

**Reply to the Speech from the Throne
by Mr. Shawn Graham,
Leader of the Official Opposition**

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Unofficial Excerpt from the *Journal of Debates (Hansard)*

[Original]

I begin today by acknowledging Lieutenant-Governor Marilyn Trenholme Counsell for her excellent work, particularly on behalf of New Brunswick's children.

I would also like to extend my congratulations to you, Mr. Speaker, on resuming your role as Speaker of this Legislative Assembly. You have presided over four very lively sessions, and I am certain that this one will be no different, though perhaps the phrase "heated debate" will indeed take on a more literal meaning.

[Translation]

I would also like to acknowledge our Sergeant-at-Arms Dan Bussi eres, the Clerk, Assistant Clerks, commissionaires, and all staff members, here at the Legislative Assembly, who work very hard to ensure that Legislative Assembly business proceeds as smoothly as possible.

[Original]

This Chamber would not function without the duties undertaken by the library staff, the staff in the translation services, and Hansard. At the same time, I think we should pay special tribute to the staff who work below us every day in the kitchen. If it were not for Marie, we would not be well fed in this Chamber, and I think we should give a huge round of applause for the home-cooked meals that are prepared for us every single day that we are in session.

[Translation]

I also welcome our new pages to the Legislative Assembly. And I welcome our returning pages. I hope that they all have a very positive experience and I look forward to getting to know them better throughout the session.

[Original]

It may interest our pages to know that the new member for Fredericton-Fort Nashwaak was once a page in this very Chamber, and he has given us very strict instructions to go easy on you. After all, in a few years, any one of you could be sitting in one of our chairs, presiding over the business of the province.

I offer my sincere thanks to the staff at the Office of the Official Opposition, who are in the gallery today, and at the New Brunswick Liberal Party office. We have a strong team not only here on the floor of the Legislature but also behind the scenes. While our offices may be a little crowded these days, for those of you who remember being able to count staff members on one hand, it is a small price to pay. I am so very proud of our staff, and I know that they are committed to the important work that we do on behalf of the people of New Brunswick. Without their help, we could not accomplish the job, as elected MLAs, on the floor of this Chamber.

I would also like to welcome the guests who are joining us here in the gallery and on the floor of the Legislative Assembly today. Thank you for being here to share this important day. I truly appreciate your support and your work.

[Translation]

I would like to welcome our many guests and I am very pleased with the support they are showing us. Thank you for being here to share this important day and thank you for your support and your work.

[Original]

Today we have a living legend of the New Brunswick Liberal Party with us—Tony Barry. She may have a house named for her here in Fredericton for the work that she does, but it was during the recent election campaign that I, as leader of a political party, came to realize the work ethic and the determination that members of our party have on behalf of the citizens of New Brunswick. No one leads the charge any harder or faster than Tony Barry. I am humbled to see you here today, Tony. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker, while you may have attended the reception that we had the other evening on the occasion of the official opening of the House, I have to say that Tony Barry throws one heck of a summer barbecue. If you have an opportunity to make it to that event, it is well worth attending.

To the people of Kent County, I want to say a sincere thank-you for allowing me the opportunity to stand in this Chamber once again, as the elected representative for Kent.

[Translation]

The people of Kent have once again allowed me the opportunity to speak on their behalf here in the Legislative Assembly for another four years. This is the third time I have been elected to represent the citizens of Kent County.

[Original]

There are a number of issues that I fight for on a daily basis on behalf of the citizens of Kent. Road improvements are a major issue. That is why I am striking up a working relationship with the new Minister of Transportation. On behalf of the citizens of Kent, I must say that I had a positive working relationship with the former Minister of Transportation. I look forward to pressing for county project allocations on behalf of all members, but as the MLA for Kent, I am going to be pushing extremely hard to make sure that the over 1 800 km of roads in Kent County receive their fair share of taxpayers' dollars and that the citizens of our region are justly served.

At this time, I want to mention my wife, Roxanne. Roxanne traveled on the bus for 30 days, visiting every corner of this province. She has improved her French language skills, and while she speaks fluent Japanese, she did not have an opportunity to practice speaking it that often during the recent election campaign. I must say that for both of us, it was an opportunity to see New Brunswick as no other New Brunswicker would have the chance to see it. We met people who came to us to share their concerns and their frustrations but, at the same time, to share with us the joys of living in the best province in the Commonwealth, the province of New Brunswick. It was a team effort that Roxanne and I made together and that we enjoyed so thoroughly during

the recent election campaign. Thank you, Roxanne, for your commitment.

