can check into that and bring that back.

My assumption would be that the turnaround time would be quite reasonable, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

In fact, it takes an average of 11 days to fill a vacant bed in a public long-term care facility.

Bed vacancy timeline in private facilities

Question to the minister of health: How long does it take, on average, to fill a nursing home bed vacancy in a private facility?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

These private homes provide a very valuable service to seniors needing long-term care. These homes are well staffed. They are well adapted to meet the needs of our senior population. I would say as well as for the private ones, the turnaround time would be very speedy, as well, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

In fact, it takes an average of four days for a private nursing home vacancy to have that bed filled by a senior that has been waiting, sometimes months, up to a year for that bed.

Question to the minister of health: Why does it take nearly three times as long to fill a vacant nursing home bed in government facilities as compared to a private facility?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Certainly, as a result of the budget that we're bringing on par to the floor, this government, on this side of the House, is very proud that we are opening up 50 new long-term care beds on Prince Edward Island in the very near future.

As soon as we can get through our budget pieces, we will be putting out RFPs. I expect that those RFPs will be answered very quickly and we will see more seniors transferring from institutions or hospitals into these long-term care beds all across Prince Edward Island very quickly, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Process for patients from hospital to long-term care

We're talking about, on average, of 11 days for a government facility, and we're talking four days, on average, for a private facility. I wonder if the minister feels that this is managing the inventory of our long-term care beds in an efficient manner and if he agrees with me that I don't think it is, what kind of measures will he put in place to ensure that we can transfer seniors in a more expedite-able process from primary referral hospitals to long-term care beds.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Certainly, when seniors are in hospitals or other areas looking to go to long-term care beds, in the past we've offered them choices of where they would like to go; whether it's a public facility, whether it's a private facility.

As we move forward with 50 new beds this year, an additional 50 next year, those opportunities will be greater for seniors of Prince Edward Island to choose and select where they'd like to go.

We'll continue to work on that. We will continue to speed processes up where they need to be speeded up and we will work so that

seniors' health care needs on Prince Edward Island are being met to our best ability, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

I applaud the government's decision to add 50 new beds, this year and another 50 next year. As a matter of fact, that's what I've been calling for now for the last seven years. This government had a perfect opportunity with the construction of the two new manors. One of which was announced eight long years ago in Montague, and the other one in Tyne Valley.

But, sadly, these facilities are being built with the same amount of beds they had before, whereas government could have been much more efficient and increase the number of beds available in those long-term care facilities.

Inefficiency in long-term care beds

My question again to the minister: We have, what appears to be a major inefficiency, what will you do to correct that?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I said, the addition of these new long-term care beds will be seen very favourably for seniors across Prince Edward Island.

We also offer a very valuable home care service for seniors. We recently enhanced that with our mobile integrated health service where advanced paramedics will be going into homes to assist with seniors' needs; to help transition from hospital to home. Home is often the environment where our seniors will progress and get healthier faster. A lot of them want to be home. A lot of the families want them home.

We want to support that. We continue to work on home care advancements; long-term care bed advancements and community care advancements so that all Islanders are

being met to the best ability of our province,
Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our nurses and our licenced practical nurses, they're the backbone of our health care system and they provide countless services to all patients on this Island.

Advertising of nurse and LPN vacancies

Question to the minister of health:
Currently, how many nursing and LPN vacancies are you advertising in the province?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I had an opportunity today to attend the AGM for the Nurses Union of Prince Edward Island.

Obviously, they're a dedicated group of individuals, very passionate about the work they do. Obviously, we are always out recruiting new nurses, whether it be RNs, BNs, LPNs, nurse practitioners. They are all part of the same group.

They do very wonderful work on PEI and we want to support that. When we come to graduating new nurses, I had the opportunity to go out to UPEI last week and talk to them. We're trying to recruit every available nurse to fill positions on Prince Edward Island, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'll provide the answer. As of today, government is advertising 68 nursing and LPN positions. Vacancies are found across the Island, Alberton to Souris.

As you well know they're found in emergency departments, long-term care facilities, obstetrics, dialysis.

