



DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

Speaker: Honourable Keith Bain

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First Session

THURSDAY, APRIL 14, 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS	PAGE
POINT OF PRIVILEGE, Hon. K. Irving	2399
C. Chender	2400
E. Smith-McCrossin.....	2401
Hon. B. Johns.....	2401
The Speaker	2402
S. Leblanc	2402
Hon. T. Houston (The Premier)	2403
L. Lachance.....	2404
Hon. K. Irving.....	2404
K. Coombes.....	2405
S. Hansen	2405
Hon. B. Johns.....	2406
The Speaker	2407
INTRODUCTION OF NEW SPEAKER'S OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR:	
The Speaker	2407
TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS AND OTHER PAPERS:	
Progress Report on French-language Services Provided by the	

Government of Nova Scotia, 2018-21, Hon. C. LeBlanc	2407
STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS:	
Portapique Tragedy: 2 nd Anniv. - Recog., The Premier.....	2408
Hon. I. Rankin.....	2409
G. Burrill.....	2409
Moment of Silence.....	2410
GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION:	
Res. 231, Read, P./Reynolds, S.: Long Serv. Awd. Recips. - Congrats., Hon. K. Masland.....	2410
Vote - Affirmative.....	2410
Res. 232, Language in Lyrics Proj.: Prom. of Gaelic - Recog., Hon. A. MacMaster.....	2411
Vote - Affirmative.....	2412
Res, 233, French Lang. Servs. Coords.: Commit. - Recog., Hon. C. LeBlanc	2412
Vote - Affirmative.....	2413
Res. 234, Lusby, Deborah: Retirement - Best Wishes, Hon. K. Masland.....	2413
Vote - Affirmative.....	2414
Res. 235, Lobster Cert. Pgm. Partics.: Completion - Congrats. Hon. S. Craig.....	2414
Vote - Affirmative.....	2415
Res. 236, World Autism Acceptance Mo.: Supp. - Recog. Hon. B. Comer	2415
Vote - Affirmative.....	2415
INTRODUCTION OF BILLS:	
No. 168, An Act to Establish an Education Fund for Former Children in Care, K. Coombes.....	2415
No. 169, An Act Respecting the Elimination of Poverty, K. Coombes.....	2416
No. 170, An Act to Amend Chapter 4 of the Acts of 1995-96, the Community Colleges Act, L. Lachance.....	2416
No. 171, An Act to Amend Schedule A of Chapter 1 of the Acts of 2018, the Education Act, S. Hansen	2416
STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS:	
Portapique Residents: Com. Spirit Awd. Recips. - Recog., T. Taggart.....	2416
Riley, Harold: 100 th Birthday - Best Wishes, Hon. K. Regan.....	2417
O2 Pgm.: Prov. Unique Lrng. Expers. - Recog., L. Lachance.....	2417
Ozon, Joanne & Mike: Illuminate N.S. Org. - Thanks,	

Hon. K. Masland	2417
Morash, A./Allen, L.: Firefighting Work - Thanks, Hon. I. Rankin	2418
GBBA: 20 th Anniv. - Recog., S. Leblanc	2418
Easter: Christian Celeb. - Best Wishes, Hon. J. Lohr	2419
ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS:	
No. 474, Prem.: COVID Child Vacc. Rates - Update, Hon. I. Rankin	2419
No. 475, Prem.: Housing Imbalance - Address, G. Burrill	2421
No. 476, EECD: School Staff Shortage - Update, Hon. D. Mombourquette	2423
No. 477, EECD: Daycare Operators - Support, Hon. D. Mombourquette	2424
No. 478, EECD: New School Air Filters - Cost, R. DiCostanzo	2425
No. 479, Prem.: Disability Rights - Solution, G. Burrill	2426
No. 480, EECD: Online Learning Challs. - Consult, B. Clark	2427
No. 481, EECD: Curric. Changes - Update, A. Simmonds	2428
No. 482, EECD: Weekly School Staff Mtgs. - Commit, A. Simmonds	2429
No. 483, DCS: CERB Overpayments - Forgive, K. Coombes	2430
No. 484, EECD: Schools Capital Plan - Attack, Hon. Z. Churchill	2431
No. 485, EECD: French-Lang. Training - Preserv., Hon. Z. Churchill	2432
No. 486, DHW: Emerg. Servs. Shortage - Update, E. Smith-McCrossin	2433
No. 487, ACSW - Budget: Gender-Based Analysis - Commit, C. Chender	2434
No. 488, EECD: School Lunch Pgm. - Implement, F. Tilley	2435
No. 489, EECD: Fin. Literacy Pgm. - Update, F. Tilley	2437
No. 490, EECD: Skilled Trades Prom. - Funding, L. Nicoll	2437
GOVERNMENT BUSINESS:	
PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING:	
No. 154, Tourist Accommodations Registration Act Hon. P. Dunn	2439

R. DiCostanzo	2441
S. Leblanc	2442
C. Chender	2443
Hon. P. Dunn.....	2444
Vote - Affirmative.....	2444
No. 155, Public Prosecutions Act	
Hon. B. Johns.....	2445
Hon. I. Rankin.....	2446
C. Chender	2448
Hon. B. Johns.....	2449
Vote - Affirmative.....	2449
HOUSE RECESSED AT 3:43 P.M.....	2450
HOUSE RESOLVED INTO CWH ON BILLS AT 4:05 P.M.	2450
HOUSE RECONVENED AT 6:00 P.M.....	2450
ADJOURNMENT, House rose to meet again on Tue., April 19 th at 1:00 p.m.	2450



HALIFAX, THURSDAY, APRIL 14, 2022

Sixty-fourth General Assembly

First Session

1:00 P.M.

SPEAKER

Hon. Keith Bain

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

Angela Simmonds, Lisa Lachance

THE SPEAKER: Order, please.

The honourable member for Kings South.

HON. KEITH IRVING: Mr. Speaker, I am rising on a point of privilege, which I believe is on behalf of all 55 members of this House.

Mr. Speaker, the government has called government business today to occur at the same time as the Law Amendments Committee sits. By doing this, it is preventing nine elected members of this House from being able to fully participate in the business of passage of bills in this House. This is limiting the rights and privileges of members of this Legislature. In fact, this can apply to all members of the House who wish to watch the proceedings of the Law Amendments Committee.

The government will stand and say that this has happened before and yes, it has, but that doesn't make it right. To my knowledge, no question has ever been put before the Speaker for a ruling, and I am asking today for the Speaker to make this important ruling. There is no urgency to any bills before the House. This House sits the least amount of any legislature in the country.

We cannot understand why this government is rushing through this session. MLAs from all sides of the House are tired and, of more concern, Mr. Speaker, is that your staff, Legislative Television, the staff in this House, are tired. They are being asked to do double duty while two legislative events are taking place at the same time.

The Premier, members of his caucus, and Opposition told us many times that they would operate differently, that they would uphold democracy, that they would be held accountable, and that they were looking forward to being accountable for their decisions. But rushing the Law Amendments Committee at the same time while the House is sitting is not about democracy and good legislation.

One can only conclude that this is a political agenda to prevent the addition of days in the Legislature to avoid additional Question Periods, and questions from Opposition and the media. In doing this, this government is violating the privileges afforded to the elected members of this Legislature.

Mr. Speaker, I am asking for a ruling by the Speaker that any legislative business of this House cannot take place while the Law Amendments Committee is meeting. To conduct the work of this House without the full participation of members needs to be decided upon.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I endorse my colleague's point of privilege. The core point that it would impact our members' individual privileges to entertain and engage in debate in this House is serious, and I believe I would support it.

I want to say something else, which is a corollary point, and I think something that the members might want to consider in thinking about this. My colleague said that the House - that we're tired, and that the House staff is tired. That's true. We're also sick, and we're also short-staffed.

There is an old political adage that one learns when one becomes a House Leader in particular, which is that there are no votes at Province House. Because of that, often the workings of this Chamber and the operations are neglected or not given due consideration. I think that's a shame.

We find ourselves in a position right now where we have one out of three Clerks at the table. We have a House operations manager who has a second full-time job. We have a third of our normal complement of Pages, and that number has been reduced due to illness and other issues throughout the session. Legislative Television has been struggling with their own absences. They're in the middle of a renovation. We've had staff changes in the Commissionaires.

Point to any aspect of the way this House conducts its business and you will find a deeply, deeply stressed system. Yet from the second day of debate, this government called hours until 11:00 p.m. and 11:59 p.m. every single day of this session. They'll say that's because they're hard workers. I wonder, when you look at other professions that work long hours, if people will tell you - we heard from the paramedics just recently who said, you don't want me to tend to your emergency when I'm on hour 12 of my shift, because I'm not the person you're going to want to save your life.

I would submit that we're doing difficult work in this Chamber. I think our constituents want us to be able to attend to that work appropriately. Without getting into the issue directly of hours, because that doesn't impact . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. There's quite a bit of chatter.

The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Because that doesn't impact on the point of privilege on the floor. I will say that at the very least, this government could afford us the privilege to actually engage in debate on bills, because that's why we're here. That's why our constituents sent us here. When people present at the Law Amendments Committee, they expect elected members to listen to and consider what they're putting forward. We're not able to do either of those things appropriately if those committees are running concurrently - the committee in the House.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I just stand to say that I support the point of privilege. I've been trying to figure out all morning how I was going to participate in debate in here - maybe have my headphones on and listen to the Law Amendments Committee and try to do both at the same time.

I think my former colleagues know that I am also a hard worker, but I also believe in workplace wellness. It is not fair to any of the people who work in this Legislature, given the COVID illnesses and the hours. I just wanted to stand in support.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Justice.

HON. BRAD JOHNS: Mr. Speaker, I would look for a couple of questions when you come back with your ruling, if possible. I do believe, as the oldest legislature in Canada, that we are currently the only legislature provincially that holds the Law Amendments Committee. I would like confirmation on that.

I would also like to know, in regard to the Law Amendments Committee, how many other legislatures are currently holding video. We have expanded that process recently in

this sitting to take advantage of video presentations to try to widen the broader range of people from across this province. Instead of having to come actually to Halifax to make a presentation at the Committee on Law Amendments, we now do them virtually, thereby allowing people from anywhere within the province to dial in and make a presentation.

I'm curious on that and what I believe was shown this morning during the Committee on Law Amendments was the fact that people from all over North America - we had some people from Canada, and I know there were some who were trying to get in from the United States to present as well. I'd like to see what comes back in that in the ruling.

Respectfully, to everybody in here and respectfully to the Speaker's Office as well, this Legislature meets twice a year. When we come in here, we come in here to do work - as the oldest legislature in the country. Although I have not had the opportunity, the privilege, to do it, I do know that between 2015-16 this Legislature met for, I believe, 24 hours straight. The job of the politicians is to come here and do the business of the people, to hear from the people, which we are doing. It's the job for the facility here, the Legislature, to ensure we're not impeded from doing that job.

Although I do recognize what some members are saying around some of the issues, and certainly am sympathetic to those, we're here to work and the Legislature needs to be open while we're here working. Thank you and I'd like a response.

THE SPEAKER: If I may, I'd like to comment on one remark that was made about the Legislature impeding the work of government. The Legislature is in no way attempting to impede the work of government. I think everybody is aware, and it's already been mentioned, that the short staff we have here is through no fault of anybody, through no fault of anybody.