At this time, I also want to say a special thank-you to my family. I come from a political family, and that is no secret. My father served in this Chamber for 31 years. I see the Premier shrugging his shoulders across the way. In fact, he mentioned to me once that my father was out on the campaign trail. I said: He is in Dale Graham's riding, because everyone up there thinks he is the Graham who is really running the show. However, again, it was a team effort. The opportunity to have family standing behind me, working with me, and providing me with guidance makes my job as Leader of the Official Opposition so much easier. I appreciate the support of my family, not my parents but also my brothers and sisters, who sometimes pick up the newspapers and read the criticism. It is easy for me, as Leader of the Opposition, to accept criticism, because that is what we are elected to do, but for a family, it sometimes becomes personal. It is more difficult for them, and I am sure the Premier has experienced that and can appreciate that with his own family. Again, it is a family effort, but I must say that I welcome the extended family I have with me here today, on the official opposition side.

Finally, I come to the acknowledgment of our caucus colleagues.

[Translation]

Members of our caucus, welcome!

[Original]

It was overwhelming on Tuesday to watch each of you officially accept the duties that have been placed upon you by the people of our province. It was with great pride that I watched not only our veteran members on the front bench return to the Legislative Assembly but also the many new members, who are in the very early days of what I predict will be very long careers of serving the people of New Brunswick. I believe I can speak for the members for Shediac-Cap-Pelé, Nigadoo-Chaleur, Victoria-Tobique, and Fundy Isles when I say that we are so pleased with the calibre of the people who have joined us here. Having 7 MLAs here previously and 26 today is not only a humbling experience but also one that we have been working very hard to achieve for a very long time. Welcome to our ranks. Welcome to serving the people of New Brunswick.

[Translation]

When I look at the high level and diversity of experience that you bring to this Chamber, I know we will be able to carry out the important mission with which the people of this province have entrusted us.

[Original]

To champion all that is good about our province, to lift up those who need a hand, and to see all people treated fairly and justly—these are the principles that have guided our team thus far, and these are the principles that will guide each of you as you carry out your duties as Members of the Legislative Assembly.

At this time, I also offer my congratulations to the Premier and to his caucus. The people of our province have placed their trust in him, and I wish him wisdom, courage, and understanding in

carrying out the very important duties that lie ahead. I also want to congratulate the member for Saint John Harbour on receiving the trust of the people of that riding for another mandate.

[Translation]

Each of us here today, regardless of political affiliation, is now part of a historic legislative session, one that has the potential to be among the most vibrant in the history of our province.

On June 9, New Brunswickers demonstrated their belief that we as political parties can learn from one another.

[Original]

On election night, I extended a hand of cooperation to the Premier and to his caucus to move forward in building our province, because I believe that those things that divide us as political parties are outweighed by those that unite us as New Brunswickers. We will make this work in this session. While we in the official opposition are committed to cooperative and collaborative efforts, we are not prepared to give categorical support to all government proposals. Cooperation is a two-way street. Furthermore, we believe that the people of New Brunswick expect much from our increased numbers. They want us to keep government accountable, but they also want to see us put forward positive initiatives of our own.

[Translation]

Last Tuesday's throne speech outlined the government's plan for this new session of the Legislature. Today, I am pleased to outline the plan of the official opposition.

One of the chief priorities of this session must be to bring about the required legislative amendments to ensure an insurance rate reduction for New Brunswickers. This is a must. This is why we were disappointed when we saw the bill on Tuesday. It does not provide for the reductions that New Brunswickers need.

[Original]

This legislation simply makes filing the law. It does not legislate lower rates. The only way there might—and I stress “might”—be a 20% reduction is if the insurance companies of New Brunswick fail to file. The rate reductions that occur, if any, will be a far cry from the sort of relief New Brunswickers need and a far cry from the reductions that should have occurred from the new thresholds announced by this government in June. Once again, we see this government bowing to the insurance companies. It set these low thresholds in June, but it secured nothing in return. However, the government is now going to make the insurance companies file. I am sorry, but this is simply not good enough.

Yesterday we in the official opposition had the opportunity to begin debate on the principle of the legislation that this government brought forward. MLA after MLA, from each region of this province, stood to tell the horror stories that were recounted to them on a daily basis, to recount the numerous telephone calls that they still receive from people across this province who are being gouged by the insurance companies with rates that are simply unacceptable. That is why we in the official opposition have a role to play.

