

May 13, 2015

[Original]

Senior Citizens

Mr. Fitch: It has been a long time coming, but, at last, the Department of Social Development is on the list for estimates and is scheduled to appear today. I hope that it does not get cancelled, like many of the meetings that these Cabinet ministers have to cancel because of the small Cabinet.

I am hoping that the minister will take the estimates process seriously, more seriously than some of her other colleagues who just gave political speeches at every opportunity that they had in estimates. I hope that we will be able to get the answers that the people of New Brunswick are looking for.

As a show of good faith and to show that the minister is prepared for the estimates that are on the docket today, I will ask a question and hopefully get an answer. That will prove that the minister is going to take these estimates seriously and that she has prepared.

One of the first questions that I asked was: In the budget, how much revenue are you expecting to create with this asset grab from the seniors?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: As the member opposite acknowledged, the estimates for Social Development will be considered tonight. He will definitely have more than enough time to ask all the questions that he would like to ask, including the one that he just asked. I am sure that the Minister of Social Development is very much looking forward to clarifying things that are in the seniors' policy, among many of the other good things we are doing to help support seniors.

However, I do have to make one comment after listening to the statements by the opposition members. I have to take issue with what the member for Fredericton West-Hanwell said. He tried to make the point that we are going to be encouraging seniors to shelter their money and hide their assets. Then he said that we are going to be attacking honest seniors. Is he insinuating that there are a bunch of seniors in New Brunswick who are dishonest? Is that what he is saying?

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: The member for Fredericton West-Hanwell will come to order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Is he saying that only the honest seniors are going to have to pay under our policy?

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: The member for Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin will come to order.



Hon. Mr. Gallant: I ask the member opposite, the member for Fredericton West-Hanwell, to get up and to explain who the dishonest seniors in New Brunswick are.

Mr. Fitch: If the Premier had shown some maturity way back when we initially asked these questions, he could have apologized to the seniors for saying: I will not take your assets. He could have said he made a mistake and he had to go back on that promise. It probably would not have grown to be the issue that it is today.

It is the seniors who are asking the Premier to answer some of these questions. Basically, financial planning is something that seniors have been doing for many, many years. Just continuing to make sure that their assets are safe as they move into their retirement years is a normal process. For the Premier to get up and say that is criminal really shows a lack of maturity when it comes to addressing the people of New Brunswick.

The point of the matter is that the minister was out online. She did an exclusive with the *Telegraph-Journal*, answering some of the things that should have been answered during estimates, so I will go back to the question. Show a good sign of faith. Answer one question here in the House during question period: What is the asset grab going to produce in revenue for the government?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The opposition member tries to make it look as though the minister has not been transparent about the decisions that were made. However, in the same comment, he said that the minister spoke to the media about them. The minister spoke to New Brunswickers, through the media, to explain the policy to them. In the same comment, the opposition member admitted that the estimates of the Department of Social Development would be reviewed this evening.

[Original]

As a government, we are very open to explaining every single one of our policies, and that includes seniors' care.

However, I have an issue with what was said by the MLA for Fredericton West-Hanwell. I ask him to clarify his comments because he said that our policy is going to encourage people to hide their assets to try to get around the policy. He said, therefore, in his words, that we would then be attacking the honest seniors. I would like him to describe where the dishonest seniors are in New Brunswick. The people of New Brunswick deserve an explanation.

Mr. Fitch: Once again, the Premier is mixing words and mixing metaphors. The reality is that people, the seniors, have a number of financial plans and financial avenues that they could take that would protect their assets from the cash grab from these seniors.

Again, he just has to go back to some of the former Liberal Cabinet ministers who are now fighting this Liberal government on the decisions he made. This does go back to the decisions and how this



government makes them. Peter LeBlanc, Bernard Richard, Mike Murphy, and Kelly Lamrock—all former ministers—are going against this government on the decisions that it is making.

Again, we ask the Premier to clarify some things. We see that, now, nursing home inspections will be posted online. That is something that would come out in the estimates. An interesting part of the story is that Cecile Cassista said: We will not be distracted by that. We will not be distracted by that. We will fight this asset grab. We will win it now, or we will win it in 2018.

I can tell you that this side will be working with them. Again, how much do you expect to gain from the seniors by going after these assets?

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We see what the opposition members care about. They care about 2018. We care about getting the finances of the province in order in a fair and progressive way. We care about creating jobs for New Brunswickers to be able to stay in our province and come back to our province.