Quality of health care and nurse vacancies

Question to the minister of health: What impact is 68 RN vacancies having on providing quality health care for the people of this province?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Currently, vacancies are being looked at and addressed all the time.

Certainly, when we talk to young, graduating nurses, they're looking for the same work-life balance as physicians do today so we have got to address those needs. But, obviously some are also looking for fulltime positions.

We are looking at those vacancies to see if any of them are part-time or casual pieces that we can combine together to make some fulltime spots for these RNs that are looking to get out and carve out their professional careers right here on Prince Edward Island, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I can speak, as a former administrator, and you could ask any administrator across this province. It means more double shifts. It means denying vacation to those nurses and LPNs, and denying educational opportunities and more burnout.

Nurse vacancy and positions

Minister: How many of your 68 nursing and LPN vacancies are for fulltime positions?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I don't have the exact number of the vacancies but I know it is being looked at. It is being addressed, if any of those should be combined. Obviously, a graduating class of approximately 80 nurses will be walking

across the stage at UPEI this year and we are out looking to try to keep all of those nurses right here on Prince Edward Island to fill these very vacancies that we have in front of us today, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It'd be great to retain all of those nurses here in the province, we all know that, but most of the vacancies that we're offering here are not full-time positions and your government's nursing strategy flags excessive part-time and casual employment as deflating staff morale. Your own government strategy urged that you improve the current part-time/full-time ratio to 50/50.

Careers for nurses on PEI

Question to the minister: How is part-time and casual work going to encourage young nurses and LPNs to pursue health care careers here on the Island?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

As I said, we're trying to identify what is the best go-forward. As speaking with some of these young graduate nurses – nursing students – they're looking to establish these work-life balances. They're getting out – they're early on in the career, they feel they have a lot of years left, and they'd like to reach that balance, but there are others that want to work full-time. They want to carve out their professional life on PEI, they want to raise families here on PEI, and we want to give them all the opportunities to do that as well.

So we're looking at where best can we provide these full-time positions and where best can you provide part-time positions for the other that would like those, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms. Compton: Well those graduates, I'm sure, want a work-life balance, but more

importantly they want a full-time job and they want to be able to be assured of that.

The UPEI School of Nursing produces about 60 graduates in a year and, of course, not all of them stay here on the Island, yet we have fewer nursing graduates than available nursing positions – now, that's just in government. What about private sector vacancies that would be on top of that?

Discussions with UPEI School of Nursing

Question to the minister: What discussions have you had with UPEI School of Nursing about this shortage?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

I was very pleased to actually go out the other day and talk to the third year students and some of the others as well and one of the things that I found out was they're not all from Prince Edward Island, obviously, nurses that attend UPEI. It is a top-notch learning facility – the University of Prince Edward Island – people come from all around the Maritimes and all over Canada to get their degrees there.

Some of these young nurses are planning on heading back to their home provinces, but we do our best to encourage even those students that live in other areas of our wonderful country to stay here in PEI. Once they're here for four years, they kind of get a taste for PEI and some of them indicated that they would be staying on Prince Edward Island – at least in the short-term because they've developed relationships and friendships here and they plan on staying here and trying to begin their careers here at the very least. Once they do that, Mr. Speaker, we'll try our best to retain them here for the future time.

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

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's great that we're trying to retain all of those nurses and even if we retained every one of them, we still wouldn't have enough

to meet the shortage that we need here right. We have to look at the age of the workforce and we talk about workplace balance. What's the big picture going forward to keep our heads above water when it comes to health care?

Even if we increased the enrollment by 20 students at the UPEI School of Nursing today, it would be four years before we start to reap the benefits.

Question to the minister: Will you commit today to working with the UPEI School of Nursing to increase the number of registered nurses being trained so that we start to reverse this RN shortage now instead of waiting until it's too late?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My time this morning with the nurses union educated me a lot. I believe the number indicated today was there are about 1,600 registered nurses working on various places across Prince Edward Island. The average age of those nurses is 43 years of age, so it's still relatively young. We're in pretty good shape here on PEI as far as the age of our RNs here on the Island, but that does not mean that we stop working.

