



Session:	1/66
Date:	12 July 2019
No:	16

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

FRIDAY, 12 JULY 2019

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Land.

Mr. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yesterday, July 11th, I took a question in notice: What percentage of farmers use the Finance PEI operating credit to cover annual cropping expense?

Finance PEI is a Crown Corporation under the Ministry of Economic Growth, Tourism and Culture. It administers financing programs to help assist businesses across PEI often working with other financial institutions, to help businesses secure necessary working capital, to grow and expand their operations.

Finance PEI priority sectors for financing are small businesses, manufacturing and processing, information technology, renewable energy, agriculture, fisheries, aquaculture and tourism operations.

Finance PEI has more than 1,000 clients in the loan portfolio of approximately \$2 million. The finance loan portfolio is primarily lending to businesses to assist infrastructure. This includes acquisitions of land, equipment, facilities – which are fully repayable and secure by assets and farm businesses.

As of March 31st, 2019, Finance PEI had \$27 million in capital term loans with farmers financing land, equipment and infrastructure and an additional \$3.5 million in working capital loans with Island farmers for working capital.

It should be noted that the farm operation typically works with chartered banks to obtain the necessary financing for planting crops. These financial situations provide the farm with their general operating bank account, as well as operating line of credits, which typically is secured by crop and inventory and receivables.

Finance PEI annual report can be found on the website financepei.ca under the reports and publications.

Thank you.

Questions by Members

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

Ms. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yesterday I asked the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women about a request to provide the PEI Coalition for Women in Government with long-term operating funding to help support their work, to break down barriers that women face when seeking public office.

Barriers for women in government

I also described to her and this whole Legislature my own trepidation and some negative reactions I received when I decided to become a candidate. The minister said in response and I quote: As a woman, I understand the barriers that are there, perceived barriers in some ways in my mind, but barriers nonetheless, for some people.

To the minister, could you please elaborate on what you meant by that comment?

Speaker: The hon. Minister Responsible for the Status of Women.

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I, in no way, meant to belittle your experience getting here, but in my own mind and I think with the barriers that you faced, a lot of them maybe were perceived because you were successful in making it to the Legislature and I know the important work of the PEI Coalition for Women in Government to show women that some of these barriers are perceived. If you make up your mind to do what you want to do, to work hard and achieve a goal that it is possible.

Through the PEI Coalition for Women in Government, they help with that.

In no means was I belittling your experience or any other women's experience. It's just my personal opinion that it's a tool in the toolbox for women to help with all of those barriers.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

Ms. Altass: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

To be quite frank I was surprised and offended and saddened by the minister's comments yesterday.

I am one of those women that she flippantly dismissed as "some people who perceive barriers" as are all the women in the green caucus. We have all experienced barriers and double standards and these barriers are not simply figments of our imagination. The minister doesn't have to take our word for it; there is significant research and data on this issue.

Question to the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women: Do you believe that women face systemic barriers or is it all in our heads?

Speaker: The hon. Minister Responsible for the Status of Women.

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm not saying that it's all in your heads, what I said was: some of the barriers that we do face are perceived. We all have different experiences, our journeys here are different. I ran four times to get where I'm at, I worked hard, I had a goal, I persisted with that goal and I succeeded.

I'm just saying that we all have different journeys, some people think that they have barriers in place and it doesn't matter what career you go for, there are barriers if that's the way you look at it. It's as simple as that.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Mermaid-Stratford.

Ms. Beaton: The minister also said: it takes a different person to do what we're doing and everyone in this House can agree to that and you have to be a strong individual who can stand up for your rights. We all need to do that.

I caution language that can be construed as blaming women who experience systemic barriers, for not being strong enough to sit in this Legislature. Indeed, the ministers' entire statement is based on the premise that the Legislature is just fine the way that it is and what we really need is to find stronger women.

I'm a single mother with a nine-year-old and that comes with its own list of barriers, perceived or not. I certainly belong here. This House needs to represent all Islanders.

Positive change for all Island women

Question to the minister: will you advocate for positive change for all Island women?

Speaker: The hon. Minister Responsible for the Status of Women.

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

I, in no way, meant to offend any of my colleagues across the floor. I've been out campaigning with our female candidate in District 9 who is working very hard to get here as well. We all had the same number of women running basically in our districts, it's not up to me or you to who people decide to support, we all have a different journey, we all have different paths. I'm just stating how I feel as person.