The official opposition has been deeply concerned about this issue for over two years. That is why in April we brought forward a comprehensive plan that would make lower insurance rates the law. Also, if the big insurance companies did not want to cooperate, we would bring in a publicly run system. Bill 1 falls far short of the needs and the expectations of New Brunswickers. We in the official opposition look forward to bringing forward our own proposals in the coming days. Our Liberal plan also addressed a number of the issues at the root of the current insurance crisis.

While immediate rate relief must be obtained, steps must also be taken to ensure that this crisis of skyrocketing insurance rates does not reappear further down the road. That is why yesterday, as the Leader of the Official Opposition, I was pleased to introduce a motion that called upon government to create a commission on insurance. This commission would have a two-pronged mandate: First, it would review the feasibility of establishing a public automobile insurance system, built by the people of New Brunswick for the people of New Brunswick here in New Brunswick. Second, as skyrocketing insurance rates are moving beyond automobile insurance, the commission would also review property and public liability insurance.

I would urge all members of this House to give our motion a favourable response. As elected members, it is our duty not only to deal with the challenges of today but also to prevent those of tomorrow.

[Translation]

I would urge all members of this House to give our motion a favourable response. As elected members, it is our duty not only to deal with the challenges of today but also to prevent those of tomorrow.

[Original]

While insurance is a matter of concern, there is another matter that has emerged in the weeks since the election. The well-being of our province's finances has a significant impact on the well-being of our province's people. Since the election, NB Power has announced a \$77-million deficit in the last fiscal period and regional health authorities are warning that they will not end the year in the black. Furthermore, the new Minister of Finance has instructed departments of government to cut \$50 million out of their current operating budgets.

[Translation]

In light of these developments, it is clear that the financial situation of the province bears little resemblance to the budgets and forecasts outlined by the Minister of Finance in December 2002.

[Original]

The timing of the announcement of these cuts would have coincided with the preparation of the first quarterly report. It is highly unusual for a government to run a deficit in the first quarter of the fiscal year, so why did we need these corrective measures? Did the first quarter reveal an alarming trend in health care spending that the government now wants to address? Did the government table a 2003-04 budget with a projected \$7-million surplus that was, in fact, underbudgeted by \$50 million? Did the first quarter reveal a serious spending or revenue problem that will surface in the second, third, and fourth quarters? These are the questions to

which New Brunswickers need and deserve the answers.

[Translation]

It is incumbent upon the government to present revised budgets and projections for the coming year so that New Brunswickers might have a true sense of the fiscal situation in the province.

The Premier has repeatedly declared his commitment to accountability. I urge the Premier and his government to support these declarations with action and to bring forward these revised financial statements.

[Original]

The official opposition is also calling on government for greater accountability in health care. The annual budget of the Department of Health comprises the largest percentage of the New Brunswick provincial budget, but more importantly, our health care system touches the lives of all New Brunswickers. Here in our province, both the reports of the Health Services Review Committee and the Premier's own Health Quality Council highlighted the need for greater accountability in our health care system. These recommendations were supported at the national level in the final report of the Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada. In his report, Mr. Romanow recommended the establishment of accountability as the sixth principle of the *Canada Health Act*.

[Translation]

The *Canada Health Act* provides the underpinnings of one of the most-envied health systems in the world. We must always strive to strengthen this foundation.

[Original]

I would urge this Legislature to endorse the addition of accountability as the sixth principle of the *Canada Health Act* and to encourage the other provincial governments of Canada to do the same. Accountability today for all elected governments will ensure universality and accessibility tomorrow for the people of our country.

In the coming session, the official opposition will also put forward a number of pieces of legislation. We will be introducing an Act to amend the *Electricity Act* tomorrow. The intent of this legislation will be very clear. We will seek to repeal legislation that gives Cabinet the ability to sell the Coleson Cove generating station.

The question that was put to us during the recent election campaign was this: How will a private owner stand up for the people of New Brunswick? A private owner will stand up for the shareholders of the company. A private owner will place profit before the people of our province. We have seen it happen in Ontario, and we have seen it happen in Alberta. In fact, in those provinces, the governments have had to back away from their plans for more private-sector involvement in electricity markets.

Coleson Cove represents a full third of the electricity generation capacity of NB Power. Selling off such a significant asset has the potential to greatly compromise the accessibility and affordability of electricity in our province. Make no mistake about it. On election night, the

government received 45% of the vote and the official opposition received 44%. With that comes the responsibility for the government to recognize the fact that the debate on NB Power is not as polarized as it had thought. New Brunswickers want to continue to retain ownership of our power utility, and as the elected official opposition, we will make sure that debate remains on the floor of this Chamber. New Brunswickers can rest assured that Liberals, as a government or as the official opposition, will not allow the sale of NB Power's assets. That is why the official opposition will put forward a bill that stands up for affordable power rates for New Brunswickers.

