

April 9, 2015

[Original]

Senior Citizens

Mr. Fitch: Some of the statements by the Liberal government are interesting. I misheard the statement from the member for Miramichi Bay-Neguac. I thought that she said “the worst government” and the “worst budget” in her statement. Anyway, that is why we were chuckling, because it is one of the worst budgets that I have ever seen in my tenure in the Legislature.

Yesterday, the Minister of Social Development tried to clarify the mess that she is in. I quote from Hansard: “First of all, everyone who currently goes into a nursing home receives government subsidization.” Yes, I get that. “The 13% represents the percentage of people in nursing homes who may be in a position to pay more.” Then, in the hastily put together commentary in the media today, it talks about: “Our recent decision to remove the cap on the per diem rate for nursing home care would have no effect on 87 per cent of the seniors receiving nursing home care today.”

My question is this: If you include assets in that calculation, what are the percentages that the minister needs to quote?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: First of all, I want to remind the members opposite and any New Brunswickers who are listening today that a policy has not been developed yet on how this will be rolled out. This is purposeful because we intend to engage New Brunswickers in developing a policy, but we will continue to be guided by the principles of fairness, equity, and transparency. Thank you.

Mr. Fitch: You have already broken that commitment.

Again, in the commentary that was signed by the minister, it says: “Another decision we have made”—another decision we have made—“which is based on fairness, is to no longer exempt liquid financial assets”—no longer exempt. The decision has been made, and the government has already heard from seniors’ groups that said: Do not touch the liquid assets.

How can these government members be talking about fairness and transparency when they have already gone against the consultation that they heard on the blame-the-people tour, which, I guess, is now the ignore-the-people tour and do whatever you want? They have already made the decision to include liquid assets. Now, they are hiding behind the formula that has to be made up.

You have included liquid assets. How do the numbers change between the 13% that represents the people in the nursing homes and the 87% that will be affected by the removal of the cap? When you include the assets, what are those percentages?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: If you take 100% minus 13%, you get 87%.



It is true that we have asked seniors to play a role in facing our challenges, but we are asking all New Brunswickers to do the same. This honours the principles of fairness, equity, transparency, and engagement, and we are listening to seniors. We will be guided by what we hear from people in the rollout of a policy, which will only happen later this year.

In this budget, we are responding to, as we need to do responsibly, the increased demands and pressures facing our Long-Term Care Services. It is being frugal and fiscally responsible for us to be fair and to ask those who can contribute more...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Fitch: I want to congratulate the minister because she can do mental math and it does add up to 100%.

The Cabinet and the caucus are applauding the attack on seniors in New Brunswick. Going from experience...

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Fitch: I have a senior parent in a nursing home. Right now, based on the income test, he would fall within the 87%. If you remove the cap, he is capped out. If you include assets, then the number changes. Which percentage would he be in? Would he be 13% or 87%?

The minister, trying to be cute with the answers and saying that nothing changes, is incorrect. There are people right now who are maxed out in their contributions based on an income test, but, if it becomes an asset test, then those contributions will change, and they will be affected. What the question...

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: There is no spin in this. We are just looking at facts. We are looking at being fair, and we will continue to do that. We have said very clearly that we will exempt the family home, and we have said that, whenever it rolls out, the policy is going to include the input from seniors and it is also going to be a process that is fair.

These are not tough decisions that are made in a vacuum. They are in a context of our also looking at building community capacity so that we can keep seniors out of nursing homes for as long as possible. We want seniors in their homes and in the community. We are trying to take some resources from where it is possible to invest them to where it is necessary for fiscal responsibility.



Mr. Fitch: The minister really needs to be clear because she has caused so much uncertainty within the senior population in the province that they are calling us and emailing and calling them and there are no answers. It is unfortunate because seniors, again, need to be treated with dignity and respect. This government is saying: We are going to take your liquid assets. We are going to take your hard-earned money, a decision that had been exempt for many, many years. I want the minister to be very clear. When you include liquid assets in the calculation, will that 13% that she has been talking about for many days now increase?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I will be very clear. We will respect the dignity of seniors. This will include whatever is happening with the new policy. We will continue to respect seniors' ability to have a good quality of life. This is very, very important to us, and we will ensure that whatever formula is updated will take care of seniors and will respect them. We know today that they have built our good province. We value the hard work that they have contributed. Whatever rolls out with this policy, it will be New Brunswickers who will help us make this policy. It is better to do it this way than to develop a policy and announce it without engagement.

Mr. Fitch: The government members did the Engage NB tour. They have been around the province. They have heard what seniors have said. The coalition did a proposal. CARP did a proposal. All those proposals said: Do not touch the liquid assets of seniors. If that is not clear to the minister, it is very clear on this side. She is saying that the government has to develop the formula. The commentary that was in the media said that she had already made her decision.