We will be talking with UPEI; we'll be talking to every student at UPEI this year and in subsequent years to ensure that we do our absolute best to indicate to these RN students: There's work here; there's a good life here; and we hope they remain here in order to fill these positions.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've had a number of debates here in the Legislature so far this spring over the Pan-Canadian framework for pharmacare and its effect on our local pharmacies here. We've heard the minister talk about big pharmacies and affecting their bottom line. They should be able to cover it, but we're hearing from a lot of small, small pharmacies out there; it's affecting these pharmacies' very, very small profit margins.

Effects on small pharmacies on PEI

Can the minister tell us today what he is doing to balance out the hit to our local pharmacies here on PEI?

Mr. Trivers: Great question.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We're all aware of these small pharmacies in small communities all across Prince Edward Island that provide that valuable service to that community, where if a child is sick or somebody has an injury where they go in, they talk to the pharmacist, probably did not have to go to an ER or a walk in clinic to get dealt with – this is a very valuable service and we like to strengthen those relationships with the pharmacists by looking at their scope of practice, looking at other areas where they may be able to develop that a little bit further.

A very short number of years ago, we've indicated to pharmacies that we'd like them to take over, or be a big part of the immunization program and we have over doubled the amount of immunizations on Prince Edward Island because of this program so that people are not getting sick, not going to hospital, and it's all because of the pharmacists that are giving the dosage.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Mr. Speaker, I think the minister would agree that this is the most successful frontline health care provider in the province. They're in every little community. There are 48 pharmacies across PEI.

I'll give you an example: We had a big debate here the other day about the Montague ER and it was talked that 58% of people that present at the ER in Montague are non-emergency. We all talked about walk-in clinics and nurse practitioners, but we were missing the most obvious example. There are four pharmacies in Montague. If the scope of practice was expanded for those pharmacists on PEI, those four pharmacies

could help alleviate that 50% of people that are presenting non-emergency.

Scope of practice for pharmacists

Is the minister committing to look at the scope of practice immediately?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

When Islanders present themselves to ERs, they're there because they feel that is the place where they need to be, whether it's for a sick child that they're really not certain about, the proper care, or their elderly parent that needs this service.

So that doesn't mean when people walk through our emergency room doors that they're pushed aside as maybe the hon. member was thinking of, but what we are trying to do with the pharmacists is to develop and talk about what their scope of practice could be, what it should be, how do we get there, so that their work that they do in the communities provides that absolute best health care service for Islanders wherever they are.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We've been hearing about this expansion of scope of practice forever. It took about five years just to get pharmacists to give flu shots and we've seen the uptake in that. We've seen the convenience of it. I'll give you another example: Public Health on PEI, they do amazing, amazing things, but for example, when Public Health comes to Morell, it comes – they might say: Okay, on October 12th, we're coming to the Morell fire hall from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Guess what? That doesn't work quite well with my family – it doesn't work with many families in PEI. Pharmacists, you can walk right up and do it. Think of how many other procedures or services that the pharmacist could provide that would be much more efficient than this.

Minister: What is the holdup? What is the elephant in the room? Is it the doctors, is it the nurse practitioners? What's going on? Why can't we get this scope of practice nailed on? Why do we just keep saying: We're going to look at it?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. LaVie: That's the last minister (Indistinct).

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Obviously things of this nature, they are a negotiation. You sit down at a table, you talk about what you're doing today, you talk about what you see in the future and what services should be routed to whom where.

We want Islanders seen by the appropriate people, at the appropriate place, at the appropriate time. We have a lot of methods for that. The hon. Leader of the Opposition stood just yesterday, I believe, and talked about calling 811, getting great service there. 811 plus the services of pharmacists provide great services all across Prince Edward Island. We are looking to improve the services where we can. It's about taking the opportunity to sit down, to look at the short-term, medium-term, long-term care needs and to find solutions, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

What I'm hearing is that when the pharmacists and these people involved in negotiations come to the table with representatives from government, it always comes back to: We have to get that pharmacare line down in our budget. Why don't we start using them as a solution? Why don't we be innovative? We've got 150,000 people here, 48 pharmacies across PEI. Imagine if the pharmacists' scope of practice could include almost what you'd get at walk-in clinics. They can do it. They're taught to prescribe. Their whole education is surrounded around that. The next time they come to the table, are we going to just talk about it? Or, what is the hold up?

