

April 28, 2017

[Original]

Property Tax

Mr. Higgs: Well, it is no secret that any solid foundation is built on trust. It is built on integrity. It is built on credibility. It is not the credibility of others. It is your credibility. That is how you develop, that is how you gain respect, but, more importantly, that is how you get results.

We have been talking this week and asking a lot of questions over and over again. Currently, I think that we are shooting for maybe 32 and 0—32 questions, 0 answers. The Premier needs to provide an explanation for the \$922 000. It is a simple question. It seems like a good place to really move the bar. This is what was spent on the tax scandal. The taxpayers of New Brunswick deserve to know why this money was spent, whom it went to, and what it purchased. Unless our Premier explains something as simple as this, then how can we expect to ever get any answers on other issues?

We need to explain where the money went. Can he expect it to be one of the topics of conversation about him next weekend at home if he does not answer? I will ask the Premier one more time, or maybe a few more today: Will the Premier tell the House how the \$922 000 was actually...

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: New Brunswickers can in fact expect to get answers to their questions. This is actually why we asked former Justice Robertson to carry out a comprehensive and independent review of what happened during the last season to cause these errors in our property assessment system. With this review, it will also be possible to determine why thousands of errors have been made each year since 2011 in our property assessment system.

Obviously, there are problems with the property assessment system, and New Brunswickers deserve better; this is in fact why we are taking action to correct the situation. The review to be carried out by former Justice Robertson will obviously help us to understand what these problems are and how to solve them. With an agency at arm's length from the provincial government conducting property assessments, we are going to rectify the situation once and for all.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: Once again, we will put that in the deflect category. Mind you, that is the one that seems to get the most popular responses. Just deflect the question. Do not answer it because that is the last thing that we would want to do here in this House. Well, I do not agree with that. This government should be accountable, and we should be giving answers, straight answers.

I have given the Premier countless opportunities to provide answers on the property tax scandal. So far, he has chosen to hide behind the squirrels, the many distractions that go out every day. Maybe people will chase this news report, or maybe they will chase this release. It is not working. The strategy of saying nothing repeatedly and hoping that the issue will go away is bound to fail. It is failing. Every day



that we get no answers is one step closer to the end for this Premier. His caucus members will come back next week after another unpleasant weekend of answering for the Premier in their ridings. The word is: Property tax scandal. The Premier must resign.

Will the Premier tell the House when he learned that this order to fast-track the assessment program would cost an additional \$922 000? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Since 2011, when it comes to the problem-plagued property assessment process, there have been thousands and thousands of errors every single year. That is why we are taking bold action, creating an agency that will be independent from the provincial government that will do the evaluations in the future. That is why we are asking former Justice Robertson to do a review to find out what happened in every single one of those years where so many errors were created.

I have to take issue. I have been here this week listening to the Leader of the Opposition saying that he wants answers, straight answers, and that there is deflection. I have a question for the Leader of the Opposition. We had the chance to discuss this the other night, and it became pretty clear that he was uncomfortable with answering the following: What role did the Leader of the Opposition play in getting Canaport LNG a tax break in 2005 when the then Conservative government gave a tax break to Canaport LNG? We have now reversed that tax break so that it will pay more taxes. What role did the Leader of the Opposition play, since he is such a straight talker?

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Mr. Higgs: The Premier always gets confused on what question period is all about. Question period is our asking the government questions.

An additional expense of \$922 000 must have gone through Cabinet. The entire Premier's Cabinet must have known about the fast-track assessments back in 2016. When the property tax scandal began to bloom in March of this year, they all must have known that the fast track of the new assessment system was to blame. Yet, not one of them—not one single member—stood up and was accountable or said that we should not be doing this, based on recommendations or based, certainly, on standing up for the taxpayers. They all stood up for the Premier and clapped and cheered. Every one of them was cheering and shouting, all the time knowing what was really going on.

Will the Premier tell us when his colleagues approved that \$922 000 budget? Was it in June 2016, as the leaked document states? Did all the colleagues know about it but cheered on, knowing that we were going to get more money out of every household in this province?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Again, former Justice Robertson's review will help determine what happened this season and every season that has created thousands of errors since 2011.

The Leader of the Opposition is right. Question period is supposed to be when the opposition asks questions and the government answers them. I get that, and that is fine. However, the Leader of the Opposition is making such a virtue of being a straight talker and says that he will answer all the questions, and he is, time and time again, criticizing us when it comes to that. Why does he not do politics differently, as he said he would, and answer the question?



