

April 21, 2015

[Original]

Senior Citizens

Mr. Fitch: The Premier had a week away from the Legislature last week. I know that he likes to read a lot, and I hope that he took at least some of that time to listen to New Brunswickers. If he is reading and hearing the same things that I am, it is obvious that he does not have, nor will he ever have, a social license to take the assets from the seniors of New Brunswick. Today, we are going to give the Premier an opportunity to stand up in the Legislature to declare that the grab for cash was a mistake, to apologize to the seniors, and to give them the reassurance that the assets will be safe and protected, as they were in the past.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I thank the opposition for the question. We have made it very clear that, as a government, we want to support our seniors and help them retire with dignity. That is why, since everyone must contribute, we have asked seniors who could afford to contribute a little more to do so when they move into a nursing home. We are only asking this of those who can contribute a little more.

We have made it very clear that we were not going to touch the family home. We have also made it very clear that we are talking about a very limited percentage of seniors in New Brunswick.

[Original]

I cannot help but comment on the members' statements of the opposition today. We have been working very hard since we were elected. There is no doubt that there are difficult decisions that have to be made and that we have made. We will continue to focus on job creation, and I am very, very happy to point out something that the opposition did not during its members' statements. During the 200 days, the economy of New Brunswick produced 2 500 jobs. That is our priority.

Mr. Fitch: I will try to help the Premier to keep whatever shred of dignity he has left here in the Legislature. We have had an incredible number of emails, phone calls, and face-to-face meetings with people basically asking: How can we get rid of this government? It has broken the trust. It has lost any sense of trust that it had with the public. To put it bluntly, people have said that they have seen enough. They would like to fire the Premier.

Some of the reading that I am sure the Premier has done over the past week was by a well-known columnist, Bill Belliveau. He said that great leaders "have the courage to follow their intuition but they have the wisdom to recognize and deal with their mistakes". Will the Premier recognize his



mistake and deal with that mistake today? Will he reverse the policy on attacking the assets of seniors?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Despite the fact that there is a condescending tone coming from the other side and personal attacks coming from the other side, I will still acknowledge the question. I will repeat what we have already said. We have difficult decisions to make as a government. I think New Brunswickers understand that. The decisions that we have made in the last budget and in the first six months of being in office and the decisions that we will have to make moving forward will not be easy. We recognize that. We do not take joy or fun from making these difficult decisions, but they have to be made. We have to stop putting our problems under the rug, and we have to face them.

With that said, the decisions we have made are going to help put our fiscal situation on the right track. They were made in a very fair, transparent, and progressive way. When it comes to the seniors, we have made it very clear that we will support our seniors, but we will ask those who can pay a little bit more to do so. We are talking about a very small percentage of the population.

Meanwhile, not only will difficult decisions be made, but job creation will be our number one priority as a government.

Mr. Fitch: The words of the Premier are ringing very, very hollow in this hall here today. The frustrating thing is that the Premier's grab for cash from seniors does not have to be made. He does not have to make that choice. It is not necessary. He could reduce the promise to spend \$2 billion over his mandate on new paving projects. He could make the choice not to have a \$150-million slush fund stashed away for a rainy day and leave seniors' assets alone. This attack on seniors is a choice. It is a choice that the Premier has made. It is a choice that the Premier convinced his small Cabinet to go along with, but it is the wrong choice. We are asking the Premier to make another choice here today. He can choose to admit that he made a mistake, he can choose to apologize, and he can choose to leave seniors' assets alone.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I obviously have to correct what the Leader of the Opposition said. We have a program to invest strategically in our infrastructure. This is a \$150-million-per-year program to which we have committed for six years. So we are far from the \$2 billion put forward by the opposition.

Furthermore, we have made choices; our choice is to balance our budget.

[Original]

Our choice is to make sure that we get our finances in order, but that we do it in a very fair, transparent, and progressive way. Again, seniors will only be asked to pay more if they can. That will represent a very small percentage of seniors. On top of that, we are going to ensure that, over



the next few years, we increase revenues within the government coffers by creating jobs, by getting the economy going—something the opposition could not do while in power. We have started that work, and, with the work of New Brunswickers, we have created 2 500 jobs over the last six months. We will continue that momentum.