Can you tell me why we can't just say: Let's do it? What's the push back?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I don't believe there's been push back. There have always been negotiations done with pharmacies, with the society of pharmacists, that it's a regular occurrence. This is nothing new. This year, with the change in the Pan-Canadian framework, that has put a little bit of pressures on the pharmacists to look at doing business differently.

We're willing to sit down and talk about that. I've had some conversations with pharmacists individually I've had some conversations with their governing body. I've indicated that we will continue this, and I actually sent a letter to that recently. As soon as time permits, we will sit down and have those discussions, and hopefully good outcomes will be the answer, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

A pharmacist can prescribe medication for a cold sore, but yet the government won't reimburse them for that. They have to charge privately, where you go to your doctor and they are reimbursed. If pharmacists can do that at a much more efficient and smaller cost, this is another example.

I'm quite concerned about our rural pharmacies. This is a difference in PEI. This isn't a big box-store pharmacy; they are in all the small communities. The walk-in clinic – we had this conversation – the walk-in clinic in Morell is open half a day a week, but yet the pharmacist is there every day. That's a huge place in our health care system. It's the frontline service in our community, and many other communities across PEI.

I worry about their bottom line, and I worry that the first place that is going to be cut is in these rural communities.

Expanding scope of practice for pharmacists

Can you commit today to expanding the scope of service so that these pharmacies can stay open in our small communities?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I've stated in here that I'm willing to sit down and talk to pharmacists. I understand their scope of practice – maybe we'll be able to do something there. But, what keeps me up at night is the –

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct)

Mr. Mitchell: – want that Islanders are being provided with the lowest cost drugs, with the best drug programs, so that they are able to go out and purchase drugs that they can afford, at affordable rates, so that their health –

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct)

Mr. Mitchell: – is improved. It keeps them out of hospitals, and that's also for our seniors.

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct) ER closed half the time.

Mr. Mitchell: It's so important that the drug programs that we provide are affordable –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct) Kevin Murphy (Indistinct)

Mr. Mitchell: – for our Islanders that need to access drug use in Prince Edward Island, and pharmacists are a part of that and we continue to work together on all means for Islanders' health, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Parkdale.

Ms. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I've asked several questions about economic development business support programs, but instead of getting answers I get told about the Micro-Loan Program. So, today I'm going to ask about that program.

The Finance PEI program provides loans of up to \$15,000 on a five-year term at prime plus 4.5%. The funds from this program are for working capital and financing for new and expanding businesses on presentation of a completed application including a business plan, just like a bank.

Priorities and objectives of Micro-Loan Program

A question for the Minister of Economic Development and Tourism: What are the priorities and objectives of this program, and is it achieving those objectives to date?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Micro-Loan Program is doing exactly what we want it to do. We're providing loans to small businesses –

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct) our idea.

Mr. Palmer: – that continue to grow and we're happy that they continue to employ Islanders. They're bringing new money into the province, and they're giving us an opportunity to reinvest back into the community.

We've been able to add, I think, 10 new –

Mr. Trivers: Too bad you can't get interest rates at IIDI.

Mr. Palmer: – frontline social worker positions because of the success of small business and business right across PEI.

We know they're the engine of our economy, and we're very proud to continue to support businesses, both large and small.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Parkdale, your first supplementary.

Ms. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This fund was launched in the spring of 2016 with a cap of \$1 million per year and plans to review it each year to determine if that cap was sufficient, and that small business needs are being met.

Distributed funds and review of Micro-Loan Program

A question for the minister: How much of the \$1 million per year was given out in each of the first two years of the program, and what did the reviews of that cap tell you?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We continue to monitor all of our programs and make sure that they are addressing the needs of small business. We want to make sure that those programs are being utilized; that's what they're for, is to create jobs, to give Islanders an opportunity to help them move along, that they can compete in the national stage and so that they can compete here locally.

