

March 24, 2017

[Original]

Property Tax

Mr. Higgs: The Gallant government is doing everything that it can to turn attention away from the property tax assessment mess. Campground owners have been calling us to say that these tax hikes, some double or triple or higher, will make their businesses no longer viable. Apartment owners are calling to say that they will have to raise rents higher than many tenants can afford. Homeowners are contacting us to say that their assessments have gone up way over 10% when they have made no upgrades in years. Again today, I will ask the Premier to extend the deadline for appeals and publicize the fact that a big mistake has occurred with property assessments. Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: We were very clear, and I will be very brief: At any time during the year, people who believe a mathematical mistake has been made in their property assessment can request a review. That is it.

However, for a while now, I have been hearing opposition members talk to us about a “mess” and about credibility. The member for Saint John Lancaster in Wonderland seems to be forgetting that the “mess” happened during the mandate of her government, when 35 000 mistakes were made, which is an average of about 9 000 mistakes per year. The number of mistakes we now have is less than a third of that.

That being said, I understand that opposition members have trouble with figures and credibility in that regard, since their leader had three consecutive years of downturn during his mandate as Minister of Finance. As for us, next year, we will have had three years of growth.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: The dream of owning a home is a common one for many everyday New Brunswickers. For a lot of these people, apartment living, while saving up for a down payment or other initial costs, is pretty much a fact of life. The Premier just pushed this dream further into the future for many and out of reach for some. This huge tax increase that the Gallant government has slapped on apartments will lead to higher rent payments. Higher rent payments will leave less money to save and, in a lot of cases, nothing left to save at all. Has the Premier given any thought to the impact these latest tax hikes will have on everyday New Brunswickers?



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: The Leader of the Opposition, too, seems to be in Wonderland, as I cannot help noticing that... As I said, it is true that there have been increases this year. However, I want to note once again that, in 2013, during the reign of the Leader of the Opposition as Minister of Finance, the assessment of 36 090 properties increased by more than 10%. In 2014, it was 31 623 properties. We are currently at 23 616 properties.

Yes, there have been increases. Yes, campgrounds were reassessed this year, something that had not been done since 2003. So, people were informed that, this year, reassessments would be done. I repeat: I am still waiting for the explanation from the Leader of the Opposition about the 35 000 mistakes made at the time. He was saying, though, that the system was fair and equitable.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: On the government Web site, the Premier has some wonderful things to say about tourism.

Our tourism sector plays a critical role in job creation for New Brunswickers. The tourism industry currently employs 42,100 people in our province.

Tourism does indeed employ a lot of New Brunswickers, but it will not employ as many when our campgrounds start closing down because they are losing money. Is the Premier aware of the consequences of his huge property tax hikes on the campgrounds? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am very happy to get up and talk about the importance of tourism. The Leader of the Opposition is absolutely correct. Tourism is crucial to our economy. It is crucial to the urban parts of our province and the rural parts of our province. That is why we have identified tourism as a growth opportunity, and that is why we are investing more than any other government in tourism infrastructure. That is also why we have increased the Tourism, Heritage and Culture budget so we can invest in things that will boost tourism in New Brunswick by 17%.

When the Leader of the Opposition criticizes the investments we are making, he should remind himself that tourism went up by 17%, and that is going to be a great return on our investment come the summer season.

Childhood Services

Mr. Jody Carr: Hundreds of New Brunswick early childhood education centres rely on a provincial wage top-up program called the Quality Improvement Funding Support Program, which allows many—the majority—of the small early childhood education centres to operate. The program is renewed annually. Every fiscal year, new guidelines are sent out with new



applications that early childhood education centres must send in for a renewed one-year contract. Can the Minister of Education and Early Child Development say whether there have been any changes to this wage top-up program at the early childhood education centres for the coming fiscal year?

Hon. Mr. Kenny: We are working every day with our early childhood day-care centres throughout the province. We have been working hand in hand with stakeholders throughout the province, and, as we go forward, we will continue to improve on the systems that we have in the province to be able to have more access for more parents and children throughout the province. We will continue to make sure that we have the best system available right now. I think we have made some major improvements where we have the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development working together for the betterment of the overall system here in the province. As I have been going through the province and meeting with our early childhood day-care operators, we are taking input from them. We are consulting with them, and we are going to continue to work from day to day with the providers throughout in the province.