Yeah, there are barriers, there are barriers for everyone in this House regardless of what you're doing and I'm just saying that was my experience, you have different experiences, we have different paths. In no way was I belittling anyone across the floor or any woman. I just look at it as: if you decide you want to do something, you can do it. There are supports through the PEI Coalition for Women in Government to help you get there.

But I like to turn it around and make it a positive thing saying: the coalition is there. It's not just about barriers; it's about their supporting women to get them where they want to be. It's as simple as that. We all have different perspectives. You might not agree with what I have to say, but that doesn't mean that my opinion doesn't count either.

So, thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

Ms. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In response to the original question my colleague asked about funding for the PEI

Coalition for Women in Government, the minister said and I quote: There are a number of asks across the province. As the Minister of Finance we decided where the funding should go and what the priorities are. We talk health, we talk education, everything is important and I will stand by that. We will do our very best to fund all the NGOs that we possibly can.

But the question was asked to her as the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, not as the finance minister. It is her job to advocate in Executive Council for the priorities of all women. In her answer, she gave no indication that she felt any special responsibility to represent the women of PEI; not just the women in this Legislature, but the women of PEI.

Operational funds for PEI Coalition for Women in Government

A question to the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women: What arguments did you make in Executive Council to support the requests for long-term operational funds for the coalition?

Speaker: The hon. Minister Responsible for the Status of Women.

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I didn't realize that the fact that I am the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women was going to become an issue for the women across the floor. I bring my own perspective to this job and I'll continue to do that.

And if you're that much in support of women, maybe you'd like to go out and help campaign with Natalie Jameson for the District 9 election on Monday.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

Ms. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

One of the things that was most apparent on election night was that the Green Party elected five times as many women as the other parties. I think part of that is because our party recognizes some of the systemic barriers that women face and try to put

systems in place to help candidates overcome those.

I'd love to see government doing something similar and I absolutely realize that a lack of women in caucus presents some challenges for government and the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women doesn't seem to be as familiar with some of the research on some of the issues that women face.

Mandate for Minister of Status of Women

I ask the Premier: What is the mandate for the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's the job of the Deputy Premier, the Minister of Finance and the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women to set a high goal and set a high target and she does that every day. She is a hard working individual who takes a back seat to nobody who stands up for herself and doesn't need anybody to stand up here and I'm half offended that I have to get up and try to look like I'm defending when she doesn't need that. She's up here – she has an opinion and she sharing that opinion.

We work very hard in here to attract female candidates; we worked extremely hard. We had seven; we lost six of them in the election. Am I supposed to tell the people of PEI that they made the wrong choice? There's two women and two men running in the District 9 deferred election; am I supposed to say they're only supposed to vote for one gender or the other? We have to allow democracy to work.

We work hard every day to put the best we can to put systems in place to knock down the barriers to make this place the most inclusive it can be. At the top of that leadership is the Deputy Premier, the Minister of Finance and the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women. And I'm glad to have her at my right wing.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thanks so much, Mr. Speaker.

I'd like to return again to the issue of the Member from the Morell-Donagh's special assignment with the Partnership for Growth and the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*.

A couple of weeks ago I brought up the issue as to whether the work of the Member from Morell-Donagh would be FOIPPable. The very next day the member told the House that had a gov.pe.ca email address for the Partnership for Growth work. I then submitted a written question asking when that gov.pe.ca account was created and I thank the Minister of Finance for the very prompt answer I got back. In fact, I'll take this opportunity to once again, thank government for the prompt responses, both to Questions Taken as Notice and also to the written questions.

It turns out that the account was requested the same day that I asked the FOIPP question in the House and it was up and running the very next day.

Private member re: Partnership for Growth

Question to the Premier: Do you think that this shows perhaps you haven't considered the full implications of putting a private member in charge of this process?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Well as I have answered this question many times in this Legislature throughout this session, the idea is to work with a group of individuals from across Prince Edward Island, now up to 21-22 member groups, to put together a plan, a strategic vision that we can build for the economy of Prince Edward Island. I put in charge of that, to get the discussion started, to get the discussion going, the Government House Leader and the Member from Morell-Donagh, who is one of the talented and gifted individuals that I have the pleasure to work with.

