

May 26, 2020

[Translation]

### Government Funding

**Mr. D. Landry:** As Leader of the Official Opposition, I, too, would like to offer my sincere condolences to a friend, the Government House Leader and member for Saint John East, for the loss of his mother. I know it is very difficult for him because, in a very short time, he has lost both his father and his mother. Please accept my condolences.

Mr. Speaker, it is good to be back. I would like to start by thanking all New Brunswick frontline workers, who are the true heroes and have contributed to flattening the curve. I want to thank Dr. Russell and her team as well as all the people who stayed home and kept their distance from others.

In terms of public health, things have gone well, but the economy is clearly struggling, with businesses closing and tens of thousands of New Brunswickers out of work.

[Original]

Can the Premier tell us how much money this has cost the province in direct financial aid to individuals and businesses to date?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs:** Thank you for the question. And, yes, it is great to be back, Mr. Speaker. In relation to economics, we put out a financial statement last week basically outlining what it has meant to the province in terms of a kind of differential in the order of \$500 million. We have a current deficit of \$300 million.

With the programs that were put in place initially, starting with the gap-filling in terms of money that Ottawa was getting out, basically that was a \$900, two-week program. That was about \$40 million in total, assisting, I think, around 40 000 individuals.

On businesses, we have a navigator program set up within ONB. All businesses have been responded to directly as they look for help in terms of getting information, in terms of helping them understand what to do in times of COVID. We have a \$50-million program where basically \$25 million is for one business size and \$25 million is for another. It is a loan. We also ended up deferring payments in relation to WorkSafeNB and taxes, moving that out so that people would have more time to breathe.

But, Mr. Speaker, the biggest opportunity of all is actually getting people back up and working and doing it faster and quicker than most. So what we have done is work with businesses. WorkSafeNB has done an admirable job in working with individual businesses to help them get



up and get on their feet. So, Mr. Speaker, this is not about just today. This is about the next 10 or 15 years.

**Mr. Speaker:** I myself have to get back into the groove too.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. D. Landry:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can the Premier tell me the total amount of pandemic-related subsidies and assistance the government of New Brunswick has provided directly to businesses since a state of emergency was declared on March 19? I would like to know how much money has been given directly to businesses.

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs:** No, Mr. Speaker, I actually cannot give an exact amount. I know that the federal government usually makes an announcement once a day and that it is hard to keep up with that. I know that in many of those cases, it is tied to other areas in terms of what provinces are going to participate as well.

But, you know, I think that we always lose sight... That has always been an issue that we have had back and forth between the members opposite and ourselves. It is about how we get people up and running in a sustainable manner and how we help those who need help—not how we spend as much money as we possibly can—and whether or not it gets results is really irrelevant.

Mr. Speaker, the same philosophy applies. We want to see people get up and running. We are working with every—every—company in this province to see that happens, not only in a sustainable way, but also in a way that allows them to think differently about the future, because we have a new future, Mr. Speaker. It is a new future. We have made changes in government operations as never before in the past two or three months, and we cannot lose that. One way was what we saw between Social Development and Health when putting seniors in the right place, in those nursing homes. It is about getting results and having a future to plan with and not just about how much money you can throw at the wall.

[*Translation*]

## Government Programs

**Mr. D. Landry:** Mr. Speaker, I do not think the Premier wants to play petty politics here, but I never said that money had to be thrown at the wall to try to please the official opposition.

The future of certain companies is being played out today. If they do not receive assistance, in a few months, we will not be talking about their future. According to a Scotiabank report on the



economic impact of the coronavirus on the province, New Brunswick ranks 10th out of the 10 provinces in terms of provincial assistance provided to individuals and businesses.

Is the Premier planning on new assistance programs other than the ones that have already been announced—yes or no? I repeat that we are ranked 10th out of 10; we are last. What is the Premier going to do?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs:** Contrary to the member opposite, Mr. Speaker, we are not in last place. Actually, we are in first place and in first place where it counts, which is the health and well-being of the citizens of this province. I know that we in New Brunswick have not been first a lot, but that is the purpose for coming back quicker and stronger and faster than others. It is in order to have companies be more resilient.