Mr. Fitch: Once again, the Premier was getting known during his 200 days of disappointment for saying one thing and doing another. We have seen it here again. He says he is committed to six years of infrastructure spending. That is a choice. That is a choice on which he can change his commitment. If he is so committed to that, why did he so quickly break the promise that he made to seniors? The Premier promised seniors that he would keep his hands off their assets. He made that promise back in June 2014 to the people who are sitting in the gallery. Could the Premier explain why he needs to keep this commitment to an infrastructure program yet he cannot commit to the seniors in the province?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The opposition members cannot have it both ways. They cannot say one day—actually, many days—that they want us to invest in a certain hospital in Fredericton, but then say that they do not want us to invest in our infrastructure. They cannot get up and say that we are not doing enough for the port of Saint John, but then get up the week after and say that we are not investing enough in our infrastructure.

They cannot criticize our job creation record when we have actually created 2 500 jobs since we have been in power and it has been estimated that our infrastructure fund will create an extra 1 500 jobs. They criticize our job creation record, yet, we are focused on growing the economy. We are focused on creating jobs. We are going to ensure that we will get our finances in order by focusing on growth and increasing revenues by creating jobs in the province but also by making sure that every dollar within government goes as far as possible. Those who are able to pay a bit more are asked to do so. That is what our government is focused on, and we will continue to do the work on behalf of New Brunswickers.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr. Fitch: Once again, the Premier is giving a mixed message. He wants to increase revenues and increase his coffers, and he is doing it on the backs of seniors. That is the message that he is giving.

Make no mistake, this is a choice. The Premier is putting pavement over people. It is a choice that he has made. It is a choice that he has convinced his small Cabinet to go along with, and it is the wrong choice. The Premier promised the seniors' coalition in June 2014 that he would not touch their assets. We have members here today who have confirmed that. There were 100 of them in the room. I wonder whether maybe the Premier has selective amnesia and he does not recall that promise, so I will ask the Premier to clarify that so that there is no mixed message. Does he remember being at the annual general meeting on June 14 to tell the seniors' coalition that he would not touch their assets?



Hon. Mr. Gallant: We have been keeping our promises since we were elected. In fact, over the past 200 days, we have been able to complete many, many of our platform commitments, and we will continue to do that throughout our mandate.

I want to go again to the point of the member opposite: One day, he says one thing, and, the next day, he decides to say something else. He is criticizing us for investing in our infrastructure, but I heard them get up and applaud the fact that we invested in the barge for Lorneville Mechanical Contractors in Saint John in order to help create jobs. I saw them get up, question period after question period, and criticize us for not investing enough in hospitals. I thought that the community health centre in Fredericton would be applauded by the opposition, but, apparently, they do not want us to invest in our infrastructure. We were asked by the opposition when we would make the infrastructure investment for the Naval Centre in Caraquet. They cannot have it both ways. Over here, we are focused on one thing, and it is creating jobs. That is exactly what we will do.

Mr. Fitch: Let's get back to the matter at hand. The Premier is trying to distract and say certain things that were in our budget... It is their budget. It is new money. It is old money. The fact at hand is that I asked this question: Did he make a promise to the seniors in June 2014 that if he was elected Premier, he would not touch their assets if they had to go into a nursing home?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Again, the member opposite cannot have it both ways. He cannot criticize our infrastructure plan and say that we should scrap that. He cannot criticize that today and then not have me defend the plan that is going to help us with our priority of creating jobs. Again, they did not criticize when we invested in the infrastructure for the barge in Saint John, when we were going to support the port of Saint John, or when we built the community health centre in Fredericton.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. Member for Portland-Simonds, come to order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: In fact, they said that we should invest more in infrastructure. They want us to keep renovating schools. They want us to keep building new ones, but, yet, they do not want us to invest in infrastructure. The two arguments do not go hand in hand. On top of that, I did not see the member opposite or the former Premier complain when we invested \$3.8 million, \$1.3 million in a school in Riverview or \$1.1 million in a school in Woodstock. I did not hear them complain about those infrastructure investments. We will continue to be focused, making strategic investments that will help us grow the economy and create jobs.