Mr. Jody Carr: The minister could easily say that he would get back to us to give us an update, but, unfortunately, no, there are no details.

The wage top-up guidelines for the coming fiscal year, starting April 1, have not been sent to the early childhood education centres. We have heard a lot of boasting from this government about women's rights and job creation, and we know that the vast majority—overwhelmingly—of workers in the early childhood sector are women.

Today is March 24, and it is one week before the end of the fiscal year. It is one week before hundreds of education centres are deprived of funding for their employees through this wage top-up program. That would throw women out of work, throw the lives of thousands of early childhood educators into disarray, and make life next to impossible for thousands of families that rely on this program in early childhood centres. Can the minister responsible for early childhood education explain why there has been no communication from his department with early childhood educators at this late date with regard to the renewal of the wage top-up program?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am very pleased to rise in the House today to talk a little bit about women's equality. If the member opposite wants to raise the topic, I certainly want to address a number of points.

Our government understands that women's equality is the right thing to do. However, it is also very important for our economy, for education, and for health. This is why I myself am the Minister responsible for Women's Equality. This is why the government is making investments to advance pay equity in the province. This is why we are working very hard to try to make sure



that more women hold industry positions not traditionally occupied by women. This is why women's equality is one of the pillars of the New Brunswick Family Plan. Lastly, this is why we will continue to do everything we can to make more day-care spaces available and make them more affordable.

[Original]

Mr. Jody Carr: It is very clear that this government avoids accountability at all costs. Ministers do not know their files. No one knows who is running this government. The minister responsible for early childhood education has not communicated with early childhood educators about the delay in this year's funding for early childhood education centres. Last year, the funding was cut by \$2.3 million for wages for private operators. Earlier this year, \$500 000 for professional development was put on hold for early childhood education centres. EECNB closed its doors.

Across New Brunswick, centre operators and centre educators are worried. They are looking for loans from banks, friends, and families, and they are concerned about paying their rent. Will the minister assure thousands of early childhood educators and thousands of parents across New Brunswick that he is on top of his files? Will he extend funding to all the educators at this late date to make sure that this program is continued and managed effectively and that we have a solid, quality early childhood education sector in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: What is interesting is that those insults coming from the member opposite about the way that we are answering questions were all written down on his page. I do not think that he was really going to care about how questions were going to be answered. He was going to throw those insults no matter what, and it is unfortunate.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Investing in education and investing in early childhood development is crucial to the future of our province. It is crucial for our economy, it is crucial for our health care system in the long term, and it is crucial for our social fabric. We, as a government, recognize that, and that is why we are so pleased to be the government in the history of our province to invest the most in education. That is why we were so pleased to increase the Education and Early Childhood Development budget in our last budget.

This is what the Leader of the Opposition thinks. On December 10, 2015, he said: "I do not deny that we have too many schools and that we have schools in rural areas that are the only things left in those areas." That is what he thinks of our education system.

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.



Education

Mr. Stewart: I cannot see how hurling insults and never taking responsibility for anything equals leadership in this House.

The change to early immersion has created a ripple effect in our Anglophone education sector and in the Department of Education. Questions continue about enrollment levels, staffing, curriculum, and resources. Some schools have been told that they have met the enrollment, but, later, the department was telling them that they needed to prove sustainability. Interestingly enough, there does not seem to be any plan whatsoever for this project. Will the minister advise the House on how many children are enrolled, how many teachers have lost their jobs, and how many nonteaching staff have been hired at the department level?

Hon. Mr. Kenny: I see the theme this morning, with the fearmongering going on with the opposition members. They are at it again. It is frustrating because, right now, we are working directly with our teachers and our districts. We are in constant dialogue day after day after day to make sure that we have the proper resources put in the proper places to make sure that we have the best programs available for our New Brunswick students.

Just the other day, I was on top of the hill with innovators and teachers in the districts for the innovation awards that were going on for the types of technology things that are happening throughout this province. We are working day after day with the teachers. From what I see from the opposition members every day, they think that we are not on top of the file. I am with them every day throughout the province. We are going to make sure that we have the proper resources in place and the best systems throughout the province to make sure that we have a really fine system to satisfy what teachers are asking for and what...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Stewart: There is no thinking or believing that they are not on top of the file. The whole province knows that they are not on top of the file.