He is boasting on his Web site that he was involved with getting Repsol and Irving Oil, when he was an Irving Oil executive, to set up the LNG terminal in New Brunswick. That involved the tax break that was given by the then Conservative government. He is boasting of this on his Web site. If he is such a straight talker, if he is so keen on having all answers given to the people of New Brunswick, what role did he play in getting Irving Oil and Repsol the tax break that they got in 2005?

Mr. Higgs: Once again, the Premier is confused. However, I will tell you what I will do. I will meet the Premier in a public forum, and we will talk about all the tax issues, including that one. I will do it today. I will do it on the weekend. I will do it next week. We want to be straight with the taxpayers, absolutely. I am ready to do it, and I am ready to do it now. The fact of the matter is that it is not a new thing for me. I have been doing it forever. I can keep doing it because it is the right thing to do and it is easy to do when you are telling the truth.

Close examination of the document released by this government regarding an inquiry into the property tax scandal... It is disgusting. It shows us how truly worthless this entire exercise is, and it is condemned. It is condemned to be worthless by the Premier. We have many points to cover. First, we have the fact that this report is being delivered to the Executive Council. Why is this report being delivered into the hands of the body headed by the Premier instead of directly to the public?

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Former Justice Robertson signed a contract with the terms of reference and the resources that were offered and given to him to do the review on behalf of New Brunswickers. I cannot speak for former Justice Robertson. I can only assume, however, since he has agreed and signed the contract with the terms of reference and resources in place, that he feels he will be in a position to answer the questions that need to be answered for the people of New Brunswick.

The Leader of the Opposition said he is ready. If he is ready, great. I would love to have the answer today. I think the people of New Brunswick would like to know. He is right, he does not have to answer the question because question period is for the opposition to ask questions. That is fine. He has professed that he would do politics differently, and I think it would be very different to see the Leader of the Opposition answer the question so that New Brunswickers could find out what role he played in giving a tax break to Irving Oil, Repsol, and Canaport LNG.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Gallant: He boasted of this on his Web site in 2005, that he was a big player in making that happen. We did not agree with the tax break. That is why we repealed it. What role did he play?

Mr. Higgs: I have already said that I am prepared to go to any public forum and talk very openly and directly about my exact role in the negotiations between Irving and Repsol, absolutely, and any other aspect. I am prepared to do that. Is the Premier ready to do that? I think not, but I am there. Just let it be on the record. I will be ready.

In today's *Telegraph-Journal*, the same article states that the Premier called the paper directly to state his case. We read that the \$922 000 was spent for technology and for the hiring of a couple of people.



Well, that is a start, Mr. Premier. We are starting to get some details. That is pretty expensive pay for a couple of people, mind you. Of course, this information was not provided by the Premier, but by the department. I have asked the Premier a dozen times to account for that money, but he would not answer in this House. We had to read it in the paper. Now, I ask: Did the Premier learn about this from the paper as well? Is he that out of touch with his government?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am going to repeat what I said before: Former Justice Robertson will carry out a comprehensive and independent review to determine what happened this season as well as every year since 2011. The goal of this review will be to find out why thousands of property assessment errors were made in the province.

New Brunswickers deserve better than that, since, every time an error is made, it can cause inconvenience and financial challenges for them. Therefore, it is important to be kept up to date on what happened and to rectify the situation once and for all.

[*Original*]

I am going to have to take issue with the Leader of the Opposition's comments. I think that this is a public forum. If he is so ready to answer the questions and so prepared to tell New Brunswickers what role he played in getting the LNG terminal a tax break to help Repsol and Irving Oil when he was an Irving Oil executive, why will he not do it today?

Mr. Higgs: As we all know, the process is that I am asking questions.

Also, in today's *Telegraph-Journal*, the Premier confirmed that he will release Justice Robertson's recommendations to the public. Now, he will release the recommendations. I think we need to understand what that means, because releasing the recommendations does not necessarily mean releasing all the information. Mind you, the document is so—so—restrictive that there would not be much there to look at, so it should not actually take until the end of August or into August.

Notwithstanding any of that, this is a reversal of the Premier's position of only two days ago. Two days ago, when he was asked whether he was going to release the recommendations, he was not sure, so he did not give a commitment. He did not really know. He went back and thought about it and said: Well, the report does not really say much, so I can probably release whatever it says. Mr. Premier, what changed your mind on releasing a document that, two days ago, you had said you would not?

