



Session:	3/65
Date:	15 May 2018
No:	44

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

TUESDAY, 15 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.

A promissory note is defined as an enforceable promise between two parties to pay back a financial obligation.

Promissory note re: financial obligation

Question to the Premier: If a person were to write a promissory note or some would call it an IOU to themselves, would that mean that they have more money?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: I'm really not sure, Mr. Speaker, if that has anything to do with my portfolio so, perhaps, we'll wait and see where the Leader of the Opposition is going with this.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thanks, very much.

If a person writes themselves an IOU, it doesn't, in fact, mean they have more money in the bank.

Question to the Premier: How does your government write itself a promissory note, AKA an IOU note, totally \$535 million for its pension funds resulting in more money in those plans?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's unclear. I'm not quite sure what the hon. member is asking either, but as we proceed through the Question Period I'm sure I'll come to the recognition of what he's asking and if I need to bring something back to him, I certainly will.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

I'm referring to the audited financial statements for the province. The province's financial statements contain promissory notes issued to itself for its pension funds. In this case a promissory notes the province is both the borrower and the lender.

Promissory notes in financial statements

Question to the Premier: Do any other provinces, territories, or even the federal government, issue themselves promissory notes or IOUs in their financial statements?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Through the Public Service Commission, and through our pension act, we abide by all the terms and regulations laid out in the legislation in regards to that. If there's something that the hon. member thinks that we're doing wrong or we're doing illegally, please, it would be nice to forward it to us.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thanks very much.

This is a government that we have repeatedly asked them: just follow the rules. It's as simple as that: follow the rules.

The provincial government of Prince Edward Island is, in fact, the only jurisdiction in all of Canada; provinces, territories and the federal government that actually writes promissory notes, or again, IOUs to themselves.

Question to the Premier: Can you explain why PEI is so far out of step with other governments?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our pension plans are, obviously, extremely important to everyone, everyone involved that pays into it. The Canadian Pension Plan enhancement, just recently, is extremely as important as well.

We'll take the line of questioning into consideration. If there is something I have to take back to the hon. member, I certainly will.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

I think it's fairly easy for Islanders now, to understand how the government can stand up and say that we've got three years of balanced budgets. It's not too hard when you're writing an IOU to yourself for \$535 million and essentially cooking the books.

Some Hon. Members: Oh! Oh!

Leader of the Opposition: It comes down as basic and as simple as this: essentially, say a person wrote themselves a cheque for \$200, then walked down to the Royal Bank, deposited in the ATM, and then withdrew the same amount from the ATM. That type of transaction would certainly raise eyebrows.

Government writing IOUs

Question to the Premier: If a person writing themselves an IOU would raise eyebrows, then why is it that your government is okay with writing an IOU to yourselves for \$535 million and thus making the books look a lot better than they actually are?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm not sure where the hon. member is going with cooking the books, but we have –

Mr. Myers: They're still hot (Indistinct)

Mr. MacDonald: – an Auditor General. We have –

Mr. Myers: – it's still cooking (Indistinct)

Mr. MacDonald: – all kinds of accountability. We brought in public interest disclosure and whistleblower legislation. We brought in a new *Archives and Records Act*; ethics and integrity commissioner, and they continue to go on that we're not transparent and accountable. If they want to take that up with the Auditor General, by all means, take it up with Auditor General, but we have balanced budgets. I know it's not sitting well with the opposition. I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, it's sitting well with the province of PEI.

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Residence of 600 immigrants

Staying on the topic of things that are cooked, question to the immigration minister: Do you have an answer today where close to 600 immigrants, who claimed the Sherwood Motel was their home and you guys nominated, are living?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, we take these charges very seriously. We are not under investigation. I will tell you, that our retention rates are getting higher every year; in 2014 –

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Mr. Palmer: – they were 53% and in 2015, they're 57% –

Mr. R. Brown: Oh great, 57% (Indistinct)

Mr. Palmer: – our goal is to attract the best and brightest immigrants here to PEI and we're doing that, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Mr. R. Brown: Oh, great.