In no way are we trying to have some type of sinister plan to keep information from everything. The hon. member has told me, whatever emails you want; he will give them

to you. He now has an email set up that you can FOIPP at any time, nobody is trying to hide anything from you and I don't know why you continue down this path.

I don't quite understand the question, why you think this is such a sinister move, we all agreed to it in the lead up to the election – we all agreed to do what we are doing. I don't understand what the challenge is here.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Last week the Premier took exception to my characterizing the Partnership for Growth group as a lobby group and he said and I quote: I see them individually as duty bound by the lobbyist act, that they have to lobby individually, but I see them when they come together in this group for this strategic partnership, I see them as partners with government and I'm very happy to lead a government that wants to work with all Island groups to build a strong economy.

Balance advice from Partnership for Growth group

Once again to the Premier: Do you really believe that an organization that exists to represent the interests of private sector business can provide you with balanced advice on economic wellbeing and true prosperity?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: If the question is: do I believe the individuals who make up these group are in a great position to provide great advice to develop a strong economy on Prince Edward Island then the answer to that is yes, everyday and twice on Sunday. Yes I do.

I feel very privileged to work with them and I'm very honoured that they have come together and all three parties in the lead up to the election agreed to work with them. As the party that won the most seats that has formed a minority government, we've honoured that commitment and we're trying to collect information from all of these individuals.

As I understand from my colleague from Morell-Donagh, that group is growing and it's growing and more people are being invited to provide direction to this government, to this Legislature and to this province. I couldn't be more grateful for the fact that they've come together to do that and I feel like we're in very good hands with those individuals.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

After our debate last week, a well known Island lawyer and *Jeopardy* champion, I might add, tweeted the following thing and I quote: admittedly, 21 ducks all flocked together don't create one giant duck – you'll have to restrain yourself here Mr. Speaker – but their individual status as ducks and the fact that the flocks collective interests and motivations are those of a giant duck, can't be questioned.

He went on to say: and if you're a fish, or a snail or a worm, you may not want the giant duck to have special or privileged access to whoever sets all the rules for your pond.

Since I can't address a question to the partnersforgrowth.gov.pe.ca email address, I'll ask the Premier.

Protecting interest of Islanders re: Partnership for Growth

What is your plan Mr. Premier? I know you like a good story and an allegory, what is your plan to protect the interests of the fish and the snails and the worms?

Mr. McNeilly: The birds and the bees, too.

Mr. MacEwen: Here it comes. Here it comes.

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Well that's quite the analogy, I must say and of course the *Jeopardy* champion is a very bright and accomplished individual.

What I would continue to say is that a group has come together and approached the

government – has approached all three parties, which all three parties committed to during the election, all four parties actually, to do exactly what we're doing.

What they're doing is trying to provide some input and trying to provide some direction as a go-forward plan to make sure our economy is strong.

These are groups that are from all across Prince Edward Island, they're represented from the Evangeline region, they're represented from the eastern region, they're represented from the city and when the Charlottetown group comes in to lobby for their own specific interests, that is a different issue.

When they all come together to provide a broad vision, the partners in this province with the Islanders and with the government and as I continue to say: I'm very glad to have them and I feel like we're in good hands.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Last Friday in Question Period, the Premier said: From my understanding, the 21 groups that have worked to develop the strategic partnership group have worked with 50 community groups from all across the Province of Prince Edward Island. They are collaborating. They are working and trying to bring more people involved, essentially what you just said there.

So basically, Mr. Premier, you will allow the ducks to decide who should participate in this process.

As the local lawyer, also *Jeopardy* champion, said on Twitter: There's nothing wrong with being a duck. Ducks are legitimate members of the larger pond ecosystem, but they're only a part of it. They are not the whole. A pond run entirely based on duck values and interests is not a pond that's sustainable.

Aren't you concerned, Mr. Premier, that by giving so much power to the ducks that the fish and the snails and the worms will be left

out? Or perhaps worse, even eaten by the ducks?

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct) the Mighty Ducks.

Speaker: The hon. hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, I'm going on a nine-minute sleep and I'm getting hard to follow along with the analogies here.

An Hon. Member: You're not alone.

Premier King: But, what I continue to say is, there's a group that's offering to give us input and to offer some insights into the direction that government can choose. This isn't just a blank slate where they can just come in and write government policy. They are offering direction, and isn't that what we should be doing in a collaborative government? Isn't that what we should be doing?

