

March 24, 2017

[Original]

Property Tax

Mr. Higgs: I have an assessment here from a family in Gagetown. They provided the information to us. They appealed their assessment, which was at \$141 600. Then they got the letter back, and it said that, after a review in which an inspection was done by the assessment group, the assessment was going to drop to \$117 420. Then they got a final letter that said that the executive director had overruled that decision. Basically, the assessment is going back up to \$133 000. The executive director did not visit. This person never looked at it and just made a judgment to say: No, we are not going to drop it that far.

I would like to ask the Premier whether he would ask the minister to reassess the executive director's reassessment of the original assessment that actually had a site visit. Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: It seems the Leader of the Opposition has as much trouble understanding the current appeal process as he has understanding finance and economic downturns, among other things.

I have explained several times in the House that everything starts with a procedure that we call the review, in which a person can ask Service New Brunswick to verify whether a mathematical error has been made in their property assessment. This can be done at any time during the year. If the person is not satisfied with the decision that was made, then an independent appeals tribunal will analyze everything that is submitted to it in order to decide whether an error was in fact made, and it can change the outcome.

That being said, I am still waiting for answers to my questions as to why, back then, after 8 801 errors were made in 2011, 9 472 in 2012, 7 791 in 2013, and 8 941 in 2014, the system was fair and equitable.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: This past weekend, the paper talked about how

Campground owners across the province were shocked and outraged by this year's property tax assessments—some say their assessment jumped by more than 100 per cent.

"I'll expect to lose a third of people", they say, because the campground rates are going to have to go up because of it.



However, the Department of Tourism goes on to say:

Camping is a popular activity in New Brunswick and the tourism department has a new upcoming campaign to encourage both New Brunswickers and visitors to explore our beautiful province

The Premier has gone on at different times.

Gallant told the house that tourism is “crucial” to New Brunswick’s economy.

“That is also why we have increased

tourism by another 17%, throwing more money at it on one hand and taking more money out of it on the other hand.

I would like to ask the Premier: Is there any chance that this will balance out or is this just another way to grab more money out of the taxpayer’s pocket? What does it do for our tourism industry? Very little.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: As a government, we are focused on the priorities of the people of our province. They have spoken many times over on the importance of our focusing on economic growth and job creation. That is their number one priority. They also want us to invest strategically in education and health care, improving educational opportunities and our health care system. We are very pleased to tell you that, as a government, we understand how important tourism is to our economy. That is why we invested more than any other government in tourism infrastructure during our last capital budget, and that is why we increased the budget for Tourism, Heritage and Culture by 17%.

The Leader of the Opposition cannot have it all ways. Is he against those investments? The question that he just asked us gives us the impression that he is. He is trying to give the impression that we are wasting money by making those investments. We believe that it is going to help economic growth and it is going to create jobs. Does the Leader of the Opposition believe the same thing?

Mr. Higgs: Once again, we see that the only solution that the Premier has is to spend more money, more tax dollars, find more creative ways to tax you more, and say: Trust us; we will do better. There is no indication that anything better will get done. Intentions are a wonderful thing, but, without results, they have little impact.

The five campgrounds in Shediac were hit with assessment increases of 76% this year. Their property tax bills went up by many thousands of dollars—\$4 700 in one case, \$2 100 in another, and \$11 000 in another. Of course, there are appeals under way. These are seasonal businesses that and can only stand so much pressure on their bottom lines. By comparison, the campground proposed by the Health Minister saw its assessment go down by over \$30 000 and the property tax cut almost in half, from \$10 230 to \$5 430. When did the Premier first learn



that the Health Minister got a break on his tax bill when everyone else's tax bills skyrocketed?
Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I do not think we can let the Leader of the Opposition make remarks such as the ones he made during his preamble without addressing them. Once again, what the Leader of the Opposition is saying would suggest that our investments in tourism were a waste. I will give him a third chance to say that he thinks the investments we are making in tourism are a good idea.

I want to give him the opportunity to tell New Brunswickers and all of us that investing in our tourism infrastructure and increasing the budget for tourism by 17% will help us create jobs and grow the economy. We know this because New Brunswickers told us. They want us to invest in those sectors. Once again, I am giving the Leader of the Opposition the opportunity to confirm for us that he agrees with our investments, instead of implying that he thinks they are a waste.