The member opposite keeps talking about an asset grab. Will the member opposite acknowledge that we are not touching the family home? We are not even touching the proceeds from the sale of a house that is the last one a senior owns and sells. We are not touching cars, cottages—any physical assets, for that matter—so to say that there is an asset grab is unfair. This is a liquid financial assets policy—one that is progressive, one that will help the less fortunate, and one that will help those who need support.

Again, we are being very fair, and we are being very honest. I ask the opposition members to be fair and honest and to explain who they think are seniors who are dishonest in our province.

Mr. Fitch: Again, it looks as though the Premier is making up policy on the fly when he talks about every asset. It goes back to the decision-making process, so I will ask him a very straightforward question. The government has included cottages. It has included boats. It has mentioned the homes, yes. We pushed for the home and for making sure that, whether it was as cash or a tangible asset, it would be protected, and we are glad to see that that particular part is included.

In making the decision on the tangible assets that the Premier was just alluding to—and he said that everything is protected—why is it that a cottage is protected when a motor home may not be? Many seniors sell the cottage and go travelling. They buy a motor home. Maybe they sit in a park out in Shediac or someplace like that, by the water, but they are in a motor home. Again, the decision-making process of this Premier has been questioned. Why did he choose cottages and not motor homes?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Honest to goodness, we have been talking about this for weeks and weeks now. I would hope that the member opposite has read our policy. First off, we have said from day one that the home, the house, would not be touched. It had nothing to do with the member opposite getting



up and fearmongering every day in the Legislature. Second, we made it very clear when the policy was announced that no physical assets would be considered. We are talking about liquid financial assets, and only a limited amount of those, and only after a certain threshold, and only after the proceeds of if they sell their last house.

Again, we are being up-front and honest and treating seniors with the most dignity we possibly can and being progressive in our policies. We certainly are not getting up and calling seniors dishonest in this province, like the member for Fredericton West-Hanwell. I ask the Leader of the Opposition to clarify, if the MLA will not do it, who is dishonest in their opinion.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Fitch: I hope we will add that time onto question period because, again, we see the small Cabinet and the forgotten backbenchers standing up and cheering on the Premier on this particular item.

The Premier goes back to day one. I will tell you what he said on day one: absolutely nothing. He said absolutely nothing. He put fear into the hearts of the seniors. He rallied the seniors to try to get the information they were looking for because he was going after their hard-earned money. Again, we are asking the Premier to clarify some things because now he is in damage control mode. They came out with a policy on a Monday after a Friday when they said that no policy had been written and that they were going to wait until the fall, until they consulted. Again, there was a big consultation on the weekend, a big Cabinet meeting on the weekend, to come up with a policy and roll it out, and, still, we are looking for some details.

Again, with the estimates tonight, this should be known: What amount of money are you going to take from the seniors under this asset grab?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Once again, we have very clearly said, from the moment our policy was announced, what assets would be considered. These things were clearly defined in our policy; if the Leader of the Opposition had bothered to read it, instead of saying things to scare everyone in the province, he would have understood. The family home will not be included; if it is sold, the money from the sale will not be included. Cars will not be included, and neither will cottages. In fact, no material assets will be included.

This is exactly what the policy has included since it was announced.

[*Original*]



I have to take issue. We are making difficult decisions. We are making them in a fair and progressive way. We understand that it is not fun to ask anybody to give a bit more or to get a little less, but we have to do it for the long-term sustainability of our province. Fearmongering is not going to get us anywhere, and calling certain seniors dishonest, as the member opposite did, will not get us anywhere either. I ask for clarification.

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Mr. Fitch: As Cecile Cassista said in the announcement this morning about online petitions, we will not be distracted. We will not be distracted by the words of the Premier, who is trying to distract and to put words in other people's mouths here today. He talks about assets. We are just trying to clarify the government's policy, the policy that was hastily put together, in the dark of night, maybe at four o'clock in the morning, by a staffer.

We are going to ask the question again. If the Premier can come up with specific items such as cottages and boats, can he answer the question: Why did he exclude motor homes, which, again, are substantial assets that seniors may own?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We made very clear what is included. We gave very clear examples of what is not included. We are confirming, yet again, that physical assets will not be included in the calculation. It will be only liquid financial assets, only certain ones, and only above a very high threshold—\$50 000 per individual and \$100 000 per couple. Even then, we take only a small percentage per year to calculate the amount that seniors should pay for nursing home care. This is progressive. This is fair.

