

May 19, 2016

[Original]

Tendering

Mr. Fitch: The Liberal backbenchers seem today to be energized and full of hope that maybe they are going to be in Cabinet in a couple of weeks, as we saw by the statements that they read today. I know that some of the ministers in the front row are a little edgy and looking behind them since they might be moving soon. Anyway, let's see if we can move forward and get some answers today.

It is the third day, and time may be a charm. For two days, the Premier would not get to his feet and answer a question on Bill 12, the patronage procurement plan. Again, this is the bill where the Gallant government is trying to exempt NB Power from going to public tenders on huge projects. We have talked about a wind farm project that is about 30 MW and worth up to \$50 million. Personally, I think that is a big project. I wonder if the Premier personally believes that a 30-MW wind farm worth up to \$50 million is a big project that needs to be scrutinized.

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: As we have said time and time again, first of all, this is not a decision from the government. Actually, there is a process that is in place. I have been very clear in this Legislature and publicly as well that it is for NB Power to decide which projects it would like to proceed with.

What we, as a government, did was put legislation forward to make sure that NB Power has the authority to enter into small-scale community renewable projects, which is what New Brunswickers are looking for. Also, we set aside 40 MW for First Nations and 40 MW for communities, municipalities, nonprofit organizations, and so forth. However, we wanted to issue the first 40 MW to First Nations communities. That request for expressions of interest went out in January. It closed on April 30, and, as I said yesterday, I am very proud that, as NB Power has told me, 23 applicants from First Nations are participating in this process. The First Nations are participating—imagine that. When the members opposite were in government, they did not want the First Nations to participate. That is the difference between you and me.

Mr. Fitch: I appreciate the Minister of Energy being energized right up to the closing days of his time as a minister. As he looks behind him, the backbenchers are just itching to take his seat. We will be more than happy to accommodate the Premier in giving him that opportunity.

The point is that this is a huge project and Bertin LeBlanc is listed as the Vice-President of the Liberal Party here in the province. Bertin LeBlanc was also the campaign chairman for the Liberal Party in the 2014 election. The fact that the Liberal government is trying to bypass the tendering process on all these projects is really... Obviously, Mr. LeBlanc is not doing this out of the goodness of his heart, I am sure, so we need to have clarification.



Would the Premier agree that the optics of this for the taxpayers of New Brunswick are that the government might be bypassing public tendering here and that we need to have all the facts on the table before this can move forward?

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: The Leader of the Opposition has been so weak in his role that there are actually seven people who want his job.

I find it quite unfortunate. We talked about this yesterday. Mr. LeBlanc is a tremendous New Brunswicker who participates in various development projects. On this project alone, he has been very clear and very public. He has been part of this process since 2008, working on this Indian Island project. Having eight First Nations actually working together, to me, is a feat.

Do you know what? One of those 23 projects is applying for a potential power purchase agreement (PPA). In fact, it is NB Power, independently, that will make those decisions.

For the Leader of the Opposition to play politics... We never brought up Chad Peters when he was representing SWN. The former government gave Chad Peters everything he wanted because he was a well-known Tory and former Tory candidate. When I look at the administrator...

Student Aid

Mr. Fitch: We have had enough of that bad infomercial from the Minister of Energy. It is worse than the Chia Pet. I will move on to another topic, and maybe the Premier will get up and answer this one.

Alex Usher, President of Higher Education Strategy Associates, is quoted as saying that this government “didn’t think through the consequences” of the TAB program. I tend to agree with him. This could have been a positive event, but it now seems that the Premier has made lemons out of lemonade. Mr. Usher also said that the government “got the details wrong”.

Given the pushback on the TAB program, will the Premier support our motion to put a moratorium in place for a year, get the details right, and participate in a working group, as requested by the New Brunswick Association of Private Colleges and Universities? Let’s take the time, do it right, and do it for the good of all the people here in the province, not just a select few.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Education is so important for the future of our economy here in the province. It is also very important for the quality of life of the people in our province. This is why we are making announcements and investments and developing historic programs that are based on the best data and reports, including the best studies, on how to invest strategically in education.



In fact, when we refer to the person mentioned by the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Usher, it becomes very clear to me that the best way to make postsecondary education more affordable and accessible is to give scholarships to young people who are in university or college. The scholarships must be given to those who need them most. This is actually the specific purpose of the program and the investment we are going to make.