I have committed previously, once the House rises, to review the workings of this Legislature and bring it back to all three Party leaders at a later date, that we might have some of these problems addressed and looked after in the future.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. Speaker, thank you for those comments. I just want to make a couple of comments based on the honourable Minister of Justice's remarks. First of all, I do understand that in other jurisdictions in Canada the public is able to give comments on legislation through various committees. In Nova Scotia, yes, we may be the only one that has a Committee on Law Amendments but, in fact, that is our only way to receive comments from the public in a recorded and public way. (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The member for Dartmouth North has the floor.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. Speaker, the thing about the Committee on Law Amendments is that it is in Hansard and it's televised and everyone gets to hear what the witnesses say. That is why the Committee on Law Amendments is particularly important and I think that any Legislature in the country should look to Nova Scotia as a gold standard in terms of having the Committee on Law Amendments.

But that being said, that is not the issue at hand. It is not that we are being so generous to hold the Committee on Law Amendments, but my honourable colleague from the Liberal Party is suggesting in a point of privilege - my understanding of a point of privilege is that something is happening that is obstructing MLAs from doing our elected job.

The fact is some of us have to be at the Committee on Law Amendments, listening to law amendments, and if some of us want to be there to hear what the public is saying - which is also doing our job - we cannot do that if we also have to be in the Chamber passing legislation, which we also are elected to do. We can't be in two places at once. It's impossible. Therefore, holding the Committee on Law Amendments at the same time as legislative hours is impeding us from doing our job.

Lastly, I will just say that it makes no difference - I want to applaud the government for continuing the access that was provided to the Committee on Law Amendments virtually that the Liberals started last year and that the current government has continued. I think it's excellent and as we move towards 2030, when our entire province has to be accessible to everyone - and that means more than doors that open and are wide enough - we have to keep that accessibility, but we shouldn't be patting ourselves on the back for it. That should be a basis of the way we hear from the public at Law Amendments Committee.

I just want to reiterate that my understanding of the point of privilege is that we are being obstructed from doing our jobs. I agree with the member, I hope you do too.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Premier.

HON. TIM HOUSTON (The Premier): I respect the opinions of the members opposite, but I take serious issue with any accusation that there's any movement by the government to impede anyone's ability to do their job in this Chamber. That is not the case. As a point of fact, I will remind members of this House that we collaboratively worked together to agree not to have Estimates in the first two days. We can work together.

Less than a week ago, the Government House Leader asked the House to recess so a member who was absent from the Chamber could return to the Chamber to speak on a bill because it was important to us, and always remains important to us, that every member have an opportunity. The way that the House is structured for today, every member will certainly have their opportunity. They may have to balance their schedules a little bit, but they will have an opportunity. (Interruption)

[1:15 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The Premier has the floor.

THE PREMIER: And for any member to suggest that they can't balance their schedule a little bit in the face of a province where we know - the member referenced paramedics, people working in health care. People are working in stressful situations all the time. This Chamber should be no exception to that.

I will leave you with one final thought. This Legislature, established in 1848, been in existence for 174 - people have come to this Chamber to represent people during wars, during depressions, famines, incredible situations. We have a situation in this province. We're working through it. What I will tell you happened for 174 years is members of this House have learned to respect the authority of the Speaker. We will respect the authority of the Speaker. We've seen just this week, one member said to you, not interested in your authority and won't apologize - leaving the Chamber because they don't respect the authority of your chair. But we do, Mr. Speaker.

I will leave you with this thought. I believe the member for Kings South referred to a precedence of this happening before in this House. He might have left out that it happened when he was Deputy House Leader for the government. I raise that for one reason: Precedence matters. What is happening this afternoon gives every opportunity for every member in this House to speak to every piece of legislation they want. If they feel they can't, talk to their House Leader and make it happen because they have every opportunity. We are committed to doing the work of the people.

We're in stressful situations, there's no question about that, but undeterred, we put Nova Scotians first and that's what we will do every single day.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: I am not going to speak long. I think there's been lots that's been raised, and I look forward to the progress and the initiative you're taking to review the House proceedings, but what I would say is that I'm a member of the Law Amendments Committee and I hold this seat. When the two things are happening at once - it's not about balancing my schedule. Lots of us in the province know how to balance our schedule. I simply cannot divide my body in half.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings South.

HON. KEITH IRVING: Precedent is obviously used in rulings, but this question has never been before the House. The Speaker has not ruled; that's what I am asking for. We could look at the precedent from 2010; it's different from the precedent in 2015. What I am looking for, or what this House should be looking for, is what is right.

Whether I sat on that side of the House and listened to the Opposition raise issues about how the previous government handled various deliberations of this House is inconsequential. We can spend the next 200 years of democracy in this province saying, well you guys did it, so you guys can't do it, so you guys do it. Let's do what is right for this House, do what is right for democracy, and what is right for our constituents as we represent them here in the House.

I am asking the Speaker to give us a ruling that will guide the future of this House, not looking backwards. We have not had a ruling from the Speaker on this. For the first time I am asking, members of this House are asking, for a ruling from the Speaker before any government business takes place while Law Amendments is sitting.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

KENDRA COOMBES: Mr. Speaker, I look forward to your ruling. I concur with my colleague in the Liberal Party.

I also agree with my colleague for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island that you simply cannot split yourself in two. You can balance a schedule all you want, but you can't be in two places at once. It is impossible. We haven't invented that type of cloning yet. It's very much a law of physics. You just cannot be in two places at once unless you are on a street corner.

The Premier brought up paramedics. Paramedics are working so much that they're bleeding through their clothes when they're on their periods. Some people are working for so long that they don't get the chance to go to the bathroom. That is not healthy. That is not right. When the Premier says that they're able to do it, no they're not. They're able to do it in a very unhealthy way and a very detrimental way, but it is not a good way.

Again, this is a point of privilege, I believe, for the whole House. The importance of Law Amendments Committee is to hear from the public about our bills. As members who are going to be voting on those bills, we should all have a chance to get to go into the Red Chamber and listen and hear what Nova Scotians, and others, are having to say about our bills and how our bills will impact them. That is democracy in action.

What is going to be happening at, I believe, three o'clock or maybe a little later now, is actually going to impede the democratic process. It will impede MLAs from hearing from Nova Scotians, I look forward to your ruling. Again, you cannot be in two places at once.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: I only have three points. They're going to be quick and very precise.

First and foremost, once again we can't be in two places at once. I'm really good. I have seven kids. I understand what that means. I can multi-task, schedule, and figure all that stuff out. At the same time, the concept of being in two places just can't happen.

Number two: Listening to Nova Scotians should be a priority. We said this. We understand that Law Amendments Committee is something that's really beneficial and yes, we do this differently than any other province, but as the Minister of Justice said, we are the first Province House . . . (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The honourable member for Halifax Needham has the floor.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are the first Province House, and we should be setting the precedents. We need to be working towards making it accessible for everyone. I also want us to remember that having Law Amendments Committee means that we are listening, understanding, and being compassionate and also, can be collaborative if we are really truly being mindful. I said that yesterday. I know you guys heard me.

The third part is that I just want to say thank you to the Speaker of this House. As we have heard, we're short-staffed on many levels. People are not well. We truly appreciate the work that they're doing here. We need to be respectful and mindful because not only are we sitting here long hours, they are also sitting here long hours. They're waiting on us. They're doing this hard work and we need to be considerate and mindful of that when this decision is made.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Justice.

HON. BRAD JOHNS: Mr. Speaker, I'm not 100 per cent sure that I was clear. I do want to state for the record that in your ruling to the member for Kings South, I would like to know: Now that we have expanded the options for the public to present at Law Amendments Committee, if there could be some rules established with that.

I find it somewhat hypocritical and ironic that members will stand up in this House and complain about the hours and about how we're conducting . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. I would ask the Minister of Justice to withdraw that word because it's unparliamentary.

BRAD JOHNS: I rephrase and withdraw the word "hypocritical." I find it somewhat interesting that members of this House will complain when the government is trying to conduct its business in an effective way to be able to move business forward, when I've approached other members in this House on how Law Amendments Committee should operate, whether or not there should be time periods set so that effective government

can happen and not be stalled by Opposition members in this House - who stall on purpose government process moving forward.

I'd like to see a ruling from the Speaker in regard to this if we're talking about the Law Amendments Committee as well.

THE SPEAKER: Again, just on those remarks, that would come up under another point of privilege as well, because what you're asking for is not really part of the point of privilege.

I have heard the point of privilege. I have heard the members make statements on both sides of the House. I will take the point of privilege under advisement. I will give a ruling when we return next week, but a second request came in in the closing remarks from the presenter about stopping all business until a decision is made. Today's business will continue as scheduled and there will be a ruling made next week on the point of privilege.

Before we get into the daily routine, it's not a very good introduction to the person I'm going to introduce to you, but anyway, I just ask all members to look up in the Speaker's Gallery for an introduction.

On Monday, April 11th, Matthew Timmons started his new role as Director of Administration in the Speaker's Administration Office. Of course, this is following the well-earned retirement of Deborah Lusby, and we thank Deborah for her commitment to all of us.

Matthew comes to the Legislature from Dalhousie University, where he was the Director of Finance in the Faculty of Medicine and has also previously served at the Nova Scotia Department of Justice. Please join me in welcoming Matthew to our Legislative Services team. (Standing Ovation)

Moving on to the daily routine.

PRESENTING AND READING PETITIONS

PRESENTING REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS AND OTHER PAPERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Acadian Affairs and Francophonie.

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: Tant que ministre des Affaires acadiennes et de la Francophonie, il me fait plaisir de déposer le rapport d'étape 2018-2021 des services en français offert par le gouvernement de la Nouvelle-Écosse.

Mr. Speaker, as Minister of Acadian Affairs and Francophonie, it's my pleasure to table the progress report on French-language services provided by the Government of Nova Scotia, 2018-2021.

THE SPEAKER: The report is tabled.

STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Premier.

THE PREMIER: Today we mark the solemn occasion as we remember our fellow Nova Scotians who lost their lives on April 18 and April 19, 2020.

Together we remember Tom Bagley, Kristen Beaton and their unborn child, Greg Blair, Jamie Blair, Joy Bond, Peter Bond, Lillian Campbell, Corrie Ellison, Gina Goulet, Alanna Jenkins, Sean McLeod, Dawn Gulenchyn, Frank Gulenchyn, Lisa McCully, Heather O'Brien, Jolene Oliver, Aaron Tuck, Emily Tuck, Heidi Stevenson, Joanne Thomas, John Zahl, and Joey Webber.

Two years have passed, but the heartbreak and sorrow remain. We cannot imagine the pain and suffering the victims' families have endured over the last two years. We stand with you today and on all days. April 18th and 19th forever changed each of us. In remembrance of the lives lost and in honour of the strength and courage of the survivors, flags throughout the province will be lowered from sunrise on Monday, April 18th until sundown on Tuesday, April 19th. We ask all Nova Scotians to pause at noon on both days and join together to observe a moment of silence. It's important that we stand together this year and in all future years.

This Fall, we also plan to introduce legislation to establish April 18th and 19th as provincial days of remembrance. Before introducing that legislation, we will consult with the families and the Department of Justice to ensure we are remembering their loved ones in the ways they think they should be remembered.

As we're doing all this, the days of remembrance will allow us to collectively remember the lives lost and reflect on how those days also brought us together as a community, as a province, and as a nation. They united us and showed our collective strength. That resilience is most evidenced in family members left behind, and in the individuals and groups that have been supporting them. Schools, community groups, and many other organizations have been there to help. Together, we remain "Nova Scotia Strong."

Mr. Speaker, following comments from the members opposite, I ask that all members of the Legislature join together in a moment of silence to honour those who we lost two years ago.