Listening to Prince Edward Islanders who are on the frontlines every day; who could give better direction on potential policy going forward than the people doing it every day?

I've heard for the extent of this Question Period and the extent of this legislative session: Why don't you listen to the nurses and the doctors on the frontlines? Why don't you listen to the teachers and the TAs and all of those on the frontlines in education? Heaven forbid, we're asking the people on the frontlines, who drive the economy of this every day, and now we shouldn't do that?

So I'm confused, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

In the Legislature, the Premier also stated and I quote: I don't know why the Leader of the Opposition is being so opposed to this process when you committed to the partnership of growth during the election, that you would do the very same thing – and you've sort of reiterated that statement today.

Actually, that's not entirely accurate. In our letter in response to the partnership's demands we stated – and this is from our letter back to the partnership and I quote: A Green government would commit to the creation of an economic plan. Reflective of our inclusive view of the economy, this plan would be developed, not only with the private sector, but with the community sector, with municipalities, Indigenous communities, post-secondary institutions and so on. We believe this plan should not be rushed. It should be developed with care. We would take the time necessary to achieve a plan that views the economy not in a silo, but as integrated with all other facets of Island life.

Balance advice from Partnership for Growth group (further)

A question to the Premier: In hindsight, don't you think that you should have taken time to consider the broader context rather than immediately promise to do whatever the partnership asked of you?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, quite ironically that's exactly what this process is actually doing. It's actually what they're doing. The group is getting broader. It's getting broader and it's getting broader, and there are people coming together from all across Prince Edward Island who want to provide input just as the Leader of the Opposition has suggested.

I think I'm standing up here saying we agree. This is what we're doing. This is exactly what we're doing and I look forward to the process as it rolls out. We committed to rolling it out within six months and we have done that, and now the process is working through under the experienced and expert leadership of the Government House Leader and the Member from Morell-Donagh.

As I say, when you bring this collection of Islanders together, I think we're in good hands and I can't wait to see what comes from it.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

I realize we're trying really hard to disagree agreeably here, Premier, and perhaps – I wasn't going to say anything more about ducks but maybe birds of a feather do indeed flock together.

Let's look at that six month timeline that you just described, Mr. Premier. Today is July the 11th, so two months since you formed the Cabinet, which was on May the 9th, and in that time the Government House Leader has had several meetings with the Partnership for Growth and they are formulating their terms of reference.

So that leaves four months to finalize the terms of reference, to strike a commission, to conduct consultations with all the fish and the snails and the worms and to report back to this Legislature, and to have a spirited debate, as you have said. Then after all of that, you're going to finalize an economic plan.

Partnership for Growth and economic plan deadline

Premier: Do you think you can actually achieve all of those things by November the 9th?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, I think the Leader of the Opposition is a little bit confused talking about ducks and feathers and worms, and I think he's missing the point.

We committed to within the first six months of our mandate to begin to work with the Partnership for Growth which is exactly what we've done. Now they're working on a terms of reference, now they're working on how they can broaden this group and I even understand from the leader they're going to meet with all the leaders.

You'll have your own input to be able to put forward direction and isn't that what we're supposed to be doing here in a collaborative government, getting the input from the Leader of the Opposition and his party, getting the input of the Leader of the Third Party and his party and getting the input of

all Islanders. Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing?

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

Mr. Henderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

During the recent budget consultations with the third party, the third party requested increased funding over what was committed in past years directly for our 70-some watershed groups across Prince Edward Island.

Increased funding to watershed groups

Premier, did you convey instructions to your Minister of Environment, Water and Climate Change to increase funding directly to watershed groups as requested by the third party?

Premier King: Well I feel missed here this week and I feel very glad to be back –

Ms. Compton: Oh you were.

Premier King: Look, as we've continued to say throughout this session – and I went through this point by point with the Clerk of the Executive Council and my chief of staff while we were away travelling – 87% of the budget that we tabled in this Legislature was put together in draft form by the Member from Cornwall-Meadowbank and I would say he did a marvelous job with that and deserves credit for what he's done, not constant criticism from his colleagues over why he did it.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

Mr. Henderson: But it is the other 13% that we have some issues with.

[Laughter]

Mr. Henderson: The third party also requested funding for a livestock strategy and during the budget collaborative process with the party leaders, yet during questioning to the Minister of Agriculture and Land during in his budget estimates, we see no budget allocation for this purpose.