What I cannot understand is that the member opposite does not realize that the member for Fredericton West-Hanwell is trying to make an argument as to why this policy is not good. That is what he was doing in his member's statement. The argument he made is that there are going to be people sheltering their money and hiding their assets and that this policy would only attack honest seniors. I would like the member opposite to get up and tell us who in New Brunswick he thinks are dishonest seniors.

Mr. Fitch: Once again, the Premier is missing the whole issue. The Premier is missing the whole issue, and he is trying to distract from the real issue. We have people who are going to financial planners to ask how they can shelter their money. We have people in the media—on the front page of the paper—saying: We are moving out of New Brunswick because of the decisions that this Premier and this Cabinet have made. We have seniors telling us that the Premier has made decisions... Even his former Liberal Cabinet ministers, ministers of the Liberal government, are saying: This is wrong.

I am giving the Premier an opportunity to make amends, not only to his former Liberal Cabinet ministers, but also to the people here in New Brunswick, the people who are trying to protect the honest, hard-earned savings that they have made all their lives. Will the Premier get up and say that he will reconsider this asset grab in light of some of the objections that are being put forward to him today?



Hon. Mr. Gallant: We made it very clear that we have tough choices to make. We have to get our finances in order. That is exactly what we are doing, and we are doing it in a progressive way, by asking those who are able to get a little less from government or to pay a little bit more to do so. It is as simple as that.

The member opposite is trying to say that we are not transparent, yet he explains that estimates are this afternoon or tonight. The member opposite is doing interviews in the media all the time. Sorry, the minister is doing interviews all the time in the media. The member is trying to say that we are grabbing assets when I have made it very clear—I think three times now—that physical assets will not be touched. We have made it very clear since day one. If the member opposite would actually take time to read our policy instead of coming to the floor of the Legislature to fearmonger...

I ask the member opposite to get up and explain why those members think that one of the problems with our policy is that seniors are going to shelter their money and hide their money and that only honest seniors are going to be attacked. I think the people of New Brunswick deserve to know who the opposition thinks are dishonest seniors in our province.

[Translation]

Ms. Dubé: Clearly, seniors in this province do not agree with the policy from the Liberal government and do not want the government to touch their bank accounts. This morning, it was clearly indicated that the government is going to implement this new policy that will hurt seniors. So, my question is this: If a house were sold two years ago—it was indicated that the province would go back as far as a year—how will the government be able to tell the difference if all the money is in one bank account?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: From the opposition members' questions, it is really obvious that they have no understanding of the policy we are talking about today; they have not even bothered to read it.

[Original]

Instead of taking the time to read and understand the policy, the members have come to the floor of the Legislature to continue the fearmongering. We made it very clear—crystal clear—that the home will not be considered. The proceeds from selling the house will not be considered. I will explain the policy, if the members would like, and why we are doing this the way we are doing it. If seniors sell their home, go into an apartment because there is less upkeep, and then go into a nursing home, the last house they owned and sold will not be considered. We want to encourage people to downsize and to have that support, if they need it, by going into another alternative type of housing such as an apartment. That is why we are doing it.

I would like the members opposite to get up and tell us: Who are the dishonest seniors in the province that they are afraid are going to abuse the system?



[Translation]

Ms. Dubé: My question is very, very simple. The government wants to reach into seniors' bank accounts. Some assets will be factored into the calculation, and others will not. The question seniors are asking is very simple: If all the money is deposited in one bank account, how will the government differentiate between the assets, and how will it analyze and assess each of the seniors' bank accounts?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: This is actually hilarious. The member opposite has clearly not read the policy, and the member opposite has taken zero time to understand fully the implications of our finances and of the policy.

When you sell a home, you actually have to sign a couple of legal documents. I do not know whether the members think seniors do that on napkins or in alleyways.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: They seem to think that seniors are dishonest. There will be legal documents that say how much the home was sold for, and there will be legal documents that say how much the mortgage was. Then, we will find the difference to find out what the proceeds and the profits were, and the profits will not be considered.

Again, the members opposite are asking questions days and days after the policy was put out. Had these questions been asked the day of the policy, I would be able to understand. However, it is clear that they have not done their homework, and it is clear that they do not believe in New Brunswickers. It is clear that they think people are dishonest and are going to try to get away from our policy. We do not agree. New Brunswickers are good people, and we have a progressive policy that will help them.

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order.

[Translation]

Ms. Dubé: You are not listening to seniors; they do not want the government going into their bank accounts and taking everything they have built up over the years. It is very clear that the government does not care and that it will continue to harm seniors.