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

So he doesn't know where they are currently at, which is scary. I think all Canadians should be scared of that. The federal government knows exactly where these people are. The Longitudinal Immigration Database is an administrative database that combines their administrative landing file, and their T1 family file, so they're matched through and identical linkage in the federal government.

Longitudinal Immigration Database

Question to the minister: Why are you not aware of this database and its content relating to thousands of PEI PNP clients that you guys sponsored for entering into this country?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We regularly review our database for common elements such as addresses. We will work if there is any –

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct)

Mr. Palmer: – patterns found in there.

We now use a qualified third-party verification process to further assist our office. The charges that they're speaking of –

Mr. Myers: BC Tony –

Mr. Palmer: – they're related to individuals allegedly giving false information to the federal government, Mr. Speaker, not to our office. Our province is not under investigation.

Mr. R. Brown: No.

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Of course it's because they gave false information to the federal government. It's the federal government who caught it when all these immigrants were coming in through Vancouver and didn't know that they were on the other side of our entire country when they were giving their home address. That's why it was caught, so you guys aren't investigating it. That's the only reason why you guys didn't catch it, because you're not investigating it.

The most recent data that's available on this file was published in 2016 and it was the federal immigration department and they did an interprovincial mobility study on provincial nominees. It covered PNP clients who landed between 2008 and 2013. So the only data that exists are people who landed in that period. There was 7,360 people nominated to Prince Edward Island here in that time, including spouses and dependents and that's just in five years.

PNP retention rate and federal stats

Question to the minister: Can you tell Islanders what the PNP program retention rate was for that period that the federal government released stats on?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's our understanding the charges filed in court are related to the 2008 program, which is vastly different than the program we have today. In 2009, the program was reviewed by the Auditor General – all recommendations were implemented. In 2010, the Auditor General did a follow-up review – all recommendations were implemented. In 2012, Grant Thornton was hired to review the program and all the recommendations were implemented. In 2015, we reviewed the program with Grant Thornton again – recommendations were all implemented.

The program continues to evolve and we are meeting with agents now to review their activity as it relates to the immigration program.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. R. Brown: Great.

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

So the minister forgot one important date. In 2018, federal government rolled in and laid fraud charges. Add that to your list because I think it's important. It's the only reason we're talking about this is because federal government has laid fraud charges. But to answer the question that he didn't even attempt to answer: it's one in five were retained in Prince Edward Island. So that's 20%; 20% of nominees from this government's program between that period of 2018 and 2013 stayed in this province. So, 5,875 people who were vetted by this province disappeared into thin air.

Location of PNP sponsor clients

Question to the minister: Where are these 5,875 people that were PNP sponsor clients by your government who don't live in this province?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

These charges are serious and they are not –

Ms. Compton: (Indistinct) check we don't care.

Mr. Palmer: We are not under investigation of the province. The most recent tax filer information is 2015; note the one year retention rate is 57%.

Mr. R. Brown: Ah, great.

An Hon. Member: One year.

Mr. Palmer: We have the information here. The two year retention rate is 53%.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. R. Brown: (Indistinct) better; they're coming back.

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

So there are 5,875 people missing that this government here vouched for to bring into our country and the minister doesn't even take an attempt at answering the question. That should worry you. The 5875 people who are missing should worry you. These are immigrants that are vetted through this province and this government's program. They were sponsored and they were supposed to enhance and contribute to our province and our economy. Those were the terms that these immigrants signed on the dotted line for.

PEI address on applications

Question to the minister: What PEI addresses did these 5,785 use on their application to you?

Mr. Fox: Walmart.

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our immigration program continues to grow. We continue to learn as the program evolves. We are changing our information all the time. We're getting more regulations that we can make sure that we get the very best immigrants coming here to PEI. We have a new expression of interest model that engages municipalities to meet with immigrants to understand their business plans and their plans for the future and they will make a recommendation if they – an endorsement to have them come to their community. Our program continues to grow and we're proud of our program.