We will always remember them, hold them in our thoughts and in our hearts.

[1:30 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: I want to thank the Premier for a copy of his remarks in advance.

It has been nearly two years since our province experienced the most unthinkable tragedy. On April 18 and 19, 2020, we lost 22 Nova Scotians, each of whom was loved and cherished by their families and communities. Our hearts were shattered. We all remember those days with shock, terror, and sadness. However, there is also love, compassion, and strength.

To the families, we recognize your grief, and Nova Scotians came out in droves to show their love and support. We wanted you to know that you are not alone. That remains true today, nearly two years later. We remember your loved ones - nurses who cared for our sick and elderly, a teacher who helped our children grow, that young girl who loved the fiddle, business owners, volunteer firefighters, correctional officers, constable - but most importantly friends, parents, grandparents, and loved ones. There are no words to provide comfort for the anguish of having a loved one torn away from you.

Two years later, I know it hasn't gotten any easier, but I do admire the families and the communities that have shown remarkable courage and strength. You are not alone. All Nova Scotians stand with you and we grieve with you today and always.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the New Democratic Party.

GARY BURRILL: Mr. Speaker, I wish to commend the government for the decision to lower our flags on April 18th and 19th in Nova Scotia and to hold commemorative silence at noon on both those days. At these hours next Monday and Tuesday across Nova Scotia, we will see workplaces become still, classes pause, pedestrians stand quiet, and vehicles pull over to the side of the road. In those moments, the people of our province will be able to say, by gesture, what it is almost impossible to find an adequate way to say in words.

We will thereby be acknowledging how our collective memory and sense of ourselves in Nova Scotia has been forever altered by the terrible events of April 2020. We will thereby be standing in the solidarity of sorrow, holding present to our minds those whose lives were taken and those who live in the valley of this shadow.

We will thereby be expressing also gratitude for all those, and here may I include the staff of the Mass Casualty Commission, who have taken on the experience of this

darkness that they might help provide some tentative, small light on the deepest place within us. We mark these days.

THE SPEAKER: Please rise for a moment of silence.

[A moment of silence was observed.]

GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Public Works.

RESOLUTION NO. 231

HON. KIM MASLAND: I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas in 2022, two current employees of a Nova Scotia Legislature will receive Long Service Awards; and

Whereas Paul Read, an audio technician with Legislative Television, will receive a Long Service Award for 30 years; and Sherry Reynolds, a senior accounts administrator with the Speaker's Administration Office, will receive a Long Service Award for 40 years; and

Whereas Paul and Sherry are outstanding public servants who continue to demonstrate their commitment and dedication to the successful operation of the Nova Scotia Legislature through their respective roles;

Therefore be it resolved that the members of this House of Assembly join me in congratulating Paul Read and Sherry Reynolds on receiving their Long Service Awards from the Province of Nova Scotia in recognition of their outstanding and dedicated service to the province.

Mr. Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage with debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

It is quite interesting to note when we introduced the new administrator for the Speaker's Office that Sherry spent all 40 years, I believe, in the Speaker's Office so maybe our new administrator might have to go a long way to beat that record.

In all seriousness, congratulations to both Paul and to Sherry and our thanks to them for their tremendous work for the Province.

The honourable Minister responsible for the Office of Gaelic Affairs.

RESOLUTION NO. 232

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas the Language in Lyrics project is a partnership between Cape Breton University's creative and cultural studies, the Office of Gaelic Affairs, the Beaton Institute, the Nova Scotia Highland Village Society, University of Glasgow in Scotland and the Digital Archive of Scottish Gaelic; and

Whereas the project team led by Dr. Heather Sparling, Canada Research Chair In Musical Traditions and Professor of Ethnomusicology at CBU, working with Màiri Brittin, project coordinator and Mary Jane Lamond, project manager, along with Gaelic community team members Daisy May Boyle, Kaleb DeLeskie , Johanna Huntley, Phaedra Laurie, Colleen Lynk, Edward MacDonell, Stephen MacIntyre, Stacey MacLean, Chelsey MacPherson, Trueman Matheson, Becca Ross, Aleen Stanton and Sìleas Tait, archived more than 6,000 Gaelic songs in Nova Scotia; and

Whereas the Language in Lyrics project has made thousands of songs available through an interactive online index;

Therefore be it resolved that the House of Assembly recognize all the Language in Lyrics project team members for making the songs Nova Scotia Gaels sang and continue to sing widely available to Gaelic Nova Scotia community teachers, researchers and enthusiasts.

Mr. Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Minister of Acadian Affairs and Francophonie.

RESOLUTION NO. 233

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: Monsieur le président, à une date ultérieure, je demanderai l'adoption de la résolution suivante:

Attendu que la Loi sur la service en français de 2004 de notre province stipule que les ministères, offices, organismes gouvernementaux, sociétés d'état, et les institutions publiques désignés de la province ont l'obligation de fournir des services en français; et

Attendu que pour chaque ministère désigné, les sous-ministres et les directeurs généraux doivent nommé un coordinateur ou une coordinatrice afin de les aider et les conseiller sur l'application de la Loi sur les services en français; et

Attendu que ces coordinateurs et coordinatrices siègent au comité de coordination des services en français, présidé par les Affaires Acadiens et les services en français, qui permet de mettre en commun les bons pratiques et de discuter l'amélioration des services en français du gouvernement pour le public;

Par conséquent, il est résolu que les députés de l'Assemblée législative se joignent à moi pour reconnaître et féliciter le travail accompli par les coordinateurs et coordinatrices de comité et pour leur engagement à offrir des services en français de qualité pour tous les néo-écossais et les néo-écossaises.

M. le Président, je demande l'adoption de cette résolution sans préavis et sans débat.

Mr. Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas our province's French Language Services Act of 2004 stipulates that designated departments, offices, agencies, Crown Corporations and public institutions have an obligation to provide French-language services; and

Whereas for each designated departments, deputy ministers and executive directors must appoint a coordinator to assist and advise them on the application of the French Language Services Act; and

Whereas these coordinators sit on the French Languages Services Coordinating Committee chaired by Acadian Affairs, which allows for the sharing of good practices and the discussion of improving the government's French-language services for the public;

Therefore be it resolved that the members of this House join me in recognizing and congratulating the work done by the coordinators of this committee and for the commitment to providing French-language services to all Nova Scotians.

Mr. Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Minister of Public Works.

RESOLUTION NO. 234

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas Deborah Lusby, director of administration in the Speaker's Administration Office, will begin her retirement at the end of April; and

Whereas Deborah has advised and supported members throughout this House of Assembly over the past 12 years through the transition of the Dexter, McNeil, Rankin, and Houston ministries; and

Whereas Deborah administered the House of Assembly Management Commission Regulations with dedication and diligence to ensure the successful operation of the Speaker's Administration Office and the House of Assembly;

Therefore be it resolved that members of this House of Assembly join me in congratulating Deborah Lusby on her retirement and wish her many years of good health and fun adventures with her husband Dave and their two children, Thomas and Ava.

Mr. Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

On behalf of the Speaker's Office, to the administration of the Speaker's Office, we want to thank Deborah for her years of service as well. (Standing Ovation)

[1:45 p.m.]

The honourable Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture.

RESOLUTION NO. 235

HON. STEVE CRAIG: Mr. Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas lobster is Nova Scotia's top fishery with Nova Scotia harvesters landing 20,151 metric tonnes valued at \$280 million in 2021, and the Canadian live export value increased from \$985.2 million to \$1.24 billion; and

Whereas the Nova Scotia Live Lobster Quality Certification Program, a first-of-its-kind program run by Université Sainte-Anne, has been established to recognize the best quality lobsters in Nova Scotia; and

Whereas six live lobster suppliers and exporters from across the province - Live Stor Ltd., Fisherman's Premium Atlantic Lobster, Lobsters 'R' Us, North Bay Fisherman's Coop, NovaCan Live Seafood, and Premium Seafoods Group - have exceeded rigorous standards of the program and have successfully passed audits in the Summer and Fall of 2021, and they are now ambassadors of the Nova Scotia brand;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of the Legislature congratulate the six companies that have successfully achieved this certification on their commitment to lobster quality and wish them continued success in their business endeavours as they represent Nova Scotia seafood around the world.

Mr. Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister responsible for the Office of Addictions and Mental Health.

RESOLUTION NO. 236

HON. BRAIN COMER: I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas autism spectrum disorder is the most commonly diagnosed neurological disorder in Canada and can cause significant social, communication, and behavioural challenges; and

Whereas autism affects 1 in 34 people, approximately 30,000 Nova Scotians, and each person on the autism spectrum has their own unique experience; and

Whereas World Autism Acceptance Month is a time to recognize people with autism, their family members, caregivers, educators, and other professionals who strive to make Nova Scotia an inclusive and accessible place for everyone to call their home;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this House of Assembly stand united in our acceptance and inclusion of people on the autism spectrum and acknowledge the dedication, commitment, and support provided by so many across the province, including staff and volunteers with Autism Nova Scotia.

Mr. Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill No. 168 - Entitles an Act to Establish an Education Fund for Former Children in Care. (Kendra Coombes)

Bill No. 169 - Entitled an Act Respecting the Elimination of Poverty. (Kendra Coombes)

Bill No. 170 - Entitled an Act to Amend Chapter 4 of the Acts of 1995-96, the Community Colleges Act. (Lisa Lachance)

Bill No. 171 - Entitled an Act to Amend Schedule A of Chapter 1 of the Acts of 2018, the Education Act. (Suzy Hansen)

THE SPEAKER: Ordered that these bills be read a second time on a future day.

NOTICES OF MOTION

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Colchester North.

PORTAPIQUE RESIDENTS: COM. SPIRIT AWD. RECIPS. - RECOG.

TOM TAGGART: I'm going to refer my comments to better days ahead. Last evening, I had the privilege of travelling back home and being there while Lieutenant Governor Arthur J. LeBlanc and his wife Patsy presented the Community Spirit Award to the residents of Portapique.

It was pretty heartwarming. There were a hundred people there out of that small community. I believe that at least half of them were children or young adults. I can't say how wonderful it was to see them so together and so happy. The Lieutenant Governor and his wife, wonderful people, just fit in there like a glove and treated those people and those children like they were their own.

I thought about those dark days that those people - it's still in their hearts, those dark days. That's there today. You know, they came together last night and they're a community. I know this is a member's statement and I'm rambling, but I look back to how we to some degree, even in our rural communities, got away from the community thing, where oftentimes we are great friends with our neighbours and others around, but we never really take time to stop and enjoy them. That community has said, we're going to win. They are together, and I'm proud of them.

Mr. Speaker, I ask that this Legislature congratulate the people of Portapique on receiving the Lieutenant Governor's Community Spirit Award. (Standing Ovation)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

RILEY, HAROLD: 100TH BIRTHDAY - BEST WISHES

HON. KELLY REGAN: I'd like to wish a very special constituent a very happy birthday today. Today, Harold Riley is celebrating his 100th birthday. His family points out that Harold has worked hard all his life. He fought in WWII and is now fighting a global pandemic. He spent 68 years married to the love of his life, Inee, whom he misses very much, so I guess that makes Harold both a lover and a fighter.

I popped in to see Harold last Summer and we had a great chat. I'm looking forward to popping in to see him for a socially distanced visit again this weekend. I want to wish him many happy returns of the day.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

O2 PGM.: PROV. UNIQUE LRNG. EXPERS. - RECOG.

LISA LACHANCE: I rise today to recognize the O2 Program at Citadel High School, led by Debra Wilson. The Options and Opportunities Program is a unique program where students get the opportunity to learn job and life skills in a collaborative way, based on their own interests, as well as do job placements.