We want them to bring new money into the province so that we can continue to support all the things that we know are so important here in PEI from a social aspect, from an economic aspect, and we're very proud to continue to support businesses, both large and small, here in PEI.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Parkdale, your second supplementary question.

Ms. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Consultation with business community

Without clear objectives, it may be quite difficult to do those reviews so I do hope that when the minister gets them done, if they are done, then he can table them. Perhaps, if they haven't been done yet, you could consult with the business community to find out whether they feel this program actually meets their needs.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. Palmer: That is a wonderful idea and that's what we do. We have people that are development officers that go out and speak to businesses to make sure that we're meeting the needs of business because we

want to make sure that businesses have the opportunity to succeed.

Our programs are for business so they can compete, so they can continue to grow, and we want to make sure that they take every opportunity to be involved in all of those programs that we do have available to them. If they're not working, we're very eager to get them changed and we will review those on a constant basis as we've done, as I talked about in the Web Presence Program that we had just reviewed in March 2017.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question today is to the Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Minister, the federal government, through Transport Canada, has notified the provinces and the transport industry that they plan to make electronic logging devices a mandatory provision by 2020 for drivers of commercial vehicles that are currently required to complete and maintain a daily log.

Impacts of electronic logging devices on transport industry

Minister: What impact will this have on our Prince Edward Island transport industry?

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, member, for the question.

The proposed amendments do not change current regulations. Electronic recording devices have been in use for several years. In fact, most of the PEI industry have invested in this technology before it's even become mandatory because it makes record keeping easier and there's high satisfaction among the industry with it.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir, your first supplementary question.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In my district I have a transport company, Morley Annear Transport, and I'm wondering, with that company as well as other larger transport carriers, we understand that they are already using e-logging devices and shouldn't be affected too greatly by this change.

Effects on smaller transport companies

My question, minister, is: What about the smaller transport companies that are currently exempted from keeping daily log books and how that will impact them?

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Commercial vehicles are exempt, as I noted earlier. The current exemption does require the motor carrier to keep a record at the main office for all employed commercial activities.

I have written a letter, though, to the federal minister of transportation seeking clarification from Transport Canada regarding this definition, with respect to any requirement for electronic logging devices for when a vehicle leaves the province, but is still within 160 kilometres of their home base.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Vernon River-Stratford.

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

My question is for the Minister of Finance, and this is something that we're going to be discussing in this House later on. It's being discussed right across the province at the present time. That is the legalization of marijuana. The federal government is going towards that direction. They noted earlier that it may be out by July. But, we're going to have to face that discussion here. I'm sure it'll be a very open discussion.

Legalization of marijuana in Canada

I was wondering if the minister could tell me

at what time we feel this may be in place and legalized in Canada this year?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The federal initiative to legalize recreational cannabis is very public and a major lens on it.

What we're seeing happening right now in the senate, we know it's going to be delayed from the original plan, but there should be — there's supposedly will be a vote on this in June. We should know more at that time.

My responsibility to the people of PEI is to be prepared for when this does happen. I think we're moving in the right direction to ensure that we have all of our i's dotted and t's crossed, so we're ready for the legalization of cannabis.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Vernon River-Stratford, first supplementary.

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

Legalization versus decriminalization

Again, I know there's going to be a lot of questions on it. The one that keeps coming up to me is: Does legalization means decriminalization and why are we going to legalization or is decriminalization involved in that? Just before we get into the big debate, I wonder if you can clarify for me, and for the other that talked to me about it, are we decriminalizing, are we just legalizing or what the difference may be there?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The hon. member is correct. We are legalizing it. We are not decriminalizing. We are trying to take the cannabis out of the hands of organized crime. We are trying to set-up an infrastructure across the nation in relevance to having a safe product.

I just read recently the Ontario police chiefs

have a program, Know your Source. They're getting behind it. That's exactly why we're setting it up. I think it's important to know that we want to prevent Canadians from have a criminal record with a small possession of cannabis, and tying up the courts and so on and so forth.

There are several different issues relevant to why it's not decriminalized and why we're legalizing it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's no secret that our province has, really, a massive debt. In fact, we're paying \$348,000 a day just in interest.