Mr. Fitch: Again, the Premier is trying to distract from the matter at hand. I have asked him a question. Did he or did he not make a promise to the seniors' coalition at its annual general meeting in June 2014? Did he make a promise that he would not touch seniors' assets if they had to go into a nursing home if he was elected Premier?



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We have been very clear about our commitments. The Leader of the Opposition talks about a major commitment that I supposedly made during an annual general meeting. If the member can quote the speech I gave on that occasion to prove his point, I will be pleased to clarify the situation or say exactly what was said during this meeting. If the opposition member can quote from my speech, I invite him to do so; I have no problem with defending what I said.

Meanwhile, we are going to focus on job creation. We want to create jobs because we want New Brunswickers to be able to stay in the province or even come back. We want to create jobs to have revenues in our coffers that will enable us to help our seniors, to have a high-quality health care system, and to have an education system that will deliver the results we need to provide to our children. We are going to continue to focus on these objectives. We are going to focus on job creation, and I am proud to see that we have already been successful in that regard in the six months since we took office.

[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Mr. Fitch: Again, I am trying to help the Premier here. He does not have to take any notes that I have here. There are eyewitnesses in the gallery who were at that meeting in June 2014 when the Premier said that, if he was elected the Premier of this province, he would not touch the assets of seniors who had to go into a nursing home. He can ask those people after question period. The media can ask them, you can ask them, we can ask them. I know that I will take their word over the Premier's word any day because he does not have a shred of dignity when it comes to this item. Did he or did he not make that promise to the seniors' committee in June 2014? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The language used a couple of times today on the floor of the Legislature is really unfortunate. We have some serious matters that we have to discuss and debate.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Again, if the member opposite has quotes or some type of language that I used for which he would like clarification, I would be more than happy to clarify it—if he wants to provide that.

We have made it very clear that we are supporting our seniors. We are supporting them in a very progressive way. A small, limited number of seniors who can pay a bit more will be asked to do so. There is nothing beyond that, and the fact that the opposition is trying to make it look as though there is more than that is unfortunate. We have serious challenges in our province. We have to



make serious decisions and have a serious discussion about how we are going to face these challenges.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: The member for Portland-Simonds will come to order. It is the third warning.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: That is what our government is going to do. We are going to focus on creating jobs and making sure that we get our finances in order in a progressive manner. Thank you.

Mr. Fitch: Again, after question period, I will give the Premier an opportunity to go to the rotunda and meet with the people from the coalition and tell them point-blank that he did not make that promise. They have even sent him numerous emails. Nelson Vessey, who is in the gallery, cc'd me on these emails. Basically, he asked a couple of basic questions and asked for clarification about what the Premier said and what he is going to do in the future. The Premier was given ample opportunity to answer. Why will the Premier not even have the decency to answer or acknowledge the email that was sent from the members of board of directors of the coalition on this very, very important item?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: First, I would like to welcome the members opposite and my colleagues here back to the Legislature. I would also like to affirm, for the Leader of the Opposition, that, indeed, budgets are about choice. We stand very proud on the budget that we have delivered.

I would like to take this opportunity to bring out some facts because there are a lot of myths floating around. First of all, we did not cancel Home First. We are very committed to the Home First strategy. In fact, I am looking forward to making more announcements in the near future on this. We are very proud of the work that we are going to be doing and have been doing with seniors.

Another myth that I would like to address is that we are attacking assets. We are not attacking assets, nor are we attacking seniors. In fact, seniors are highly valued in our society, and that will continue.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Mr. Fitch: I will have to point the minister to her own article, which was published in the *Times & Transcript*. It said that the decision had been made and that assets would be part of the assessment when people go into nursing homes. Also, there is Hansard. The minister could go back to Hansard to see where they said that.