That being said, we want to do more for more people, and we are very open to suggestions from all New Brunswickers, including opposition members.

[Original]

Mr. Fitch: I am glad that the Premier said that he was open to suggestions from everybody because we have put suggestions on the floor. Again, I appreciate the fact that the Premier is standing up and answering this question because, as we know, he is jet-setting away next week to Manitoba and he is not going to be in the House.

Students want to choose. They want to choose among the many private universities and colleges in the province, and they have had that right taken away from them because of the TAB. I suggested yesterday some of the areas where they could work, such as computer programming, web design, dental, pharmaceutical assistant, or trucking. Many people have a need for long-haul truckers, and students could do that at the Atlantic Transport Training Academy.

Now, the TAB program does not allow people to choose those private institutions, and I do not know why the Minister of Social Development was not up defending Crandall University, her former university, that is excluded from the TAB program. Can the Premier articulate the reason for this discrimination against private universities?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: This is about the 20th time that I have explained to the Leader of the Opposition why we introduced the policy we are discussing this morning.

We are giving priority to education, and that is why we need to invest strategically in it. We must ensure that postsecondary education is accessible and affordable for more people, and that is why we are investing to help those who need financial assistance the most.

We will try to help more people in the future, but, given the financial situation we inherited from the previous government, this is the investment our government can make at this time.

Private universities and colleges are very important for our economy and our province. Several programs will help students and institutions. We are going to do more for people, but, at this time, we will focus on people who need our help most and who attend publicly funded universities and colleges.



[Original]

Mr. Fitch: Again, that is my point. The timing of this and the details that the government has wrong need to be corrected. Student loan applications are being processed. Acceptance into university is being processed. Students are making choices and decisions, and, because the government has come out with this at this point in time, they are rethinking those decisions. It has put a significant amount of flux into the whole education system. It is not beneficial at this time because it has created such upheaval. That is why I am asking the Premier to put a moratorium on it. Let's work on the details.

We talk about jobs and the fact that there are 2 700 fewer jobs than when the Liberals took over. Some of the students could choose the private institutions in which to take a program in a shorter period of time and be in the workforce sooner than if they went to a four-year university. Anyway, I wonder whether, before the Premier leaves the House next week, he could tell the instructors at these private universities and colleges who may lose their jobs because of a drop in enrollment what he says to that?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The private institutions, colleges, and universities are important for New Brunswick. They are important for our economy, and we are doing many things to help students who are going there.

However, we also publicly fund universities and colleges. They face immense challenges when it comes to enrollment. The Leader of the Opposition knows this. At one point—and it is already happening—it is going to become even more significant. The universities and colleges that are publicly funded are going to ask us for more and more money because they have two sources of revenue—tuition from students and the government. Instead of waiting for that to happen, we are coming up with creative and innovative ways that will help enrollment for our publicly funded universities and colleges and, at the same time, make university and college more accessible than we have ever seen before for those who need it most.

We are proud of what we are moving forward on. Again, the day that we made the announcement, we made it very clear that, if we can gain the fiscal capacity with the decisions that we have made, we will invest more to do more for more people.

Mr. Fitch: This is the exact problem. The Premier does not get it. The government cut up to \$50 million of student aid programming. It has reinvested only \$25 million. If the government took the time to get the details right, it could apply it across the board to the private institutions and universities.

The Premier also says some incriminating things, such as there are only two sources of revenue for the private universities—the government and enrollment. Well, that is not the case at all. There is also a third, which is endowments and charitable giving. Again, the Premier shows that he does not know the complete details on the file.



A student that goes to a public university costs the government a significant amount of money beyond what we are seeing today. If a student goes to a private institution, it does not cost the government any more money.

Again, will the Premier take the time to do it right, get the details, and apply it right across the board to public universities and private universities and colleges? Let the students decide. Let the funding go to the students, and let the students decide where they are going to go.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The elimination of the education and tuition tax credits is estimated to be about \$1.5 million. The inflationary adjustment to the Timely Completion Benefit would be about \$1.5 million, and the elimination of the tuition tax rebate would be about \$25 million, for a total of \$28 million.

