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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

FRIDAY, 11 MAY 2018

Responses to Questions Taken As Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

This government's Provincial Nominee Program continues to generate a lot of controversy in the national media. It also generates a lot of money for this province.

Dollars into PNP program versus bad publicity

Question to the Premier: Which matters more to you, the money or the bad publicity?

Mr. Trivers: Don't hold back.

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, what matters to me is that our province does well. That we achieve the goals that have been outlined in our population action –

Mr. Myers: At any cost.

Premier MacLauchlan: – plan. I'm proud to say –

Mr. Myers: Even fraud is okay.

Premier MacLauchlan: – that we are surpassing those goals –

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Premier MacLauchlan: – and that that is happening in communities throughout our province, and communities throughout our province from Tignish to Guernsey Cove; a lot of great activity; building our culture; diversifying our population and our talent.

Mr. Speaker, I'm very proud of that.

Thank you.

Mr. Myers: No holds barred, even fraud (Indistinct)

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Between 2015 and 2017 the province actually cashed in \$27 million in forfeited PNP deposits; a huge windfall.

Forfeited deposits and immigration rules

Question to the Premier: Didn't these forfeited deposits give your government 27 million reasons to look the other way when it came to enforcing immigration rules?

Mr. Myers: All about the money.

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition mentioned –

Mr. Myers: All the way to the way to China.

Premier MacLauchlan: – earlier and yesterday the question of reputation –

Mr. Myers: And your buddy who took you there.

Premier MacLauchlan: – and it may have missed the attention of the official opposition because we haven't heard a peep about it, that on January 19th of this year, *The Globe and Mail* had a feature, front page piece for the weekend edition promoting Prince Edward Island as Canada's immigration lab. As of the place that Canada could learn from in terms of people –

Mr. Trivers: Everybody makes mistakes –

Premier MacLauchlan: – coming here –

Mr. Myers: They're going to want a correction on that one.

Premier MacLauchlan: – staying, doing well and contributing as Prince Edward Islanders and Canadians and we should all be proud of that.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

According to court documents, 99% of the clients were approved by the PEI government. One possible outcome of this investigation could be that some, or all, of these 566 nominations signed by the province could be rescinded by the federal government.

Legal implications re: approvals of PNP nominees

Question to the Premier: What would the legal implications be for PEI if the federal government were to rescind all or a large number of approved provincial nominees?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

These charges that we're talking about are in relation to individuals who gave false information to the federal government, not to the province.

We continue to work with the federal government to provide all the information that we can to make –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct) investigated (Indistinct)

Mr. Palmer: – sure that they can get to the bottom of this and hold those that are responsible –

Mr. Trivers: How much are they going (Indistinct) –

Mr. Palmer: – hold them to account –

Mr. Myers: Shameful.

Mr. Palmer: – so again. They gave false information to the federal government, not to the province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Provincial nominees pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to government in fees. With hundreds of nominees involved the total could certainly run into the millions.

Financial implications re: approvals of PNP nominees

Question to the Premier: What are the financial implications for the province if the federal government were to rescind large numbers of these approved provincial nominees?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Immigration is one of the components of our population strategy. We have lots of new businesses continuing to operate in PEI. Our population continues to grow for the first time – 2017 –

Mr. Trivers: It's a revolving door. Open your eyes.

Mr. Palmer: – was the first time our population was over 150,000 –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct) in one instance (Indistinct)

Mr. Palmer: – so, we're very happy to continue to grow our –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Mr. Palmer: – population. Recruitment is one of those ways we do it. Retention is another, and immigration is one –

Mr. Myers: They'd have to park all the way to Walmart.

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

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

The Premier referenced a story that ran in *The Globe and Mail* that ran back in January. I've said before a well-run

immigration program matters, deeply matters for our economic future.

But, if these investigation results in hundreds of provincial nominees being rescinded, that will be a huge black eye for this province.