Today, my daughter, Keira, and her classmate Bailey are job shadowing at my constituency office. This hands-on opportunity allows them to dive into the legislative process, such as helping to write member statements, and learn more about the work my office does locally by visiting organizations such as Spencer House.

I ask that my fellow members join me in recognizing Debra Wilson and the O2 Program at Citadel High School for the unique learning experiences they provide to our youth.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Queens.

OZON, JOANNE & MIKE: ILLUMINATE N.S. ORG. - THANKS

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, this past Saturday, the Hope Wesleyan Church in Shelburne played host to Illuminate Nova Scotia, a first-of-its-kind formal prom held for members of our special needs communities. I rise today to acknowledge former Liverpool residents and event organizers Joanne and Mike Ozon and their entire team.

Pride and excitement evident on every face, each guest was treated to pampering, professional photography sessions, and an RCMP escort down the red carpet. Every guest was crowned King or Queen following the catered meal, and the powerful impact of this special night was felt by all in attendance.

I offer my heartfelt appreciation to Joanne and Mike and to all who played such a special part in creating this truly memorable evening for so many.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect.

MORASH, A./ALLEN, L.: FIREFIGHTING WORK - THANKS

HON. IAIN RANKIN: I rise today to recognize Captain Angela Morash and Lieutenant Laura Allen, who have both served as volunteer firefighters with Halifax Regional Fire and Emergency at the Prospect Road Fire Department, Station 52, for over 20 years.

On April 11th, at 8:30 p.m., Ms. Morash and Ms. Allen responded to a report of two males who had slipped off the rocks of Peggy's Cove. The heroic actions of these volunteer firefighters played a significant role in saving a life. On the evening of the emergency, both of these individuals responded to the emergency call and quickly located an injured male who was hypothermic from being in the freezing waters off Peggy's Cove. He was not able to hold onto the rocks or tread water.

Angela Morash deployed her lifeline tether to the male and held him against the strong current so that he would not be taken out to sea, while Laura Allen deployed a second line to aid in the rescue operations. Placing themselves in harm's way to secure the male and keep him from being taken by the current and waves enabled them to pull the male to safety within 15 minutes of their arrival. Their heroic actions are why the male is alive today.

Peggy's Cove is, we know, a place of beauty and danger which has claimed the lives of folks in years past and even claimed another on April 11th, but thanks to the efforts of Ms. Morash and Ms. Allen, a life was spared. Heroism consists of putting others first, even at your own peril, and these individuals are shining examples of humble heroes showing great courage, sacrifice, and valour in their actions.

I'd like the members of the House of Assembly to join me in thanking Captain Morash and Lieutenant Allen for the selfless sacrifices they have made by putting others first, even at their own peril and by showing great courage, sacrifice, and valour in their actions and service.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

GBBA: 20TH ANNIV. - RECOG.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the Greater Burnside Business Association on the occasion of its 20th anniversary.

GBBA, as it's known, supports 1,400 businesses and organizations, big and small, located in the Burnside Business Park in Dartmouth North. The GBBA provides educational and social events to its membership and promotes and advocates for businesses and organizations in Burnside. It also produces the very handy *Burnside Business Directory*.

This year the GBBA has kept members up to date on government pandemic supports, promoted the women- and Black-owned businesses in the park, participated in the Hidden Gems and Dine Around campaigns, and held events such as the Burnside Garage Sale, a provincial election candidates debate, and the Brews & Chews social.

Please join me in congratulating the Greater Burnside Business Association on its 20th anniversary and in thanking the board of directors for its hard work and commitment to business in Dartmouth North.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings North.

EASTER: CHRISTIAN CELEB. - BEST WISHES

HON. JOHN LOHR: Mr. Speaker, I rise today in celebration of Easter. For many Nova Scotians, Easter is a time to reflect on the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Customs among us may vary, but the celebration of Easter is undoubtedly a holiday of faith, tremendous hope, and the redeeming power of love.

Whether Nova Scotians are spending this weekend with their church family, spending time with loved ones, hunting for Easter eggs, or simply enjoying an extra-long weekend, I would like to wish all Nova Scotians a Happy Easter and ask that all members of this House join me in doing so.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The time for Statements by Members has expired.

[2:00 p.m.]

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM.: COVID CHILD VACC. RATES - UPDATE

HON. IAIN RANKIN: Mr. Speaker, we know that access to data is vital as we navigate the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. One of the metrics tracked was vaccination

status by age cohort, which is no longer available. In early January, the vaccination rate amongst children under the age of 11 was only 55 per cent, well behind the government's goal of 80 per cent by last Christmas.

My question for the Premier: Has this government achieved the vaccination goal of 80 per cent amongst our children?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for this important question. I believe the answer is no. We know that we need to get more boosters into arms; we need to get more vaccinations across the spectrum for Nova Scotia.

Vaccinations work. They're important. We're seeing in real time that they're helping to mitigate the severity of illness in the vast number of cases. Vaccinations are important. We continue to promote to get the rates up, and we're hopeful that Nova Scotians will continue to respond and get out and get their shot.

IAIN RANKIN: Mr. Speaker, this is very important. Our teachers in school and staff are working every day with children who are not fully vaccinated. While this virus may have mild effects on kids, it has devastating impacts to other Nova Scotians, like their grandparents. Vaccinations not only offer protection to the person but for those around them in our health care system.

My question for the Premier: What will it take to have us achieve that 80 per cent vaccination rate that they were trying to achieve by last Christmas?

THE PREMIER: What it would take would be more people getting the vaccination, Mr. Speaker. But we know that, particularly in children, if they've had the virus, they can't get the vaccination for 90 days. Obviously that's having a bit of an impact in the numbers.

The only thing I can say to the member is that we know how important vaccinations are. We continue to promote them and continue to encourage Nova Scotians to get out and get their vaccination. We're optimistic that they will.

IAIN RANKIN: My question really is: What are they doing to promote to get kids out to get their vaccine? I'd like to see it a higher priority for the government when we have their grandparents in long-term care facilities, with 39 outbreaks now, and lots of virus in the community.

Throughout the pandemic, Nova Scotians were given access to reliable information until recently. This government has gone so far as to remove much of the data on Panorama, leaving Nova Scotians in the dark with stats like vaccination rates by age cohort. On April 5th, we asked the government why they removed this data, and the Minister of Health and Wellness said she'd look into it - and I'll table that. Now we're a week later and the data is nowhere to be seen.

Can the Premier explain why he removed this critical data and if he plans on returning it for Nova Scotians?

THE PREMIER: Look, there are significant amounts of data that are available. Certainly we know that we're at a stage in the pandemic where it's really not helpful to politicize every element of COVID. I know that the Opposition is anxious to politicize COVID, but we're working hard to move away.

People will have noticed with the weekly reporting, with last week's press conference with Dr. Strang and Dr. Deeks - I think they're doing another one today - but it's really not the place for politicians to be trying to divide communities, trying to stir up emotions. This is a place for people to recognize that COVID is all around us, that COVID is serious, and of course vaccinations work. People should take the steps they can to keep their families safe. There's no need to politicize this stuff on the floor of the Legislature, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: Before I recognize the Leader of the New Democratic Party, I neglected to say that Question Period will finish at 2:50 this afternoon. Just so it won't be extended, that's all.

The honourable Leader of the New Democratic Party.

PREM.: HOUSING IMBALANCE - ADDRESS

GARY BURRILL: Mr. Speaker, on the subject of housing, we've heard the government say many times that they're focused on supply, but Statistics Canada has released new data this week that shows there is a great deal more to the problem.

The Canadian Housing Statistics Program announced on Tuesday that 22 per cent of the property owners in Nova Scotia own 41 per cent of the properties in the province. In other words, if Nova Scotia were a group of 10 people, two of those 10 people would own almost half the homes. Would the Premier agree that this is a major problem?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, this is the problem with statistics. There's nothing to say that those people don't rent them out to a Nova Scotian. Looking at something like that in isolation is really hard to comment on on the floor of the Legislature.

What I would say is that we understand that we're in a housing crisis. The minister has been very clear on that. There's no one answer - the minister has also been very clear on that. There are multiple facets to getting to a solution on this.

There's a budget before the House. I encourage the member to support that budget, to vote on that budget and the important initiatives in there around housing. I encourage all members in this House to get behind the important work of the task force that is moving

forward to address the housing crisis. We're going to do everything we can to address the housing crisis. We will not stop until we do.

GARY BURRILL: Mr. Speaker, the new figures released this week go further. They show that in this province, the top 10 per cent of homeowners by income own more housing wealth than the bottom 50 per cent combined.

In fact, more of the Nova Scotia housing stock is owned by people who own multiple homes than is the case in either Ontario or B.C. That's why the headline of an article about the release of this new study reads, "Housing wealth in Nova Scotia concentrated at the top . . ."

As the government works to increase supply, what is the Premier doing to address this fundamental imbalance in the housing market of the province?

THE PREMIER: Listen, I'm not familiar with those numbers. What I would say is that one thing we're taking immediately is around an additional tax on non-residents. There's a lot of emotions about that. Certainly, we're hearing from many people that the home has been in the family for a long time, and there are lots of moving parts to that part of it.

What I would say, Mr. Speaker, is that there are a number of issues impacting the housing supply. We will continue to work towards resolving those issues to make sure that housing is available in this province.

GARY BURRILL: I should clarify, Mr. Speaker, that the numbers released this week speak about residents of the province who own multiple homes. It doesn't matter how much your income is or how much you might inherit.

Everyone in our province should have the right to safe and affordable housing. Unless the government deals with the situation where the richest 20 per cent own nearly half the homes in our province, thousands of families are not going to be able to realize that right.

Will the Premier agree that housing does need to be seen as a human right before it's seen as a speculative investment?

THE PREMIER: Look, there's a housing crisis. There are many moving parts to this equation. There's no question about that. We're getting to work on a number of fronts. I actually shudder to think what the member might be suggesting is his solution to the problem that he has identified.

What I would say is I respect the work of the task force, I respect the work that the minister is doing, and I respect the needs of Nova Scotians for affordable, safe housing. That's the only thing that's guiding us, Mr. Speaker. We'll continue to stay focused on that.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

EECD: SCHOOL STAFF SHORTAGE - UPDATE

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Mr. Speaker, in Budget Estimates on April 5th, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development noted that the department wasn't keeping track of COVID-19-related absences.

This is very strange to me, as we should all want the information we can get for fighting COVID-19 now and making contingency plans for the future. In New Brunswick, schools have been forced to corral students in gyms and cafeterias due to the significant staffing shortages because of COVID-19, and I'll table that.

Can the minister tell us the status of the staff shortage in Nova Scotia schools?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: I would take this opportunity to say an incredible thank you to the work of the department and our staff because we have done a really good job in Nova Scotia of keeping our kids in schools.

There is no corralling happening here in Nova Scotia. We know there's COVID-19 in schools. There's COVID-19 on buses. There's COVID-19 in our communities. There's COVID-19 in stores. We have the information that we need to manage our schools and our staff, and our students are doing an incredible job of showing up and learning.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Mr. Speaker, schools are struggling with absences amidst this wave of COVID-19. In January, Ontario was forced to raise the cap on the number of days that retired teachers were allowed to work before it impacted their pension, from 50 to 95 - and I'll table that.

My question to the minister is: Can the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development tell us whether the Nova Scotia Teachers Union has requested that and whether they are considering that initiative?