The Tuition Access Bursary is estimated to be an investment of \$25 million. The Youth Employment Fund is an investment of \$11.7 million. The elimination of the parental and spousal contributions to student loans has been \$2.7 million. We have invested almost \$40 million with the programs that we have either enhanced or created. On top of that, we have enhanced the number of SEED weeks that students will be able to get.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: They will be able to have more money during the summers. On top of that, we are going to ensure that we do the ultimate, most important thing for our youth. We will create jobs and grow the economy so they can stay here in the province.

Nursing Homes

Mr. Steeves: It has come to our attention that the Gallant government is now making a move to place financial obligations of our province's nursing homes on the province's books. This has not been done in a very open and transparent manner, which we have become accustomed to from this government that campaigned hard on that. One of the first things that it did was to take away the *Fiscal Transparency and Accountability Act*. In fact, it has been anything but open and transparent.

The action raises a ton of questions, but the first question that I have for the Minister of Social Development is this: Can you tell us the plan for the nursing homes? Is the province going to take over the operation of the nursing homes completely?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Melanson: We are well aware that, for a few years now, the Office of the Auditor General has been recommending that the value of nursing home assets be consolidated and



accounted for in the province's books. So, we are in discussions on this matter and we are looking into the situation. We are also making sure that the New Brunswick Association of Nursing Homes is well informed that this is a possibility. However, we do not want to manage nursing homes. We are just talking here about a potential accounting exercise to record the value of these assets in New Brunswick's books.

[Original]

Mr. Steeves: The Auditor General's report acknowledged that the financial results of the nursing homes may end up on the province's books. It says:

If this conclusion was reached, all of the homes financial results including the revenue, expenses, assets and liabilities would be consolidated in the Province's financial statements.

We are looking to the Minister of Social Development or maybe the Minister of Finance to give us a dollar figure of what would end up on the province's books. This is what we are looking for.

Hon. Mr. Melanson: The Auditor General, again, has already made recommendations in regard to the asset value. We know that there is an estimate of about \$600 million in asset value. We are considering the recommendations of the Auditor General.

We also need to be very clear. If we make a decision to do this, it will be an accounting exercise. We have no intention of taking over the operation of nursing homes. They have local governance bodies, boards of directors, and general managers who take care of their operations. If we do make a final decision, it will be an accounting exercise to account for the asset value on the books of the province. The credit rating agencies already consider that as a provincial government asset. It would have no impact, as per our understanding, on the credit rating. This is something that we are considering at this time.

Mr. Steeves: Considering that the government already looks over all the books of the nursing homes, and considering that it sets the amounts that nursing homes can and cannot spend on anything from cleaning supplies to bandages and anything in between, it is odd that the government needs to go to this level of bookkeeping if there are no further plans down the road. I am once again asking the Minister of Social Development to reveal her government's plan for the nursing homes as it relates to the local nursing home boards.

I am worried about these boards, and I am worried about the volunteers. Some of our seniors, who are our most valuable people, are volunteers at these seniors' homes, and they are very, very instrumental in fund-raising for them and in helping them in so many ways. I am worried about the boards. I am worried. Are there changes coming? Please, I want your assurance, once again, minister, that there are not going to be changes coming and that they are not going to fall under the government.



Hon. Mr. Melanson: I thought that I was quite clear. The opposition is quite inconsistent. The Auditor General is making some recommendations from an accounting point of view on how we account for the asset value of nursing homes. I would hope that, one day, the official opposition of today would stop fearmongering New Brunswickers. I think that I have been very clear. It is an accounting exercise. If we make that decision, it is to account for, on the books of the province, the asset value of nursing homes. It is not about getting involved in the day-to-day operation of nursing homes. We have met. The Comptroller of the province met with the Nursing Home Association last week to explain exactly that and to make sure that everything is open and transparent.

I hope that the opposition will stop fearmongering on this file and on many other files, by the way. This is about making the right decision. We are not trying to take over nursing homes. We are considering accounting for the asset value of nursing homes, as has been recommended by the Auditor General.