Successful marketing of PEI as immigration destination

Question to the Premier: How can we successfully market PEI as an immigration destination if scandals like this are what turns up in a Google search?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our programs continue to improve. Over the past 10 years, we've made recommendations – we have implemented all the recommendations made by the Auditor General. Our retention rates have improved. And we now have an expression of interest model that includes a community endorsement letter –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct) for sale (Indistinct)

Mr. Palmer: – from various –

Mr. Fox: (Indistinct)

Mr. Palmer: – communities –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Mr. Palmer: – in our province.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There's one troubling case highlighted in the court warrants this week and it's a three-person family from 2015. Ms. Li and her three-person family were stopped in September, 2015 at the Vancouver Airport when they gave the Sherwood Motel as their address.

Of course, by that point border services had

that address already flagged. The family told border services that their immigration consultant was Tony and he gave them the Sherwood Motel address. They didn't know Tony's name they only had a Vancouver number for Tony.

BC Tony and Sherwood Motel address

Question to the minister: Why would BC Tony have given these already approved PEI clients a Sherwood motel address?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

These charges are in relation to individuals who allegedly gave false information to the federal government, not to the provincial government.

Mr. MacKay: That you signed off on.

Mr. Palmer: We continue to work with them – with border services – so we can get to the bottom of this from a program that's 10 years old.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

So I want to remind the minister that late 2015 wasn't 10 years ago. This government had already changed the program and these clients were approved and they were already committing residency fraud when they were allowed in by this government.

BC Tony told the family his immigration company was based in Beijing and run by his wife, but when border services checked on BC Tony, he was not, and still is not, a registered agent in Canada. The PEI client family then admitted to border services: Tony told them this was the place where their permanent residency cards would come to.

Approved clients in Vancouver with PEI addresses

Question to the minister: How is it that in 2015 approved PEI clients were still landing in Vancouver with cover stories that had fake addresses in a motel in Sherwood?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

These charges relate to investors from the program from 2008 and it is false information given to the federal government, not the provincial government. The expression of interest model that we have now includes a community endorsement letter and we also have residency verification that we look for purchase or lease agreements for a house, we want utility bills with PEI address, we're looking for income tax forms proving PEI residency, and all other documentation that will support it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The minister's doing a terrible job trying to run away from this. You know the Premier is tied right tight to Frank Zhou because he was in China with him with Anne. We know Frank Zhou's tied to probably all these people.

Let's go back to this family that landed that were defrauding all of the Canadian government. The next day, September, 2015, the family flew from Vancouver to Charlottetown and they were under the watchful eye of border service agencies. Upon landing, they were met at the airport by a man – this guy who's now up on federal charges – and they drove off in his car.

Meeting at Charlottetown Airport with program families

Question to the minister: Why do you suppose the motel fraudster met with one of the government's program families at the Charlottetown Airport at 2:00 a.m. in the morning?

Mr. Fox: Yes.

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, again, these charges are related to individuals that gave false information to the federal government –

Mr. MacKay: That you signed off on.

Mr. Palmer: – not the provincial government.

An Hon. Member: You cashed a cheque.

Mr. Palmer: They allegedly gave the false information to the federal government.

We continue to work with border services to support them because we're not interested in this kind of behavior. This is not the people we're trying to attract to PEI and if there's any wrongdoing, we're very happy to work with border services to get to the bottom of it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Myers: So this story is probably a lot bigger than Tony because we know the Premier went to China with Frank Zhou, who was one of the major intermediaries for bringing Chinese people to the Island

Mr. J. Brown: (Indistinct)

Mr. Myers: – who are defrauding –

Pardon me?

Mr. J. Brown: Say that outside the rail.

Mr. Myers: Are you challenging me outside the rail?

Mr. J. Brown: (Indistinct)

Mr. Myers: The minister of education is challenging me outside the rail during Question Period. Follow me out when this is over and I'll say whatever I feel like.

This motel fraudster and his family drove right by the Sherwood Motel after they were picked up and they went to the Delta. The Delta staff later confirmed that the reservation was booked through a third party from BC. The fraudster picked them up from the Delta in the morning and took them to the Innovation PEI office. So now you can stop saying this has nothing to do with you and this is federal people. They went right inside with the family and met with government.

