

April 22, 2015

[Original]

Senior Citizens

Mr. Fitch: Yesterday, we watched the Premier dodge around admitting his own words, and I could not help but think of that old philosophical question: If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around, does it make any sound? If I were to ask the Premier that question, he would say: If there is no one to take notes, then he really did not make any promise at all. That is what we saw yesterday.

I know that you want to raise the level of debate. I really, really hate to do this, but, if I have to shame the Premier into admitting what he said was in fact the truth, I will continue to ask that question of the Premier. Will he admit this, yes or no: Did he tell the seniors' coalition at its annual general meeting that he would not touch seniors' assets if they went into a nursing home and he was made Premier?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I answered this question yesterday, and I will be pleased to answer it again. If the member has quotes from my speech or a record of what was said at the meeting, I would be very happy to clarify my comments.

[Original]

Going back to the member's question, I would certainly like to answer. Actually, the answer to the philosophical question that he asked would be that it depends on what your definition of "sound" is. Is the definition of sound the creation of the waves or is it the creation of the waves and the reception of the waves? If it is the creation of the waves, a tree in the forest where no one is around does make a sound. If the definition is that there is the creation of the waves and the reception of the waves, if there is no one around when the tree falls, then it does not make a sound.

I really appreciate the question, and I am very happy that we get to be a little philosophical this morning. Certainly, I hope that the member opposite will ask more questions...

(Interjections.)

Mr. Fitch: That is a very interesting response, and I know that I have read that type of answer before. However, the point is that there were actually 100 people in the room to hear the sound waves that came from the Premier's voice. They not only heard it, but also understood and remembered what he said. There were eyewitnesses who heard the sound waves created by the Premier's words coming out of his mouth.



Today, he is changing his tone a little. Yesterday, it was: If there are any notes. Today, he is saying: Well, if there are quotes. I am producing notes, which I will give to the page to table on the floor of the Legislature. There were notes taken that said that the Premier would not touch the assets of the seniors if they went into a nursing home if he was made Premier. Mr. Premier, would you like to deny the words that were written, which you spoke at that meeting?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: If the Leader of the Opposition can quote my words, it will be my pleasure to clarify what I said.

I certainly do not mean to say that those people did not do a good job. I think that seniors who try to represent people in their age group, throughout the province, are doing great work; they are working very hard. Of course, when people take notes, they may think that certain things were said when it was not necessarily the case.

Once again, if the member has a record of what I said, I would be happy to clarify my comments. I remember my speech well, in which I talked a lot about my own experience.

[Original]

I have talked a lot about the fact that, when growing up, I lived with my grandparents and I understood exactly how tough life can be when seniors are retired and trying to live in dignity, trying to make sure that they can make ends meet, and calculating every dollar to the last cent. I know how it is to want to be able to keep the family home that you built and on which you did the upkeep for so many years. That is why we are going to treat seniors fairly, protect the vulnerable, and ensure that their homes will not be...

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Mr. Fitch: Again, the Premier is trying to skate as hard as the Ottawa Senators are, trying to stay in the playoffs.

The reality is that notes were taken. People heard him say it. Over 100 people heard him say it and understood what he said. I am giving the Premier an opportunity to explain exactly what he meant when he said: When I am Premier, I will not touch the assets of seniors who have to go into nursing homes. We are giving the Premier an opportunity to regain some of the lost accountability that he is cashing in so quickly in a number of days.

There were eyewitnesses in the gallery. There were 100 people at the meeting who heard what he said. Could he explain? Maybe he would just like to deny that he was ever at that meeting, because nobody took a photograph or has produced a photograph. I have sent over the record of the meeting. I have sent over the quote from the people who were there. I have sent over the



notes. It is indisputable evidence. The Premier said it. Will he just admit here today that he said it?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I thank the member for sending these notes, which come from an email sent on Wednesday, April 22, 2015, at 9:43 a.m.; I do not consider it to necessarily be a very official document. Once again, we can spend all our time in this House discussing the speech I gave in June. I have very clearly indicated that, if there are comments or a quote on file of what I said about seniors in this speech, I would be happy to clarify these comments.