[Translation]

In the coming days, we will be introducing other legislation. The *Volunteer Protection Act* will limit the liability of people who donate their time and energy for the benefit of our province.

I introduced a *Volunteer Protection Act* during the last session of the Legislature, and it remains an issue of concern. Volunteers are so important to our quality of life in this province. Offering this protection will not only benefit those who currently volunteer, but it may encourage others to become involved. Furthermore, it is our hope that, since this legislation will protect volunteers from liability, it will lead to lower rates for liability insurance.

New Brunswickers are giving of their time and energy. For those who volunteer in public safety, the sacrifice is considerable.

[Original]

There are over 5 000 professional and volunteer firefighters who serve and protect New Brunswickers, and we recognize that this service comes at a price. Our firefighters put themselves in danger, not only at the time of a call but also further down the road, because their work brings them into contact with toxins and chemicals that are released into the air during fires. Sadly, we know that firefighters face a much higher incidence of certain types of cancer than the general public due to the important public service that they perform on our behalf.

That is why the official opposition will be introducing legislation extending workers' compensation coverage to firefighters who develop certain types of cancer directly related to their work, even after they are no longer firefighters. New Brunswick will become the fifth province in Canada to extend this coverage to professional firefighters and only the second province in the country to extend it to volunteer firefighters. This is an important first step in recognizing the contributions made by our firefighters, and we in the official opposition have taken the lead on this piece of legislation. We extend a hand of cooperation to government in making the passage of this bill a reality in the province.

[Translation]

Finally, we will introduce legislation that will protect New Brunswick workers against unfair labour practices.

Quebec currently has in place restrictions that prevent our construction companies from working in that province; yet, Quebec firms face no similar barriers for getting work in our province.

What happens is that Quebec firms increase their prices in Quebec, where there is no external competition, and they then come to provinces like New Brunswick and lowball their tender applications. Who loses out? New Brunswick workers and companies do.

[Original]

Fairness is a two-way street. Jurisdictions that want to place restrictions on New Brunswickers should face the same restrictions in New Brunswick. Again, it is the official opposition that will be leading the charge, leading the way, and standing up for the construction workers of New Brunswick so that they have the same protection and ability to work in other provinces that people from other provinces are given here. The legislation that we will present will prohibit Quebec firms from winning publicly funded construction contracts until such time as the restrictions against New Brunswick workers are lifted in Quebec. We believe this needs to be in place in order to begin negotiations on a level playing field.

These pieces of legislation are commitments that we made to the people of New Brunswick in the recent election campaign, and we, as elected MLAs, have an obligation to fulfill these commitments. There are many other commitments and many more issues that we look forward to debating when the Legislature resumes for a much longer fall session. In the spirit of cooperation, we today request that the government adjourn the House rather than prorogue at the end of the session. This will allow legislation to remain on the Order Paper and be discussed in the Committee on Law Amendments.

There has been some speculation that following this summer session, the Legislature will not reconvene until the spring of 2004. It is my sincere hope that such speculation is just that—speculation. I would urge the Premier to reconvene the Legislature in the fall, as has been the case for a number of years. First, there are very practical considerations; for example, the capital construction budget. In order to take full advantage of the construction season, it is necessary that capital construction budgets be tabled in the winter months.

[Translation]

More importantly, the Premier and his colleagues made a number of significant commitments to the people of New Brunswick. It is incumbent upon them to return to the Legislature this fall to present a full throne speech that outlines how and when these commitments will be kept.

[Original]

Shortly after I was first elected, someone gave me a copy of Edmund Burke's famous quotation from a speech to his constituents. The quote goes as follows: "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement." As we stand today at the dawn of the 55th Legislative Assembly, I am reminded of another Edmund Burke quotation: "All government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue, and every prudent act, is founded on compromise."

Each of us in this Chamber today has a duty to uphold not only the interests of our constituents but also the interests of our province and the principles of democracy that we have been elected to serve.

I look forward to this current session and to the sessions that will come, because I believe that

we all are part of a Legislature that has the opportunity and the potential to achieve great things for our province. Most of all, I welcome the balance that has been achieved in the Legislative Assembly, a historic balance that will allow the people of our province to see that we, in cooperation with the government elected today, are here not only to build a better province but also to stand up for the people of New Brunswick. Thank you very much.