Meetings at government offices

Question to the minister: Why in September, 2015 was no one from the government concerned when a stranger was picking people up at the airport and taking them down to government offices, walking inside, and meeting with government officials with them.

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I hope the hon. member is passing all the information that he think he has along to the federal government because they're trying to get to the bottom of this because that's where the false information –

Mr. Myers: I'm not being investigated for fraud. You're the one being investigated.

Mr. Palmer: – was being delivered from to the federal government –

Mr. Myers: You're the one being investigated for fraud here, not me.

Mr. Palmer: – not to the province.

Mr. Myers: I didn't commit any fraud, you're the one.

Speaker: Order! Order!

Go ahead hon. minister.

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, I don't know if they could hear over the shouting, but I certainly hope that they would pass that information along to federal agents because they seem to think they have

some information that maybe the feds don't, but this is false information given to the federal government.

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct) that's shameful. (Indistinct) embarrassed this province. You're shameful, shameful, shameful.

Speaker: Okay, go ahead.

Mr. Myers: He's got nothing to say.

Mr. Palmer: This is false information that was allegedly given to the federal government, not to the province. We're there to continue to support the federal government as they get to the bottom of this.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Fox: (Indistinct) your office.

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I've never seen such an embarrassing attempt to run away from questions in my life. I've never seen a more embarrassing attempt in my days in this House from somebody trying to hide the truth from Islanders. This is an embarrassment – a national embarrassment to Prince Edward Island. You guys were at the helm of it. You've been at the helm of it since 2008, according to you, embarrassing Islanders over an immigration program. You should be ashamed of yourself.

Minister: How many separate interviews did these two individuals sit in on with your government and your officials about immigration here on Prince Edward Island?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We continue to support the federal government so that we can get to the bottom of this because we do know it is serious.

Mr. Trivers: Find out the information and bring it back (Indistinct)

Mr. Palmer: We've continued to improve our immigration program.

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct)

Mr. Palmer: We've continued to improve our immigration program.

Mr. Trivers: Islanders want to know. They're tired of your games.

Mr. Palmer: We've continued to improve our immigration program since 2008 and we've evolved it to the point where we now have an expression of interest model.

Mr. Trivers: Maybe we can bring witness to public accounts. Oh wait a minute, government keeps voting them down – can't do that.

An Hon. Member: The PCs don't know the answers.

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

After his interview with government, this motel fraudster and his clients walked next door to Service Canada, where border service surveillance observed the fraudster helping the family fill out social insurance forms and verbally confirmed the Sherwood Motel as their address to federal staff. Social insurance numbers, as we all know, are very valuable in Canada and can be used to access programs like Employment Insurance and Canada Pension Plan and numerous other things.

Residency fraud and PNP program (further)

Question to the minister: How was this blatant fraud happening right here in Charlottetown under your government and signed off on as late as 2015?

Mr. Fox: In your offices.

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

Mr. Palmer: Mr. Speaker, the alleged false information was given to the federal government –

An Hon. Member: You cashed the cheque.

Mr. Fox: In your building.

Mr. Palmer: – not to the provincial government.

Mr. Myers: Social insurance numbers work here in PEI too.

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

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Last fall, when this government's PNP program generated national headlines over revolving door business startups, the Leader of the Opposition Pressed this government over how it evaluates the success of the program. In response, the government belatedly released the March 18th, 2016 evaluation of the program.

Verification of legitimacy of provincial nominees

Question to the economic development minister: What did this report have to say about how government verifies the legitimacy of its own provincial nominees?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our immigration model currently is looking – our improved program requires all of the following information for residency: lease agreements or purchase of a house, tax returns confirming PEI as a province of residence –

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct) recycling answers now.

Mr. Palmer: – utility bills confirming residency of PEI –

Mr. Trivers: Answer the question.

Mr. Palmer: – letters from schools confirming dependence, and Visa and Mastercard. I'm repeating this because it doesn't seem like they seem to be listening on the other side. Maybe they don't want the answers they just want to ask the questions.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct)

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

Ms. Compton: Well regardless of what the minister is telling us, in that report, they were silent on the topic – perhaps not surprising given this week's federal charges being laid.