Mr. Speaker: Direct your questions to the Chair, please.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I just want to clarify two things. First off, I would appreciate the Leader of the Opposition calling it a "review". That is what former Justice Robertson has agreed to undertake.

In fact, when it comes to the timeline that former Justice Robertson will use to finalize his review, he actually asked that it be extended from the former publicly announced date of August 1 to August 15 of this year. That is former Justice Robertson's request, and that is why we obliged—no issue from our front. I would let the Leader of the Opposition know that, when he talks about how he thinks a review should be done more quickly, it is actually former Justice Robertson who would like the time, which he



has been given to be able to do the work on behalf of New Brunswickers, to find out why there have been thousands of errors every single year since 2011 when it comes to our property assessment process.

We look forward to his review. We look forward to actioning that review to fix the problems once and for all.

Mr. Higgs: There is no way the result of any inquiry into the property tax scandal should be delivered to the Premier. I mean, that is indeed the fox guarding the henhouse. It should be delivered right to the people, right away, spin-free. What good would the document from this rigged inquiry be anyway? That is the concern, that it provides little value other than, like the Strategic Program Review plan to justify raising the HST... This is to justify outsourcing SNB.

The justice has not even been given the power to compel people to provide documents. He can request. He can say: Would you give them to me? Well, no. Okay, well, my power is limited. Instead, he can only request and hope for the best. Why has the Premier not given Justice Robertson the power to actually do his job? Why has his very basic power been withheld in what is supposed to be an independent inquiry, as is so repeatedly said, but bears no resemblance to an independent inquiry?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Again, former Justice Robertson signed the contract with the terms of reference and resources that he has been given. I can only assume that it is because he thinks that he will be able to do the work on behalf of New Brunswickers within the terms of reference and within the resources that he has been given.

I want to quote again the investigative authority that has been given to former Justice Robertson:

8.1. In order to carry out the Work, Mr. Robertson is authorized to request of New Brunswick Government agencies and departments access to all documents in their possession, subject to restrictions on disclosure under Applicable Law.

8.2. Mr. Robertson is also authorized to seek the assistance of government employees in procuring information deemed necessary to carry out the Work.

Also, in the time that I have to get to 8.3., it says:

8.3. ECO

—the Executive Council Office—

on behalf of the New Brunswick Government, will direct agencies and departments to comply with requests made under sections 8.1 and/or 8.2.

These are the two powers that I just described to the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. Higgs: The political pressure that caused the property tax scandal has been cited from many, many sources. The New Brunswick Union pushed back on the Premier by saying: “the blame for this problem does not sit with the assessors, it rests with the elected officials. They need to take responsibility for their actions in this matter”. That is what this is all about. The Premier and the office have not taken



responsibility for the problem that they have caused. They have not taken responsibility for the many, many fraudulent invoices—tax bills—that have been sent out, which was purposely done. Renovations did not happen, yet the bills were sent. They should take responsibility.

That statement was released over three weeks ago, which leads to my next question for the Premier. Why did the Premier not give Justice Robertson the power to make any findings in the political direction on phony renovations? This document does not allow Judge Robertson to look at where the problem all started. Let's start from the beginning. Why can we not do that?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The review that former Justice Robertson will conduct certainly has given him the ability to look at the decision-making process that led to errors this year and every single year since 2011. Again, thousands of errors have been committed by the problem-plagued property assessment process every single year for years. We want to get to the bottom of it, and that is why we have asked former Justice Robertson to do this review, to find out exactly how this happened year after year.

We know because we got the information through leaked documents, which we think of as something that is positive. It is great that the people took it upon themselves to let this be known to the public. We found out that there was an arbitrary formula used this season. It also seems that there was an arbitrary formula used in 2011, although after being rectified... We need to get to the bottom of all these errors and fix this once and for all.

Mr. Higgs: I know that it has been repeated over and over again. That is the philosophy—just keep repeating something and hope that it sticks. There has never in the history of this province been a situation where the Premier's Office has directly ordered a system that led directly to fake, phony, invoices—tax bills—being sent to the citizens of this province.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Higgs: That has never been the situation before. These are not errors. These are the results of a decision to implement a program in one year instead of four years. Why would we do that? It is because we want more money to spend. We want to buy your votes with your tax dollars as fast as we can because an election is coming.