[*Translation*]

Extra-Mural Program

Ms. Dubé: I have another question for the Minister of Health. We know that he is currently negotiating behind closed doors with a private company about the management of the Extra-Mural Program. We know that this is a hospital without walls that is currently associated with the Horizon and Vitalité health networks. I would like to ask the Minister of Health if he is going to make sure, in the current negotiations, that this company is required to comply with the Act governing medical care. Will the minister make sure this is in the contract?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: I do not know how many times I will have to talk about this file. The member continues to rise and to try to scare people who receive exceptional service from the Extra-Mural Program in New Brunswick. For months now, the member has been rising in the House to talk about privatization and service cuts. She says we are going to force clients to pay for Extra-Mural Program services. There is absolutely no truth to these statements.

We are in discussions with Medavie EMS about looking at a potential model which could combine the Extra-Mural Program, Ambulance New Brunswick, and Tele-Care 811. We have said this time and time again: The goal of the exercise is not to cut the budget or staff. The goal of the exercise is to improve services.

Ms. Dubé: The minister is the one who is negotiating behind closed doors and who gave himself a deadline of three to four months to get a signed contract. It is his government that decides to adjourn the House earlier than scheduled, so we can expect that a contract will be signed before our return in the fall.



So my question is not meant to scare people; it is valid. I would like to ask the Minister of Health if he is going to make sure that health care delivery, potentially done by Medavie EMS, complies with the Act governing medical care. It is a very simple question: yes or no?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The minister has answered this question. I cannot even count how many times because it has been so repetitive. I suggest that perhaps the opposition needs new staff because they are clearly just copying and pasting the same questions over and over to give to their MLAs.

I got up because the member opposite is talking about the Legislature closing. That is not the case. I am sure that she would have seen the media clippings from yesterday. We made it very clear that, if the opposition needs more time to scrutinize and hold the government to account, there is no problem. We will come back.

However, I would like to point to this very moment. The members opposite would like us to be in the Legislature, yet they ask exactly the same questions over and over. There was a bill yesterday on which I think that a dozen of them got up to say probably the exact same things and to try to get off track—talking about the Cabinet shuffle. It is not for me to judge, but I invite New Brunswickers and the media to listen to the questions and the statements from the opposition to see whether the time here is well served.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Dubé: Our time would certainly be better spent if we could get answers to our questions. This is why we have to ask the same questions every day. My questions are not repetitive; the topics are, because we are not getting answers.

Once again, I point out that the Extra-Mural Program is certainly a gem envied across Canada. We have this program here, but the government is negotiating behind closed doors to entrust a private company with the management of these services.

It is very well known that quality of care prevails within the Vitalité and Horizon health networks. However, for a private company, it is profitability that will prevail.

Once again, my question is for the Minister of Health, since I still have not received an answer: Is he going to make sure that, if a contract is signed with Medavie EMS, the Act governing medical care will be complied with?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: Now, the opposition is telling me that I should just sign the contract. Never mind the due diligence—just sign it.



(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: We have been in discussions. The member is trying to say that we are doing this behind closed doors. This has been one of the most extensive consultations that the Department of Health has had. We have had the RHAs at the table. We have had the Medical Society at the table. We have had all three unions—the Nurses' Union, CUPE, and the New Brunswick Union. All three represent various health care professionals. Sitting down with the unions was not enough. We then sat down with the professional associations as well. Every professional association was invited to a briefing.

There have been ongoing meetings. There have been ride-alongs where staff from the Department of Health and from Medavie go with extramural employees to homes to make sure that they get a full understanding of what is involved. This is about improving the service, not cutting it, although the member opposite likes to fearmonger.

Student Employment

Mr. Holder: Like most decisions and announcements coming out of the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, as you start to peel the onion back, you realize that not a lot of thought went into the process and not much consultation went into the decision. I am going to ask today specifically about the SEED grant program. Whom did the minister consult? It is not enough to make a blanket statement that there was widespread consultation. Exactly whom did she consult?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The Legislature. They asked us to make it a nonpartisan process. They asked. It was awesome. The member for Oromocto-Lincoln, who would have had his hands all up in the SEED program when he was the minister, had the audacity to get up in the Legislature, to go and talk to the media, and say that it was “épouvantable” that we would be doing this the old way. The member for Fredericton South asked us as well to make it a nonpartisan process. Do you know what? We agreed. No problem. For us to make it nonpartisan, we had to make some changes. When I say “nonpartisan”, I want to be clear. I am not accusing anybody of anything.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: In fact, MLAs know their communities. They know what types of programs are happening, and they know who needs support. That was the way it worked, but the public... Through the opposition, it was asked that we change it, so we did. It is now nonpartisan.