[*Original*]

Mr. Higgs: It appears that something was lost there, so I will ask the question again. The five campgrounds in Shediac were hit with assessment increases of 76% this year. Their property tax bills went up by many thousands of dollars—\$4 700 in one case, \$2 100 in another, and \$11 000 in another. Of course, appeals are under way. These are seasonal businesses that can only stand so much pressure on their bottom lines.

By comparison, the campground proposed by the Health Minister saw its assessment go down by over \$30 000 and the property tax bill cut almost in half, from \$10 230 to \$5 430. When did the Premier first learn that the Health Minister got a break on his tax bill when everyone else's tax bill was skyrocketing? Has the Premier recused himself from any discussion on this matter?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: There are many things that the Leader of the Opposition just said that are inaccurate. I will let the Minister of Local Government respond to those. However, with regard to Bob Jones's latest story, I found out his angle with everybody else this week by being briefed on Bob Jones's story. That was when I found out his angle. In terms of some of the things the Leader of the Opposition has just said that are inaccurate, the Minister of Local Government will address them.

I do want to take a moment, again, for the Leader of the Opposition to correct himself, since he is still criticizing our investments. The investments that we are making in tourism are going to help create jobs and grow the economy. There is no question about it. We know that tourism is crucial to our economy. On top of that, we just recently announced that we are yet again cutting taxes for small businesses. Since we became the government, we have cut small business taxes by 33%. That is helping the bottom line.



Mr. Higgs: On March 1, property tax bills were distributed—tax bills including big hikes for many campgrounds and a big drop for the Health Minister’s campground project. Over the March break, the Health Minister recused himself from Parlee Beach matters. Now, it appears that the Premier has also recused himself from speaking on matters relating to the assessments. This leaves the Environment Minister to speak on both Parlee Beach and assessments. It is unfortunate that the Premier has allowed this shuffling exercise to occur—or perhaps the Premier directed this method of issue avoidance. Can the Premier advise the House whether this was done with his permission or at his direction, or will he talk about something totally unrelated?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: Last week, I had the opportunity to explain that, in this province, a reassessment was done for all campgrounds for the 2017 taxation year and that the last time a reassessment was done was in 2003.

That being said, even though I do not intend to talk about specific assessments, I still want to say to the House that I can tell the difference between a campground and a vacant lot. I can tell the difference between a \$500-million or \$600-million deficit and a deficit cut in half by a government. I can tell the difference between a government that has three consecutive years of economic downturn and a government that has three consecutive years of economic growth.

So, if you want my opinion, the Leader of the Opposition should stop attacking members’ integrity. He should also stop attacking the credibility of the three Conflict of Interest Commissioners who settled the issue.

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Higgs: Once again, we think that the words are going to change if the volume gets louder. Everyone will clap, and, meanwhile, life will go on in New Brunswick.

New Brunswick citizens have until Friday to appeal their property tax assessments. They take it seriously because they are concerned. We do not take it seriously because we are not going to deal with it. We are just going to clap, wave, jump up and down, and think that all is well.

The Environment Minister, speaking on behalf of the Minister of Service New Brunswick—and apparently also on behalf of the Premier—has so far refused to extend the deadline for appeals. Last week, the Environment Minister told us that a record for the number of appeals was set in one week. Given all that and given all the issues surrounding property tax assessments, will the Premier step in, stand up, and speak up for New Brunswickers? Will the



Premier overrule the Environment Minister and extend the property tax assessment appeal deadline? Will we do the right thing here and allow New Brunswickers a chance to voice their concerns, to be heard, and to get the issue resolved?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: We have every reason to be standing up, since we are open-minded and transparent. The opposition members now want us to solve all the problems the previous government left for us.

I remind you that, on average, during the mandate of the previous government, some 9 000 mathematical errors were made each year, for a total of some 35 000 errors, and that, each year, nothing special was ever done. Today, the opposition members would like us to solve all the problems.

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

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

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: I can tell you that we are taking these errors very seriously and that we are far from saying the system is fair and equitable, as the Leader of the Opposition said after four years as Minister of Finance. We are saying this: We are handling the situation, and anyone who believes their property tax assessment contains a mathematical error can contact our Service New Brunswick regional offices, and we will be pleased to check and see whether an error was made. If so, a correction can be made at any time.

[*Original*]

Health Care

Mr. Higgs: It is incredible to witness just how far out of touch the Premier seems to be with the issues that are of the most importance to the people of New Brunswick. We just want to talk about spending more of your tax dollars, and we want to find creative ways to tax you more and to spend, but with no results in mind because that does not matter. If we are spending more, that is good enough.