Program evaluation of PNP and agreement

Question to the economic development minister: Why do you think a program evaluation of PNP wouldn't look at how many nominees actually fulfilled the terms of their agreement?

Mr. Myers: Good question.

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I want to be clear: the province is not under investigation.

Mr. Fox: Yes they are.

Mr. Palmer: The federal government were the ones that received, allegedly, false information, not the province. We cooperated with border services –

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct).

Mr. Palmer: There are no charges against the province of PEI.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct). You stand up for fraudsters.

Mr. Trivers: Be accountable.

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

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'll read from that report:

Reporting indicates progress toward the goal of recruiting and settling the full number of nominees allocated by the CIC. However, no reports include specific action steps through which IIDI plans to attain that goal.

Question to the economic development minister: Don't you think that's a pretty big piece of the immigration puzzle to be left missing?

Mr. Fox: Yes.

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our retention rates continue to grow. In 2014 –

Mr. Myers: 601 motel –

Mr. MacKay: So does your bank account.

Mr. Palmer: – they were 53%. In 2015, it was 57%. Another improvement, and we have our expression of interest model – is we engage the community.

Mr. MacEwen: (Indistinct) retention numbers before they leave at the end of the year.

Mr. Palmer: So, there's community endorsement letters, and immigrants are talking to various communities and they're getting support of those communities because they want them to come to their community to help them grow the economy –

Mr. Trivers: The PNP program is selling passports.

Mr. Palmer: – help them grow the population –

Mr. Fox: (Indistinct)

Mr. Palmer: – and grow diversity here in our province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms. Compton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

It would be interesting to know whether those 601 and 255 or whatever it was, supposed residents are part of our population increase.

I'll read further from the government's own review of its program:

In a sample of reports reviewed, targets were not incorporated into the reports and management review was not formally documented. Similarly, the reports did not incorporate a comparison of actual results to the plan submitted to the federal government or immigration figures allocated to PEI.

No targets. No management review. No comparison of the plan you submitted to the feds to the actual results.

Potential fraud from beginning of program

Question to the economic development minister: Wasn't that a recipe for potential fraud from the very beginning in this program?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We continue to improve our program. We now have an expression of interest model, and we have communities involved, and they are meeting with immigrants –

Mr. Fox: Trying to figure out (Indistinct)

Mr. Palmer: – and working with them to get endorsement letters to go to those communities, because we know various communities are interested in growing their population and bringing new economic ideas, bringing new economic development. We're very happy to have that as one of the pillars of our population growth strategy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

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

Yesterday, the long awaited referendum act was read a first time. In the 2017 throne speech in reference to their proposed referendum, government committed to, and I quote: Do everything within the scope of its responsibility to assure clarity, fairness, and the inclusion of all voices during this process.

These principles were so fundamental that government repeated them in motion 43 calling on the Legislative Assembly to adopt a clear question for the upcoming referendum. So far, nobody, other than government members, have had an opportunity to speak to this motion, and the Legislature has not yet voted on it and yet here we are with the act in front of us.

We also have heard concerns from Islanders that there has been no public consultation.

Fairness and inclusion on Motion 43

A question to the Premier: How do you reconcile this process with the promise of the 2017 throne speech to assure, and I quote: Fairness and the inclusion of all voices?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Third Party may recall that in December of last year he was approached, as was the Leader of the Opposition, and invited to join me in signing an invitation to the Electoral Boundaries Commission to prepare the map that was intended to educate Islanders and to provide a sample of what would be involved in mixed-member proportional representation and they both declined.

That's one of several examples of how we have indeed endeavored to engage a dialogue around this and it hasn't been that much activity from the other side.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

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

When speaking to motion 43, the Premier made much of his role in the Supreme Court decision around the clarity question.

Legal actions and referendum act

Could you explain to us, Premier, the legal basis upon which your referendum act combined future governments in violation of the principle of Parliamentary sovereignty?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the referendum will take place in conjunction with a general election. There will be people who have their names on a ballot in that general election, and I expect their electors will have an opportunity to ask them whether they intend, those on the ballot, to go through with the result of the referendum.