BECKY DRUHAN: Mr. Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question. I can say that I am in regular contact with the NSTU and we have a very effective and collaborative working relationship. We've been in contact as we've worked through COVID-19, as we've implemented measures.

As the member opposite would know, we've extended masking in schools. We have the tools in place that we need in schools to manage our way through COVID-19.

Are things as smooth as they would be if we didn't have a pandemic? Absolutely not - how could they be? But are our students and our educators and our staff doing a great job at staying in school and learning? Yes, they are.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou on a new question.

EECD: DAYCARE OPERATORS - SUPPORT

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Mr. Speaker, the impacts of the Omicron wave are not only impacting staffing levels in our hospitals but also in our daycares. Daycare operators in the province are saying they are experiencing the worst staffing levels since the start of the pandemic. I'll table that as well.

Helen Gamble of Health Park Early Learning Centre in Sydney said six of her 16 staff tested positive for the virus. Staff are working with our young and most unvaccinated Nova Scotians.

My question to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is: What is being done to support our daycare operators and the families who are not able to access care due to COVID-19?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: Mr. Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question. With respect to what our department is doing and what our government is doing to support our daycare operators, I can say that as we have done throughout the course of the pandemic, we are supporting our daycare operators with the provision of necessary PPE and tailored and targeted supports as COVID-19 evolves, as it changes.

With respect to staffing, I can say that I am very proud of the work the department is doing to work on supports for our staffing and the work that we're doing under the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement to make sure that we have compensation for our staff that will adequately reflect and value the incredible work they do and service they province.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Mr. Speaker, Michelle Cleary, owner of Maple Tree Montessori in Halifax, has said that while her daycare has elected to keep all their health protocols in place, she too has been challenged with staff calling in sick and being unable to maintain the staffing ratios of one teacher for every eight children.

My question to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is: As this government is developing plans for the national child care program, will they commit to extending staffing ratios so there is a buffer in the case of illness?

BECKY DRUHAN: One of the incredible steps that we're taking under our early childhood agreement implementation is to create a consultation table so that we can work with all of the incredibly knowledgeable folks within the sector, and who are stakeholders in the sector, to make sure we fully understand what the sector needs as we transform child care.

We look forward to talking about staffing ratios and all the other issues that impact child care in Nova Scotia, so we can build the absolute best system for Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

EECD: NEW SCHOOL AIR FILTERS - COST

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Speaker, one of the conditions for our schools to be reopened was to ensure there would be adequate ventilation. The province announced they would be installing new HEPA units in 70 schools. These filters, along with three-ply masks, were aimed at providing extra protection from the Omicron wave. I will table that.

My question to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is: Have the units been installed in all 70 schools? Have there been any additional units purchased for other schools that were not on that list?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: The units that are described were purchased for schools that have passive ventilation. Those are the schools that rely on the opening of windows and doors for air flow. I can confirm that those units were installed and are in use in all of those schools.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I thank the minister for the information. Mr. Speaker, concerns were raised around the costs and lack of consultation on these units. In his report, mechanical engineer Aaron Smith, who sits as a board member of the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers said, "It looks like they bought ones with some extra high-tech bells and whistles that basically may not actually deliver much advantage." It was done without sector consultation on the decision. I'll table that.

My question to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is: The estimated budget for these units was \$2.3 million after labour; what was the true expense of these units?

BECKY DRUHAN: I don't have those numbers at my fingertips, but I'll get them for you.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the New Democratic Party.

[2:15 p.m.]

PREM.: DISABILITY RIGHTS - SOLUTION

GARY BURRILL: My question is for the Premier. This morning, the Supreme Court of Canada has firmly rejected the Province's attempt to overturn the landmark decision of the Nova Scotia Court of Appeal, a decision which had found the Province discriminated against people with disabilities. The Supreme Court has refused the provincial government leave to appeal and it has underlined the matter by awarding costs against the government of the province.

Mr. Speaker, after eight years of the government's legal wrangling about this issue, will the Premier now stop fighting people with disabilities in court and sit down with the Disability Rights Coalition and come to a solution?

THE PREMIER: The member is right that this morning the Supreme Court did not grant leave for the appeal. We certainly respect that and thank the Supreme Court for their work on this.

The member knows that this has never been about people with disabilities. This government supports people with disabilities. There are significant investments in the budget to get moving forward on solving the issues that are there. That's always been the situation. I hope the member supports the budget and those incredible initiatives in there.

What I would say to the member in direct response is that, of course, the department, the government, myself, and anyone will work with the board of inquiry to move forward and find out the next steps in the process. This has never been - as sometimes other people have tried to characterize it - but it's never been about holding back people with disabilities. Not for one second, Mr. Speaker.

GARY BURRILL: Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, it continues to be the case that the Province's lawyers are currently arguing before a resumed Nova Scotia Human Rights Board of Inquiry proceeding. Their argument there is in order to try to justify the government's systemic discrimination against persons with disabilities.

In light of today's decision, will the Premier now direct a halt to the Province's legal efforts to justify systemic discrimination at the board of inquiry level and, to use the Premier's own words, will he "work with the community to make sure the supports are in place"?

THE PREMIER: As a matter of fact, we've never stopped working with the community. We will continue to work with the community. That's always been our objective.

There are concerns around the broad ramifications of these types of court decisions that as a government we need to consider. We for one second did not stop working with that community. Of course, we will continue to work with the community.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

EECD: ONLINE LEARNING CHALLS. - CONSULT

BRAEDON CLARK: All Nova Scotians have felt the strain of COVID-19 over the past two years. Few places have had more issues than our schools, where students from pre-Primary to Grade 12 wore masks, kept their distance, and transitioned on and off into virtual learning.

As we all know, this experience was difficult for families and children, but online learning played a key role in helping students to educate themselves in the midst of a global pandemic.

My question for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is: Have steps been taken to consult with students and families to understand the experience of online learning, especially the challenges faced by some parents and students?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: I think this is a really important question. This is a principle that guides me and all of the work that I do. We need to learn from what we've done and continuously make improvements going forward. I will say that is a concept that infuses our work.

Our focus right now, while we are still in the midst of the pandemic, is making sure that we do the right thing every day in the current circumstances to keep our kids in class, which is the best place for them to be. That's the primary focus now, but I can assure this House and the members opposite that we will be looking at all actions that have been taken to make sure we take the best lessons and make improvements going forward.

BRAEDON CLARK: We know that online learning was difficult but it was essential. I think we would all agree with that. Technology helped teachers to teach while following Public Health protocols through the worst of the pandemic. While we may hope - and I think we all hope - that we will never have to go back to online learning, we certainly don't know what the future holds.

I'd ask the Minister of Education: What steps are in place for a system-wide review and - the minister alluded to this - to learn from this experience and the sacrifices of Nova Scotian families to be better prepared for crises in the future?

BECKY DRUHAN: Thank you to the member opposite for this important question. I think it bears saying that our educators, our staff, and our students did an amazing job

over the last two years in being resilient and adaptive, learning new technologies, using new technologies, and absolutely, it was difficult, but they did an incredible job with that.

But the member opposite is also correct: It's important to take the time to understand how that worked, and which of those tools going forward are going to be a benefit, and make sure we really curate those tools so that they serve our students and our educators the best that they can. This is definitely work that the department is undertaking.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Preston.

EECD: CURRIC. CHANGES - UPDATE

ANGELA SIMMONDS: Mr. Speaker, the work of inclusivity in our school system is ongoing and important. Communities of colour have mentioned for decades that they do not feel or have seen themselves reflected in the curriculum. The BLAC Report of 1994 has laid out 46 recommendations - which I can table. My question is for the Minister of Education: Can the minister provide an update on the necessary curriculum changes that are provided by the recommendations by Nova Scotians?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: The need to have, and our commitment to have, inclusive-based schools where everyone feels safe and welcome is very much fundamental to our government's principles and our commitment in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. And our inclusive education policy. Our work on that continues to progress.

With respect to curriculum, one example that I can point to is that work is under way for the development of anti-racism professional development for educators. There are all sorts of other initiatives within our Inclusive Education Policy that support this important work.

ANGELA SIMMONDS: The question was in reference to the BLAC Report and the recommendations, so perhaps maybe later we can have a discussion about that specifically.

My next question: The minister referenced systemic racism, and so one of the things that we know to be true is that in the larger communities and culture within the riding for which I am an MLA, most often, in particular for African descent people and students, there's a higher suspension rate for African Nova Scotians in the school system. My question for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development: Could the minister please provide an update if the students of African descent continue to be suspended at a higher rate?

BECKY DRUHAN: Thank you to the member opposite for this question. Making sure we identify and address and rectify systemic racism within our school system,

wherever it may emerge, is very much a key priority of the department and a key priority of mine as well. I'd be happy to talk to the member opposite and meet with the member opposite to discuss questions around implementation of elements of the BLAC Report and other information she's looking for with respect to that.

THE SPEAKER: The member for Preston on a new question.

EECD: WEEKLY SCHOOL STAFF MTGS. - COMMIT.

ANGELA SIMMONDS: I look forward to working with the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development around those recommendations.

In the mandate letter to the Minister of Education was a requirement to work closely with schools across the province and sit in on at least one school staff meeting per week virtually to hear on-the-ground concerns that teachers face each day. I'll table that. My question to the Minister of Education: Have you kept this commitment and are you meeting weekly with school staff?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: I've said it before, I'll continue to say it: the way we make improvements in systems is by understanding the lived experience of the people within those systems. In the education system, it's both our students, it's our families, communities, and our staff as well.

I'm very happy to say that, yes, I have been meeting with our educators, and have been participating in staff meetings. I have had some really great conversations, and have some really direct feedback. One of the primary things that I'm hearing is: Thank you for listening. This has never happened before. We've never spoken with a minister.

All sorts of other themes are emerging. I'm really looking forward to being able to take action on many of the things that we're discussing.

ANGELA SIMMONDS: I ask, Mr. Speaker, because in my riding, our schools are: Nelson Whynder Elementary School, Bell Park Academic Centre, Ross Road School, Humber Park Elementary, Graham Creighton Junior High, and Auburn Drive High.

My question for the minister is: Have you met with staff who are working in supervisory leadership roles which support Black and Indigenous learners? If you have, would you please be able to provide this member - the MLA for Preston - an opportunity to meet with the minister as well during these times?

BECKY DRUHAN: My efforts to meet with educators, our staff and our schools are ongoing and persistent. They have been a little bit interrupted throughout the course of COVID-19, so I haven't been able to be out and about as much as I'd like to. School tours

are resuming, my meetings continue, and I look forward to talking with the member about including her in some of that work.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

DCS: CERB OVERPAYMENTS - FORGIVE

KENDRA COOMBES: My question is for the Minister of Community Services. The final forecast for COVID-19 response funding shows that the Department of Community Services had savings of more than \$40 million. This is in part because the government did not allow IA clients to receive both income assistance and CERB, despite the federal government urging provinces to exempt CERB payments. As a result, the department had a multi-million-dollar windfall and many people who have returned to IA are being charged overpayments.

My question for the minister is: Will she agree to immediately forgive overpayments charged to Income Assistance clients due to CERB?

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: This is somewhat a budget question. There was about an \$81 million shortfall definitely because individuals who were on IA, when they realized that they could receive CERB, decided to go off IA. They had a choice. They couldn't be on both, right? There are choices in life that they made . . . (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The Minister of Community Services has the floor.

KARLA MACFARLANE: They made a decision. Now, Mr. Speaker, as the federal government is no longer passing out CERB cheques, what is happening is we're seeing many clients come back to us. We're seeing some new ones too. This is a program that is not capped. If you need Income Assistance, you receive it from our department.