Again, I am asking the minister to be very clear, because she has said to the public and to the media many times that only 13% of people in seniors' homes will be affected. When we include assets in the calculation, what percentage of people in nursing homes will be affected?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: At the consultation, through the Strategic Program Review, we heard a lot of messages from a variety of stakeholder groups. One of the messages that we heard very clearly was that we had to be fair to people, and we are doing that. We also heard that we did not want a return to the old assets policy. We have listened to this. We will not be returning to the old assets policy, which was, indeed, unfair.

We are listening to New Brunswickers. We have not completed our Strategic Program Review initiatives. We will still be doing engagement sessions in the next couple of weeks. We are continuing to engage New Brunswickers in this process. Thank you.

Mr. Fitch: Once again, the minister has stood up in the House and confused the issue. The minister has said that we will not be returning to the old assets policy, yet, in a commentary that was in the paper here today, she said: We have made a decision to include liquid assets in the calculation. It is unfortunate that the minister does not know the file or does not want to be one hundred percent with the people of New Brunswick.

I am asking a simple question, and the question is this. The minister has been in the media, saying that only 13% of the people in nursing homes would be affected by the decisions that the



government is making. She has made a decision. I am asking the minister again: What percentage of people in nursing homes will be affected when the government includes liquid assets in its reassessments this year?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: We keep getting the same questions over and over again.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I am trying to explain to the members opposite and to clarify misinformation for the public. Unfortunately, seniors may be made afraid, and I do not want this to happen. They do not need to be afraid.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: We are going to take care of everyone who does not have the ability to contribute a little bit more for nursing home care. We are committed... Any changes will affect a small percentage of the population, but they will be done in a very fair way that does not disrespect, that does not take dignity from people.

I keep getting these questions asking for details, but the details have not been formulated yet. Seniors are going to be part of those details. Thank you.

Mr. Fitch: The minister's responses here this morning are just appalling. She is the one who created the fear in the public. She is the one, along with the Premier, who created the uncertainty on this particular file. The government said that it had made a decision to include liquid assets in the calculation, yet members stand on the floor of the Legislature and say: People are just going to pay a little bit more. They have not defined what that "little bit more" is. Is it \$50 000? Is it \$100 000? Is it \$250 000? Seniors want to know what to do with their assets when they sell the family home. They have accumulated this money over a lifetime. It is obvious that the minister is hiding behind the estimates. I want to give her an opportunity.

Last night, on CTV, Barb Vessey—a lady who worked on the minister's campaign and made calls to say that the minister would stand up for seniors and would be a strong voice here in Fredericton—went public and said that she was so disappointed in the minister. Barb says that her integrity is being called into question now.

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: It might be an appropriate time to remind people that it was the last government that increased per diem rates for everyone three times. We are trying to be careful



about who pays the higher cost. We want to make sure that we protect those who cannot afford to contribute, so that everyone down the road... We have increasing demands and pressures. We are going to have an increase of 61% in terms of the senior population over 75 who will potentially require nursing homes in the next 10 to 15 years. We need to make sure that our system is sustainable for these people. Therefore, we want a system that is progressive and a system that takes care of those who do not have the provision to take care of themselves.

Mr. Fitch: The minister cannot fire Barb, as she did Ian Pelkey, because she was a volunteer.

I ran out of time with that last question.

Barb and her husband, Nelson, are good people in the town of Riverview. They are members of the Lions Club and are very, very concerned about seniors. Barb feels that her integrity has been called into question because of the work she did for the minister. When Barb made a call, she told people that the minister would stand up for seniors. That is obviously not the case. Maybe that comes from having a small Cabinet. No one will stand up for seniors.

I am going to give the minister a chance today to try to redeem herself. Barb was very public with regard to her situation. I will give the minister an opportunity to stand up and apologize to Barb for her situation. More importantly, Madam Minister, why not apologize to the seniors in this province for causing fear and unrest based on your decisions?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I am going to take this opportunity to share a quote, in case someone has not heard this yet. Former American Vice-President Hubert Humphrey famously said:

the moral test of government is how government treats those who are in the dawn of life, children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy

Mr. Speaker: Order. The member for Carleton will come to order.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I believe that, with our government's budget, we have passed this moral test.

Mr. Speaker: The member for Carleton will come to order.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I have spent many years as an advocate for the well-being of vulnerable children, families, and seniors. I have been an advocate for the poor.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I am pleased that the budget of the Department of Social Development saw an increase of \$14.6 million so that we could provide important programs and services, not only to seniors...



Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Steeves: There are so many questions about this government's grab for seniors' cash that I am not sure where to begin. I guess an apology is out of the way.