The Premier tries to pretend that this year did not involve a new system, a new problem, with phony renovations. I just covered that. The Premier tries to pretend that this is an old problem, but the problem is in the Premier's Office. If the Premier has any proof of a made-up renovation being used prior to this year, where is it? Where is the proof?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I think we have demonstrated very clearly, with the bold actions that we have taken, that we are taking this matter very seriously. The point that we have been making is that the problem-plagued property assessment process has been failing New Brunswickers for years—thousands of errors every single year. One error for one New Brunswicker can cause inconvenience, to say the least, and, many times, it can create a situation of financial hardship.

We recognize that every single one of those errors caused issues and challenges for New Brunswickers, so we have to get to the bottom of how all these errors happened since 2011. The review that former



Justice Robertson will do on behalf of New Brunswickers will answer these questions and will also allow us to set up an agency independent of the provincial government to do property assessments in the future. We are very pleased with the fact that we are finally, here in New Brunswick, going to be able to fix this problem once and for all.

Mr. Higgs: This was more than an error. This was a deliberate act. This is not like before. Let's not pretend it is something that it is not. We know what it is. The Premier's changing stories on the property tax scandal are a matter of public record. Eventually, there was admission that the order to fast-track—the fast track, and there lies the problem, and the order—this assessment and that it all came from the Premier's Office. That admission should make the person in charge of what particular office it comes under, under a specific scrutiny.

Guess what! Why did the Premier not give Justice Robertson the power to make any findings regarding the Premier's role? That is not in his mandate. Every arrow points to the Premier's Office, except the handwritten document that was given to Justice Robertson on what he can actually do. It is not handwritten. It is a typed document, but he is not allowed to investigate the Premier's role. That is what is wrong.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Once again, I repeat that, with his comprehensive and independent review, former Justice Robertson will be able to look at the decision-making process that led to the problems and errors we have seen this year and every single year since 2011.

I want to clarify the situation for the Leader of the Opposition: Yes, through his comprehensive and independent review, former Justice Robertson will be able to determine the chain of decisions or the decision-making process that led to these property assessments, as far back as 2011. This study will also include the past year.

Thousands of errors have in fact been made every single year since 2011. This year, the difference is that we will rectify the situation, because it has been revealed that an arbitrary formula was used. New Brunswickers deserve better, and we will therefore rectify the situation once and for all.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: The Premier has not answered questions in this House. He has done it over and over again. Today, it is the same situation. I am probably at 40-plus now and zero answers. Many of the questions are very straightforward—straightforward if, indeed, there is not something to hide. This is not the only tool of our democracy that the Premier treats with contempt. The Premier does not answer questions in estimates or in committee either. Where do you go with this if you cannot get any answers? The court of public opinion will one day rule. I daresay people are becoming very vocal, and for good reason, on where this is and why the Premier is not answering the questions.

Will the Premier commit now to giving testimony to Justice Robertson on his role in the scandal? This is not a requirement in this document, but, if the Premier wants to tell all, to make sure that it is a clean



document, and to come clean with the people of this province, there is the opportunity. Will the Premier do that?

Mr. Speaker: Time.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: As we have already stated, we will fully cooperate with former Justice Robertson; we will comply with his requests. I cannot speak on his behalf, and I have no idea of what he will do to carry out his comprehensive and independent review. However, I can tell you that the ministers, the entire government, and I will fully cooperate to help him carry out his comprehensive and independent review.

[*Original*]

Again, the Leader of the Opposition is criticizing based on the fact that he feels that questions are not being answered. Obviously, I feel that I am answering the questions. He is entitled to his opinion. One thing that is pretty clear is that he is not answering ours. In 2005, a tax deal was given to the Canaport LNG terminal.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We repealed the tax deal that was given—the tax break that was given—to Irving Oil, Repsol, and Canaport LNG. The Leader of the Opposition boasts that he played a role in that project. What role did he play in getting them that tax break?

Mr. Higgs: Given that this is question period and that it is the opposition's role to ask questions, I have a suggestion. Let's extend question period, and I will answer that very question if the Premier agrees to answer the questions that I have been asking. Let's extend question period, and I will answer. Mr. Speaker, ask the Premier if he will agree to that.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order. The Premier has the floor. Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Clearly, the opposition is trying to wheel and deal here.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I think that the people of New Brunswick would love to hear the Leader of the Opposition on this subject. The Leader of the Opposition is right. He is right. Question period is about the opposition asking questions to government. I am not going to refute that. That is what this is. He professes that he wants to do things differently. He professes that all these questions should be answered, and he keeps criticizing by saying that he feels that the answers we are giving are not to his liking.



