

March 21, 2017

[Original]

Parlee Beach Provincial Park

Mr. Higgs: The Premier has repeatedly defended the Minister of Health. He has said that concerns around Parlee Beach were without foundation. He said that there was no conflict. Mere weeks later, the commissioner said that there was a perceived conflict. This demands specifics. The Premier has avoided answering this question. What changed between the Premier's absolute defence of the minister and the commissioner's statement that the minister has recused himself? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: First off, I would just like to point out to New Brunswickers listening and to the media themselves that the next time they hear the Leader of the Opposition speak of how he is going to do things differently, they should roll back and listen to the members' statements coming from the opposition today. We have some very serious challenges in our province, and we have many important opportunities. We need to make sure that we stay focused on growing our economy, investing in education, and improving health care.

If the Leader of the Opposition wants to pretend that he did not hear the answer that I gave numerous times over the past few weeks, I will give it again. What changed was that the Conflict of Interest Commissioner was told that we found out just recently that there may be a proposal coming from the steering committee to cease development for a period of time near the Parlee Beach area. Because of this potential recommendation, the Minister of Health went to see the commissioner again. His advice was that there was no conflict but that there could be a perception of conflict, so the Minister of Health recused himself.

Mr. Higgs: For clarification, let me word this just a little differently. What conflict did the commissioner perceive that the Premier was unable to perceive for over a year? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: First off, I would suggest that the Leader of the Opposition direct questions about what the commissioner saw or what was his advice to him. What I can tell the Leader of the Opposition is what the Minister of Health and this government have been told through the consultations and discussions with regard to the Parlee Beach file. Throughout the file, the Minister of Health has been in contact with the commissioner—in fact, three of them. As you know, there was a past commissioner and a current commissioner. We had an interim one in between. Every single one of them gave the same advice.

When there was this new development that had to do with the steering committee potentially proposing that it cease activity in developing the Parlee Beach area for a period of time, the commissioner then said to the Minister of Health: You are still not in a conflict, but there may



be a perception of conflict, so my advice is that you recuse yourself. That is exactly what the Minister of Health has done. That is exactly what our government has done.

Mr. Higgs: I am not sure that the people of New Brunswick would appreciate the answer to this question and what I have seen here at this time. My question is again to the Premier: Given the importance of the Premier's judgment in all matters, what has the Premier learned from this experience? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I have learned that the Leader of the Opposition and the opposition in general will do anything to try to get a headline. They will do anything to try to score political points.

We have members on this side of the Legislature who are working very hard. I have no doubt that previous governments, both Conservative and Liberal, were filled with people who were working very hard. It is complex to govern, and you have to make sure that you are as accountable as possible and as transparent as possible. That is why we have legislative officers, to make sure that they can shed light on what is happening. That is why we have procedures and policies.

In this case, with regard to Parlee Beach, there is a commissioner for conflicts of interest. They—I say “they” because there have been three over the period of this file—have been giving advice to the Minister of Health regarding the potential conflict. There was none until there was the potential recommendation to cease activity and development in the Parlee Beach area for a period of time. When this was said to the commissioner, he said that the minister should be recused, and that was what we did.

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Mr. Higgs: The Premier has told the House that the Health Minister recused himself from the Parlee Beach fiasco “with regard to a potential recommendation that would come from the actions” that the government is taking. Would the Premier explain, upon his explanation, what actions he means?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am not sure where the quote read by the Leader of the Opposition came from, but I can certainly explain the situation to you. As you know, a committee was established. This was one of the steps taken by the government when we learned there were issues to address about water quality and the accountability obligation regarding the reports on this file.

This committee is working hard to ensure that the situation is rectified as far as we can do so. It is possible that one of the committee's recommendations will be to stop development in the Parlee Beach area. That is why the Minister of Health went back to see the Conflict of Interest



Commissioner with this information. The commissioner explained to the Minister of Health that he did not have a conflict, but that it could be perceived as such. The Minister of Health then decided to recuse himself from the file. The government asked him to recuse himself from the file.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: MP Dominic LeBlanc was in the media in February, talking about Parlee Beach and saying that the federal government would spend more money on the Shediac wastewater system if the province spends more as well. This is the wastewater system that the Health Minister's mega campground is looking to hook into. As we know, the Premier has the taxpayers' credit card. Is the Premier planning to put more tax dollars into the project that would be of benefit to the Health Minister's mega campground? Is that why the Health Minister has recused himself? Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: This is very unfortunate. In case there were recommendations on investments in infrastructure to rectify the situation at Parlee Beach, I would like to hear from the Leader of the Opposition and know whether he would agree that the government invest in these projects.