I am glad to have one senior here. Do you know what? We always say that God works in mysterious ways. I would like to welcome my mother to the House. I know that it is not guest time. She was supposed to be here this afternoon. I will introduce her later. She is 92 years old. I am sure that she wants to know how seniors are going to be affected as well.

You talk about liquid assets being taken away. When the house is sold and becomes a liquid asset, we want to know from the Minister of Social Development: Is that part of the liquid asset? You say that you are not going to take the house. You say that you are not going to take the house at all. When it is sold and becomes a liquid asset, is it still protected? That is what I would like to know.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: It is great to see the family of the member opposite here today. I know the family, and it is very nice to see them.

In this budget, we attempted to be fair, and we will continue in this as we develop policy regarding liquid assets. If we are fair and if we respect seniors and respect the dignity of seniors, then, obviously, we are not going to rob seniors. This is beyond rationality. We are trying to make people feel comfortable, but we are going to be fair in the rollout of the policy. We are going to engage seniors in the process and in the definition of how we can be fair in this policy. I just want to reiterate that we will be fair. This is not a return to the old assets policy. We know what the problems were with this, and we are not going to go back there.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Steeves: I am sure it is impressive when we hear the words "trust us" from the Liberal government because it has been trying to trust them.

Can I take that as a confirmation that, when a house is sold, when seniors sell their house and move into an apartment, and then when somebody has to go into special care, the assets from that house will not be taken as liquid assets? Can I take that from the Minister of Social Development as her word that that house... I know that you are going to have all sorts of input from seniors, and I am sure that many of them will say: Yes, please take the assets when I sell my house.

I would like to know right now, if you are not going back to that policy, will you confirm here today in the house that you are not going to take the liquid assets when the family home is sold?



Hon. Ms. Rogers: There is a variety of ways we could have responded to the need for the increasing demands and pressures for nursing home care and for long-term care on the whole continuum. We know that we have to meet these needs and demands because that is part of government's role. We could do this in a way that penalizes everyone. We do not want to do this. We want to do this in a way that penalizes no one. We want to do this in a way that is respectful, fair, and equitable and that ensures the quality of life and the dignity of life for seniors.

We will be doing this. I cannot announce exactly what the formula is going to be before the formula is updated. We just keep going in circles on this. I would like to invite the members opposite to be part of the solution. I would like to invite you to give us some ideas on how we can do this. Thank you.

Mr. Steeves: We have unanimous support over here for a great solution, and that is: Do not touch the liquid assets. We would like that.

It was mentioned that, in three years, or in the last four years, we topped up the cap three times to a total of \$18. I wonder if the minister will confirm that she will not raise that cap to any more than \$18.

I am still looking for just one answer. The question is: Will the government not touch the liquid assets from the family home when the family home is sold? When it is sold, does it become a liquid asset that is potentially going to be taken by this government? It is just a yes or no. Will the government take the liquid assets from the sale of the house when a person requires special care?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I am hearing: Do not remove the cap, and do not look at the liquid assets. I would like to know how we are going to meet the increasing demands and pressures when we want quality care for our seniors...

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: ...and we want to invest more in the front end where we take care of seniors better at home, where they want to be, and then in the community. We are open to answers. We are open to solutions. However, we have discussed this, and this is one way we see to be fair. There is a multitude of ways that a policy can roll out with looking at accessing some liquid assets. It does not mean that we are going to take everything from seniors. It means that we are looking at the liquid assets to come up with a fair policy.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.



Payday Loan Legislation

Mr. Coon: There was a commentary by Randy Hatfield in yesterday's *Telegraph-Journal*. He is with the Saint John Human Development Council, and he described how payday lenders set up shop around poor neighbourhoods such as Ward 3 in Saint John, where one out of two children lives in poverty now. The Financial and Consumer Services Commission has now completed its public consultations on regulating the payday loan industry.

My question for the Minister of Justice is this: Will he establish a \$17 cap on the cost of a \$100 payday loan, as recommended by the Saint John Human Development Council?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: First of all, I would like to thank the member for Fredericton South for his question. I want to let him know that it is an important question, not only for him, but also for members on this side of the House.

The member also understands that payday loans fall under the FCNB, the Financial and Consumer Services Commission. For the past two or three months, the commission has asked the public, the citizens of New Brunswick, for their suggestions and concerns about businesses such as payday loans, and it has taken those into consideration. That ended on March 31, which was only a couple of days ago. The commission has taken those submissions and concerns, and it may try to extend that to get more concerns and questions out there to deal with those.

We know that people out there are having a hard time. That is why our policies and priorities are job creation and getting our fiscal house in order so that people do not have to deal with these businesses. We want to make sure that people can somehow get by so that they do not have to go to these...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Coon: Of course, people who are accessing payday loans are working, and they are part of the working poor, which is becoming a larger part of our population.