That is really the foundation of Parliamentary democracy, is to hold an election at which people put forward positions and come back, those who are elected, to live up to what took place in the course of the election. That is the ultimate in democracy and a Parliamentary democracy, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

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

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

Written legal opinions re: survival of court challenge

Well, a further question to the Premier: Can you provide this House with all of the written legal opinions that you have received to ensure that this referendum would survive a court challenge?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, let me be very clear.

We are, and have been saying now for two years and going back to the white paper that was presented in this House in July of 2015 on a course that has been engaged with Prince Edward Islanders, we said in the fall of 2016 that we would respect what took place in that plebiscite by giving Islanders an opportunity to have a clear question, to give a clear answer, and that is the foundation on which this bill is brought

forward and it is in that principle and in that spirit, and in the interest of allowing Islanders to have their say, that we are presenting this bill and we'll have an opportunity to consider it here in this House.

That's the ultimate constitutional principle on which we are here. It's democracy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

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

My question is for the minister of agriculture. I think everyone in this House, and most everybody across the province, realizes the value of our agriculture and our fisheries to this province. I know that's just what this minister's department stands for. I know we have a fantastic staff over there and we have great programs.

Programs for farmers and fishers

I'm just wondering what the minister could tell us what you're doing to ensure that all of our farmers and fishers are quite aware of the programs that are within your department.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Mr. Henderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The reality is that our department has a very impressive group of professionals who focus solely on making sure that we can grow our agriculture and fisheries commodities and make sure that we're providing safe and traceable biosecurity measures as well as food measures.

One of the issues is, is from our staff, we hire very professional staff and they focus on the protocols of making sure they're delivering good customer service and feedback and information to our farmers and fishers.

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

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

Again this year we're hearing stories about vehicles being driven over some farmers' fields, which is very unfortunate. I know it's only being done by a few, but if someone is driving over a soy bean field or a field of winter wheat, or even a hay field, this is the farmer's livelihood and it's quite distressing that this would be happening. It is the farmer's livelihood.

Disrespect for farmers' fields

I'm wondering what the minister can tell us: How do we get the message out to those few who are violating the farmers' fields and what your department may be doing to get this message out as well.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, that's a very good point and it really saddens me as the minister of agriculture hearing that there would be people out there that would be denigrating some of our land. Farmers put a big investment into their crops, whether that's the forage crops, alfalfa hay crops and some of those things, as well as dealing with winter wheat and winter rye and some of those things.

These are people that are trying to make a livelihood, and when people disrespect landowners, it saddens me. As far as trying to make sure that we're aware of that, we do encourage landowners to contact the RCMP, law enforcement agencies, or the Department of Communities, Land and Environment conservation officers and (Indistinct) that, they are certainly welcome to contact our department and we'll give them the proper information.

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

Mr. McIsaac: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Another issue has to do with, in the livestock industry, the biosecurity; our farmers are pushed now to spend a lot more dollars with regards to this and it is very

important. I mean we are wanting our consumers to consume our products.

Issues of biosecurity

I'm just wondering what the department is doing to help our farmers with this issue of biosecurity.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, Prince Edward Island certainly has a global reputation as Canada's Food Island. We have a high commitment to food safety and quality of food products.

Our department does recognize that having an efficient traceability system that addresses food safety and animal health issues as paramount.

We are working with – we, actually, have now a provincial vet that is working with all of the sectors; livestock sectors out there to develop biosecurity protocols. It is our provincial responsibility to make sure traceability of livestock, wherever they may go, that we can trace, that should an outbreak of some disease or a contagion that might impact our industries, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road.

Mr. Perry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question is for the Minister of Health and Wellness.

Recruitment of doctors in West Prince

Minister: Can you give an update to the House on the doctor situation in West Prince. Including how many doctors have shown an interest and maybe how many doctors have actually visited West Prince?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

Certainly, over the last while, there has been an incredible amount of activity on that file. Just in the last four weeks alone the good staff and the good folks at recruitment and retention have interviewed seven physicians for that area. We have another two interviews scheduled for early next week.