Implementation of funds for livestock strategy

Premier, did you convey instructions to your Minister of Agriculture and Land to find funds for the implementation for the livestock strategy?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, in response to the question, we're funding the maritime strategy as the hon. member knows and as the hon. House leader said, that it was conveyed to your House leader far in advance that that wasn't one we were going to be able to get at this year.

Three parties were working together, we asked for your input, from the hon. House leader from the Green Party, 10 initiatives came forward, we touched all 10, we didn't get it to the full extent that they wanted but we touched all 10.

The inputs that came from the third party, we implemented, you've got 87% in there, you're doing pretty well I would have to say.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness, your second supplementary.

Mr. Henderson: Premier, one of the biggest issues here, you keep talking about the issue of collaboration, we hear it everywhere you go, you say: collaboration, when it comes to your model of government for PEI.

Yet, it seems that on the opposition side, both sides over here, all it is it seems to be words with no action.

We know that government has set aside an \$18 million contingency slush fund.

Government contingency fund

Question to the Premier: Will you direct your Minister of Finance to use the government's \$18 million contingency fund and provide the requested funds by this party – and I'm thinking might even be supported by other parties here – to fund our watershed groups and to provide a livestock strategy and fulfill your commitment on the words of collaboration, which you boast

about on every occasion to the parties on this side of the Legislature.

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: I boast about collaboration because in six weeks the most collaborative Legislature in the history of this building is in action.

Collaboration is when you sit across the table and you say: what do you want in the budget? You tabled 12 budgets and never asked any party what they wanted in the budget. Not once.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Premier King: That's not collaboration, this is collaboration, when you sit here and you say: listen, collaboration is give me your ideas, give me your issues, give me your initiatives, it doesn't mean you get them all. That wouldn't be collaboration would it? That would be all your way and we've seen that for 12 years.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

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

I have a question to the Premier, who, with all this talk of ducks is very plucky today.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Mitchell: And he's talking like he has a majority on that side of the House as well.

I would like to welcome the Premier back and trust his meetings this week were very productive.

During the Premier's absence, there were several matters raised by his Cabinet members that are quite frankly, very confusing to us over on this side of the House.

Elimination of free drivers' licenses

For example, the minister of environment appeared to be opposed to his own budget. He raised the idea of eliminating the free drivers' licenses and retrieving the revenue for other spending.

Premier, do you agree with this approach?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: What a great question to be welcomed back to, Mr. Speaker.

I would say that if we are going to be serious about the reduction of carbon, and we all are because you all went out when the microphone was there and said you believe in it and you went from 1.4 to 1.2.

An Hon. Member: Where were you?

Premier King: So you have to – I (Indistinct) right here from the start right here and you can ask the Member from Summerside-Wilmot – absolutely. I'll tell you what, this is what it comes down to, you can continue to pay people to drive or you can continue to put initiatives in place to reduce carbon.

This Legislature ratified a bill brought forward by the opposition party to be more aggressive with our reduction targets and you can't continue to do that under the former plan that you've done. So yes, we are looking at taking that money and diverting it from making it easier for people to drive and to reward those who take initiatives to reduce carbon, which all Prince Edward Islanders want.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Islanders will certainly be confused by that because it wasn't in the PC platform.

The same minister also seemed to be warm to the idea of raising the excise tax on fuel. But to be frank, the minister of the environment appears to have the ability to contradict himself very easily.

Changes to excise tax on fuel

Question to the Premier: Are you considering any changes to the excise tax on fuel next year?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, I would say at this time, no.

But, one of the things we have to look at as a responsible Legislature is how we go about reducing the targets, which you all voted for. How do you go about reducing the targets from 1.4 to 1.2?

I think a standing committee is going to meet on that and figure out ways of how we do that and as the minister said; everything has to be on the table because we have to be serious about how we go about doing this.

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Members of the Cabinet also suggested this past week of recreating the Island Community Fund, ending assessments for our Island students, and a brand new move toward carbon neutrality.

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct) get your facts straight.

Mr. Mitchell: But, we also discussed a \$17 million contingency fund that was kept by the government.

An Hon. Member: Slush fund.

Mr. MacEwen: It's yours.

Government contingency fund (further)

Mr. Mitchell: Will the Premier be using those contingency funds to pay for any of those contradictions, and many of them that were raised in the House this week while you were away?