I do not think the email sent 15 minutes before question period will be very useful to us. I can tell you that the policy we established is progressive. We will ask people who can afford to pay a bit more to do so. Of course, those who cannot do so, or who are vulnerable, will be protected. We will not touch the family home. We will act progressively regarding the difficult decisions we have to make.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Mr. Fitch: The Premier is again trying to dodge the words that he said himself. He said yesterday: Maybe you could produce a written record of that. We did that. The members opposite are the ones who stood up in this Legislature when they were in opposition and waved unsigned letters—unsigned letters. At least we have the audacity, the ability, to produce an email from a person who was willing to sign a name to the letter. The Premier has the audacity to stand up and call that person's integrity into question.

They are calling into question the integrity of the people who were in the gallery yesterday. They are calling into question the integrity of the 100 people who were at the AGM. We have already heard some of those people say: We worked for this government. We helped to put those members in, and they have made liars out of us, because they told us to read this script—We will stand up for seniors. We will fight for seniors.

Obviously, that is not the question. Will the Premier just admit that he made a mistake, apologize to the seniors, and reverse this policy?

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I have answered several questions from the member opposite already, so I will take the liberty of reminding the opposition of what we have been focused on in government.

We are very focused on creating jobs, and we want to be able to create opportunities for New Brunswickers so that they can stay here, raise their families here, and even come back to New



Brunswick. That is of the utmost importance to us. We are doing this because we want to get our finances in order. By increasing revenues through job creation and economic growth, we will ensure that we will have strong social programs for many years to come. We want to be able to invest strategically in a strong social fabric, with strong systems of education, health care, and senior care.

We are very proud of the work that our government is doing to help our seniors, to protect the vulnerable, and to make sure that those who can pay will pay a little bit more. This will also give us the flexibility to give tax credits to seniors to renovate their homes. It will ensure that there are opportunities for young people, for children and grandchildren, to stay here in the province.

Mr. Fitch: Once again, the words that the Premier says here today are meaningless. They are very hollow.

I will tell you, his decisions and the decisions that he has convinced his small Cabinet to make are driving people out of the province. Seniors have called me and said: We are just going to move out; we have worked hard for our assets; we want to make sure we can protect those assets, so we are going to move out of the province. It is the same with the decision on the moratorium, which has driven businesses out of the province as well, despite what the Premier is saying.

I have a question for the Minister of Social Development. They talk about records and whatnot. Yesterday, the Minister of Social Development said: “We are not attacking assets, nor are we attacking seniors.” That is on record. It is in Hansard. I wonder whether the minister could say what she wants to stand by, because they are in conflict.

In an article that was written and published in the *Times & Transcript*, the minister said: “Another decision we have made... is to no longer exempt liquid financial assets such as savings or investments”.

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Attack—the language that is being used by the member opposite is unfortunate. It is the same language that we saw after we made changes to the Legislature. We made changes to the Legislature to make it more efficient, to have better debate, and to ensure that we are constantly improving our democratic institutions. The members opposite got up day after day and said that we were attacking democracy. They even went so far as to say that we would have nine question periods in a year. That is what they told the people of New Brunswick. After the changes were made—the changes that they said would completely change democracy and provide only nine question periods in a full year—in the first month, we had 15 question periods.

I ask the members opposite to stop fearmongering and to admit that they have heard what we have said. We will make sure that it is a progressive policy, that the vulnerable will be protected, and that the family asset, the home, will not be touched.



Mr. Fitch: Again, the Premier should check the record and see how he attacked when he was in opposition.

(Interjection.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Fitch: He should also check the record because it was Kelly Lamrock, a former Liberal Cabinet minister, who came up with the nine days.

I am asking the Minister of Social Development, who is so concerned about... If no notes were taken, it must not have happened.