In New Brunswick, we lack data about the payday loan industry. However, in Nova Scotia, the estimated total value of payday loans taken out by the working poor last year amounted to \$89 million, and that is with an average loan being only \$433—\$89 million. In fact, half those loans were recurring loans.

There is nothing in New Brunswick's proposed regulations to deal with the debt cycle of repeat borrowing that characterizes this industry. That is the business model. That is what happens, and the working poor get trapped in this situation. In doing so, they cannot afford to pay their rent or pay for their groceries, despite the fact that they are working.



Will the minister adopt the repeat borrowing repayment provisions of British Columbia, as recommended by the Saint John Human Development Council, to prevent the working poor in New Brunswick from being trapped in this debt spiral?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: Again, this falls under the Financial and Consumer Services Commission, and we will work very closely with that commission to make sure that it has the correct legislation so that people do not have to go to these businesses and fall into debt.

We know it is difficult for people. That is why this government has raised the minimum wage and will continue to raise the minimum wage to \$11 by 2017.

We understand that the Financial and Consumer Services Commission is also looking at the jurisdictions of Nova Scotia and Manitoba, which have legislation in their provinces to deal with businesses such as these.

We do not wish for people to have to go to these kinds of businesses. We know the difficulties for people who are working hard. We understand that they are working hard and that they are the working class. However, we are looking at ways of making sure that, when we do put the legislation in... We will be the eighth province to do so, and we will help New Brunswickers, to make sure this is a very safe province to live in and to make sure this is a place where they can live safely.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Coon: I am not getting very many answers to very simple questions.

The Act to regulate payday loans was given royal assent seven years ago, but it was never proclaimed, despite the urgent need for action to protect the working poor from, frankly, punishing rates and fees charged for payday loans in this province because of the lack of regulation. Seven years were allowed to pass before consultation was finally initiated to establish the necessary regulations.

My question is for the minister responsible. He is the minister responsible, so maybe he can answer this question. Can the minister tell the House when the payday loan legislation will finally be proclaimed?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: It is a concern, and maybe this question should have been asked of the previous government.

We are working on this. We are making sure...

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order.



Hon. Mr. Horsman: We are making sure. We are working with the Financial and Consumer Services Commission of New Brunswick to make sure that it is going to be doing this. We will be the eighth province to put in regulations. I cannot give you a time. It takes time, and the member opposite knows that. We will make sure that we look at this. We want to do it correctly, just as we have been doing all along for the last six months. We will make sure that we do things correctly.

We will be looking at the ones that are doing very well, such as Manitoba, which also takes some of its finances and brings it back into the public through literacy. We will look at Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, which has the highest rate, at 25%. We will do it correctly, we will do it once, and we will be on it. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Senior Citizens

Ms. Dubé: My question is for the Minister of Social Development. Since taking office, the government has said that all options are on the table. My question for the Minister of Social Development is very simple: Will bank accounts of people who receive home care services or live in special care homes also be considered?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Rogers: We have spoken about nothing but nursing homes. I am not sure whether there is an intent to try to collect more fear here. All we have done is to speak about nursing homes.

We are looking at a whole continuum of care and a way to make sure that the long-term care system is sustainable. We know that there are increasing demands and pressures on this. Yes, the member opposite is correct in saying that everything is on the table with our need to address the pressures and demands for the whole province of New Brunswick in all areas. That has been part of the Strategic Program Review.

With regard to this particular budget item that she is referring to, we are talking about nursing homes, we are talking about a per diem cap removal, and we are talking about developing an updated policy to consider the inclusion of liquid assets—period.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Dubé: Even though my question was very, very simple, the situation is even less clear. We know that all options are on the table, so I asked if the fees for seniors who receive home care or live in special care homes will be increased. In the assessment, will the infamous formula that the



department is developing take into consideration these people's bank accounts, and will they be asked to pay more? The question is very simple.

On the one hand, the minister says that this measure is only intended for people living in nursing homes, while, on the other hand, she tells us that all options are on the table and will be considered as part of the Strategic Program Review.

My question is very simple: Are you going to increase fees for home care? You talked about long-term care and, this morning, the continuum of care. So I am asking the minister again: Will people receiving home care or living in special care homes also see an increase in service fees, as is the case for seniors who live in nursing homes? To that end, are you also going to take their bank accounts into consideration?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I just want to reiterate again that the budget item that is being discussed today is the removal of the cap and the consideration of liquid assets in the contribution that seniors make as they go into nursing home care. The reference to "everything is on the table" is about a matter that is broadly government under the whole initiative of Strategic Program Review. I do not like when words are put into different contexts.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: The Strategic Program Review is a very strong and brave initiative that our government is undertaking in order to be sustainable and to meet the demands of the people of New Brunswick. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker: The time for question period has expired.