KENDRA COOMBES: I think there's a mistake made because, as far as I know, there was no choice to be had in this. After speaking with many people, there was no choice to be had, according to those who are involved.

People across the province who applied for Employment Insurance in 2020 were automatically given \$2,000 to help them in the early days of the pandemic. Two years later, many have been told that they were overpaid and must immediately repay the amount.

During a crisis, it is important for the - Mr. Speaker, there's a lot of noise happening over there.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please.

The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During a crisis, it is important for government to act quickly. However, those actions must be properly thought out so there are not unintended impacts on Nova Scotians' finances.

Mr. Speaker, is the Premier lobbying the federal government to forgive all EI overpayments due to CERB?

[2:30 p.m.]

KARLA MACFARLANE: I would recommend to the member that she ensures that she has a good relationship with her MP because it is a federal issue. What I would say is that if she would like to discuss, I have a system in place in my office that works extremely well. It's about an individual coming in and finding themselves in a situation where they're struggling, and you tell them what happened. Then you come up with a plan that's going to get them through.

The idea of anyone thinking that, oh wow, here's a \$2,000 cheque, here's my income assistance cheque. Wow, why did I get this? I don't understand. It seems like they're trying to create this story that there's no assistance out there and no one helping them understand the systems. Talk to your clients. Find the resources to help them. They're there. You just need to use them.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Yarmouth.

EECD - SCHOOLS CAPITAL PLAN - ATTACK

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: The previous government invested in one of the largest capital programs in multiple generations for schools. This was an investment to build new schools and renovate schools across the province.

Last week, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development derided this capital program using an Auditor General's Report from six years ago. My question to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development: Did she actually read the whole report from the Auditor General from six years ago?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: Yes.

ZACH CHURCHILL: That's good, because then the minister should know that it was actually the recommendations from that report which informed the five-year capital plan, which was the largest capital plan this province has ever seen, particularly for the CSAP and new schools for our French communities. Five, to be exact. This was very different from previous Progressive Conservative and NDP governments, which didn't build any new schools for our Acadian communities. They just allowed hand-me-down old schools from the English school boards to be passed on.

Did the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development actually consult with the CSAP and the Acadian communities before she attacked the capital plan from the previous government?

BECKY DRUHAN: I fail to understand why I would need to consult with CSAP before commenting on or, in fact, reading from an Auditor General's Report related to the prior government's capital expenditures.

I would also just observe that if, in fact, the previous government's capital planning and expenditures were so incredibly well-planned and executed, I'm curious as to why there are so many questions from across the floor about the current state of the capital.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Yarmouth on a new question.

EECD: FRENCH-LANG. TRAINING - PRESERV.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: The answer is obviously because we want this government to get those projects done. It's important for those communities, and to have the minister stand up and suggest that capital plan was wrong, that of course is going to trigger some questions from the members opposite.

In relation to the CSAP, we're actually hearing that the lines of communication have not been good between the department, the minister's office and the CSAP. We also heard the minister deride a capital plan that heavily invested in new schools for our French communities. We also saw the governing party yesterday not move to support independent legislation for the CSAP that they have been waiting for over two years.

THE SPEAKER: Question.

ZACH CHURCHILL: My question to the minister is: What engagement does she have with the CSAP and how is she preserving French-language training for those Acadian communities in Nova Scotia?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: With respect to engagement with the CSAP, and the preservation, expansion and protection of French language within schools, I can assure the member opposite that one of the first meetings I had in my role as Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development was to meet with the CSAP. That engagement continues. The Minister of Acadian Affairs and Francophonie and I have meetings scheduled for the CSAP when the House rises.

In addition to that, we are doing work relating to engagement in the communities so we can also hear directly from francophones and Acadians about community needs in relation to education. This is something we very much value and very much support. That dialogue is ongoing and will continue.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, it is absolutely necessary that there is an independent act for the CSAP. It is something that we didn't complete while we were in government. It did take years to engage in this precedent-setting piece of legislation, which included consultation with previous Supreme Court justices and Charter lawyers. There was a lot of work that's been put into this. The good news is that work resulted in the legislation that was tabled yesterday.

Will the minister commit to this House to move forward with an independent act for the CSAP?

BECKY DRUHAN: Mr. Speaker, seeking clarification. I don't believe we're able to speak to a bill that's on the floor during Question Period.

THE SPEAKER: The member can reword his question, as long as it doesn't relate to the bill that's on the floor.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Will the minister commit to having a piece of independent legislation for our French-speaking communities?

BECKY DRUHAN: I can assure the member opposite that the Minister of Acadian Affairs and Francophonie and I are very much committed to making sure we meet the needs of our francophones and Acadian Nova Scotians. We look forward to ongoing dialogue with the CSAP and feedback from the community to understand exactly what those needs are and make sure that we meet them.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

DHW: EMERG. SERVS. SHORTAGE - UPDATE

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Many of us in this House have brought to light the reality people are facing due to lack of emergency services in the province. The minister has explained many times the changes she's overseen since being elected. I've received a letter from a local community leader - and I'll table it - sharing a situation that she's very angry about.

A woman came upon an injured youth on the side of the road. She got out to help and attempted to call 911. She called 911 three times. The first time, she was told that an ambulance was on the way. The second time, she was told that they were waiting for an ambulance to be available. The third time, she thinks she got an automated system - she's unsure, because she was in shock.

My question to the minister is: Given that the minister frequently refers to ongoing conversations and working toward solutions, can the minister actually shed a light on exactly what's being done and provide the members of this House with details?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for the question. I was made aware of that from the member for Cumberland South the other day. We have reached out to EHS to reach out to that person to better understand what happened in that circumstance.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Thank you to the minister for the answer. I hope that information is shared with the House.

Unfortunately, there are many situations. This is just one example of many. I'm really proud of the community and the people for being willing to share it. Hopefully it will create some positive change.

It's only due to the goodness of an off-duty police officer, an off-duty firefighter, and an off-duty paramedic - none of whom had adequate supplies - that the youth eventually made it to the hospital in the back of a police car. An ambulance never came, and the woman never received a call back from 911.

The system is so overwhelmed that people are left without emergency services. It's not rocket science why paramedics are leaving this province in droves.

My question to the minister is: Can the minister table the contract with Medavie Blue Cross? When does the contract end? Will the government be tendering an RFP to possibly replace or at least provide competition to this private company?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: Mr. Speaker, in terms of the contract, I'm not sure whether it's proprietary or not. I'll have to take that back to the department and ask.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

ACSW - BUDGET: GENDER-BASED ANALYSIS - COMMIT

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of the Advisory Council on the Status of Women Act.

Yesterday in Budget Estimates, it was confirmed by the minister that there's been no gender-based analysis of this budget. That means no gender-based analysis of millions of dollars of tax relief, like the one for skilled trades and other tax cuts, or economic programs like the innovation rebate.

This government has no idea, in fact, if its budget is widening the gender gap in our province - although it seems like it might be. Will the minister commit to ensuring that the next budget from this government will undergo a gender-based analysis?

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for the question. During our dialogue in Estimates yesterday, I indicated to the member that we at the Department of Community Services would absolutely be ensuring that there is a gender-based analysis across our department and offices within our department for the next budget. I was speaking to our department, but I certainly always encourage all my colleagues. We all know here that we have to ensure an inclusive and diverse community within government. We're working towards that every day.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: The status of women needs to be guaranteed by the Office of the Status of Women. The Office of the Status of Women needs to ensure that the entire budget has a gendered lens. I would respectfully ask the minister to take that back to her department and to ask her colleagues in government and the Department of Finance and Treasury Board if the office can take control of a gender-based analysis for the entire budget.

Mr. Speaker, between January 2021 and January 2022, unemployment among men in Nova Scotia decreased by 17 per cent. Over the same time period, unemployment among women increased by 28 per cent. I'll table that. We know that women in lower-paying jobs have been most impacted by the pandemic and by the government's failure to provide necessary protections, like ongoing paid sick leave and caregiving supports.

We know there's no recovery plan. Will the minister tell the House when this office will produce a real COVID-19 recovery plan for the women of this province?

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Economic Development.

HON. SUSAN CORKUM-GREEK: Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite: I would be happy to speak with you about work done to date to specific programs that relate to support for women and other groups with employment barriers. One of the things that I think we can do to give all Nova Scotians, including women, the best possible way forward is to grow our economy.

As far as this repeated idea that we do not have a plan, we have a plan. It is about population growth, increased consumption of local goods, internet connectivity, and recruiting initiatives to bring companies here.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

EECD: SCHOOL LUNCH PGM. - IMPLEMENT

FRED TILLEY: Mr. Speaker, Nova Scotian school children benefit from a school breakfast program supported by the previous government. This universal program is available across the province and sees that students in need get a healthy, nutritious breakfast.

My question for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development: Given the success of the school breakfast program, are you planning to implement a universal school lunch program as well?

[2:45 p.m.]

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: This is a really important issue. We know that students need to have a nutritious foundation, nutritious meals, and nutritious food for their own personal well-being and health, and also to ensure that they have the ability to come to school to learn. This is very much a priority.

We do have a provincial program in Nova Scotia that's supported with the Department of Health and Wellness to ensure that we have access to resources for our regions to make sure that there's food in schools. That does include the breakfast program.

Throughout our schools, as well, our educators and our staff are very much mindful that this is an issue, and we work in a variety of ways to make sure that when students need food, and if families need food, they have access to that food.

FRED TILLEY: At Budget Estimates, the minister couldn't confirm whether they are considering expanding the breakfast program to include lunch. That appears the same today. In fact, when discussing the breakfast program, the minister said, when students need food, we make sure they can get it. That was just reiterated today.

There is concern with this statement. It's vague, and it really downplays the real need for support for students for lunch as well as breakfast. Rather than an ad hoc program, can the minister explain why, rather than introduce a lunch program, kids will just miraculously get food when they need it?

BECKY DRUHAN: I ran out of time, so I didn't get to continue on when I was speaking previously. One of the things I am very excited about is the fact that the federal government has identified in two of their ministers' mandate letters a commitment to school food programming. This is something that's really important.

I mentioned a number of the ways that we get food to students, but this is an issue that we can always do better on, and we will continue to work to do better on. I very much look forward to looking at all opportunities to improve our delivery on this, including with respect to options and resources that may be available through the federal government.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount on a new question.

EECD - FIN. LITERACY PGM. - UPDATE

FRED TILLEY: Mr. Speaker, the mandate letter of the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development called for reviews of large areas of the school curriculum, including financial literacy, civics, environmental stewardship, physical activity, healthy living, and diversity.

Today I want to focus on one of those in particular, which would be financial literacy. In the PC platform they stated that they would work with teachers to include mandatory financial literacy education in the high school experience, which I'll table. Can the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development provide an update on implementing mandatory financial literacy in our high schools, especially given the cost of living crisis we currently face in this province?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: I can absolutely say that this is an important issue, and we want our students to be as well-educated and as well-informed as possible in this respect. I can confirm that work is under way within the department to make those adjustments to the curriculum.

FRED TILLEY: I think financial literacy is very important for our students, for the future society.

Mr. Speaker, like the rest of society, our students are constantly being bombarded with information online. The flow is relentless, from social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram to official and unofficial news sources. We know that some of what our kids see online is misinformation and disinformation. Recent reports show that students in Winnipeg are being taught information literacy to manage some of these dangers. I can table that.

My question to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is: Does the curriculum in Nova Scotia include information around online literacy? If not, when will it?