Mr. McNeilly: Yeah, a lot (Indistinct)

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Well Mr. Speaker, as the member would know, a contingency fund is there in case you need something. It's a responsible measure put in place by the wonderful Member from Cornwall-Meadowbank, who must be cringing sitting there listening to his colleagues run him down for wonderful work, three straight budgets which he can put his hand on in

surplus, and you're running him down. I can't believe it. I don't know – come over former minister, come over where you're welcome and appreciated. It would be so wonderful to have you over here.

A contingency fund is for a contingency if you need it. You can't go out and spend it. One of your members is calling it a slush fund. You're calling it a contingency fund – it's a responsible form to make sure that the Island is in good hands, and thanks to the former minister – the Member from Cornwall-Meadowbank, the Island is in good financial situation.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. MacEwen: Here are some good questions coming.

Mr. Deagle: Well Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure how I go after all of this excitement.

Premier, you got a break from me this time. I'm not at you.

For many years, I've been active in minor hockey and soccer, as both a coach and referee. One thing I have noticed in recent years is what seems to be a dramatic increase in vaping by Island youth. There's been a significant and troubling increase in youth vaping in Canada.

A study public in the British medical journal found that those 16 to 19-years-old, vaping has increased by a stunning 74% from 2017 to 2018.

Rate of vaping by Island youth

A question to the health minister: Do you have any figures on the rate of vaping by Island youth as we do with regular smoking?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Aylward: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am, as well, quite concerned about the increase in vaping within our youth population.

Just recently, there was a report done, a study that showed that upwards of 26% of

our high school students admitted to vaping and I find that extremely troubling.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

E-cigarettes were originally targeted for adult smokers who have not been able to quit and I know that vaping is seen by some as a way to reduce direct tobacco use but I feel it seems to be geared or targeted towards teens.

This study also found that cigarette smoking among 16-19-year-olds during the same time period increased by 45%.

Minister, does this disturbing trend disturb you and what are the current rules around the use of vaping on Prince Edward Island?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Rules for use of vaping on PEI

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

Again, as I said previously, it's very alarming, the rapid increase of our youth participating in vaping. As the hon. member said, you only have to be around high schools, public places where youth gather and you can see this trend.

The research isn't completely in yet on the harmful effects of vaping but we know that the ultrafine particles that are consumed through this process are getting deep into the lung tissues of our youth and any individual that does participate in this.

I am greatly concerned about this; the Canadian Cancer Society as well is doing research on it and advocating the many programs to try to greatly reduce this practice. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Being around the rink and the soccer fields all the time, I've seen youth first hand that have started vaping and it really has become an epidemic, I believe. The results of this study regarding youth trends is a tremendous concern given the progress that has been made in recent years to reduce youth smoking. We need to avoid a new generation of teenagers being addicted to nicotine through vaping products.

Increase of minimum age to purchase vaping products

Minister, will you take action on this and look at increasing the minimum age to purchase vaping products to 21 or perhaps we can take leadership and even look at banning the sale of vaping products on Prince Edward Island?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

At this point in time, we are working closely with the office of the public health officer, we're not quite at the stage yet where we would either increase the age or outright ban it. I remember not that long ago here in the Legislative Assembly when I was on the other side of the floor, we were bringing measures forward to prohibit flavoured tobacco products, which we had great success here in the House in doing so.

Currently the legal age for obtaining these products is 19, this government has invested money into the cessation programs and one of those particular measures is we are increasing the – if you want to take it as a mystery shopping program, so that we can better go into the retail outlets to ensure that our retailers are abiding by the laws of Prince Edward Island and they're not selling vaping products to minors.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The idea for a universal half-day preschool for four-year-olds is the result of recommendations by the Margaret and Wallace McCain foundation and Chances who completed a six year research project to document the impact of expanding access to a range of quality integrated early childhood services focused on at risk families.

Implementation of universal half-day kindergarten

Question to the Premier: could you please confirm and let the House know if there are any other factors to make this an election promise?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Well as the hon. member has alluded to, I mean the extensive study was taken by what I would say are two tremendous organizations who are committed to doing the best we can for children.

The conversations that I've had, not just with the Margaret and Wallace McCain foundation but those in the industry is that the earlier that we can get our kids into a system where they can do some (Indistinct) based learning on a small level like a part day, the better chance for success going forward. That's why we have committed to working with chances and others to do this.