Mr. R. Brown: Great.

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

So, 3,090 of these people are now living in Ontario; 2,280 of these people are now living in British Columbia. That's alone. This minister wants to get up and expel the virtues of the program, and the great work that they're doing, and how they're growing this economy, and how they're vetting – the

process is vetting, but over 5,000 people just disappear into thin air, right off the map. They were nominated by this government.

Active role in Canadian residency fraud

Why, minister, are you continuing to defend the fact that your government played an active role in Canadian residency fraud?

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

Mr. Palmer: Again, I'll have to say: We're not under investigation. But I can tell you we are continuing to attract immigrants here. Our retention rates are 57% in 2015, so we continue to attract new immigrants and all you have to do is look around Charlottetown and you can see that our population is growing, there's jobs being created, and labour gaps being filled across the Island.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Well I see high rents and high retail prices, businesses rolling over once their one year is up. I see 600 people who are supposedly living in a motel in Stratford, 285 people who are living in a bungalow in Beach Grove; that's what I see and that's what Islanders see. It's fraud. Quite frankly, it's fraud. It's embarrassing that he gets up and he uses the 57% number. The only known number of retention is 20% – it was released by the federal government. So you can say whatever you want until there's audited figures come by the federal government then Islanders don't believe anything you say and you don't deserve them to believe anything you say. You haven't been honest at all with this whole program, that's why fraud is being committed.

Provincial enforcement of PNP clients leaving province

Question to the minister: Why has there been no provincial enforcement of these cases where PEI PNP clients left PEI when these people got to renew their residency card here?

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 our immigration office. The province is not under investigation. We continue to work with border services. If they ask us for information, we're happy to give it to them. We take this serious and we want to get to the bottom of it and we have full cooperation with border services.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: Member from Borden-Kinkora.

Mr. Fox: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The South Shore Health and Wellness Inc. is a community corporation that has come together for their neighbors in the area, advocating for this government to fill a physician vacancy in Crapaud. They met with the health minister last week.

Meeting results re: physician vacancy in Crapaud

Minister: What was the outcome of this meeting?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There is a group of community residents from the Crapaud area that have a good focus that the health needs of their residents need to be met and I agree, as minister, that that is the case. We're working very collaboratively together on workable solutions for that region. As I said, they're very focused, they know what needs to happen, and those discussions will continue and I'm very pleased to say that this group is one that you can collaborate well with and I know that that will continue into the future, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

Mr. Fox: Mr. Speaker, the only thing I heard over there was a lot of stuttering.

Minister: Why are you against having a doctor to fill Dr. Visser's former practice in Crapaud?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Giordani deciding in the last several days that he would like to leave his family practice was part of that discussion. Dr. Giordani is leaving that family practice for personal reasons, but he is remaining on the Island and he will be working in another area of the medical field.

That being said, we are indeed out looking for a doctor replacement for Dr. Giordani, whether that is a full-compliment doctor, or a locum in the short-term. The residents of that area do need this medical coverage and we are working closely with that community to find a workable solution, whether it's a doctor, whether it's a nurse practitioner and we will work very closely into the future.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

Mr. Fox: Well that was another very shaky answer. Health PEI's networks are supposed to provide primary care services to residents within 30 kilometers of their house. Crapaud was the only location that will meet the requirements of his department.

Contingency plan for South Shore residents (further)

Question to the minister: Will you commit to the South Shore Health and Wellness Inc. and the people of the area that a Health PEI clinic staff or the necessary staff will be funded and open by the end of the summer?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

All options, all solutions are being discussed at that table. Another option is kind of grouping that area into the East Prince collaborative approach that we have going

on there. They are receptive to that. Nurse practitioners will be coming out of the East Prince complement and going to several communities that are neighbouring on Crapaud, and this is a possible option in the short term.

No options are being left off the table. It's very important that Islanders' needs from that region are well met as far as health care and as minister; I'm committed to look forward to doing that, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

Mr. Fox: Well, Mr. Speaker, we're going to switch.