Now that we know the government will keep going after seniors' assets, can we find out, for example, how many people the government will be hiring to audit seniors' assets, since, under this policy, everyone admitted into a nursing home goes through this assessment process? Is that the Liberal government's job creation plan?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We already answered that question many question periods ago.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We have answered the question before. We said that we are very confident that we will be able to do it with the human resources that we have.

I invite the opposition members, if they want to keep this issue alive for political reasons, to actually do their homework to find new angles. They should find things in the policy with which they actually take issue, not things that are not actually the case. They are naming things and saying that we are going to touch the proceeds from the family home. We made that clear weeks ago. We made it very clear that we would not touch it.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Now, they are trying to bring things forward as though they do not even understand how a home is sold. They did not even do the math. When you sell a house, do you have documents? Do you sign something? Is there a mortgage? Does the bank keep records? Do you just go into a parking lot to sell it and give it to somebody?

The opposition members have to take the finances of the province a lot more seriously than they do. I will ask them again. If they are going to come up with arguments that the policy will attack honest seniors, I want them to start pointing at whom in our province they think is dishonest.

Rural Communities

Ms. Wilson: The Premier is on standing notice that I intend to have him answering questions as Minister responsible for Rural Affairs. I should advise that I intend to ask him questions, but whether we get anything resembling an answer has yet to be seen.

I know that just about everybody in rural New Brunswick wants to hear the Premier tell them that, for the want of \$170 000, he took away the bookmobile. Will the Minister responsible for Rural Affairs tell the House how he could let this happen on his watch?



Hon. Mr. Gallant: We have difficult decisions to make.

[Translation]

We have clearly said that we have difficult decisions to make. However, we are going to make them in a progressive way. This is a principle that has guided us in developing our budget, and it will guide the decisions we are going to make as a government.

[Original]

If you would like to know what we are doing for rural New Brunswick, it is what we are doing for the whole province. We are creating jobs. We are focused on growing the economy, and we are very happy to see that happening all over, from St. Stephen to Caraquet to Bathurst to Moncton to Saint John and a bunch of places in between. We are going to continue to be focused on creating the conditions for jobs to be created in our beautiful province, for businesses to start up, for businesses to invest, and for businesses to expand in our province as well.

I have to ask the members opposite why they do not think that is the right focus. I guess it is probably because, when they were in government, theirs was the first government in 40 years that did not have a net gain in jobs. I ask the member opposite to put that into perspective.

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Ms. Wilson: The Liberal election platform was a waste of a lot of good paper and ink, especially the part where it says that the “Liberal Party recognizes that money spent on culture is an investment”. Ask rural New Brunswickers about the bookmobile, and they will tell you that the bookmobile is part of rural culture. It is part of the fabric of rural life. It might be just a thread in the fabric, but, if you pull too many threads out, the fabric tears. It falls apart.

Will the minister responsible for rural New Brunswick get up and explain how he can know so very little about the culture of rural New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am from rural New Brunswick. I know the challenges and the opportunities that are in New Brunswick.

[Translation]

I can tell you that we have difficult decisions to make, but they will be made in a progressive way to protect the most vulnerable. We are going to ask those who can afford it to contribute a little more.

[Original]

One other thing that we will be doing is that we are going to have a very comprehensive strategy for literacy, and that will include all parts of New Brunswick.



There is something else, if the member opposite wants to hear what we are doing for rural New Brunswick. We are investing in our infrastructure. We are investing strategically in our infrastructure to keep New Brunswickers safe—as the Auditor General said that we should do—to stimulate economic development, and to create jobs.

The question then becomes: Does the opposition support that? The opposition members criticize us day after day for investing in infrastructure. Then they get up, and they want us to invest in new bridges in their ridings. They want us to invest in the justice building in Sussex. They say that they support the barge terminal investment in Saint John. Which one is it? Do they support infrastructure spending, or do they not?

Ms. Wilson: Who knows what is going to happen with this government next year. Last year, the members said that they would not touch seniors' assets. I was at the meeting, and I heard that.

In the Liberal election platform, the Premier boasted that the Liberal government would be “implementing a comprehensive literacy strategy”. As always, the Premier’s actions do not line up with his words. “Comprehensive” would suggest to any reasonable-minded person that the Premier intends to improve things, but then he goes and cuts the bookmobile, the most unique and readily recognized tool for promoting reading and literacy across rural New Brunswick. It does not make any sense. It looks and feels like a petty, mean-spirited attack on rural New Brunswick, for a few pieces of silver.

Can the Premier remind us how much money he is getting toward his \$2-billion goal by acting against literacy in rural New Brunswick?