Last July, at Public Accounts I asked the Auditor General, who, exactly are we paying all this interest to?

To my great surprise and maybe I shouldn't have been surprised. The response was: The province does not have the information on who holds the debentures. There are six or seven syndicates that issue the debentures, but the actual holders are confidential and are constantly changing.

Investments to syndicates and investors

A question to the Minister of Finance: Minister, who are these secret syndicates and investors that Island taxpayers pay hundreds of millions of dollars to each year?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our province's investments are paying dividends, right now, for what we're seeing in the economy.

We just released our most recent Budget 2018. I can tell you we're hearing all kinds of good reports based on the knowledge of that budget.

I will mention today, it's very interesting and I know sometimes — what it's allowing us to do is reinvest in health care, education, social services.

I will say, today, through Stats Can that just came out today, we are actually a province of 152,000. Our GDP has increased by 3.2%. We're behind Alberta and we're behind BC –

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct)

Mr. Myers: One good day of fishing

Mr. MacDonald: – so a small province –

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct) mighty. On a tear.

Mr. MacDonald: – it's unbelievable.

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Mr. MacDonald: I'm not as concerned about the economy as these people are. I am concerned about the reinvestments we are making in Prince Edward Island because the economy is so good.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, this province owes billions of dollars that are financed through debentures.

Interest on the debt is the third largest line item in the budget. It think it's completely unacceptable that the Minister of Finance does not know who we are paying interest to.

Who knows what kind of entities PEI taxpayers are contributing to around the world?

Taxpayers' dollars paying off province's debt and interest

A question to the Minister of Finance: Minister, will you commit to finding out and sharing publicly who Island taxpayers are sending money to?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our net debt to GDP is actually declining. We are in good shape. We're continuing to

reinvest in all the important issues that we hear from Islanders on a daily basis; whether that be mental illness, whether that be infrastructure, whether that be education. We're going to reinvest.

If that is available to me and that's legally allowed, I will bring that back and table it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This is a key part of the finance minister's portfolio, is servicing our debt and understanding where this interest is going to, who holds it. These debentures are \$2 billion worth of debentures.

In other provinces like British Columbia and Nova Scotia, they make this information publicly available on their websites. It's really about time that this government does the same.

Publicly sharing information on debt payments

Minister: You should be able to find out this information, and will you commit to publicly sharing this information with Islanders?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think I just indicated that in his last question and my response that I would if I'm legally able to.

But, what I will say, the last time the Premier went to Toronto and visited with the big banks, who we, at times, borrow money from, the last thing before he walked out the door, they said to him was: When are you coming back to borrow money?

Because, they know, that our province –

Mr. Myers: He's in his back pocket that's why. He's in their –

Mr. MacDonald: – is in good –

Mr. Myers: – back pocket. The big bank Premier –

Mr. MacDonald: – fiscal responsibility. We're prudent –

Mr. Myers: The big bank Premier.

Mr. MacDonald: – gatekeepers of our finances. We're growing the –

Mr. Myers: That's where he's got his own.

Mr. MacDonald: – economy as fast as we can. We are growing the population as fast as we can. We're seeing the benefits of that.

Our 2018 Budget is historic. We'll continue to charge forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, in the last 10 years, this Liberal government has more than doubled the debt of PEI by adding \$1.2 billion to the debt of our province.

At the same time, this government has increased taxes and fees so that government revenue has gone from \$771 million to \$1.1 billion; a 43% increase.

Mr. Myers: We're on a tear.

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct) though.

Mr. Trivers: Despite their erroneous claims, this government has never balanced the books of this province –

Mr. R. Brown: Oh yes.

Mr. Trivers: – their budget estimates aren't worth the paper they're printed on. The proof is in the actual over-budget spending of this tax-and-spend Liberal government.

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct)

Mr. Trivers: Yearly spending has shot up \$775 million since this Liberal government took office –

Ms. Biggar: We're on a tear. We're on a tear.

Plans to pay off PEI debt

Mr. Trivers: Minister, question for the Minister of Finance: What are your plans to pay off the debt?