Last week, the Premier took to the newspapers to proclaim that there is no crisis in health care in our province. Given the wait times in emergency departments, the hospitals that are overcrowded at record levels, the lack of surgeons, the 50 000 people without a family doctor,



and the joint replacement wait times measured in years, how can the Premier qualify his opinion that there is no crisis in health care? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Despite the condescending tone at the beginning, I appreciate the question. Do we have serious challenges in our health care system? Absolutely. We have had challenges in New Brunswick when it comes to health care for decades. If we sit around and do nothing, will those challenges be aggravated moving forward? Absolutely. Therefore, we are acting, and we have been acting since we became the government of the people of New Brunswick.

We are investing strategically in things that will help curb wait times, that will help New Brunswickers live healthier lives, and that will help our hospitals have the infrastructure that they need to provide good health care. We are investing in the social determinants of health, such as things that will reduce poverty and advance women's equality and things that will help those living with a disability, those seniors who want to live in their homes longer, and those with mental health challenges. There are serious challenges, and we are acting seriously to fix the issues.

Mr. Higgs: No one on this side is questioning the Premier's ability to spend money. It is well established. No one is denying that. The question of spending money and getting results for it so that you can actually determine that it is improving the lives of New Brunswickers—now, that is a serious debate.

The Premier's apparent lack of compassion toward the health crisis should be a concern to all members of this Legislative Assembly, regardless of the political party. I would ask this of the Premier: If he has taken time to learn from his Health Minister, just how many New Brunswick citizens have been waiting for surgery that is classed as urgent? I would further ask whether he has taken the time to learn how many of these urgent surgeries have been waiting over three months and over six months.

There are examples after examples, and we have all experienced them in our ridings. They are people who have been told that their situations are urgent, yet they wait and wait and wait. Mr. Premier, I would very much appreciate your answer to those questions.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The fact of the matter is that, as a government, we have invested more than any other government in health care.

Now, it is okay that we do not agree. It is very clear that the Leader of the Opposition would have us cut into health care. It is very clear that the Leader of the Opposition would have us cut into education. It is very clear that the Leader of the Opposition would have us cut our investments in infrastructure, which are helping to create jobs. That is okay. We disagree, and that is fine. That is what this Legislature is for. It is to debate on how we should move forward.

We have been very clear. We believe that investing more and investing strategically in health care will help us overcome the challenges that our system faces. We believe that investing



hundreds of millions of dollars over the next few years in health care infrastructure is going to help. We believe that not closing any hospitals in our province is going to help, and we believe that investing in things that will help reduce poverty and help our seniors stay in their homes is going to help.

Parlee Beach Provincial Park

Mr. B. Macdonald: What we on this side of the House certainly understand is that the Minister of Health understands investing in his own campground. The Premier has told us that, for the last three years, there has been full disclosure with respect to the Minister of Health and his campground. The Premier also told us that he understands there is a direct link between the water quality at Parlee Beach and the development of a campground owned by the Minister of Health. If there was full disclosure, why did the Premier choose to make this member, the Minister of Health, responsible for public health at Parlee Beach?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I ask the member opposite to correct his statement. There is no campground owned by the Minister of Health at the moment. The Minister of Health, throughout this process, has gone to the Conflict of Interest Commissioner. At some point, the opposition members are just going to have to get up and flat-out say that they disagree with the advice of three commissioners with regard to conflict of interest. The Conflict of Interest Commissioners, at every step, have given advice to the Minister of Health, and the minister has followed that advice.

Most recently, because there is the potential for a recommendation that would be made by the steering committee to cease development in the Parlee Beach area for a period of time, the Conflict of Interest Commissioner has changed his advice and said to the Minister of Health that, because there could be a perception of conflict, the Minister of Health should be recused from the file. As a government, that is what we have done.

Mr. B. Macdonald: The funny thing is that the Minister of Health said that he would recuse himself from matters concerning that campground three years ago, when the Premier appointed him as the Minister of Health. He has already said that he would recuse himself from matters concerning that campground. Yet, he did not already do that. It took him three years to get to that point.

The one thing that the Premier controls directly... We question him on a lot of things in here. However, the one thing that the Premier controls directly is whom he puts in his Cabinet. Why did this Premier make a choice, of his 25 other MLAs, to put this minister in charge of Health and in charge of public health at Parlee Beach?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am going to repeat what I said, because it is important. Opposition members do not appear to want to listen to me or believe me. The Conflict of Interest



Commissioners gave advice to the Minister of Health about this file. According to the advice from the three different people who held this position over the years, this file was not associated with any conflict of interest. In fact, to this day, this is still what the Minister of Health is being told.