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order, member.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Our actions line up with our words because our priority is job creation, and, since we were sworn in as the government, the economy of New Brunswick has produced 2 500 jobs.

Unfortunately, the member opposite talks about billions of dollars in spending. Again, the members opposite have yet to answer the questions. They say that they are against our infrastructure spending and investments, yet they want us to invest in all their ridings when it comes to infrastructure.

I will put out another point on the billions of dollars that they keep throwing out there. We have the former Finance Minister, the one I think failed at his job, who keeps criticizing our contingency reserve. The federal Finance Minister—a Conservative member, I might add—says that the contingency reserve is a good idea. The federal government has it as well. The member opposite talks as though he does not even understand what it is.

(Interjections.)



Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I ask: What is it? Is it a bad policy? Do they disagree with the federal government, or do they now agree that it is good policy?

Senior Citizens

Mr. B. Macdonald: The Premier pretends to help the underprivileged, but the reality is slightly different. He committed to a policy on the fly, which is having some very important unintended consequences. His intentions may be good, but the reality is different. Right now, seniors with the greatest means have the greatest access to financial advisors and have the greatest financial resources. They are therefore the most able to transfer their assets into nonliquid assets. What steps will the Premier put in place to stop the sheltering of assets by those who have the greatest means to do so?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I understand what is happening, and it is a good thing. I will admit that the member for Fredericton West-Hanwell is good on his feet. He can get up and try to get some quotes in question period to try to soften what he said a while ago, but we heard what was said. His argument was that our policy on senior care was not good because there would be people who would shelter the money and hide the assets. He said that the people who would suffer would be honest seniors, obviously insinuating that we are not doing a good enough job of going after dishonest seniors. I would like the member opposite to get up on his feet and explain who he thinks are seniors in our province that are dishonest and that would try to get around our policy. That was clearly the argument that he made during his member's statement.

Mr. B. Macdonald: I will be happy to review the record with the Premier at any time, but I will tell you that my concern is for the ordinary, average, hardworking, and, yes, honest New Brunswickers of this province.

These are the people who have saved a little for their retirement. They do not have a deep knowledge of the financial system, and they do not have the options that others have to shelter their assets. These honest, ordinary, hardworking New Brunswickers are going to be the victims of this Premier's policy on the fly. I want to know what the Premier is going to do to ensure that his policy is fair to all New Brunswickers and that it will not benefit only those who have the ability to shelter their liquid assets.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I really invite the opposition members to read the policy before they keep getting up and talking about our senior care policy.

What are we doing? Couples that have an income of \$60 000 or less, under our policy, will have more money in their pockets for the spouse or dependant at the home. That is what we are doing. We said that quite some time ago, so I hope the member opposite and his team will take some time this afternoon to read our policy. The member will very much see how we are protecting those who need more support. We are giving them more money in their pockets, but that does not deflect



from the fact that the member for Fredericton West-Hanwell got on his feet today and made the argument that our policy would be attacking honest seniors—meaning dishonest seniors would get away with it, in his opinion. I would like him to explain those remarks.

Mr. B. Macdonald: I have been quite clear. I think that the policy does attack honest seniors. It is difficult to read a policy that is written on a cocktail napkin. It is clear that this policy and this Premier seek to protect seniors who can invest in cottages and boats, at the expense of those who cannot. This puts in place a policy that punishes those with liquid assets and protects those with nonliquid assets, so the choice is clear for seniors: They should protect their assets by making them nonliquid. I want to know what the Premier is going to do to make sure that this policy is fair to all New Brunswickers, not just to those who can afford to take their liquid assets and make them nonliquid because of his policy on the fly.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Is the member opposite suggesting that we should go after the family home, the car, the cottage, and all the vehicles? Is that what he is suggesting? Is that the policy of the opposition—that we should also go after the physical assets? Again, if I am listening to what the member opposite is saying, he thinks that would be fair. We do not. We want people to be able to keep the family home and the proceeds thereof if they sell it.

I also have to take issue with what the member opposite said. We do not believe that there are dishonest seniors in New Brunswick. We believe that they are honest, and we want to treat them fairly and equitably and protect them to the best of our ability. That is exactly what this policy does. It allows those couples with incomes of \$60 000 or less per year to have more money in their pockets.

If the member opposite would like to know what else is progressive about our policies, we are taxing the 1% to make sure that we have the financial capability of providing good services—something those members oppose. Something that they also oppose that we are doing is raising the minimum wage for the working poor in our province.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Time. Order.