[Original]

Property Tax

Mr. Higgs: The government's confusion over the property tax file grows by the day. So far, the government has blamed the opposition, the media, computer software, computer hardware, and civil servants for the problem. The government, under pressure, has admitted to 2 400 errors. A New Brunswick company, Propertize.ca, has identified nearly 20 000. New Brunswickers want to know that their government is ready to fix this problem, not just assign blame. In light of that, could the Minister of Service New Brunswick tell the House how many property tax appeals the minister has personally reviewed? Thank you.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: I am still very interested in hearing the answers from the Leader of the Opposition to a few questions that I asked last week. I have said this, and I have repeated it many times: We acknowledged the errors. One error is one too many. However, I have been hearing, just now, the opposition telling us that a minister should be the voice of the public.



Well, as soon as we were made aware of these errors, we made them public because we are transparent. We notified people, and we made sure they knew they could ask for a review. However, what did the Leader of the Opposition do? When was he the voice of the public? When was he transparent? When did he notify the people of New Brunswick after 35 000 errors were made?

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: It was not only not the right minister. It was not the right question that he was trying to answer.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

I believe I can speak for all New Brunswickers in expressing concern that the minister responsible for this file is not allowed to answer any of these questions. I ask again, directing my question to the Minister of Service New Brunswick: How many property tax appeals has the minister personally reviewed? Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: I would also be very interested in knowing this: Of the 35 000 errors that were made, how many did the former Minister of Finance personally review? We would be very, very interested to know. That being said, I have said this, and I am repeating it: One error is one too many. We are working with the public, and people know that, if they believe there was an error, they can contact the people at Service New Brunswick, the regional agents, at any time during the year. We will look at the situation.

I would also be very interested in knowing who exactly this person is who is providing figures and finding errors. Could there be some sort of link with the Leader of the Opposition or the party of the members opposite? I would be very interested to know.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: This issue has been in the headlines for weeks. New Brunswick families are scared that they cannot afford to pay their taxes. Families in apartments are afraid they could lose their homes. I will remind the minister that assessments are not supposed to increase by more than 10% per year. Can the minister tell the House how many families have seen their taxes increase by more than 10%?



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: Once again, I find the question from the Leader of the Opposition very interesting, since he seems to really want to know how many families have had a property tax increase of over 10%.

This represents about 5% of the assessments. However, I would like to tell you this: During the last two years of the mandate of the Leader of the Opposition as Minister of Finance, 8% of properties had an increase of over 10%. In addition, during the last year of his mandate, it was 7%, whereas for the last fiscal year, it was 5%. What is happening? Who had jurisdiction between 2010 and 2014? Where was the voice of the public from 2010 to 2014? Where was the transparency from 2010 to 2014? I have been asking these questions for a week, and I still have not received an answer.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: With less than 10 days to go before the deadline for appeals of property tax assessments expires and with the number of reported problematic assessments close to 20 000, the government has refused to extend the deadline for appeals or to launch an information campaign to make it easier for New Brunswick families to appeal this government's mistakes. Without passing the buck—without blaming the opposition, the civil service, municipal governments, or computer error—will this government commit to giving New Brunswickers the time and information they need to appeal mistakes in their property tax assessments? Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: You know, I was a university professor for 22 years, and I did not have to repeat answers as often to make myself understood.

That being said, you know, being a Member of the Legislative Assembly is also about providing figures in a responsible way. So, I would very much like to know where the 22 000-family figure came from. The most familiar figure and the highest one is 35 000—35 000 errors made during one mandate.

I have said this, I have repeated it, and I am repeating it again: Yes, any property owner who finds an error can contact our Service New Brunswick regional offices. If there is an error, a change can be made at any time during the year; is this clear?