These are experts in my mind, these are the people who do this every day and it's something that we're really trying to do cautiously at the beginning. There was a major push to do a full day, which we didn't think was the right step going forward. But we do think with currently 80-82% of four-year-olds are already in some kind of care that we thought that this was a logical step. It's a way to help families get to part of their day for the daycare services that some families need.

One of the issues that I heard on the campaign trail from many young parents were: Would it be mandatory? I said: Absolutely not. If you felt it wasn't the best thing for your child that you certainly would be within your right to hold them back or find other opportunities. But we really wanted to try to do the very best we can to give our kids that start they need going

forward. I think there's a lot of details to be worked out going forward for sure. But that was the basis of the commitment that we had made.

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

Ms. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

You beat me to one of my questions so I'm just going to jump to it just to clarify.

You're saying this is not a mandatory program?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Yeah, I think, Mr. Speaker, what we had committed to going forward was to try to this year work with the professionals within the industries and some of the experts to actually build what the program could look like, what expansions that other facilities might need.

We already have a number of these early childhood education facilities across Prince Edward Island, so we think that's the best place to implement this. But we want to make sure we have their input as well, so that's why we didn't rush to do it for this year. We wanted to have a year to work with the professionals to figure out what is the best going forward.

But I don't think – I mean my youngest is now 12, I don't think when he was four, this might have been the perfect thing for him. Our middle child, I think it would have been wonderful for her, but I think all kids are different, all children are different and I think the parents have to have a final say within that.

I don't think the idea would be to make it mandatory. As I say, I think if you have a hesitation that maybe you could find other options or you could make the best decision for yourself. I do see it evolving going forward and I would hope as many people take the opportunity to get a good start here. But no, I don't think the best interest is to make it mandatory.

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

Ms. Bernard: I appreciate that because one of my concerns was, the fact that as a parent, I would have never have chosen that for my children and that we take away that choice for parents and that's not okay.

The other part before I get to my question is on – we can't afford to feed the kids that are in the system now. We've got work to do in our school system, so my fear is taking this money to burden an already burdened system is problematic. I recognize that the government is on the data collection phase of this proposed project.

My hope is that if this government is going to go ahead with putting our four-year-olds in a half day universal pre-school program that the implementation of such a program is done so extremely cautiously with care and concern.

We must consider the ripple effects and the possibility of other problems resulting from such an implementation. There must be research done, jurisdictional scans complete; there must be consultation with parents and educators at all levels.

Information/plans for half-day universal kindergarten program

Question to the Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning: Can you please provide us with any information or plans you have so far in terms of this program?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and thanks for the question.

Obviously, we are the very beginning stages of moving forward. One thing we really do need to be cognizant of is that there are several issues in early learning. We talked about the early childhood educators, making sure we have enough of them as well as the earned wage – good for the work they do.

Really, the thing we have to be cognizant of is, we have one of the best early childhood development systems in Canada. I believe we are actually ranked number one.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Trivers: As we move forward we want to make sure we're not impacting that.

The first step really is to get this special advisor to the Premier in place who's going to be leading this work. We're very close to that right now. I don't think I can make any announcements today, but thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park, your final question.

Ms. Bernard: I always hear that we have the best early years programs and I hope people are looking at that with the lens of well being, because when you're working in early childhood it's – anyway – okay.

The official opposition has spoken to many early childhood educators and daycare owners. All of them are already struggling to maintain enough staff and cannot imagine staffing a program such as this. Their core issues are around wages and staff retention, local access to educational programming that advance early childhood educators and care for our special needs children.

Early childhood educators re: program

Question to the Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning: Can you please inform the House what you heard from early childhood educators when you consulted with them about this program?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The early childhood educators I've talked to, I'm getting a similar message to what the member across just brought forward.

There are some major challenges here with people entering the program and staying in the program. There are challenges with ECEs that are moving to become educational assistants, and it has to do sometimes with wages. These are all parts of the areas we need to address and that's one of the things that we're going to be doing as part of the first 1,000 days and the pre-k development.

I do have a nice table – it's an early childhood education report from 2017 that looks at all of the provinces across Canada and it outlines the specific areas where PEI did come out on top and I can share that with the member as well.

Speaker: Thank you, members.

[End of Question Period]