As well, last week, we were able to work with the community of West Prince to have one physician in for a site visit. We currently have two more that are coming in June with a third coming in July.

We are very hopeful that we, because of that work, we will be rewarded with a couple of doctors for the West Prince area, at least, hopefully, by summer, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road, your first supplementary.

Mr. Perry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, in other jurisdictions, there are physician assistants. If we were to have them practicing in West Prince this could alleviate some of the pressures that are put on the doctors that are presently working now; probably help the potential doctors coming here, especially with emergency room coverage.

Physician assistants

Minister: Can you explore, or have you explored the possibility of a physician assistant as some other provinces have them in place?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

Currently, physician assistants are not – it's not a regulated profession for work on Prince Edward Island. Currently, to the best of my knowledge, there are none practicing here on PEI.

They do have to work under direct supervision of a physician. In most cases, as you kind of mentioned there, most of their work, a physician assistant in other jurisdictions, is done usually in trauma situations, or ER situations.

In the area of West Prince we are currently not focusing on acute care, but more primary care. We are looking to attract family physicians, nurse practitioners to the area. We are not actually out recruiting physician assistants at this time, but that is something that could be looked at in the future.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road, your second supplementary.

Mr. Perry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I do understand that the physician assistants are primarily for – they would help in the emergency coverage, especially. Some doctors potentially don't want to go out to an area if they have to do emergency room coverage. This might help entice some new doctors to come and take the pressure off the existing doctors that are there.

I know of one physician assistance who is actually living in the Alberton area. He works out west, out in Alberta. He flies out there to work. He is monitored, or affiliated with a doctor in Newfoundland. We have that resource in our own backyard.

I think it would only make sense to use our own resources to help with the current doctor situation in West Prince.

Minister: Will you seriously consider this as an option?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Certainly, I think absolutely we could look at considering this as an option. Obviously, up to this point, we have not had any requests for physician assistants.

It's a bit timely. Approximately, a year ago, we were doing some work in regards to that, but it was determined at the time it may not have been a viable option.

As we move forward this summer with the registered health professional act, there is an opportunity for regulation for physician assistants on Prince Edward Island. And absolutely, we'd be interested in taking a look at that.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Excluding students from PISA

Question to the minister of education: Can you explain how the process works to exclude a student from writing common assessments like PISA?

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

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

This is not a process that I have the step-by-step detail in respect of right now. I can bring that back.

What I will say is that this process is very well defined in terms of what is set out by PISA. PISA is operated by the OECD, which is a major international group of the top performing countries in the world in terms of their economies and the education systems that they have, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Decision on student exclusion

Question to the minister: Who has the final say on a student exclusion, the teacher or the department?

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

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

Again, I'm not 100% certain on that, so I'm not going to say one way or another here today. Again, this is done in very close adherence to guidelines that are set out by the OECD and the operation of their PISA assessments. They monitor this. When the reports are performed, there is an audit that's done on that information. It's ensured that

that information is correct and that the standards have been adhered to.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

For international student assessments like PISA no more than 5% of students should be excluded from taking the tests.

When Island students last wrote the PISA in 2015, the government excluded close to 12%. In 2012, more than 8% of Island students were excluded.

Exclusion rates in PEI

Question to the minister: Were you assure Islanders when Island students write PISA this year, that our exclusion rate won't exceed the 5% ceiling?

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

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

What I can assure this House is that our education system takes the PISA testing very seriously, as we do with the other tests that we do and have had success in, such as PCAP.

We have had a great deal of interaction with the folks that operate this testing. We know, as an example, Andreas Schleicher has commented and he's the fellow that is the head of the PISA testing from OECD, and said: Prince Edward Island's exclusion rate was high because we include so many students in our regular classes. He goes on to say: Inclusive education is Prince Edward Island's strength and it provides a high degree of equity for students.