Yesterday, in this House, the minister said: "We are not attacking assets, nor are we attacking seniors." A release that was written in the *Times & Transcript* by the same minister said: "Another decision we have made... is to no longer exempt liquid financial assets such as savings or investments". These two statements are conflicting. They are totally opposite.

I wonder whether the minister could clarify for us today which is the real fact and which is not a fact.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I would like to thank the Opposition Leader for the opportunity to clarify fact, reality, and misrepresentation. The words "attack" and "cancel" have been used a lot, not by us, but by the opposition. Nothing is further from reality. In fact, "attack" could be better represented with the word "support". We are committed to supporting seniors in all ways, including keeping seniors in their homes as long as possible and providing the supports and services necessary to do so. We know that their quality of life is better at home and in the community. Thank you.

(Interjection.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Ms. Wilson: I would like the Premier and the Minister of Social Development to know that I was at the seniors' coalition meeting in June 2014. I know what the Premier said, as does the Premier.

Let's get to the Premier's promise to keep his hands off seniors' assets. That is a promise he is going to keep sooner or later. The seniors are not going to give up. They are right, and the Premier is wrong. These seniors come from a time when giving your word meant something. Out of respect for the dignity of the Office of the Premier, will the current Premier keep his word and cancel this attack on seniors' assets?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We have answered these questions numerous times, on numerous occasions, and on numerous days. I will ask the member opposite a question.



Will she acknowledge that it has been made very clear by our government that no more than 13% of seniors will be asked to contribute a bit more? Will she acknowledge that it is only 13%, if it even gets to 13%, that will be asked to pay a little bit more—no one else—13%? Will the member opposite and the opposition acknowledge this fact that has been repeated by our government in this Legislature time and time again?

Ms. Wilson: The Premier is not going to do the Shediac shuffle out of this one. We all remember when he got caught mixing messages on the moratorium. He left an audience in Saint John believing that he was in favour of a shale gas industry. Then, when he got to Shediac, he denied everything. That was back in February 2014. By June 1, guess what! I guess he got quite a bit bolder with his plan to say anything to get elected. Now that he is elected, that is coming back to bite him. The Premier can return some dignity to the Office of the Premier by rising today, offering his apology to our seniors, and cancelling his attack on their assets. Will the Premier get on his feet and do the right thing?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: If I may, I would like to return to the opening story of whether a tree really makes a noise when it falls if no one hears it. This might show that there is more concern on the other side with image than with reality. I would like to be really clear about some facts.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: One fact is that New Brunswick has an aging population. In the next 10 years, the number of seniors over the age of 75 will increase by 61%. We have to take care of this. It is a problem that governments across Canada and in many parts of the world are facing. In New Brunswick, the costs, demands, and pressures for long-term care are increasing while resources are decreasing. We want a sustainable system to take care of the people in our province.

Ms. Wilson: If anyone should worry about image, it should be the people on the other side. There is going to be plenty of back-and-forth between the Premier and me when I take him to task for his attack on rural New Brunswick.

Today, we want to focus on his attack on seniors. I am sure that it will be on the final list of the Premier's 200 days of disappointment, in capital letters: attack on seniors. I think another item should be the attack on the dignity of the Office of the Premier. Between all the promises he has broken and then that embarrassing speech in Toronto, the Premier has not done us any favours. Today, he can take his first step in the right direction and keep his word to our seniors. Will the Premier get up and cancel his attack on seniors?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: We are not really concerned about image. In fact, we are trying to implement political courage and will, because we want to make some tough decisions for the good of our province.



Mr. Speaker: Order. Order, member.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: We have said over and over again that we will not be hurting vulnerable populations with any policy change. We have said over and over again that we will engage seniors in the development and design of a formula that will determine how much we are going to ask some seniors to pay for long-term care. Image is obviously not our concern. Good governing is our concern.

[Translation]

Ambulance Services

Ms. Dubé: Seniors are definitely being targeted by this government. Yesterday, we heard the Minister of Health say that, now, ambulance fees will be reintroduced, which is yet another attack on seniors' finances. In his speech on estimates, the minister also indicated that bills would be sent to people, including seniors, to limit misuse. So, I am asking the Minister of Health what he means by misuse.