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: To continue on that line, many New Brunswick families have contacted opposition MLAs to express concern over the property tax assessment and the appeal process itself. Can



the minister describe the appeal process for New Brunswick families who are appealing their property tax assessments? Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: I can read the review process. Anyway, I want to remind the Leader of the Opposition that, until March 31, we are not talking about appeals, but about reviews. After that, when the review is done, if people are not satisfied, there is in fact an appeal process. So, I want to clarify the facts. It is true that the Leader of the Opposition was only Minister of Finance for four years.

That being said, we have been very clear, and people received the information. The envelope that people receive contains the assessment. The review and appeal processes are very clearly explained in it. So, I invite the Leader of the Opposition, who—suddenly and unfortunately—is only realizing today that just one error is one too many, to simply have a look at the documentation that was probably sent to him as well.

[*Original*]

Mr. Higgs: Will the minister, the Premier, or at least one person who is informed on this matter on the benches opposite please explain to New Brunswick families that the yellow form included with the notice of assessment that everyone receives is not the form required to file an appeal. This process needs to be explained to New Brunswick families. Will the minister, in light of the nearly 20 000 errors, in light of the confusion over the appeals process, and in light of all the families contacting the government and opposition members to share their concerns commit to doing the right thing and extend the deadline for these appeals? Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: Listening to the Leader of the Opposition, I understand the problems he had as Minister of Finance. I understand now why his deficits were huge. I also understand why the growth rate was so low during his mandate. I will repeat the figures: In 2011, growth was 0.2%; in 2012, there was a 1% drop; in 2013, there was a 0.3% drop; in 2014, there was a 0.1% drop. Let's talk about deficits. In 2011, it was about \$600 million. In 2012, it was approximately \$245 million. In 2013, it was about \$533 million. In 2014, it was about \$600 million. I understand why the Leader of the Opposition is talking about 20 000 errors when there are actually a lot fewer errors, because he definitely has problems with figures.

We are aware that errors were made, but there have been a lot fewer than in the past because we are working on improving the system. I am still waiting for answers from the Leader of the Opposition.



[Original]

Children at Risk

Mrs. Shephard: We are all aware of the tragedy of children dying in care in our province. It is a problem that extends back decades, but it most certainly demands action today. Can the Minister of Social Development answer this question: How many children have been in care in New Brunswick over the past 20 years?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: It is always a great opportunity to stand on such a topic. The number one priority of this government will always be families and children. We have always said that, and we have committees in place. We have the Child Death Review Committee, the Child and Youth Advocate, and the Chief Coroner's Office all working together with the government, with stakeholders, and with the province of New Brunswick. We want to make this a priority, and we will continue to listen to New Brunswickers. We will ask them whether they have submissions to make this process better.

However, we are doing well. We are doing much better than we did 10 or 15 years ago. We will continue to do so. We are open to suggestions, and we want to make this place the best place to live, work, and raise a family.

Mrs. Shephard: Let me help out the minister. Given the turnover rate, we can assume that approximately 10 000 New Brunswick kids have spent time in care over the past 20 years. There have been 53 deaths during that time. The minister has said and just said that the system in New Brunswick is excellent. The minister has said that we should not be concerned because some of these deaths were accidents. Can the minister please tell this House the rate of child deaths in Canada?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: Again, we are not perfect. The Premier has said it. We have said it in this House. We are continuing to work hard. The people at Social Development and the people around the province are giving suggestions to make this process better. I hear the member opposite talking about what they would have done. I can remember her words being: They dropped the ball. We are not going to drop the ball. We are going to work with New Brunswickers. We are going to continue working with our committees. We know that this is a tragedy. For any parent, losing a child is tragic. We know that. Our number one priority as a government will be children and families, and it will continue to be so.