PISA and the OECD have certified that the results that Prince Edward Island delivered were accurate and were well within the guidelines. We would take their word for it and we would propose to adhere to those guidelines and do it again.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thanks for freedom of information requests from the media, Islanders learned more this week about how fixated government is with assessments like PISA and how far they'll go to avoid poor results.

Reducing sample size for PISA test

Question to the minister: Why was government trying to find ways to reduce the sample size and have fewer Island students write the PISA test?

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

Mr. J. Brown: Mr. Speaker, I don't know where this opposition is coming from sometimes, lately with their questions.

I can say that this is absolutely not the case. Again, we have seen results, like our latest PCAP results that demonstrate the great work that Island teachers have been doing and the great work that Island students have been doing. Those follow on the 2015 PISA results.

We are talking about an overall program that has demonstrated improvement in the education system in Prince Edward Island over the past 10 years, where we have come from a position of being closer to the bottom of the pack, in terms of performance in Canada, to the top of the pack. That's something to be proud of. We're one of the top countries in the world when it comes to education and we're near the top of that pack.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The deputy minister of the day was exploring the idea of excluding entire schools from writing the PISA test based on their socio-economic status.

Excluding schools based on socio-economic status

Question to the minister: I find that appalling. How can you boast about an inclusive school system if you're trying to exclude students based on their socio-economic status?

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

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

This just goes to show where the opposition is coming from with this. The indication is that at the time there was an effort to determine who would be or who would not be excluded. There's no allegation, I don't think, here today that there was anybody improperly excluded along those lines.

I should say that in other provinces, there are large exclusion rates based on schools in different areas of the provinces. This opposition can't take 'yes' for an answer. Our students are doing well. We need to celebrate that. This is another way that we recognize that, and we will continue to take the information we garner out of these tests and we will continue to feed –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Mr. J. Brown: – that back into our loop that is set out to improve student performance in this province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Ms. Biggar: (Indistinct) teachers and students.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. Myers: Calm down (Indistinct)

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, I do agree our students are doing great. That's why I find it unbelievable that you're trying to cut 12% of them out due to their social-economic status. It comes from a previous deputy minister in your department.

Exclusion of schools re: socioeconomic status

Question to the minister: Which schools was government planning to exclude based on their socioeconomic status?

Mr. Myers: Good question.

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

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

Again, our education system on Prince Edward Island is probably the most inclusive education system in our country. Many of the other provinces in this country have entirely different schools for students that we would have in our regular classrooms. That does present interesting challenges that we do have to deal with.

Let me say it also adds a great deal of perspective to the students that we do have in those classrooms. It builds empathy. These are all skills that the OECD is looking at as being very important in their upcoming PISA assessment.

I expect that we'll continue to do well on these assessments because of the inclusivity and the equality that we have in our Prince Edward Island education system.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque, final question.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Excluding students like that would be really stigmatizing and a terrible message.

Question to the minister: How was your government planning to exclude students based on their socioeconomic status? Were you going to have students ask to bring their parents' tax returns in?

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Mr. MacKay: You're fudging the numbers.

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Mr. MacKay: You are. 12%. You pick and choose. Minister of everything – knows everything.

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Ms. Biggar: (Indistinct)

Mr. MacKay: Have some morals. Do you not feel guilty (Indistinct) do?

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

Mr. Myers: You'd have to have a conscience for that.

Mr. J. Brown: Thank you.

Mr. MacKay: I know. You must have to put that on a form to be signed.

Speaker: Members, let the minister answer the question.

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

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

Again, there are guidelines that are set out in respect of all of these programs, whether it be PISA or PCAP or any of the assessments that we do. We adhere to those guidelines, we insure that we know what they are and understand. We're always trying to ensure that students are doing better. That's what our education system is all about here on Prince Edward Island.

That's why we've added 161 frontline positions to our compliment over the last 12 months. We are trying every day to try to do our utmost to improve the lives and the education of Island students, whether that be right from the age zero where we're now recognized to be the top early years education system in the country –

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct)

Mr. J. Brown: – right through to PCAP results that came out and indicated that we're doing very well at the intermediate level. We need to recognize this; we need to celebrate it; and we need to continue to support our Island students.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[End of Question Period]