BECKY DRUHAN: I can say that yes, it does, and I'd be happy to share some of the detailed information with the member.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

EECD - SKILLED TRADES PROM. - FUNDING

LORELEI NICOLL: Mr. Speaker, there hasn't been much detail given on how the government plans to increase enrollment and encourage high school students in particular to consider a career in the skilled trades beyond a promotional campaign.

My question to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is: Given the increasing demand for graduates in the skilled trades sector to address the province's housing crisis, how much of the \$750,000 budgeted is actually going towards resources and how much is going towards promotion?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: It's really nice to see the members opposite appreciating our plans and getting on board with the idea that we need to advance skilled trades, add to our workforce, and encourage our students to choose these options as the great career options that they are.

I can confirm that there are a variety of programs already in our schools that address this. They include O2 and various tech programs throughout our system. Right now, we're working to expand those, expand interest, expand access, and expand resources.

LORELEI NICOLL: As the parent of three adult children, Mr. Speaker, and from my past experience as a long-time chair of school advisory councils, it's clear to me that we've needed to increase access to the trades for some time in Nova Scotia, to meet this. The growing demand did not happen overnight. Students need more opportunities to be introduced to the trades prior to NSCC.

My question to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is: Can the minister give me an outline of which schools in Nova Scotia have trades infrastructure within their school buildings and where can the students in Nova Scotia access trades education at the high school level?

BECKY DRUHAN: We have a variety of options throughout Nova Scotia for our students to access information around and skills around skilled trades and I'd be more than happy to share that information with the member opposite.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The time allotted for Oral Questions Put by Members to Ministers has expired. We will take a 10-minute recess.

[2:50 p.m. The House recessed.]

[3:05 p.m. The House reconvened.]

THE SPEAKER: Order, please.

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call the order of business, Public Bills for Second Reading.

PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 154.

Bill No. 154 - Tourist Accommodations Registration Act.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage.

HON. PAT DUNN: Mr. Speaker, I move that Bill No. 154, the Tourist Accommodations Registration Act, now be read a second time.

These changes to the Tourist Accommodations Registration Act reflect feedback we have heard from both the tourism sector and municipalities. The amendments will ensure all short-term rentals are required to register so we have a clear picture of short-term rentals in the province. It will support municipal zoning or other bylaw enforcement activities.

The Tourist Accommodations Registration Act requires roof accommodations to register annually if they provide accommodations for 28 days or less. However, currently operators or houses that offer accommodations in or attached to their primary residence are not required by law to register. A primary residence is considered the place where the operator normally lives as an owner or renter, and the address they use for bills, identification, and filing taxes.

This means that people who rent a room in their house or a loft above their attached garage or even a basement apartment are not required to register under the current law. This leaves a gap in the information we have about the number of short-term rentals operating in our province. Removing the exemption will create more clarity for operators about who is required to register to make it easier to enforce the Act.

Mr. Speaker, we are hearing from municipalities that while they have the legislative authority to regulate short-term rentals, their ability to do so is limited by registry data that is not complete. Municipalities such as Halifax were considering creating their own short-term rental registry to fill in the gaps. To avoid duplication and unnecessarily burden municipalities and operators, we are taking steps to improve the provincial registry so all municipalities have access to complete data on short-term rentals.

The Tourist Accommodations Registration Act, when introduced in 2019, repealed the outdated Tourist Accommodation Act and replaced it with an online registration system. The goal was to create a level playing field for tourism accommodations and reduce unnecessary red tape for operators. However, we have heard from the tourism industry

stakeholders in Nova Scotia that a level playing field can only be achieved if all accommodations are required to register. More complete data would also help the tourist industry understand the available supply. Having all short-term rental operators register is an opportunity to bring them into the fold of the tourism industry so they can be included in initiatives to encourage travel to Nova Scotia.

The tourism industry is a vital part of Nova Scotia's economy, Mr. Speaker, and we know accommodations were hit hard by the pandemic. Ensuring a strong tourism recovery will help create jobs and business opportunities in communities throughout the province. Short-term rentals play an important role in the availability of tourism accommodations and help attract travelers to our province.

For example, short-term rentals allow accommodations supply to expand and contract in response to events within a community. They help provide the variety of accommodation options we know travellers are seeking and offer accommodations options in rural areas where a large hotel might not be viable. For example, the annual Gran Fondo Baie Sainte-Marie brings thousands of visitors to the small community of Saulnierville. This influx of visitors supports local restaurants, coffee shops, retailers, and gas stations. All those people need places to stay. That demand is met in part by short-term rentals that open their offerings as demand allows.

Booking for short-term rentals, the kinds of accommodations we typically see on platforms like Airbnb and Vrbo, have seen significant growth in the last several years. According to the data company, AirDNA, there were 371,000 room nights booked through sharing economy platforms in Nova Scotia between January and November 2021. That's an increase of 21 per cent compared to the same period in 2020.

However, it is also important to seek a balance between short-term rentals and meeting local housing needs. This legislation is one more way that we can work with our municipal colleagues to address the impact of short-term rentals on housing supply. As I mentioned earlier, municipalities have the local knowledge and legislative authority to regulate short-term rentals in their community.

Needs may vary by community, but the province can support all municipalities by providing meaningful data to help them identify units in their communities. Once the amendments have passed, regulations will also be developed to support enforcement of the Act and to make compliance with municipal zoning and bylaws a requirement at registration.

I want to conclude by thanking my colleagues at Municipal Affairs and Housing for their work on this legislation in collaboration with Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage. With those words, I will take my seat and look forward to further discussion of this legislation.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to rise to speak to Bill No. 154, the Tourist Accommodation Registration Act. As the minister was just explaining, this Act was brought in to help include a segment of the short-term rental that was not included at the beginning. Other jurisdictions also started the way we did and realized that wasn't enough and had to include the person's primary residence as well.

Previously, the primary residence was exempted. And that is actually a large number of the units that we are trying to track. I'm very happy that this is being added and we've had some correspondence from constituents who are also happy.

There are a few issues that I'd like to point out that maybe can be brought in as an amendment or in the regulation at a later date. One of the issues is that this bill was brought in and has with it a registration fee of \$50 if you own one to four units and \$150 per year - not a huge amount, a small amount - but a little bit of a fee because people are making a lot of money out of renting their units. There was no fee - as far as we know from the bill briefing - that this registration fee has not been collected for the last two years. If the minister can let us know when and if that will be enforced? Also, there was a penalty introduced for people who do not register and that was not collected at all for the last two years.

In a way, I think we need to balance, to encourage people to register. If you're giving a fee, just a small fee, maybe that would - to give them a break until we get more people to register. What's important is to have that registry. Maybe if we have a deadline by which they have to register, until that deadline in the regulation you can have it not pay the fees but after that date, that will encourage more people to register their units if they know by such and such a date they will have to pay the penalty. The penalty should be enforced, otherwise nobody will register. If I had 10 units, why would I register if there was no penalty? That is really a very important aspect of this bill and we're not going to get anywhere if we do not enforce it. Also, it will give the municipality tools to track the availability of this.

There was also a suggestion from Neighbours Speak Up. They wanted to make sure that the short-term platforms like Airbnb include registration numbers - that is also very important. When they advertise, it should have the registration number that will indicate that this assures that at least the minimum the public would know, the consumers, that this short-term accommodation has authority to operate. So maybe some kind of numbering that the people, as they advertise on Airbnb, should be included.

Another suggestion, perhaps, as I said, is a deadline created. I also wanted to share with my colleagues an incident that I came across seven or eight years ago. My husband and I have been using Airbnb for a long time because you feel at home instead of in a hotel room. As I was working as an interpreter with this young student, an international student

who was here - I don't know if my colleagues would remember: Many years ago, we had many students from Saudi Arabia, thousands - they were renting all the condos downtown and a lot of money came to Halifax because of that, and it was wonderful.

[3:15 p.m.]

Those students went home for three months, from May to August and this entrepreneur, an international student, paid them one month's rent for each of those months and he rented their units, which are furnished, on Airbnb. He made more than \$30,000 in three months. That was almost seven years ago. There is quite a bit of money to be made in the Summer from renting those units through Airbnb. We need a little bit of control to make sure that we know how many units are being rented and maybe some kind of registration.

What was said at the bill briefing was that regulations are being brought and they hope to have it ready by the Fall. I look forward to learning more about the regulations, but we do need - the enforcement is very important. A deadline of when this will start to be enforced will encourage people to register. I hope the minister will take those into account. Thank you again. We are happy with this bill.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'll speak just briefly on this bill. Yes, the amendments are welcome to us, and it is encouraging to see the support they've received from the Tourism Industry Association of Nova Scotia as we look to rebuild our tourism sector coming out of the pandemic.

We know that short-term rentals have wide-ranging impacts on our communities, including the impact on housing for residents or the impact on the competitiveness of existing accommodation providers. Collecting more data is a good idea and an important step to fully understanding the impact.

I would echo my colleague from Clayton Park West and say that I question the effectiveness of the registry when the rules around Airbnbs or short-term rentals have not been enforced. The government has failed to collect registry fees for the last two years and doesn't plan to do so this year and has not charged penalties for those who have not registered.

I am wondering why the government is taking such a tentative approach to short-term rentals. As my colleague pointed out, people who put their units or their properties on short-term rental are making good money on them, so a small amount of money to pay as a registration fee is really a cost of doing business - or it's less than the cost of doing business, probably.

We also learned in Estimates that there have been no fines for people who do not register, nor has anyone been removed from the registry for not complying with regulations. I just say those things out loud because I think, again, we do have to regulate this industry. It has serious impacts, good and bad, for our tourism industry and our housing situation. I encourage the minister to take these comments away and figure out how we can make sure that the registry is as robust as possible. I look forward to hearing from the public in Law Amendments.

THE SPEAKER: The member for Dartmouth South.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I just want to rise and say one thing about this bill, which is, I would echo most of the comments so far. I think it's good to have a handle on the number of Airbnbs in the province, to understand the impact of the sharing economy, but I would like to be clear that I don't think this bill has any impact at all on the housing situation. I say that because when this bill went through in 2019, we discussed having an exemption for people who rent rooms in their homes, and the logic was that it's hard to afford a home in Nova Scotia.

Remember, that was 2019. In 2019, it was hard to afford to purchase a home, so it made sense that some people might need to rent out a room to help defray the cost of that home. There was no way that that would impact the housing stock because it's not taking an unoccupied home that could be rented long-term and renting it short-term. It's renting a room or a part of a home.

Since then - I can't remember the exact statistic and I'll table it later, but I think it's since 2020 the average median price of a home, at least in HRM, has gone up 69 per cent. I would submit that it's even harder. It would be common sense to say that it's harder to afford a home now. Speaking for myself, I suppose, I would say that I think it's good for people to register, but I don't have a problem with people renting a room in their home.

I think when people talk about the deleterious impact of the sharing economy on housing, and I think when the tourism industry - and hopefully we'll hear about this at Law Amendments - speaks about the challenge of Airbnb to their business model, it's not people renting rooms in homes. It's people purchasing, often several, properties and then converting those into what I think is known as ghost hotels, essentially.

That's where it makes a lot of sense, to understand where those are, to charge a registration fee, and to level the playing field, which I think is the request from the tourism association. I just want to echo my colleague and encourage the department to take further action, in fact, on the sharing economy, because this is fine, but this isn't it, in terms of housing. I think in terms of housing, what we need to understand is how many homes that would otherwise be long-term residences for residents of Nova Scotia are instead being used functionally as hotels, but without being charged all the things that hotels are charged.