So if the member opposite has particular companies that he would like to assess and if he would like to work with Opportunities New Brunswick to figure out how we get them up and running and sustainable, let's do it, Mr. Speaker. But if we are going to follow RBC's rule and say that we have not thrown as much money as over here... I do not care about being in tenth or in first place on that list. I care about being in first place on the list that sees our people get back to work and that sees our economy start to get back in a positive territory and seeing people... For the first time, Mr. Speaker, I have people looking at New Brunswick and saying: What is going on with New Brunswick? I would like to live there. We are pushing on tourism, and we are pushing on every other aspect of making New Brunswick great, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

**Mr. D. Landry:** Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that our side of the House also wants to see a thriving New Brunswick as soon as possible. A number of small businesses in New Brunswick indicated they would not be able to survive the recession triggered by this pandemic. Is the Premier worried about this, and does he share the concerns expressed by entrepreneurs, chambers of commerce, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, and many other organizations? Is the Premier worried about this?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs:** Yes, for sure, Mr. Speaker, I am concerned about that. The idea is this: How do we work with those companies in real terms? I will say again to the member opposite that I want to work with any company. ONB is set up to do that. That is why we set up the navigator program. We work with every company. We work with every business. We understand the situations that they are in, and we react accordingly to ensure that we can get them up and moving.



Does that mean that everybody is going to be able to survive this pandemic? Maybe that is an unlikely aspiration, but it would be great if that were possible. So let's put details around the specifics, Mr. Speaker. Let's put in real information, and let's put in real companies. Let's look at the real situations and analyze what works for them and how we see them get back to normal. That is our goal.

I mentioned tourism. We have been focused on staycations here in New Brunswick as never before. Obviously, surrounded by the COVID-19 virus, we want to have people looking at and discovering New Brunswick.

**Mr. Speaker:** Time, Premier.

**Mr. D. Landry:** On this, Mr. Speaker, I will follow what the Premier is saying. These organizations have called for specific aid from the province other than loans, arguing that it could help some of those businesses survive. Does the Premier think that these arguments have merit?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs:** Mr. Speaker, that is why we have a program set up to analyze these businesses. That is why it is not about saying at face value: Give me \$5 000 000 or give me \$200 000. It is about saying: What do you need to get back into position? What does getting back into position look like? What does the new economy look like in a COVID world until we get a vaccine?

Once again, it is about the details. It is about where and when we get the right formula to have businesses survive in a new economy. What I am saying here is that, as with everything that we are doing, we look at the specific situation. That is why Navigators was set up. That is why Opportunities New Brunswick has a website set up. I forget the number, but, thus far, something like 2 000 businesses have called and wanted information. But they direct to any department. That is why I mentioned WorkSafeNB. It has been working with individual companies, companies that we hear from that want to get up and get back...

*[Translation]*

**Ms. Thériault:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The decision made last month to ban temporary foreign workers from coming to New Brunswick has caused a very big imbalance in the fisheries and agriculture ecosystem. This has caused considerable commercial loss, as much for fish processing plants as for fishermen and farmers.

One month later, does the Premier realize that the decision he made on April 28 has caused an enormous amount of stress to our fishermen, our processing industry, and our farmers?

*[Original]*

**Hon. Mr. Higgs:** Mr. Speaker, there have been a lot of decisions made in the last two months that have caused stress in one pocket of the province or another, whether it be because of



family trying to get home, whether it be because businesses that wanted to run could not run, or whether it be because of a situation where we were trying to limit the exposure in terms of health. Businesses all over the province have been negatively impacted by decisions that have been made over the past two months. They were made for one reason. They were made for the health and welfare of the citizens of this province. That is why they were made.

The temporary foreign workers decision was no different. It was done to prevent one other risk. Now, admittedly, did I get as many volunteers or as many people who wanted to work in the fishing plants or on the farms as I had hoped? No, I did not. I did not. Did I say at the very beginning that we would ensure that these locations would have the people they needed? Therefore, the temporary working ban was changed and lifted. I did say that at the beginning, and we did do that.

But am I proud of people in the fish plant in Baie-Sainte-Anne with students from Blackville who are working there? It is running...

*[Translation]*

**Ms. Thériault:** Speaking of fisheries, the federal government provided direct assistance to plants during this difficult season to enable them to store as much of their resource as possible. However, it is currently difficult for plants to process this resource, given the labour shortage, and this has a direct impact on fishermen, who are now faced with a limit of 500 lb per day. Yes, there are challenges in terms of markets, but it is important to realize that the ban on temporary foreign workers had a direct impact on the entire chain: fishermen, plants, and plant workers.

So, my question for the Premier is the following: Will he stop relying solely on Ottawa? What will he do to help fishermen, plants, and plant workers?