The Health PEI primary care clinic has a huge wellness impact and a huge economic impact on rural PEI. This government refuses to support rural PEI in health care services.

A collaborative primary health care centre in Crapaud is a community-led opportunity that provides a real solution to a rural community for primary health care and economic development.

Economic impact on South Shore region

Question to the Minister of Rural and Regional Development: What do you think the economic impact of the clinic would be for the South Shore region?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness,

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As part of discussions that we had just on Friday, a proposal was brought forward and as minister and as a department, we are looking very closely at that. It was a good proposal, and we had great discussion on that.

But, our primary concern at the moment is to identify doctors to come to Prince Edward Island to take up all the vacancies that are here. Currently, we have, as it was stated on the floor of the Legislature, about 11 vacancies and we're working very closely to try to recruit doctors and obviously Crapaud

is one area that we are looking at as well, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

Mr. Fox: Thank you.

Support for rural health care services

To the minister responsible for rural PEI: Are you supportive of rural health care services?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Rural and Regional Development.

Mr. Murphy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Of course, I mean I've been a well-known advocate for rural health care long before I became minister. I remember having to fight the other side when they wanted to close the hospitals in Alberton and O'Leary.

I continue to –

Ms. Biggar: One hospital.

Mr. Murphy: – I continue to support rural health care in rural Prince Edward Island and I think it's a necessity.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

Support for health clinic in Crapaud

Mr. Fox: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

To the minister: Will your department support this initiative and provide the necessary resources and financial support to provide health care in the Crapaud region?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

All of these discussions have been had with those representatives from that community with a very strong vision of their residents'

needs when it comes to health care on Prince Edward Island.

We are looking at that option as an opportunity, but as I said to the committee: Our first and foremost concern is identifying a doctor to go to the region. If after we have identified a doctor that will take on those patients, absolutely we will look at a clinic in that area. That would be how that process would unfold and we will continue to work closely with those representatives so that good outcomes will be had for the patients of that region.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

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

On Friday, I asked the Premier to explain the legal basis upon which his referendum act can bind future governments in violation of the principle of Parliamentary sovereignty.

The Premier responded, and I quote: Mr. Speaker, the referendum will take place in conjunction with a general election and 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 can 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 in Parliamentary democracy, Mr. Speaker.

Legal actions and referendum act (further)

I was unable to find an answer in his response so again to the Premier: Can you explain the legal basis upon which your referendum act can bind future governments in violation of the principle of Parliamentary sovereignty?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, let me put the answer that was just read in several words. Those who are elected come

to this Legislature to live up to the platform on which they campaigned.

You can twist that to say it's binding a future Parliament. Why would anyone be on the ballot if they don't intend to go to the next Parliament and do what they promised to do?

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

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

Ms. Biggar: (Indistinct) not going to honour (Indistinct)

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Thank you.

Of course, we've never had a government in the history of Prince Edward Island who has promised something that they didn't commit to and then follow through on. Of course, that's never happened.

I also asked the Premier about the lack of public consultation on his referendum act and in his response he seemed quite concerned that I didn't sign his letter to the Electoral Boundaries Commission.

Public consultation and MMP map

A question to the Premier: How exactly does the commission's preparation of the MMP map relate to your lack of public consultation when drafting your referendum act?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the initiative to invite the Electoral Boundaries Commission to prepare that map was indeed an opportunity to engage the public, to have meetings throughout the province, to put forward two maps, to present those, hear comments, and that was indeed to prepare Islanders, to engage Islanders, to decide the question that is now on the referendum.

I noted earlier in this House that those maps – or that map of the commission – was tabled by you for five weeks or four weeks before anybody on the other side of the House said a word about it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Thank you.

Indeed, there was consultation on these maps; very well-attended consultations. I attended at least two of them and I know there were many members of the opposition and of government attended those consultations. But, we're talking about consultation on Bill No. 38, the referendum act.