That's the question before us. That's what we tried to deal with when the Act was amended in 2019, which was not dealt with well, which we said at the time and we'll say again. I think it's not even really being addressed here, so I won't criticize this bill, but I will encourage the government to address this, because it's really important.

I would go so far as to say that would include - I don't understand why the fee for a multi-unit rental Airbnb would be waived because of the pandemic. I think we've seen that people continue to come here and stay in hotels and stay in Airbnbs. That's revenue I'm sure the government could use, hopefully towards housing. Anyway, just to say this bill is fine, but it doesn't address the housing issue. I actually don't think it directly addresses most of the issues that the tourism industry has brought to the table, and I hope that the government will act on those issues.

THE SPEAKER: If recognize the minister, it will be to close the debate.

The honourable Minister of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage.

HON. PAT DUNN: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments from the three members on the opposite side and certainly will bring those comments back to the department for further discussion.

Certainly, there's an intention of having municipalities and government create these enforcement measures going forward through regulations. Certainly, having a comprehensive database for the entire province is going to be a move in the right direction. Another thing on the plus side for operators that have Airbnbs, once they're registered, they'll be able to take part in the marketing activities through Tourism Nova Scotia, such as NovaScotia.com and the NS Doers & Dreamers Guide.

Another thing: Operators will be required to post their registration numbers on their premises. The municipalities will be able to have a better idea of how many are in their communities or in their municipalities, where they are, and if they're following the by-laws set out by the municipality. Once again, there'll be further discussion as far as understanding the impact of the shared economy, which one of our honourable colleagues just mentioned.

Having said that, I move to close debate on second reading of Bill No. 154.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is for second reading of Bill No. 154.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Ordered that this bill be referred to the Committee on Law Amendments.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Would you please call Bill No. 155.

Bill No. 155 - Public Prosecutions Act.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Justice.

HON. BRAD JOHNS: Mr. Speaker, I move that Bill No. 155 be now read a second time.

The Nova Scotia Public Prosecution Service was established in 1990 and prosecutes charges laid under the Criminal Code and Nova Scotia statutes. It handles more than 40,000 new criminal charges annually. The Director of the Nova Scotia Public Prosecution Service has recently retired after serving for 21 years. This change presents an opportunity to amend the Public Prosecutions Act to update the appointment process. This will ensure that the requirements of the appointment of the director and deputy director of Public Prosecutions are aligned with current best practices.

The first proposed amendment is to set a seven-year term for the Director of Public Prosecutions without reappointment. This term aligns with the two other Canadian jurisdictions with an independent prosecution service, specifically the federal Public Prosecution Service and Quebec's Public Prosecution Service. It's also consistent with the fixed terms for the heads, or leads, of other independent organizations related to the Department of Justice. It also aligns with the recommendations of the Marshall Inquiry, which advocated for a fixed term for the Director of Public Prosecutions.

The creation of a new term for the director will also allow for new candidates with fresh ideas more often, and provide opportunities for diversity in senior leadership roles within the prosecution service.

The second proposed amendment also relates to the director role. It clarifies that the Attorney General is responsible for recommending the proposed appointee to the director role to the Governor in Council. This is an established practice; however, it is not currently explicit in the Act.

I'll now take a look at the deputy director role, which serves as the second-in-charge of Public Prosecution Services. Under the current provisions, the Public Prosecution Act, the deputy is appointed by the director. The proposed amendments will alter the appointment process for the deputy to be appointed by Governor in Council on the recommendations of the Attorney General.

This will be for a five-year term, with the opportunity to extend the appointment one time by up to five years. The appointment of this integral role by government is in

keeping with best practices, and is consistent with other Canadian jurisdictions that have independent prosecution services.

[3:30 p.m.]

The current deputy of Public Prosecutions will remain in that role, and these proposed changes to the deputy director appointment process will not commence until the incumbent is no longer in that position. It's further proposed that the Act specify that the deputy must be from within Nova Scotia's public service and must be a barrister for at least 10 years standing.

Overall, the measures proposed in this bill will provide clarity and public transparency related to the selection and the appointment of these two integral roles within the Public Prosecution Service. They will also provide opportunities for ongoing renewals and more diversity in senior leadership roles within the justice system.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: I rise to speak on the second reading of this bill. With some reservation, we will be supporting the amendments. We do think that creating thresholds and having a maximum tenure will be a positive thing. That came out of the Marshall Inquiry.

I don't see it moving in a direction that's far enough that has been advocated for in many ways by community advocates who have been reaching out to the minister's office. We know that the Nova Scotia Crown Attorneys' Association wrote a letter to the then-director expressing concerns about management-level hiring practices and seeking acknowledgement of systemic racism within the Public Prosecution Service.

We have other letters, which I will table, that have been sent to the minister that have been seemingly ignored. To my knowledge, the minister has yet to meet with the African Nova Scotian Decade for People of African Descent about their suggestions of how to amend this very Act. There were three amendments proposed. I wonder if the minister can comment on how he views those amendments as potentially being helpful.

Crown prosecutors in this province have an enormous amount of power in our justice system. We know that systemic racism exists in the justice system, and I would submit that the Crown Office is no different.

I did ask for a confirmation during Estimates for the minister to put that in writing, as others have. He kept his comments more in general - that systemic racism happens more generally. I think it would be helpful if there is a confirmation that it has existed within that office.

Given that after 30 years of the Public Prosecution Office being in existence, there has never been a Black or Indigenous Director, Deputy Director, or Chief Crown - over decades - from the very organization that was born out of the Marshall Inquiry.

That is a testament to hiring practices. It is a testament to not following the Public Service Employment Equity policies that state “The Government of Nova Scotia is committed to being a workforce that is free of discrimination, values diversity, and is representative, at all job levels, of the designated employment equity groups: Aboriginal people, African Nova Scotians . . .” It’s also a violation of the Civil Service Act itself in the hiring standards.

This is a small step forward. Given that people from marginalized communities are disproportionately impacted by the justice system, they need to see themselves reflected in the courtroom and the very Crowns who are looking at very important cases, and the level of discretion that they have. It can’t be overstated.

They can decide when to drop charges or pursue them and when to refer to restorative justice. Those who aren’t diverse, who actually have first-hand knowledge of impacts to marginalized communities, need to go through cultural competence training. That was another suggestion brought forward. I brought it forward during Estimates as well.

I’d ask the minister to take note and just fully understand how much power Crowns have in this province. The fact is that we haven’t had any representation in 30 years at the senior level, even though some Indigenous and African Nova Scotians have been nominated to qualify to be a judge. Surely we can have representation at the senior level within his office.

That’s why, when I was Minister of Environment, the first initiative that I understood to be important - it wasn’t a really bold announcement - was to create a specified Crown for the Department of Environment. Why? Because of the discretion. Because they should have specialized training. Too many companies were being - cases were being dropped for violating the Environment Act. That’s why we need to have the very best people who have the subject matter knowledge to be able to decide what to do in these cases.

That’s why we created the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives. That office was designed to ensure that the policies I referenced are spread throughout government. I know the minister will probably mention independence. He did so at length in the Estimates. But that independence was never meant to be a roadblock to justice and advancement of equity within government. It was actually supposed to be the opposite. He has discretion as the Auditor General to work with Crowns to ensure they follow those Acts, the policies within government, to ensure that he consults with communities.

I do see a bit of a pattern, I have to say, of no consultation with marginalized communities. I'll table the letter. I won't go through each of the amendments, but they have to do with ensuring that there is cultural competence training, considering a position that will be tasked with equity similar to the office that I created but within the public service. He can have all the independence he wants, but he can have someone dedicated within the office who's responsible for following what is already in the Civil Service Act and government policy.

We will support the bill. We see the threshold as a positive thing. But I would ask the minister to consider what DPAD and what others have been calling for to ensure that we get a better reflection of the population in our province in that very important Public Prosecution Service.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'll keep my remarks short on second reading.

I've listened with interest to what the Leader of the Official Opposition had to say just now, and also in Budget Estimates. I think he raises an important issue. As he pointed out and I will reiterate, this Public Prosecution Service - one of the only independent public prosecution services - was born out of the Marshall Inquiry. We talk a lot about the need for an independent Public Prosecution Service, but we also need to remember that the rationale was because of the systemic racism and injustice to which Donald Marshall Jr. was subjected. I think the equity concerns brought forward by my colleague are important.

I will just confine my remarks to say that we are glad there is a jurisdictional scan of best practices. I think that's positive. I think updating legislation is positive and bringing Nova Scotia into alignment with other jurisdictions. I think the rationale given by the minister to term limits sounds good.

With all bills, but particularly with this bill, which is coming forward as sort of a housekeeping amendment, when any housekeeping is done to a bill that impacts an independent body, the question always has to be asked: Whose house are we keeping?

The question will be for the Law Amendments Committee, and hopefully we'll have presenters. I would love to hear the reaction of the Public Prosecution Service. I don't know if they'll come. They did break a long spell of not doing that somewhat recently. Maybe they'll do it again. I don't know. Others with expertise around the legal profession and the role of the Public Prosecution Service, and also from communities disproportionately impacted by the work of that body - I certainly hope to hear from them. We'll definitely will have more to say on third reading.

THE SPEAKER: If I recognize the minister, it will be to close the debate.

The honourable Minister of Justice.

HON. BRAD JOHNS: Thank you to the two members opposite for their comments on this bill. As I pointed out in my opening remarks, of course this is taking advantage of an opportunity with the recent retirement, and this opportunity didn't exist before.

I will clarify for members that currently our interim director who is in place is an individual who would be viewed as a visible minority herself. We certainly are taking into consideration, as we move forward, both remarks that we've had, contacts that we've had from people within the Public Prosecution Service, Crowns, as well as partnering organizations such as DPAD, we are recognizing.

This is really to set the process in place so that we can move to the next level. That level, of course, would be to try to put an interviewing committee in place to do a search and find somebody to fill that role of the director. As that group is formed and goes forward, they would follow the best practices of the Public Service Commission and that would include diversity and inclusion, of course.

Many of the comments that were made by previous members I have heard, but I will say that the current composition of the Public Prosecution Service - we do have representation there from our Indigenous community, African Nova Scotian representation there, as well as other peoples of colour. It is diverse and we will ensure that the process as we move forward is as fair, diverse - and takes in all the best practices of the Public Service Commission.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I would move that we close debate on Bill No. 155.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is for second reading of Bill No. 155.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Ordered that this bill be referred to the Committee on Law Amendments.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, I move that you do now leave the Chair and the House resolve itself into Committee of the Whole House on Bills.

THE SPEAKER: All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We'll have a short recess while the Committee sets up.

[The House recessed at 3:43 p.m.]

[4:05 p.m. The House resolved into a CWH on Bills with Deputy Speaker Angela Simmonds in the Chair.]

[6:00 p.m. CWH on Bills rose and the House reconvened. The Speaker, Hon. Keith Bain, resumed the Chair.]

THE SPEAKER: The Chair of the Committee of the Whole House on Bills reports:

THE CLERK: That the Committee of the Whole House on Bills has met and considered the following bills:

Bill No. 143 - Boat Harbour Act (amended).

without amendments, and

Bill No. 145 - Electricity Act (amended).

which was reported with certain amendments by the Law Amendments Committee to the Committee of the Whole House without further amendments, and the Chair has been instructed to recommend these bills to the favourable consideration of the House.

THE SPEAKER: Ordered that these bills be read a third time on a future day.

Having reached the hour of adjournment pursuant to Rule 4(1), I shall adjourn the House without question put. We stand adjourned until Tuesday, April 19th at 1:00 p.m.

[The House rose at 6:01 p.m.]