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: We had this discussion here, yesterday, during consideration of estimates. As we have tried to explain from the very start, when we tabled our first budget, we want to remind people that everyone has a role to play in addressing the financial challenges we are facing. One thing is certain: When service fees are removed, usage increases. Yesterday, I gave the opposition member the figures to show that usage had, in fact, increased.

Is this increase in ambulance use entirely linked to fees? Maybe not, but it certainly has an impact. For us, it was important to make sure that everyone received a bill, as is the case in all other provinces. However, we still put mechanisms in place to protect those who cannot afford to pay their bill.

Ms. Dubé: On the one hand, the Minister of Health says he wants to improve access to health care; on the other hand, he is limiting access through policies he is bringing forward. The minister also uses the word "misuse" to tell us that people are misusing the system. It is not because there is an increase in the number of people receiving social assistance benefits that people are misusing the system; it is because people need it. Once again, I am asking the minister to define what he considers to be misuse.

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: I am going to continue to give the member the same answer that she was given over and over yesterday during estimates. We are asking everyone to be part of the solution. New Brunswick was the only province that was not sending bills for ambulance services. We believe it is one way among many to help address the deficit situation our province finds itself in.

That being said, we are still quite prepared to protect those who cannot afford to pay their bill. Several different conditions apply to ensure low-income people, whether seniors, social



assistance recipients, or people who receive the federal supplement, are protected and do not have to pay the bill.

Ms. Dubé: One of the things the minister said clearly yesterday was that he thinks people are misusing the system. So, he wants to limit access to health care even though he is trying to say the opposite. Furthermore, he said that it was complicated for civil servants to determine who is insured, who is not, and who is entitled to the service. His solution is to say everyone is misusing the system, and so bills have to be sent out.

I also want to ask the minister a question about people who may be exempt from paying the bill. What mechanisms will the minister establish within his department to protect seniors who pay a premium for the service? If they do not understand that they may be exempt, because they are unable to read the information, they will pay their bill, so they will end up paying the same bill twice.

This is the question I am asking the minister: Now that you are sending out bills, what are you going to do to protect seniors who pay a premium for the service? Even though they may be exempt, they might still pay their bill.

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: I would like to remind the member opposite that, during the 2010 campaign, she and her party promised to eliminate ambulance fees for all New Brunswickers. That is the promise that was made, and it took the members opposite three years and eight months to keep it. It is funny, but they kept their promise four months before the election. At that time, they chose to try and do something, but they did not do what they promised they would; they only eliminated ambulance fees for a small number of people.

We maintain our position that everyone will receive a bill for their ambulance fees, as is the case in all other Canadian provinces. However, certain categories of citizens will be protected. I am referring here to low income earners, low-income seniors, and people who cannot afford to pay the bill and can prove it.

[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Pensions

Mr. Savoie: We learned in the media today that the Finance Minister has made his final offer to civil service pensioners. Ironically, the civil service pensioners also found out through the media that the minister has made his final offer to them, as did the lawyer.

The question that I have for the Minister of Finance is quite simple: What does his final offer do to the books of the province? What is the dollar figure? The minister is responsible for that. The government just released the budget, which has all kinds of facts and figures put in place.



Obviously, this is not something that those members looked at in the last two weeks. This is something that they have been working on. I would like to know today from the minister opposite whether we can please know what the dollar figure is and what the impact will be on the people of New Brunswick.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Melanson: I thank the member opposite for giving me the opportunity to clarify the situation. We remember how the previous government dealt with the pension plan issue. According to the discussions that were held at the time and taking into account the reality of that time, the previous government, which was led by the former Minister of Finance with regard to finances, did not act respectfully towards people affected by its decision. The government imposed a decision on them that changed pension plans.

During the election campaign, we committed in our platform to disclose, where possible, all the information so that the civil service pensioners could better understand the reasons behind the decisions made by the previous government. Today, I am confirming that we have fulfilled our commitment.