Mrs. Shephard: The rate of child death from accidents in Canada is 4 per 100 000. That means that the rate of death is 30 to 40 times higher among kids in care in New Brunswick than it is in the general population. The minute that the minister takes the oath of office, he has responsibilities—the same responsibilities as parents—for these most vulnerable kids. It appears that the minister and the Premier have not been motivated to ask or, apparently, to care about these basic questions. Yet, the Premier spoke today about the value of our



legislative officers. Will the minister, at this late date, fast-track legislation to allow the Child and Youth Advocate to take action to fix this long-standing problem?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: I can reassure not only the members opposite but also the people of New Brunswick that we take our jobs very seriously and we will continue to do so. I am very proud to be the minister of social development, the Minister of Families and Children. We work hard with our stakeholders. We work hard with our committees. When suggestions or recommendations are made... We have acted on 100% of our recommendations, and that is not all we are going to do. We are going to continue to work with our stakeholders.

Losing a child in New Brunswick is very serious. We take that very seriously. The people at Social Development continue to work on a daily basis. What the member opposite is stating is so out there. I do not know what the proper word or the legislative word...

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order. The member for Gagetown-Petitcodiac will come to order.

Hon. Mr. Horsman: However, we continue. We have listened to the Child and Youth Advocate. He has agreed that he does not have the proper resources to deal with this, but the Child Death Review Committee and the Chief Coroner's Office do. They continue to do a great job.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Water Quality

Mr. Fitch: On Friday, we discussed the Parlee Beach situation. When we did that, the Tourism Minister advised the House that an individual named Jacques Paynter and other people were working on this file. The Tourism Minister did not expand upon the statement, so, today, given the importance of this file, I would like to pursue this a little further. Can the Minister of Tourism advise the House as to who Jacques Paynter is, what his employment position is, and the scope of the work that he is doing on the Parlee Beach file?

Hon. Mr. Ames: The gentleman I spoke of, Jacques Paynter, has an impeccable track record. He has a great résumé, which I am looking at right now. I would certainly be glad to share with the member opposite. Jacques Paynter is a professional engineer, and he has international experience. He has climate change and water resource experience. He has Aboriginal stakeholder and public engagement experience and multiple consultation and communications experiences as well as experience in environmental impact assessments, which is extremely important and crucial for us in dealing with this file today.

As per the dialogue that we had last week, I need to remind the member across the floor that this is why we are talking about this. We are trying to be the government that is proactive and



moving ahead with trying to fix the issue that we have in front of us. We are not dwelling on the past. We are not trying to dig up old files that are going to make people look bad. We are concerned about Parlee Beach being the best beach in the entire Maritime Provinces. Thank you.

Mr. Fitch: If the Tourism Minister does not want to dig up the past, why was his seatmate talking about the last five years here in the last little while?

In the impeccable track record of Jacques Paynter on his résumé, I am guessing that the minister opposite forgot to mention that Jacques Paynter was on the front page of the *Moncton Times & Transcript* fishing with Shawn Graham during the 2010 election campaign. He forgot to mention that.

Will the Tourism Minister advise the House as to whether Mr. Paynter is employed by the Tourism Department, the Health Department, the Environment Department, or some other department and whether this work that he is doing is subject to an RFP process?

Hon. Mr. Ames: With respect to the individuals who work for us—who work for the government, who work for the province—we want to have the best people possible working on these files. Mr. Paynter... Regardless of what the member opposite claims he has done or whom he has swum with or canoed with or watched a movie with, the bottom line is that this individual is helping us to get to the bottom of what is at the heart of the issue at Parlee Beach.

That is what we on this side of the floor are concerned about. We are concerned about making sure that Parlee Beach is in a better situation for tourists and is in a better situation for New Brunswickers because it is a place of pride for me and for my colleagues on this side of the floor. Going forward, we want to make sure that we have the best people in place to find those solutions.

Mr. Fitch: The Minister of Tourism is trying to make light of the fact that Jacques Paynter was on the front page of the newspaper with the former Liberal Premier promoting the Liberal Premier and promoting the Liberal agenda. That is why it is important to understand whether this went through an RFP and whether an EIA is going to be done by Mr. Paynter. That is why I am asking the Tourism Minister whether he can advise the House of the length of the contract that was given and the payment particulars with respect to Mr. Paynter's contract and whether any of these other people he refers to are working on this project and what they are being paid.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: It is unfortunate that the member opposite, the former Leader of the Opposition, has to consistently try to question the credibility of good New Brunswickers, good people who are trying to help our province. This is a serious issue, and we have to make sure that we act swiftly and that we do everything we can to rectify the water quality reporting issues at Parlee Beach and the water quality issues ultimately. We have to do this because Parlee Beach is important for our economy, it is important for tourism, and it is important to the quality of life of so many New Brunswickers.