*[Original]*

**Hon. Mr. Higgs:** First, Mr. Speaker, I think about Ottawa. I mean, to whom have they not given money? To whom have they not thrown out money? How do we in this province end up at the end of the day? Where are we going to be in our transfer payments next year? Does anybody think about next year or the year after or the year after, when 30% of our transfer payments... A good portion of that 30% was coming from an economy that has absolutely collapsed in Alberta. Where is that going to come from? Are we thinking beyond today?

In terms of the 500-lb limit that the member opposite mentioned, I was speaking to the general manager of the plant that recently burned in Val-Comeau. I believe that the quota came in after that plant burned because it lost its processing capacity and roughly 300 people were out of employment. I also know that the individual is working to work with the other plants and with those workers being dispersed. My kudos to him. After going through a very traumatic experience, he is working through to get his workers employed. I have not seen the numbers



that would suggest that the limitations were on and financial burdens were placed. I have not seen that. Maybe the member can share...

**Mr. Speaker:** Time, Premier.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Thériault:** Thank you. Knowing that the Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries met with his department on April 24 to talk about temporary foreign workers coming here, will the Premier agree that the last-minute decision to ban them from coming to New Brunswick, when the entire industry had made preparations to take the necessary precautions, was, Mr. Speaker, a mistake?

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs:** Nobody has protected our borders like the borders in New Brunswick, Mr. Speaker—no one. Am I sorry that we did that, Mr. Speaker, because other provinces were not doing it? Absolutely not. In fact, I am proud of every compliance officer or safety officer who was out on the beat. They were there 24 hours per day protecting our borders. We made decisions throughout this entire pandemic, and we made decisions that counted.

Mr. Speaker, for me, when colleagues mention it here today, I think a big part of the success was directly related, not to the typical opposition that you see here, but to the cooperation that we had from leaders of all parties as we worked through this. I think it made a huge difference and is an example of what New Brunswick can actually do: not be in last place, Mr. Speaker, but be in first place. When we get in here talking in circles, then we end up going back to last place. Mr. Speaker, what I would like to think, through all this, is that we will start thinking about the longer-term vision for New Brunswick.

**Mr. Melanson:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think it is very important, as we reconvene in the Legislature, that the tone of how we ask questions and receive answers... We should be sensitive around that.

I want to thank the Minister of Finance for giving us a fiscal and economic update last week. Certainly, we knew that there was going to be an impact on the budget, and now, at this time, we foresee a deficit of about \$300 million. I want to ask the minister how he is going to look at addressing this fiscal situation.

There are probably two main areas that you can look at—obviously, on the revenue column, as I see that about 75% of the impact comes from a shortage in the revenues, and on the expenditures. Can the minister give us an idea of where his budgetary decisions or fiscal decisions are going to be made moving forward? On the revenue side, or on the expenditure side?





**Hon. Mr. Steeves:** Good afternoon, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. I will take a moment once again and echo the speaker's thoughts from a few minutes ago. To the frontline workers and the essential workers, thank you to everybody who has helped so far.

Do you know what? The financial update was exactly as the member said. We went from a \$93-million surplus to a \$300-million deficit in a hurry—awfully quick. We are in unprecedented times. No government has faced this before. I would suggest to the member opposite that we will do as we have done before. We will be prudent with the money of New Brunswickers. With the taxes of New Brunswickers, we will be careful. We will be careful how we spend, we will be careful how we budget, and we will look, once again, not to budget for tomorrow, but to budget for the future and the next generation. As we have said before, we do not budget for the next election, we budget for the next generation. We will continue with that same thought as we continue and move forward. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Melanson:** Mr. Speaker, we know this situation has had a significant economic impact on New Brunswick. The Minister of Finance provided an overview of economic growth when the budget was tabled. This growth was expected to be around 0.9%. With the update, we see that the minister is now anticipating that our economy will shrink by 4.3%. Private sector agencies are anticipating a 5.5% decline.

With respect to investment, even the most cautious economists are telling us that it is essential. Government must be able to make decisions and invest public funds in order to stimulate the economy. This must be done in partnership with the various levels of government, whether federal or municipal. The New Brunswick government should certainly be involved in these efforts.

I would like the minister to indicate to us whether he, along with his Premier and his government, is really going to invest more in our economy so that it can get back to normal.

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Steeves:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Yes, the banks have talked about us maybe contracting the GDP by as much as 8.5%. The Bank of Montreal, though, says that it may contract by only 3.5%. Our experts—and I know that the member opposite has worked with our experts in Treasury Board and Finance and they are exceptional people—believe that we are going to settle in somewhere around 4.5% to 5.5%.