You know, when I was a young boy, my father taught me: Respect your elders. The Premier said: "Our seniors have worked hard their whole lives to give us all that we take for granted today. We owe them a retirement filled with dignity and respect." The government, the Premier, and the minister have done neither of those things. They have not shown dignity. They have not shown



respect. I will give the minister and the Premier one more opportunity. Stand up on the floor of the Legislature, apologize to the seniors for what you have put them through, and reverse this policy on attacking seniors' assets as they enter nursing homes.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: New Brunswick has an aging population. In the next 10 years, the number of seniors over the age of 75 will increase by 61%. I would like to tell members of the House and members of the public that, last week, when we had a break from the Legislature, all departments of government took the opportunity to meet with partners, with our department, to engage them, to discuss the situation that we face with the growing demands and pressures of our budget.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: In Social Development, we had an excellent opportunity to present, in a very transparent way, the whole of the budget of Social Development, along with the pressures and demands that we will be facing in the next 10 years. We are committed to continuing to engage people, including seniors, in all the policy changes as we go forward. We are very proud of that, and we are committed to this and other principles, such as fairness.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Steeves: I would like to go back to June 2014 again. We never did get the Premier to admit that he uttered those words, but we will talk more about that. The Premier stood before 100 or more seniors and pledged to keep his hands off their assets. It is also interesting to note that, at the same gathering, a Liberal candidate was on hand to hear the Premier's words. The Liberal candidate went on to win her seat and is now the Minister of Social Development. We all had high hopes for her.

Will the minister get on her feet today and tell us what she thought at that time, back in June 2014, when she heard the Premier promise that seniors would not be attacked, that their assets would not be attacked? Did she think it was a good idea? Did she think the promise was sincere? Did she think the Premier would break his word?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: Since way before June 2014, I have been aware that we need to take a long-term outlook on the challenges and pressures that we face. The time to take action is always the present when we face challenges down the road. If we take short-term fixes, we continue to push the problem forward. We have known about demographic pressures, for example, for quite a while.

We are acting in a courageous way, in a fair and transparent way, and in a very progressive way. Number one, it protects all the vulnerable people. It protects the people who cannot afford to pay



more. We are very concerned about having a sustainable system. We cannot just think for today. We have to think for tomorrow in order for the system to be sustainable.

Mr. Speaker: The Leader of the Official Opposition will come to order.

Mr. Steeves: I want to quote a lady who is in the gallery today, Cecile Cassista, of the Coalition for Seniors and Nursing Home Residents' Rights. She has said that the budget has left seniors in the province under "a dark cloud". She has also said: "There was no consultation on this decision to use assets. It was all done behind closed doors, so it caught seniors completely off guard." That has become the modus operandi of this Premier and of his government. It is all done behind closed doors.

The minister was quite clear during the election. She said:

Seniors deserve to be heard in Fredericton. With your support in the September 22nd provincial election, I will be a vocal advocate for your concerns.

I would like to know whether the minister would clarify that statement. What does she consider to be a "vocal advocate" for seniors' concerns, considering what she has now done?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I am very happy to have our guests here today. It gives me an opportunity, as well, to reemphasize that, indeed, nothing is being done behind closed doors. In fact, our budget could have announced a whole new policy, but we did not want to do that without engaging New Brunswickers.

I am very happy that we are simply announcing an intention to go forward in a way that helps to make our long-term care system sustainable. In doing so, we are going to be engaging New Brunswickers—in this case, particularly seniors' representatives and seniors' partners—to help us develop a mutually agreeable and very fair policy. We have said this from day one, and this was said in the budget as well. Anything that is said outside of this is not said by this government.

Mr. Steeves: It is nice when something is announced in the budget and then they say that they are going to be doing consultation on it. It is nice when you make the announcement first and then say that you are going to consult on it.

Webster's defines "advocate"—as we go back to the minister's word—as somebody "who argues for or supports a cause". It also offers: "one that supports or promotes the interests of another". There are many variations of the definition of "advocate", but the common thread is that an advocate picks a side and promotes that side.

Clearly, the minister has had a change of heart and is now a vocal advocate for the government in speaking out against our seniors, quite frankly. She has been all over the media, defending the attack on seniors. Will the minister stand up and tell us what brought about this change of heart?