I also asked the Premier to provide us with all the written legal opinions he has received to ensure that this referendum would survive a court challenge and again, his answer was less than enlightening.

Written legal opinions for Bill No. 38

Once again, Premier: Will you table any written legal opinions?

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

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

We have heard kind of time and again from the opposition member in relation to this legislation. We have numerous examples of his coalition that has written in *The Guardian*. We were around to numerous consultations throughout the course of about 14 months on democratic renewal. Out of all that we've put a bill together that will be debated on the floor of this Legislature and everybody will have their opportunity to provide the input they've heard from their constituents –

Mr. Trivers: When was the last (Indistinct)

Mr. J. Brown: Prince Edward Islanders, and if they have legal issues they'd like to bring to the floor, we'd certainly like to hear about them then.

Thank you very much.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

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

So, I appreciate the Attorney General standing up to answer that previous question, but I'm still confused around the issue of Parliamentary sovereignty and when the government uses – they've made a big deal of making this question in the next referendum or plebiscite, that it be a clear question and a binding question.

Binding, to me, is something that's very seminal to this bill before us.

Legal actions and referendum act (further)

Question to the Attorney General: Can you explain the legal basis upon which the Premier's referendum act can bind future governments in violation of the principle of Parliamentary sovereignty?

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

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

What I will do – I'm going to quote from the Supreme Court of Canada in the Quebec secession reference case and perhaps that will give us a sense of what we're talking about. They said: A clear majority vote in Quebec on a clear question in favour of succession would confer democratic legitimacy on the succession initiative which all of the other participants in Confederation would have to recognize.

The principle is simple. It's the same principle at play here, and basically what we are saying is there's a piece in there that would trigger a requirement for the next government to act and the question would be clear. The answer would be clear and as it says in here, the participants would have to recognize it. That's how this works. Every law is the same in this province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Bevan-Baker: I find that very interesting that the Attorney General is equating the leaving of a country with the

changing of a voting system; that those two things are of the same magnitude.

The Attorney General of any jurisdiction has a special role to play in advising the Cabinet to ensure that the rule of law is maintained and that Cabinet actions are legally and constitutionally valid.

Explanation of Parliamentary sovereignty

Again, to the Attorney General: How did you explain the principle of Parliamentary sovereignty to your fellow Cabinet members?

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

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

I'll use another example from the Quebec secession reference case because, apparently, this is a hard one to get our head around, "The referendum result, if it is to be taken as an expression of the democratic will, must be free of ambiguity both in terms of the question asked and in terms of the support it achieves..."

That's exactly what we're looking to do. We're looking to put a very simple question to Islanders. We're looking to get an answer that's supported by Prince Edward Islanders. That's really the fundamental principle of democracy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. MacEwen: (Indistinct) junior shut-down-Brown.

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

I mean, I, and I think everybody else, who has listened to the responses for the last couple of days, can be left with no other impression other than government has not sought an outside legal opinion on whether this legislation could withstand –

Mr. Roach: The Supreme Court of Canada .

Dr. Bevan-Baker: – Charter challenge.

Again, to the Attorney General: As legal advisor to government, are you comfortable putting your professional reputation behind the constitutionality of the Premier's referendum bill?

Mr. Myers: He's not the legal advisor, Spencer is.

Speaker: The hon. Minister –

Mr. Roach: (Indistinct)

Speaker: – of Justice and Public Safety, and Attorney General.

Mr. J. Brown: Mr. Speaker, I find this question a little bit ironic, in that the hon. member is asking if we sought an outside legal opinion in relation to this matter. I think here about three weeks ago he was saying we shouldn't be going outside for anything.

Dr. Bevan-Baker: That's not what I said.