Yes, we will be investing and we will be talking to the people and, as the Premier said earlier, we will ask the businesses. We will go out with ONB and with the Minister of Economic Development as well, and we will find out exactly what is needed and where it is needed. Do you know what? We will come up with a plan. We are not just going to throw it out. We are not



just going to spread the money and just throw it higgledy-piggledy around. We are going to come up with a plan, and we are going to find out which businesses really have a plan to spend this money and to grow New Brunswick. The best project that we have, the best plan that we have, is to get people back to work—to open up the economy and get people back to work. And that is what this government is doing.

**Mr. Melanson:** We are also very proud to be the jurisdiction that has dealt with the public health issue, and we are number one, as I understand, in how we dealt with that. Kudos to Public Health and everybody involved.

But the health of our economy is also very critical. I think we need to understand here today—and the minister speaks about a plan—that small and medium-sized businesses are hurting now. They are having a cash-flow issue, a working-capital issue. We need to understand, from this government, what is going to be the plan. We cannot wait too long—“we” being not me myself but the business owners who are struggling today to keep their businesses afloat. It is always easier to keep a company alive than to work with a start-up. We need to understand when this minister and this government are actually going to come up with a real plan and to invest in our economy so that we can stimulate the economy and get back to a normal, healthy economy, which we deserve.

**Hon. Mrs. M. Wilson:** Thank you for the question, Mr. Speaker. I want to point out that we had an amazing response.

**Mr. Speaker:** Could you speak closer to the microphone, please?

**Hon. Mrs. M. Wilson:** How is that? Is that good? Can everybody hear me?

(Interjections.)

**Hon. Mrs. M. Wilson:** Thank you, again, for the question, Mr. Speaker. I want to point out that our government has been very reactive to this emergency that we have been dealing with. We took immediate action to put supports in place for businesses impacted by this pandemic. As our Premier mentioned, our Business Navigators were answering calls on March 19. I have the number. To date, they have resolved more than 2 887 calls from the business community. Also, as mentioned, we have made up to \$50 million available in immediate assistance to support our businesses that have been negatively impacted. In meeting those gaps, there was one thing that we made sure did not happen. There was no minimum payroll requirement, unlike the federal program, so that was very important.

**Mr. Speaker:** Time, minister.





## Economy

**Mr. Coon:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The pandemic has revealed fragility in our health care system, in our senior care system, in our food production system, in our social safety net, and in our supply lines. It has exposed the pressing needs for major investments in our public institutions and in our food system to build resilience into our society and our economy. How do we do this? Where do we find the money?

Mr. Speaker, the Bank of Canada, the very bank that we, as Canadians, own, brought Canada out of the Great Depression with the injection of money into our infrastructure, loaning money to provinces. It was the Bank of Canada that financed our enormously costly war effort during World War II and afterward financed the programs needed to assist returning soldiers, our veterans, with vocational and university training, even providing them with access to farmland. We need the Bank of Canada now to play that role again as we deal with a crisis that has been compared to both those momentous events in the life of our country.

My question is for the Premier: Will he muster the support of his fellow Premiers to insist that Prime Minister Trudeau use the full potential of the Bank of Canada to carry us once again through a crisis...

**Hon. Mr. Higgs:** Mr. Speaker, I would agree with the Leader of the Green Party that bringing back our economy in a way like never before is extremely important. I would say that the federal government is certainly leveraging the Bank of Canada in light of... I think that we are now at about \$300 billion. I think that is the number. And that is being spread all over the country. I know, individually, as provinces meet and talk weekly... The financial support is coming from the federal government and not independently from the provinces in terms of borrowing from the Bank of Canada. However, I think the important thing is this: How do we focus on what is important, such as food security and the safety issues and the safety nets that are so important to our society?

When we talk about business... I go back to that. A stat was worthy of mentioning in relation to the CFIB report. The recent CFIB report says that New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island are leading every other province in terms of new businesses opening up, over 54%...

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Coon:** Mr. Speaker, a truly national approach is required to build a resilient society and economy. We are part of this unique colony that was founded for the greater good between us, Nova Scotia, and the Province of Canada. The Bank of Canada is one of the institutions that came out of this union.

Private banks realize the money they lend, as does the Bank of Canada, but there is one major difference: The Bank of Canada returns the interest earned to the government and to our national community, while private banks send the earned interest elsewhere in order to



reinvest it and charge even more interest. By doing so, they suck money out of our productive economy.