Mr. LaVie: No plan.

Mr. Myers: Good question.

Mr. Fox: The budget will balance itself.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, our net debt to GDP is declining –

Leader of the Opposition: (Indistinct) chasing (Indistinct)

Mr. MacDonald: – net debt per capita –

Mr. Roach: (Indistinct)

Mr. MacDonald: – is declining –

Mr. Myers: You're going –

Mr. MacDonald: – I'm not sure where –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct) Premier of Bay Street.

Mr. MacDonald: – the hon. member is coming from.

If you look at the value of our net debt to per person in Atlantic Canada, we're the lowest in Atlantic Canada.

In fact, we're the fifth lowest in Canada. As a province, we're continuing to drive the province and drive the economy.

Mr. Myers: Right into the ground.

Mr. MacDonald: It looks like we're driving it into the ground with you have people like APEC saying we're on a tear. When you have the Royal Bank of Canada saying –

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Mr. MacDonald: – all kinds of positive things –

Mr. Myers: Royal Bank can't say –

Mr. MacDonald: – it's –

Mr. Myers: – can't say, borrow more money.

Mr. MacDonald: – unbelievable –

Ms. Biggar: (Indistinct)

Mr. MacDonald: – we haven't borrowed money since before 2015 when this party took over.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, this is a classic example of short-term thinking and lack of a plan.

Island taxpayers and their children are on the hook for this government's huge debt. They are doing nothing about it. They have no plan.

Of the 19 debentures owing, only nine of them has sinking funds with any money in them. In layman's terms it's like this provincial government has 19 maxed out credit cards worth \$2 billion owing, and this government has chosen intentionally to make only the minimum payment.

When it comes time to pay the piper, the Minister of Finance plans to simply get another credit card and roll over the debt onto it, passing it on to our children and grandchildren.

Passing debt on to future Islanders

Question for the minister: Minister, why are you contributing to sinking funds for the majority of debentures, choosing instead to pass even more debt onto Islanders of the future just so you can look good today?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm not sure, but a balanced budget to me is very prudent to what the hon. member is – contravening what the hon. member was

actually talking about. If you want to talk about sustainability, if you look at the 1,000 student that are going to go to UPEI or Holland College for free next year, that's sustainability. If you look at the reduction in electricity, that's sustainability –

An Hon. Member: Forward thinking.

Mr. MacDonald: – to help those most vulnerable. There are all kinds of things that we're doing and not borrowing money since before 2015 – obviously, I'm not sure what economists the hon. member's talking to, but I hope he changes.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, my questions are all about servicing our existing debt, something that this government refuses to do. Really it's unacceptable for this government to sit back and take no action to pay off our debt and continue to send hundreds of millions of dollars in interest out of the Island economy every year.

Here in the official opposition, we have a suggestion – we have a plan. Islanders hold hundreds of millions of dollars in investments in their RRSPs, TFSAs and elsewhere. Retired Islanders, especially, are looking for low-risk, reliable investments. Just imagine if Islanders held government debt and the massive amounts of interest government pays out goes to Islanders – most of it's staying in the Island economy.

Transfer of government debt to Island investors

Question to the minister: Will you consider issuing financial instruments, such as provincial deposit receipt specifically designed to transfer your government debt to Island investors?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm getting confused, but I will tell you this: that –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct)

Mr. Fox: You're the finance minister.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: Go ahead.

Mr. MacDonald: I think if they look at the resources and the individuals, and the different financial institutions, and what they're saying, and the economists across the country and ministers from the federal parties –

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct)

Mr. MacDonald: – talking about what PEI is doing and how they're doing it, it's pretty simple.

Mr. Trivers: The former minister of finance doesn't even know.

Mr. MacDonald: Our government is working diligently hard, we're respectful of taxpayers on Prince Edward Island and balanced budgets with an influx of investments in everything from the most vulnerable, to our students, to our health care and education. We're continuing on a right path, Mr. Speaker, and we will continue on a right path and I can ensure Islanders that, that we have a good handle on the books.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Roach: Great job, minister.

[End of Question Period]