What brought this about, and why has she abandoned her commitment to seniors? What has changed her mind? Has she abandoned her commitment to seniors?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Everybody needs to help improve the future of our province. We have made it very clear that, when we make difficult decisions, we want everybody to take part. With regard to seniors, asking those who can pay a little bit more to contribute is the fairest way of doing things. It is only seniors who can afford it; we will not ask seniors who cannot afford it to pay more. We are asking each segment of the population to contribute, and I can tell you that, with regard to seniors, it is being done in a very progressive way.

[*Original*]

I have to put something into perspective. When we made the rule changes in the Legislature, the opposition members got up day after day after day, saying that we were attacking democracy. In fact, they went as far as to say that we would have only nine question periods during the whole year. In the first month after our changes, do you know how many question periods we had? We had 15. It goes to a group that is trying to fearmonger. That is not what New Brunswickers need. They need more than that.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Health Care System

Mr. Coon: My question is for the Minister of Health. The minister is aiming to cut 10% of the budget of the Department of Health. This is supposed to be a strategic review, not an exercise in aiming for arbitrarily determined cuts.

There are 50 000 New Brunswickers lacking a family doctor right now, yet the number of nurse practitioners seeking work could take 18 000 people off the waiting list and cut our health costs at the same time. This would reduce health costs while providing primary health care for thousands of New Brunswickers needing it. Will the minister make the strategic decision to reallocate money from the Medicare budget to fund group practices for nurse practitioners?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: I thank the member opposite for the question. Just to be clear, in the exercise that was conducted last week as part of the Strategic Program Review, we were asking all departments to come forward with options that could equate to 10%. It does not mean that there is going to be a 10% cut across the board. I just wanted to provide clarity on that.

In terms of primary care and some of the challenges that the member opposite has just listed, I encourage him... As soon as we are finished with routine business, we will be moving into



estimates and the Department of Health will be the first department up. I think there are quite a few items in my speech that will please the member considerably, considering the question he just pointed out.

Mr. Coon: There are a growing number of nurse practitioners who are unable to practice because the minister is holding out, hoping against hope that he will be able to recruit enough physicians to provide access to primary health care for people waiting on the list.

[Translation]

Nurse practitioners can diagnose illnesses, order tests, prescribe medications, and treat illnesses. While thousands of families are without a family doctor, nurse practitioners have to leave the province to find jobs.

[Original]

There are 20 more nurse practitioners who will graduate this fall from UNB and another 7 from the Université de Moncton. What is the minister's plan to ensure that these nurse practitioners, when they graduate, can provide primary health care to New Brunswickers stuck on waiting lists for doctors who may never materialize?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: As I indicated, I think the opposition member will be very pleased with my upcoming speech, which I will be giving when we begin considering the estimates of the Department of Health.

With regard to primary care, nurse practitioners, and increased access to family doctors, I think the member will find several satisfactory items in our estimates. Let's hope that he can help us promote these decisions and that he will applaud them.

[Original]

Mr. Coon: The government's platform committed to improving access to primary care by maximizing the use of health professionals such as nurse practitioners and midwives. The commitment was to ensure that these health professionals would be functioning to their full scope of training. This is clearly not the case for nurse practitioners, and it is nonexistent for midwives, as there is not a single midwife working in New Brunswick today. It would be strategic to have midwives attending births instead of OB/GYNs. It would be less costly, and it would result in better long-term health outcomes for moms and babies, given the community care the midwives provide before, during, and after birth.

What is the minister's plan to maximize the use of midwives in New Brunswick and make strategic reductions in the health care budget that way?



Hon. Mr. Boudreau: Again, I do not want to get ahead of my budget estimates speech, which is coming up a little later on today. A lot of the issues that the member opposite is raising are issues that we are going to be addressing. We have already moved on many of our commitments. There are 24 commitments in the platform that fall under the responsibility of the Department of Health, many of which we have acted on already and many of which we will be acting on today as we release our estimates speech and details.

Just yesterday, we announced the creation of a frontline medical advisory committee, which was something that had been brought forward by my colleague when he was in opposition. It made it into the platform, and it was something that we acted on yesterday. We have announced it. It is a promise made and a promise kept, and more promises are going to be kept in the speech today.

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