The month of March is traditionally when preparations for the next school year are completed. Teachers, supports, curriculum, resource allocation, and many other items on a lengthy checklist should all be in place in both education sectors. With one week left in the month of March, can the Minister of Education give the House a report on the preparations for the school year that starts this September? What is in place? What is not in place? Where are you at, and can you inform the House? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Kenny: He is on a witch hunt right now trying to find specific numbers. We have a very robust system throughout the province. For me to say exactly the numbers that they are at right now is another attempt for this government to say that we are doing the wrong thing. It is really frustrating when I, as the Minister of Education, am meeting with the teachers, when I am meeting with parents, and when I am receiving information that they want to be able to



enroll their children in these programs. That is what we are doing. We are going day after day to make sure that we have the proper resources in place for the upcoming school year.

We are making record investments in education, unlike the former government members across. They cut and slashed to try and find their deficit targets, and they could not do that. It is so frustrating on this side of the House to hear the rhetoric every day from the opposition. They are trying to say that it is doom and gloom in here when I have teachers coming out and saying: We are proud of what we are doing. We are proud of our system, and we are going to make it better.

Mr. Stewart: The only witch hunt is by the province of New Brunswick on the people of New Brunswick because there is no representation for the people of New Brunswick on that side of the floor.

The minister has yet to bring his department before the estimates committee to review its budget. I am waiting, and the public is waiting. I would love to ask some questions. I am concerned, and parents are concerned. Teachers are concerned, and district education councils are concerned. We have so many questions for the minister and his department, but, for some reason, Education has failed to appear before the committee and, at this moment, is not even scheduled. The future success of our children and the future success of our province depend heavily upon success by this government. Asking questions about where this money is going in the department is valuable, and the citizens deserve to know the answers. When will the department appear at estimates?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: When it comes to estimates, of course, every department is going to go in front of the Legislature, and the member opposite and the opposition will have ample time, if they budget appropriately, to ask questions of Education.

With that said, I cannot help but listen to the member opposite talking about insults. Then, he goes on a ramble of rhetoric, just throwing arrows our way.

At the end of the day, New Brunswickers want us to focus on growing our economy. They want us to invest strategically and more in education. They want us to improve and invest in health care. That is what our government is doing. We have grown our economy. We have ensured that we have invested more in health care and in education than any other government, all the while cutting the deficit in half.

The Leader of the Opposition wants us just to focus on cutting the deficit. Here is a window on how he would like us to do it, and I quote: "I do not deny that we have too many schools and that we have schools in rural areas that are the only things left in those areas." That is not our approach.

Mr. Speaker: Time. Members, do not call time.



Aboriginal Affairs

Mr. Coon: In 2015, almost two years ago, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission presented 95 calls to action for the federal and provincial governments. On Monday night, the former chairman, Senator Murray Sinclair, presented his first progress report, and he acknowledged that there had been very little progress federally. The same could be said for New Brunswick.

In October, Judith Keating, who was leading the interdepartmental working group tasked with implementing the TRC calls to action here in New Brunswick, left the Executive Council Office. Since then, progress seems to have stalled. Will the Premier provide this House with an update of who has taken the lead and when we can expect to see an action plan to implement the TRC calls to action in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Doherty: Thank you for the question. New Brunswick, along with other provinces and territories and the federal government, has endorsed the work of the commission on missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. This collaborative approach across governments will help ensure that the work of the commission is truly national in scope.

I have had the opportunity to attend two meetings of the National Roundtable on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and I would like to inform you that progress is being made. It is a very sensitive and complex issue, and we look forward to moving forward with this file.

Mr. Coon: That tells me absolutely nothing. My question is very simple: Who now has the lead of the interdepartmental committee to implement the TRC calls to action in New Brunswick, and when can we expect to see a plan of action?

Hon. Mr. Doherty: As you know, there were 94 recommendations in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report. We worked very closely with each individual department, identifying which recommendations would be their responsibility to implement. We have also worked very closely with the 15 First Nations to make sure that we have input from our First Nations communities in terms of the recommendations from government.