However, since the committee could make a recommendation to cease development in the Parlee Beach area for a period of time, the Conflict of Interest Commissioner advised the Minister of Health to recuse himself from the file, because there could be a perceived conflict. That is just what we did as a government.

[Original]

Mr. B. Macdonald: This is the minister the Auditor General found acted beyond regulations, disrespected the advice of his department, and gave over \$70 million of taxpayers' money to Atcon. Yet, the Premier thought it was okay to put him in Cabinet. This is the same minister the Premier made Minister of Health. He then failed to protect public health at Parlee Beach so that he could get his campground developed. The Premier thinks it is still okay to keep him in Cabinet. Now, this is the minister who is paying almost half the tax when other campgrounds are paying double the tax.

My question is simple: What is it going to take? What does the Minister of Health need to do to get replaced?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Once again, the opposition members are making remarks that call into question the advice provided by the Conflict of Interest Commissioners in the past. If that is what these members want to do, will they at least admit they understand that the Conflict of Interest Commissioners gave advice on this file to the Minister of Health throughout the process? Will they admit they understand that the Conflict of Interest Commissioners have always said, on every occasion, and continue to say, that the Minister of Health does not currently have a conflict of interest with regard to Parlee Beach?

However, we are very transparent, and we have said that the commissioner advised the minister to recuse himself from the file, because of the potential perception of a conflict. As a government, that is just what we did.

[Original]

Social Assistance

Mr. Coon: I have a constituent in crisis. She has no source of income, so she and her children face homelessness. When people are in dire straits, our social safety net is meant to be there to



support them. That is not the case for her. She is being denied social assistance because she refuses to name the father of her children. I find this ludicrous and, frankly, sexist.

Can the Minister of Families and Children explain to this House why his department insists on knowing the name of the father before providing a single mom and her children with the income they need through social assistance so that they can secure housing and food?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: I appreciate the question from the member opposite. The people at Social Development continue to work hard for all the people of New Brunswick, and they will continue to do so. I cannot get into specifics, but there are rules and regulations for everything. I would welcome the member opposite to come to our office if he has any questions or concerns about that. Get a consent form signed by that person, and we will certainly discuss that. I will continue to be proud of the people at Social Development for the work that they do to help people in crisis.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: The member for New Maryland-Sunbury will come to order.

Hon. Mr. Horsman: We do this either through jobs, finding homes, etc. Again, the people at Social Development will continue to work and to help the people of this province. They will continue to do so.

Mr. Coon: I show up here in the Legislative Assembly to ask questions in question period, and I am looking for answers. There are countless reasons that a woman may choose not to disclose the identity of her children's father. To hold her assistance ransom for such a private piece of information is an abuse of the social assistance system that is being perpetrated on single mothers. Almost half of the single-parent-led families in our province live in poverty. In Saint John, one in four families is led by single mothers. This is an issue not just for my constituent, but this is an issue that stands to impact many women and families across this province.

Can the minister explain to this House why he needs to know the name of the father of the children in families led by single moms seeking social assistance?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: Again, we do not want to talk about specifics, but we want to talk about the general population. We continue to help the people of this province, and we will continue to do so. Again, I would request of the member opposite, if he has any questions or concerns, that he get a consent signed by the person mentioned and come to our office. We welcome the members opposite at any time, if they have any questions or concerns, to come and see us. We would certainly be glad to help them out as best we can, with the rules and regulations at this time.

I have always stated that our policies need to be changed. We welcome at any time a change in our policies to make them better for the people of this province, maybe to modernize them. Again, we will continue to help the people of this province. We will continue to help the people



who are on social assistance. That is why our government has raised the minimum wage. We want to raise the money that people are earning in those jobs, and we will continue to do so. Again, I want to thank the people at Social Development for the work that they do.

Mr. Coon: Continually, ministers on the other side, in response to questions, invite us to come to their offices rather than answering questions in the light of day here so that all New Brunswickers can hear what is behind the policies that are being implemented and that are having significant impacts on New Brunswickers.

I thought that this blatantly discriminatory policy had been abandoned a long time ago when Elizabeth Weir successfully campaigned against the McKenna government's efforts to force single mothers to reveal the identity of the men who had fathered their children in order to qualify for social assistance. Everyone will remember, I am sure, the "Frank's the Father" campaign as women around the province started sporting buttons that said: "Frank's the Father" in response to that question.