It is up to us to do things differently and put this powerful economic tool back into the hands of our government, so that it can play its role and help us get through our darkest hours.

[Original]

**Mr. Speaker:** Time, member.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs:** Thank you for the comments. I guess that in relation to the Bank of Canada and its role, I do not think that there is any debate or discussion on how important that role is. But I think that in terms of the money from the federal government, as I said before, that is where the federal government is playing a major role in terms of funding the nation in how we move forward.

We have asked for more flexibility, where we can put money into areas that are going to have a long-term view on sustainability. I guess what I would suggest, coming from this, is that... In the meetings that we have had to this point with our COVID Cabinet group, it has been about how we define the four or five priorities that we can focus on in terms of where the province needs to move forward and in terms of how we can actually do those collectively. I think some very good points were raised during many of the discussions that we had on a range of issues— obviously COVID-focused at the time. Food security was one that came up significantly. But with the economy and borrowing more for the economy, there is a balance there somewhere, and I think we have to find it collectively.

## Government Services

**Mr. Austin:** Mr. Speaker, you probably would not notice it by looking around this room, but hairstylists are now open. Gyms, yoga studios, pool halls, and bowling alleys will soon be good to go, yet for some reason, Service New Brunswick centres and most other government departments remain closed to the public, with some offering only limited services by appointment.

My question is for the minister in charge of Service New Brunswick. Why are the government departments lagging to reopen when private businesses are eager to open their doors? When will Service New Brunswick offices be open to the public?

**Hon. Ms. S. Wilson:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for that question. On April 1, Service New Brunswick reopened nine centres for essential services by appointment only. SNB service centres have been fully staffed and working throughout the pandemic situation, providing appointment-booking services, local dealer support, and online fulfillment. Ten locations are now currently open, and two more will open next week, on June 1, in Tracadie and Sussex. They will be by appointment only. We encourage everyone to call the 1 888



number, 1 888 762-8600. When people call that number, they will be assisted and they will be able to make an appointment.

I want to remind everyone in the House today that of the 429 services that we offer at Service New Brunswick, all of them except 30 can be done online. So if people call and they are, like me, not a techie, they will be assisted. If they...

**Mr. Speaker:** Time, minister.

**Mr. Austin:** I would like to thank the minister for that response. However, there is a growing gap between private sector and public sector. We are seeing the private sector eager, salivating, to open because its livelihood depends on it, frankly. However, we do not see the same eagerness from the public sector in terms of government departments. Of course, we have our essential health care workers, who deserve all the praise in the world, in nursing homes, etc. When it comes to government departments, we seem to see some shortcomings with how quickly they are moving. I would like to ask the Premier when we can expect to see government departments open to the public so that services can continue to flow and be maintained. Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs:** Thank you for the question. Thinking about how we open up differently... I am not speaking particularly of Service New Brunswick and getting reopened across the province. I am speaking about how we look at things differently in terms of... We have talked about virtual health visits, and we have talked about reducing the wait times and more patients having access to primary care. We have talked about opening up government differently.

I would say to the leader of the People's Alliance party that it is not just about getting everything open the way things were. I know that many businesses are doing it quicker because livelihoods depend on it, and I get it. It is trying to find out whether we have the best model going forward. We think about moving 200 seniors out of hospitals because the best place is nursing homes, and we did that in probably less than five weeks with coordination between the Department of Social Development and the Department of Health. That is something that has been on the books for a long, long time. How many other things can we do differently as we bring back government in a whole new way and with better service to the public?

[*Translation*]

## Federal Funding

**Mr. LePage:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since the government established, on May 20, a list of workers deemed to be essential in order to provide them with an income supplement, my question is: How did the Premier determine which essential workers are entitled to this \$500 supplement and which are not?



[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Holder:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I was a little concerned for a minute that I was not going to get a question on this particular first day back. I want to say one thing very clearly from the onset, which is how proud we all, as New Brunswickers, should be that every single question in this House today has been about jobs and the economy. Mr. Speaker, that speaks volumes to what we have accomplished as a province during the last number of months in flattening the curve and, in fact, practically eliminating the curve so that we can go on to talk about jobs and the economy. I am excited about where we can go.

Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite and his question, I can tell you that we worked with the criteria that the federal government gave us. I can tell you that we have identified and are in the process of identifying the workers who need it the most and that we are making sure that they are rewarded for the work that they have done to help flatten the curve and get us through this so that we can go on and talk about the economy.

**Mr. Speaker:** Question period is over.