Mr. Coon: The question remains: Who is heading up the interdepartmental committee to implement the TRC recommendations in New Brunswick, and when can we see a plan of action released to the public?

Hon. Mr. Doherty: I am very happy that the Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat is working very closely, along with other departments in government, to see that these recommendations are, in fact, implemented. Our government takes this very, very seriously.

(Interjections.)

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



Hon. Mr. Doherty: We are looking at improving the welfare of First Nations, in cooperation with the federal government, when it comes to housing, when it comes to social issues, and when it comes to child protection. Yes, we are a government that I am very, very proud of because we, in fact, have decreased our deficit by half. At the same time, we have invested in Aboriginal affairs issues. We have invested in education. More importantly, we are investing in health care as it relates to First Nations.

[Translation]

Property Tax

Ms. Dubé: More and more, people do business and make payments online, which the government promotes; reforms were even carried out in this regard.

This morning, I would like to know this: Why are people who deal with credit unions, now known as UNI Financial Cooperation, unable to pay their property taxes online?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am not up to date on this file, so if the member opposite would like to meet with the Minister of Finance, another minister, or me to discuss it, we will be pleased to work with her to see whether this situation can be resolved, so that people can get online access to government or private sector services.

In years to come, online services will be helpful for us, as a government and as a society. In fact, this is a pretty interesting day to be talking about this topic, since we have people from the New Brunswick Innovation Foundation with us. These are people who make strategic investments to promote innovation, which will not only stimulate our economy and create jobs, but will also help us to provide better public services in education and health. So I thank the member opposite for her question.

Ms. Dubé: I thank the Premier for his answer. If I look online, I certainly see the banks that already have agreements with the government in this regard. The Royal Bank of Canada, the Bank of Nova Scotia, TD Canada Trust, and the Bank of Montreal are there, but one institution is certainly missing: One that is missing is UNI Financial Cooperation, which is still referred to as credit unions.

So, my next question would be for the Premier or the Minister of Finance, since it is the time of year when people must pay their property taxes. When can people who deal mainly with UNI Financial Cooperation expect this service to be available online?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Thank you, I understand the question a bit better. We will be very pleased to work with any banking institution, especially one that is so important for New Brunswickers. We certainly want to assist people and financial institutions with regard to services provided. So, we will be pleased to work with this banking institution to ensure as much accessibility as possible for its customers.



Once again, I reiterate: It is important to work with the private sector and, as a government, in areas that will help us establish online accounts and more online services. This will without a doubt help improve access to services for people in the province. Also, we are in a very good position as a province to provide this type of service to New Brunswickers, since our province is number one in terms of Internet access.

In fact, according to a third-party study and analysis, New Brunswick ranked first in terms of Internet access. So we are in a very good position to assist New Brunswickers in this regard.

Ms. Dubé: Thank you for your answer, and rest assured that we will follow this file very closely. If this can all be done quickly, people will be able to take advantage of the service this year.

I would have another question for the Premier about a topic on which we receive many requests.

More and more, people pay various fees with their credit cards to accumulate travel points. So I am asking whether this is something the government is considering, because people enjoy taking advantage of the travel points they accumulate with their credit cards.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am not sure I completely understand the question, but some caution is required in this case, since it is not for the government to tell private sector businesses how to best serve their customers.

However, we are always ready to do everything we can to help businesses and people from the private sector in New Brunswick better serve their customers. Of course, by doing so, we hope to grow the economy and create jobs. So we will do everything we can to try to assist these institutions. We appreciate the member opposite asking these questions in the House today.

We will continue to do everything we can as a government to try to create an investment-friendly climate. We are very proud of the results. New Brunswickers work hard, and businesses are innovative. This is why our GDP grew by 2.3% in 2015, which is the highest rate of growth in New Brunswick since 2004.

[Original]

Economy

Mr. Higgs: One thing is certainly not in doubt, and that is the Premier's ability to spend money. No one is questioning that. We are spending at four times the rate of inflation. No one questions how the Premier gets that money. He taxes us. He taxes us extremely well. He is very capable of that, and he is very capable of spending money. He is very capable of espousing the fact that he is increasing spending in every category.