Mr. J. Brown: What I have said, and what I will continue to reiterate is that we've put a bill forward. As the hon. member, has indicated, in the past we would expect that the hon. members of this House will participate in a fulsome debate of that legislation. We've put considerable effort into preparing that bill. We think it speaks for itself. We'd certainly be open to any commentary as we go forward in the spirit of every debate that we have in this House.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Perry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question is to the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Issues with lobster bait

Minister, I have been hearing from fishers about issues with bait for lobsters this spring. Can you tell us what the situation is for lobster bait for the spring?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, indeed, there are some challenges around the bait fishery, as well as to access bait for some of our lobster fishers. Part of that is – has happened with some of the flooding that's happened with the Saint John River, affecting gaspereau catches.

You know, fishers are having a hard time. We've seen prices of bait actually increasing and a lot of fishers have been out there trying to catch their bait, as well as to freeze and keep that bait for the coming season.

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

Alternative bait sources

Mr. Perry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister: What is being done to look to alternative bait sources for fishers?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, actually our department has been working – we happen to have a staff person, who is working on their master's for their educational perspective. They are working with the PEI Fishermen's Association to try to come up with some alternate sources of bait that may be just as successful as traditional herring, mackerel, gaspereau.

In fact, they've tried some experiments in LFA 25, where they've worked with perch, tried perch, as well as tried rock crab. We're also aware of some studies that have done in New Brunswick, as well as in Maine. We're monitoring those outcomes.

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

Mr. Perry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, you mentioned rock crab. Presently, the rock crab season opens in, I think, it's late June.

Rock crab season

What about opening the rock crab season earlier to accommodate bait for lobster fishers?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Mr. Henderson: It's a very good point. The hon. member is bringing up a point, actually, that a number of fishers, the rock crab industry from the western Northumberland Strait have made a request to DFO. Myself, as minister, have also supported that request to see if we could look at starting the season a little bit earlier.

I might note that the rock crab fishery is a quota fishery. This would not have any, necessarily, impact on the amount of rock crab harvested.

I have to say, unfortunately, at the moment, the minister responsible for fisheries and ocean has denied that request, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As a member of this Legislature, we are granted certain privileges, rights and protection not afforded to our citizens.

The Liberal chief of staff told me I could not speak to the press. On April 28th, 2017, the former minister of finance stated in this Legislature that it would be inappropriate for an MLA to have direct contact with a police investigator.

On May 1st, 2017, in this Legislature, the minister of justice complained about my right to speak about a cozy relationship between the enforcement wing of government and the Premier's office.

MLA rights to speak to press

My question is to the Attorney General and minister of justice: How is this an open and transparent government if an MLA does not have the right to speak to the press?

Mr. LaVie: Good question.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Public Safety.

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

I'm not sure that this question is within the purview of my portfolio. I will say that certainly I am not aware of having ever been told that we can't speak to the press when we wish to. Certainly, every piece in our team that we have discussed would be that we're working together and that we're open, and that we're open to convey the messages that we would see fit as we represent our constituents.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

MLA rights to speak to RCMP

Mr. Dumville: Question to the Attorney General and minister of justice: How is it open and transparent government if a member of this Legislature does not have the same right as a Canadian citizen to speak to the RCMP?

Mr. Fox: Yeah.

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

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

I'll say again, as far as I'm aware, we are free to speak with whoever we wish to, including on the floor of this Legislature.

If the hon. member does not feel that that's the case, he could bring that forward in other appropriate forms, but I will say, from what I have seen, and the team that I am here with, I have not heard that kind of commentary. I feel free to express whatever I would feel appropriate on behalf of my constituents. I think that's important and it's valued in our team, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

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

Role of MLA to hold government accountable

Mr. Dumville: My question is to the Attorney General and minister of justice: How is this open and transparent government if I do not have the right in this Legislature to expose troublesome relationships within government as a requirement of my role as an MLA to hold government accountable?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Public Safety.