Mr. Holder: We are not talking about partisanship here. We are talking about community development. We are talking about local organizations that need these grants to survive. The



Premier got up and answered. There was not one bit of information in there as to whom was consulted—not one bit.

The question I have is this. Part of this process is to eliminate the PEP grants. The PEP grants made sure—they guaranteed—that county museums across this province had access to grants each and every year. That guarantee is gone as a result of this. My question is this: Whom did the government consult within the heritage community and the museum associations across this province? In many rural communities, it is the only community and tourism site. It creates a Main Street effect in many of these communities. Whom did the government consult within that community?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Once again, it is the opposition that asked for changes to the process. I remember that very well, since it was last year. I told myself: That cannot be, because when the previous government was in power, that is how the process always unfolded. Once again, it is the opposition that asked for changes to the process. It asked that MLAs not be involved. The previous government also wanted a more youth-focused process, and that is precisely what we did.

We are facing a challenge here in the province that is actually nationwide: There are not enough jobs for our young people. The government is well aware of this. We are doing everything we can to help them. In fact, under this program, we even increased the number of weeks of work that can be given to young people so that they can work throughout the summer. We will continue to do everything we can to help the young people of our province.

[*Original*]

Mr. Holder: I will tell you that one thing that we did not ask for is that county museums across this province be left behind, and that is exactly what has happened. There is a pattern developing here. There is a pattern developing. There is a pattern of no one being consulted with respect to the decisions coming out of this department. There is a pattern of everything being written on the back of a napkin. I would love to find the napkin that the government's magic fund was written on. I think that this decision was written on the other side.

Either this minister—who has not gotten up and answered any questions today—is not asking the right questions or her department is not telling her. Either way, she does not appear to know what is happening in the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour. I will ask it again. Who was consulted? Was the Department of Tourism, Heritage and Culture consulted? Every heritage site and museum across this province is being left behind with this decision.

Hon. Mr. Fraser: I am very proud to get up as the Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture and speak about an important economic generator for our province worth \$1.14 billion. The



member opposite talks about our heritage partners and our museums, and we value all the work that they do in our communities across the province.

My department has been working closely with these partners and museums. We are looking forward to a very positive tourism season this year, right across the province. I have no lessons to learn from the former Minister of Tourism opposite.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Fraser: Look at the numbers from when he was the minister, and look at the numbers when we took government last year. There have been increases right across the board, at all our parks and attractions. There have been increases in marketing dollars that we invested in the Quebec and Ontario markets.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Fraser: There has been an increase in the number of U.S. visitors coming to our province. We are very proud of all the work that the team at the Department of Tourism, Heritage and Culture has done, and we are looking for another bang-up season this year. There has been a 50% increase in our Web site visits to date over last year. It is going to be another record season in the tourism industry in New Brunswick.

Forest Industry

Mr. Savoie: We recently had a little good news about our GDP. Of course, we have to recognize it for what it is. Next year, there will be no refinery turnaround. There will be no big mill investments, and, of course, potash investments will be zero. We need to be sure that the foundation of our GDP is as strong as possible.

Forestry and blueberries were highlighted as major contributors to our GDP growth this past year. With that in mind, will the Premier get up today and tell the House when he will finally announce his plan for the forestry strategy? The industry has been waiting. It has been 20 months. We would like to have an answer on that today. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: My colleague the Minister of Natural Resources is working very hard. As he has said many times, he has consulted several individuals. One thing that he noticed is that, when he was doing these consultations, it became pretty darn clear that the opposition, when it was in government, did no such thing. That is why his work has to be so extensive, to make sure that everybody is heard.



Unfortunately, the member opposite is trying to drag down what New Brunswickers were able to accomplish in 2015, which is unfortunate. The 1.9% GDP growth is the largest growth that we have seen in New Brunswick since 2010, and it is the fourth-largest increase in the country. However, it also has to do with many industries—agriculture and forestry, fishing and hunting, crop and animal production, forestry and logging, fishing and hunting and trapping, support activities for agriculture and forestry, construction, manufacturing, seafood processing, wholesale trade, and retail trade. All have gone up, and many more, because we are working together to grow this economy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Question period is finished.