However, do you know what is missing? What is missing is that, in all those spending announcements, there is not one sign... Are we going to get better education as a result? Are we going to get better health as a result? Are we going to have less poverty as a result? Are we going to see improvement in our basic lives as a result? There is not one single measurement of improvement through all these spending habits. I would like to ask the Premier this today: Can he indicate, in any area where money is being spent—I guess that I would pick education and I would pick health—where it is going to have a defined benefit to the people of this province? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We believe that investing in the priorities of New Brunswickers is what we were sent to Fredericton to do, and the priorities of the people of our province are stimulating the economy and creating jobs. They want us to invest strategically in education, and they want us to improve health care. That is exactly what we are doing.

We recognize that, to do all these things, we need to work with New Brunswickers. We developed an Economic Growth Plan with stakeholders, businesses, entrepreneurs, and experts. We developed our education plans by listening to teachers, educators, and those experts around the province who have ideas about how we can better our system. When it comes to health care, we are proactive, and, with the Family Plan, we are going to be making investments to reduce poverty. We are going to be making investments to help those with mental health and those living with a disability and to promote women's equality. By listening to the people of New Brunswick, we are getting things done.

Mr. Higgs: There you have it—great intentions. The roads are paved with great intentions. I use the word “paved” as a literal term here because that is a big factor in job creation for this government.

In terms of what we identified a few days ago, there have been only about 100 net new jobs during this mandate, but the Premier said: I am going to fulfill my mandate, 9 900 more jobs by the end of the mandate. I would like to ask this: How is that going to happen all of a sudden?

We realize that the Premier cannot complete the 2015 record. He claims to have done something in 2015. We explained the other day what that really meant, and it had nothing to do with this government. He could not continue it in 2016 and 2017, so, obviously, there is nothing that the government did to do that. However, how many jobs, in his renewed commitment to meet that goal of 10 000, are going to be purely based on being taxpayer-funded positions, which means that, without taxpayer input, they would not be there?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: It was such a rousing question that you could see the reaction of his caucus.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.



Hon. Mr. Gallant: In 2015, the economy grew by 2.3%. That is undisputed. The Leader of the Opposition can do everything he would like to, but 2.3% was the growth of our GDP in 2015. It was the best growth rate we have seen in New Brunswick since 2004, and it was the third-best growth rate in 2015. If you want to use the average growth rate, from 2011 to 2014 in New Brunswick, the average growth rate was -0.4%. It was because the Leader of the Opposition was the Minister of Finance, cutting into education and health care. From 2015 to 2017, we are estimated to have an average growth rate of 1% per year because we are investing in education and we are investing in health care. We are fostering innovation and investing in infrastructure to create jobs.

Mr. Higgs: This is a telling moment. The Premier has finally realized that you can average GDP but you cannot accumulate it. I think this is fundamental. Thank you very much for that.

With that very sign of the possibility of moving forward, I think that we should look at what we are in Canada right now. New Brunswick is probably about the fourth or fifth worst in terms of national debt or debt per capita. I think that we are currently running at around \$18 000. When this government is done, we are going to be at about \$19 000, or in that range, per person. We are gaining on the other provinces that are currently worse than ours. There may be three or four.

The concern is that, by spending at four times the inflation rate, we are going to go deeper in the hole. If we are going to raise the carbon tax, if we are going to raise the tax on marijuana, and we are going to get more revenue, does that mean more spending and more debt?

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: The Minister of PETL will come to order.

Mr. Higgs: I want to know how these jobs are going to be created. That was the question.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The Department of Finance has told us very simply that the cumulative GDP growth from 2015 to 2017 is estimated at 3.3%.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: If the Leader of the Opposition is smarter, in his opinion, than the whole Department of Finance, I think we recognize why we saw the province, in 2011 and 2014, have its economy retract. On top of that, the Leader of the Opposition is clearly focused on the deficit. We have cut the deficit in half, all the while growing the economy, all the while investing more in education and in health care.



The Leader of the Opposition wants to focus on the deficit. I will tell you how he wants to get it under control. He said it on December 10, 2015: “I do not deny that we have too many schools and that we have schools in rural areas that are the only things left in those areas. I understand the passion. I do not deny that we have too many hospitals. I realize that we can be much better if we consolidate.” That is what he plans to do—cut into education and into health care.

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