I ask him again. Will he just tell the people of New Brunswick in this very public forum, since he says he is ready at any time to answer the question, what role he played in giving Irving Oil, Canaport LNG, and Repsol a tax break when he was an Irving Oil executive?

Mental Health

Mr. Coon: Yesterday, the government published the first pillar of its Family Plan, focusing on improving access to primary and acute care. Presumably, we will soon hear how government intends to improve access to mental health care. Earlier this month, when the Conference Board of Canada tabled its report ranking New Brunswick as the best in the country for quality of life, it highlighted the fact that we have the highest rate of suicide in the country, at nearly 14 suicides per 100 000 residents. This is really unsettling and disconcerting. With the waiting list for people struggling with mental illness, it can be as long as a year before they get access to counselling.

What does the Minister of Health plan to do to eliminate these indefensible wait times for people who are struggling with mental health problems?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: I want to thank the member opposite for the question. The member opposite is correct. Yesterday, we responded to the first pillar of our New Brunswick Family Plan. We are very proud to start unrolling the vision that we have in regard to all services related to families in the province, seeing that that is a priority for this government.

In regard to mental health, we have been making significant investments over the last three years. We are going to continue to do so. We are actually following the Action Plan for Mental Health that was put in place by the former government. We have continued it since coming to office. I am very proud to say that approximately 9% of our health care budget goes to mental health initiatives.

There are still challenges, and there are still needs that need to be addressed. We are going to continue to do that. We have some very successful pilot projects that are in the process of being rolled out across the province. We will see positive results.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Coon: The action plan of the former government, which this government is pursuing, is clearly not working when we have extremely long waiting times for mental health services, for counselling, or for access to psychiatrists. It is unacceptable. In fact, the rate of suicide is increasing in New Brunswick, which is unacceptable. It is increasing beyond the Conference Board of Canada's numbers for 2010 to 2012 of 14 people per 100 000 who committed suicide.

The most recent report from the province's Chief Coroner is for 2014. It is reporting 16 suicide deaths per 100 000 residents. Gregory Zed, the province's only forensic suicide expert, has now put that number at 17 for the year 2016. It is alarming that, when we already have the highest rate of suicide in the country, that rate is increasing. Today, patients are waiting months to see a psychiatrist. Will the minister commit to hiring more psychiatrists to eliminate the waiting list for psychiatric care?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: Again, I want to highlight the fact that we are making record investments when it comes to mental health. We will be hiring more health care professionals to deal with some of the



challenges we are facing with regard to mental health. We are making other investments, such as the Fredericton Downtown Community Health Centre. The member was there for the opening a few weeks ago, and he was very happy to see this community health centre open, to deal with the most vulnerable in our society, some people who may not have access to a family physician.

We are continuing with many initiatives, whether it be our Integrated Service Delivery model in our schools, our FACT teams working with adults, or our mobile crisis units that go out. All these initiatives started in pilot project form, and we are now in the process of actually investing more money so that these successful pilot projects can be rolled out across the province. By the end of this year, we will have all these initiatives right across the province, and, hopefully, we will be able to address some of those wait times.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Coon: Physical health is still getting the lion's share of the attention. Gregory Zed, the suicide expert, provided some context for the numbers that I have been speaking about. Between 2011 and 2015, more than 70% of New Brunswickers who ended their lives in suicide had visited their family doctor to talk about their mental health within three months of their death. What this means is that there is an opportunity to intervene in 70% of the cases. The question is whether the minister will seize this opportunity to intervene at the level of the primary health care providers to help save lives in New Brunswick.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: I agree with the member for Fredericton South that more has to be done to prevent suicide; no one will argue with that.

What I am telling you is that, over the last three years, we have increased investments in our budget to address this issue. For example, our integrated service program for young people in our schools started out as two pilot projects: one in the Acadian Peninsula and the other in the Charlotte area.

Since the launch of these two pilot projects, wait times for services have been eliminated. So, if young people need services, they get them. We are now implementing this initiative throughout the province. We are going to hire more professionals, offer more services, and address the waiting list issue.

[Original]

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