[Original]

Mr. Savoie: There was a musical group in the nineties called the Spin Doctors. I think the minister listens to the Spin Doctors quite a bit because he did not answer the question. The question is very simple: What is the dollar figure? What will it amount to for the people of this province?

The government did a budget, and I am actually going to read from its platform:

· ***Inviting civil servants and retirees who had pension reforms imposed upon them back to the negotiating table for an open, fair and transparent dialogue... provide***

—them—

with all available background information, including actuarial, legal and financial advice received by government. The objective... would be to achieve agreement on a way forward.

He is just saying... He is dictating. This is the final offer. That is it. That does not sound like an agreement. Even the lawyer who is working for the pensioners does not know what this deal means. He cannot get a meeting with the government. He does not know what is happening. Will the minister clear this up, as he says he wants to, and give the dollar figure to the Legislature, please?

Hon. Mr. Melanson: I want to correct the member opposite. A portion of what he said is right. He read from our platform, and what he read from our platform is absolutely correct. What is not correct is the fact that he used the word “dictating”. We had a very constructive discussion with



the coalition and with the executive of the coalition of retired public servants. It was quite constructive. We offered the information that they required in order to better understand the decisions that were made. Through those discussions, they came up with two areas where they had concerns: predictability and certainty, based on future benefits. That is why, based on their concerns and based on the fact that we are very respectful to New Brunswickers—and certainly to this group, in particular—we made a proposition to them. There was no negotiation. There was a proposition that we made to them to avoid a legal situation.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Savoie: The lawyer himself says that he does not know what this deal means. He is trying to get a meeting with the government, but it will not meet with him. It is a very simple question for somebody who is the Minister of Finance. What is the liability impact as a result of this decision?

Members of the government could not have been working on this for just the past two weeks, and this tells us one of two things. Either they know the budget, they have allocated for this in their budget, and they will not tell people or this is policy on the fly. It is very simple. Is this policy on the fly? Do they know the numbers? Yes or no? What is the liability impact on the province?

Hon. Mr. Melanson: Policy on the fly is maybe something that you did when you were in government. We do think, and we really try to understand the consequences of our decisions.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Melanson: To correct the member opposite, we had six meetings—very constructive meetings—with members of the coalition. They got all the information, and they came back with some specific areas where they had some concerns. We made a proposition to them. I do not know how they operate within their membership. I am not sure if they have informed their legal representative. Certainly, we had some very constructive discussions. There were six meetings.

We are being very responsible, and we will respect individuals. We will respect New Brunswickers with regard to this file and many other files. If there is any financial impact, it will be within our fiscal framework and our budget.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Natural Gas

Mr. Stewart: Yesterday, the Minister of Energy and Mines released what he claims are the terms of reference for his committee, run by the father-in-law of the Liberal Party's campaign chairman. Make no mistake about it: Patronage is alive and well on the government side of the House.



However, the minister is proudly stating in the media that he is not going to have anything to do with making a decision on natural gas development in the province. Of course, we all know that that is because of his utter lack of knowledge on the topic.

My question is for the Minister of Energy and Mines. With no guidance from the government, is this minister saying today that the recommendations from this committee that has absolutely no background or experience in resource development will be the government's final decision on gas development in the province?

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: I find it quite unfortunate that the member opposite wants to discredit the quality of individuals who accepted to take on the role of commissioners for the province. Former judge Guy Richard has a tremendous career in the legal system. We can look at John McLaughlin, the former President of UNB. Cheryl Robertson, in her academic career, was the chairperson of NBCC. For the member opposite to discredit... I will put their résumés beside that of the member opposite any day.

I did give the panel carte blanche. The reason we are in this mess today is that the former government always wanted to forge ahead with fracking in New Brunswick, with total disregard for what was happening and what the concerns were from other groups. I gave the panel carte blanche.

The reason that the terms of reference were so short... They are not short. If anything is short, it is the leadership aspirations of the member opposite.

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