With the logic that the former Leader of the Opposition is bringing to the floor today, I have to say that, over the past few days, I was spending time in Boston trying to promote the seafood and fish products of our province to buyers from around the world. I went to seafood receptions. I went to meetings. I drove around Boston to meet people with David Alward. There are photos of me and David Alward. That does not mean that I am promoting David Alward's agenda.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

[*Translation*]

Hospitals

Ms. Dubé: It is clear that, since taking office, this government has been trying to privatize services, especially in health care. It is also clear that citizens' groups are against this idea and rose up against the process. It is clear that Vitalité Health Network very clearly voiced its opposition on several occasions, in committees, in public, in the media, and even within the Board of Directors.

This time, I am asking the Premier whether he will let go of the idea of privatizing health care services in New Brunswick, since people are clearly against it.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I simply want to mention a small detail about this file; then I will let the Minister of Health answer the question. I think it is very important to note that Vitalité Health Network officials themselves are proposing a different delivery model for these services. I think that the fact that they are proposing to review the way these services are delivered shows they recognize that there is a better way to do things.

So, the Minister of Health will review the file with the opposition members—I am sure he will do so proudly—to explain why we think the choice we made is better for New Brunswickers and is the best option to make sure we have the most money possible to invest in the education systems and, of course, in primary care.

However, it is important to note that Vitalité Health Network officials themselves made a proposal regarding a different delivery model for these services. This shows there is a better way of doing things.

Ms. Dubé: The people from Vitalité Health Network have always said they were against privatizing and dismantling all their services. They wanted to keep service management under their authority. Citizens' groups also said this: We want to remain within a united and efficient system.



Once again, we are asking the Premier to stop discussions on privatization and to maintain services under the authority of the two health networks. This is to have efficient services and ensure that they are provided within a public system. Once again, I am asking the Premier this: Would you agree to stop the privatization process and keep everything under the management of our health networks?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: The only thing the member opposite is forgetting to mention in her question is that the process that led us to want to sign a service contract with Sodexo started in 2013. So, going back and looking at who was in power in 2013, it was members who are now in the opposition. They are the ones who started the process, and they are the ones who released the request for proposals. They are the ones who chose the winning bidder. They chose Sodexo among three companies that submitted bids. Then, since the election was coming up, the topic was kind of set aside and no longer discussed.

When we came to power, we took over the file with what had been done up to that point, and I am proud to say that we will move forward with it because that is the right decision for patients in New Brunswick.

[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

[Translation]

Ms. Dubé: It would not be complicated if we could change the government tomorrow: We would be in power and sitting on the other side. At the time, we made the decision not to go forward. Yes, we examined the situation, but the answer was no. We said to ourselves: We will sit down with union representatives to make sure efficiency is improved within the systems.

Vitalité Health Network, among others, did its homework and its job. It found efficiencies, improved management, and saved money, and this is why, we, as the opposition, are rising in the House to support Vitalité Health Network, Horizon Health Network, and the public so the integrity of our public health care system is maintained. Today, can the Premier do as much? Mr. Premier, do you want to protect public health services? This is the question you are being asked.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: I know that the member opposite is Francophone, but I might repeat this answer in English just to make sure that she understands. We are continuing a process that began in 2013.

(Interjections.)



Mr. Speaker: Order. The member for Edmundston-Madawaska Centre will come to order.

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: If you look back at who was in government in 2013, you will see that it was the members opposite who were on this side of the House and who were in government. It was the member for Rothesay who was the Minister of Health. They started the process.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: The member for Edmundston-Madawaska Centre will come to order.

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: They released the request for proposals. They actually chose the winning bidder. There were three companies that submitted bids. They chose the winning bidder. They started the discussions with the RHAs. Then, come June 2014, they decided that they were going to slow things down to get past the election. They never canceled the RFP. They never sent out letters to cancel the process. They simply swept it under the carpet to get past the election.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister. The time for question period has expired.