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

I really don't know where – I'm not trying to belittle the hon. member's comments, but he's asking me questions specific to him. Maybe, I'll say it like this: The hon. Minister of Rural and Regional Development, as an example, was a very vocal proponent of his constituents –

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct)

Mr. J. Brown: – he's certainly been out there and spoken with the press on issues he felt important –

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct)

Mr. J. Brown: – to him –

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct)

Mr. J. Brown: – and I would think he would be proud of that. He is certainly welcomed as a member of our team, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Back in December government issued a request for proposal for the preliminary design and costing of a province-wide fibre optic network, the so-called high-speed Internet backbone that was hastily announced last fall as part of this government's latest attempt to make good in its promise of high-speed Internet access for all Islanders.

Stantec consulting won the work for just under \$50,000 and presumably has

completed the preliminary design and costing.

Status of fibre op backbone project

A question to the finance minister: What is the current status of this project and will you table the preliminary design and costing, especially a map of where this fibre optic network backbone will be deployed?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Fast and reliable Internet is important to business and residents alike on PEI. We are working to develop that network across PEI and improve the business case to help drive Internet deeper into the communities in PEI.

We are continuing to work with a number of consultants. Stantec being one of those to really understand this complex business case and do mapping across PEI to make sure that the money is spent in the best places that it can be spent.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Once again, this government refuses to share information. You've got to be more open and transparent.

Right now the government has fibre access through the infamous Bell contract that expires in 2020. My sources tell me that the preliminary design of the high-speed Internet backbone, which you won't table, covers a significantly smaller part of the Islanders than the map included in the original RFP. It won't even reach most parts of the Island where lack of high-speed Internet is most relevant. In fact, I'm hearing it's basically a duplicate of the existing backbone. The whole point of this project is to protect government access to high-speed Internet when the Bell contract expires.

Coverage of new fibre optic network

A question to the Minister of Economic Development and Tourism: Will this fibre network be expanding new coverage, or is it just a replacement of the expiring contract's existing coverage?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We continue to work with consultants across PEI and with providers across PEI to make sure that we get the best bang for the buck. To make sure that we are getting the coverage across PEI, we work in collaboration with existing ISPs planned for rollout; that we want to make sure that we have the connectivity and we're working towards that right across PEI. And we've worked with communities like Seawood Estates and Rattenbury Road to be able to move their Internet delivery further.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I really wish this government and this minister would come clean with Islanders and let them know what's going on. When a legislative standing committee looked into the Internet issue, we learned that the real challenge is what's known as the 'last mile' that connects fibre to homes. If this project is to implement only a backbone, so-called transport fibre, then the last mile fibre that delivers high-speed Internet to a consumer's home or business will have to be put in place afterwards by private Internet service providers.

Question to the minister: Is your fibre backbone network last mile fibre to homes, or is it simply transport fibre?

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

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, the last mile's been the challenge since the Internet started. That's the area that is very costly and that we're working with Internet service providers for

them to deliver the last mile and we can have connectivity through the province – that we can deliver high-speed Internet right across PEI.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

So in the meantime, consumers and businesses, really across this province, are without access to a basic service and they can't run their business and they can't live their everyday lives the way that some others in the province can.

This government has no problem issuing millions of dollars of loans to help their friends buy hotels. Also, we have a vibrant network of Internet service providers and I think you agree with me, minister, in this province, locally-owned businesses building our communities. Even with the existing high-speed Internet backbone that we have right now on PEI, there are local Internet service providers that are looking to provide real, reliable, high-speed Internet to all Islanders. And in the process, create dozens, if not hundreds of jobs.

Loan dollars to Internet industry in province

A question to the Minister of Economic Development and Tourism: Why aren't you making loan dollars available to this industry through a competitive process to get this project done now?

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

Mr. Palmer: Mr. Speaker, to build a network across the province takes some planning. I've been involved in fibre networks in the past – high-speed Internet delivery across a couple of provinces. I have experience in that and I understand from that experience, planning is the most important part. You need to know where you're going so that you can drive –

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct) Islanders are tired of waiting.

Mr. Palmer: – and get the Internet down to the last mile so that ISPs can deliver to get that high-speed Internet to the homes and to the businesses and we are working with all ISPs on PEI to deliver just that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[End of Question Period]