I thought that this government was using a gender-based analysis in its approach to policy. Will the minister strike this policy from the books of his department immediately?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: Again, because of privacy issues, we cannot confirm or deny what the member opposite is saying. As a former police officer, I know that there are always three sides to a story. I am not saying that the side that the member opposite is giving is not true. What I am saying is that there are always different sides to a story. There are rules and regulations that we have to follow, and we will continue to follow them. The people who work at Social Development will continue to work hard for all New Brunswickers, and we will do so.

Again, I would invite the member opposite to come to our office. We welcome him at all times to see what we can do. Maybe we have to modernize our policies. Let's look at it. Again, I want to thank the people at Social Development for the work that they do for all New Brunswickers. Thank you.

Water Quality

Mr. Fitch: The Minister of Tourism is in a very giving mood this afternoon, as he gave up the e-mails from the former Parlee Beach manager, whom he blamed for the fiasco out there, that he tried to hide and cover up. The minister has had plenty of time to get briefed, so maybe he could brief us now on the employment status of Jacques Paynter and the other people that he mentioned in a comment here in the Legislature last week. The minister advised us that Mr. Paynter and company are working for the Department of Health, but, since the Minister of Health is recused, can the Minister of Tourism tell us exactly the type and scope of work that Mr. Paynter is conducting?

Hon. Mr. Ames: I appreciate the question from the member opposite. As I mentioned during last week's discussions, Mr. Paynter is under contract with the Department of Health. He is



working in conjunction with my department and other departments to ensure that we get to the bottom of this situation so that we can move on and make sure that we have a great tourism season coming up in New Brunswick.

We have one of the best beaches in the world. It is one of the warmest beaches north of Virginia, and we need to ensure that, moving forward, we are in a better position to really showcase to New Brunswickers and to the rest of the world how great a place it is. We on this side of the floor are going to make sure that we can get to the bottom of the issue instead of digging up old narratives that do not seem to be on point. Thank you.

Mr. Fitch: I am not sure whether the Minister of Tourism found that question to be frivolous, but I would like to know, again, exactly what the mandate is. As he said here this afternoon, he wants to get to the bottom of this narrative, and so do the people, the tourists, and the tourism operators. We want to know exactly what the mandate is for Mr. Paynter and the other people the minister has talked about. What kind of work are they conducting, and what types of conclusions are they going to come to?

More importantly, I think that the question that I want to ask the minister is this: When this work is completed, will he try to hide it as he did with the e-mails of the former manager of Parlee Beach, or will he make the findings public so that everyone can know what is going on at Parlee Beach?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: I think the opposition should know that, with regard to Parlee Beach, I am responsible for this file, acting in place of the Minister of Health. As my colleague very clearly said last week, we have Jacques Paynter. This is a highly qualified person, who has proven himself and is helping us by chairing a committee.

We very clearly said, and I will repeat, that we are the ones—not the opposition—who are taking the bull by the horns, though huge errors were made during the previous government's mandate, and that government did nothing to correct them. We are looking for a way to improve the water quality index system and also enhance communication with the public about water quality. Above all, we are looking for the pollution sources, too, in order to solve the problem, which the opposition members never ever did when their party was in power.

[Original]

Mr. Fitch: Again, the member opposite who answered the question is so concerned about the future. Let's make sure that we are very clear on where the future is going to lead, especially when it comes to this very, very important tourist attraction here in New Brunswick. I am asking the minister responsible: Will he commit today that, when the findings of the mandate of Mr. Paynter and his other people are completed, he will make them public and not try to hide



them, as the Minister of Tourism did with the e-mail scandal? It was so evident that he was trying to cover up those e-mails from the former manager of Parlee Beach.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We have been very transparent with regard to this file, and we will continue to be. Of course, we will be releasing a report soon. We will not hesitate to release it, so that people can see what recommendations were made.

[*Original*]

I do have to take issue with just a few quick things. First of all, the member opposite is now talking about the importance of tourism. I would like to hear from the Leader of the Opposition again as to whether the opposition agrees with our investments in tourism. We are increasing the budget for Tourism, Heritage and Culture by 17%, and we are also investing more than any other government in tourism infrastructure through our capital budget.

Also, it does not really bother us, and we were used to ministers doing this in the past. However, I have to raise the fact that the member for Riverview was asking questions about tourism when he is not the Tourism Critic. The opposition members are making big hay out of who is answering the questions when they are not even doing things exactly the way that they think they should be done by us. I ask the members this: Why the double standard?

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

