

May 5, 2017

[Original]

Property Tax

Mr. Higgs: Well, this is the last day of the session before fall. “Finally, I want to share some advice that I hope that you will find as helpful as I have:”...

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Higgs: ...“work hard, be disciplined and take responsibility for everything you do. I have found that when I follow these three principles, I have always been proud of my actions.”

Based upon these words written by the Premier in his mandate letters, he has not been very proud of all his actions over the past two and a half years. He has plenty to be ashamed of, though—most recently, the property tax scandal. Does the Premier believe that he has taken responsibility for his actions? Is he proud of himself for his actions in this regard? Let’s hear it from the Premier. Is he proud of his actions on the property tax scandal? Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: As we have stated several times here in the House, we understand, as a provincial government, that there are very serious problems with the property assessment system, given that thousands of errors have been made each year since 2011. Each error has an impact on New Brunswickers, and this is why we are taking the steps already mentioned.

We are going to make sure people can request a review until August 1, so we have extended the deadline for this process. We also very clearly said to New Brunswickers that, if their property assessment contains an error, they can report it at any time; there is no deadline for that.

Also, we asked former Justice Robertson to carry out a comprehensive and exhaustive review to determine what has been happening every year since 2011. We also committed to having an agency that is independent from the provincial government that will do the property assessments in the future.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: Another quote from the Premier: It is very important, Steve, to note that I myself and Cabinet were not aware of this. We were not part of the decision-making.



Do those words sound familiar to the Premier? Does that sound like anyone in the Gallant Cabinet taking responsibility for their actions? Does that sound like something to be proud of? I would like very much for the Premier to defend those words in the face of the proof that is out there for all to see. The Premier was aware, his Cabinet was aware, and, certainly, the minister responsible was aware. Why has the Minister of Service New Brunswick not submitted his resignation? If he resigned from Cabinet, would he also resign from his seat in Saint John Harbour? Why has the Premier not resigned?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We recognize and we are aware that there are serious issues with the problem-plagued property assessment process. Thousands of errors every single year since 2011 have not served the people of New Brunswick in the way that the process should. Every single one of those errors has a New Brunswicker who suffered either inconvenience, confusion, or, in some cases, financial hardship. We recognize that. That is why we are taking bold action.

We have asked former Justice Robertson to conduct a review that will be independent and that will be exhaustive as well. With his findings, we are going to find out what has been happening since 2011 that has been creating all these errors. We are going to be able to set up an agency that is independent of the provincial government and that will do the property assessments in the future, fixing these problems once and for all.

Mr. Higgs: I will continue with the quotes:

We did not intervene or overrule with them in their... decision to proceed.

Those are more of the Premier's words from one of his press events for damage control. They are recorded and out there on social media for all to watch, along with the memo that tells us that the Premier

was recently exposed to desktop review... He immediately requested our CEO Gordon Gilman to accelerate

—the program's—

modernization efforts.

If that is not intervening, what does the Premier call it? Of course, I do not expect a straight answer. There would be no reason for me to. It is too bad that the Premier did not come up the hill with me yesterday so that he could witness how to provide an open, honest, and clear answer as I provided on the LNG question. Mr. Premier, if you did not hear it, "no involvement" was the answer. Does the Premier agree that he intervened in the fast-tracking of the assessments? Thank you.



Hon. Mr. Gallant: As we said, we understand that the property assessment process is problem-plagued. That is why we are taking bold action to fix these problems once and for all. The Leader of the Opposition, I think, should give former Justice Robertson the time that he deserves and the time that he asked for to conduct his independent and exhaustive review of what has happened every single year since 2011 that has created thousands of errors.

Again, every single one of those errors affects a New Brunswicker and, in some cases, a New Brunswick family. They found themselves in a state of confusion, potentially inconvenienced, and, in some cases, they have financial hardship. We recognize that, and that is why we have to fix these problems once and for all. By asking former Justice Robertson to conduct this review, we are going to be able, once and for all, to fix the problems and improve the process.

[*Translation*]

Student Employment

Ms. Dubé: Since taking office, the Liberal government has made massive changes to the management of the student program, the summer program, which we all know as SEED. It has been chaotic ever since. So the government decided to make a few other changes, but it is still chaotic. We are all bombarded with calls from students who have not received their vouchers for a job. Nonprofit organizations—once again, especially in rural communities—cannot get students. My question for the minister is this: What changes has he made in order to specifically give back to rural communities better chances of having student employees, because this is frankly not happening?

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: I have been waiting a year to be asked a question, so I am very pleased. It is ironic to have this question about the SEED program, which is very important for students. I have to say that the Gallant government has focused on students to ensure that they can gain the experience they need in their fields of study. This is not a program for employers; it is a program for students.

I remember that when Conservatives were in power, they had control of the students, if I can put it that way. Members would even hire students in their own offices.

It was with the public that we decided to take politics out of the student program system, and this is exactly what we have done.

Last week or the week before, the member for Fredericton-York mentioned that he wanted to go back to the old system, through which petty politics would still be possible. No, this is not going to happen.

Ms. Dubé: My question is precisely for students. The focus is on students. We are telling you that students from rural areas cannot get work. Some students with a diploma are forced to go to urban areas and even other regions to find employment. Therefore, they have to pay for an



apartment and various other fees.

My question for the minister is very simple. Members on both sides of the House agree that our students are important and that we must give them the best quality of employment possible to make it a good experience and for them to be prepared, but there must be real access.

Does the minister agree that the system is still not perfect? Is he still prepared to help students so that, starting this summer, they can be working and gaining experience?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: I do not think so. The Student Alliance validated the program and agreed with it, and the FEECUM said that it agreed with the program. I will take their side any day before I take the member's side. This year, like last year, there will be more students working in the province than in the last 10 years. Not only do we have 1 600 students with a voucher to work across the province wherever they wish, but also we secured over 275 positions in our museums in the province, in our libraries in the province, and in our visitor information centres in the province. That is what the Gallant government has done. We have protected jobs for students.

On top of that, the Trudeau government is also investing in over 3 000 student summer jobs right here in New Brunswick. I think that, if somebody is standing up for the students of this province, it is this government.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Dubé: Members from both sides of the House have worked with students, and we agree that our students are important.

The message I am bringing to the minister comes from our students. The organizations representing students have said: We are going to give the program a chance. They knew that changes were going to be made, they made a contribution, and they were even there for the random selection. However, I am telling you that, even with this, there are still problems.

Students from rural areas cannot get a job. Nonprofit organizations in rural areas want to hire students, since they need them to operate. However, they do not have access to them.

In our offices, we are bombarded with questions from students and employers. They are prepared to work together, but the connection is definitely not made. Moreover, other students must move elsewhere just to work.

What we are saying is, well done to all the members who want to do their best, but we are telling you that...



[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: It is obvious that, when they were in government, their hands were in the cookie jar, playing politics with student summer jobs. As I said a while ago, the member from the area of York said, in an op-ed: I want politics back in the student summer program. Not under this government. The focus is on the students.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: The member wants to talk about the nonprofits. Last year, over 76% of the students were working in the nonprofit sector. I will repeat: There were 6 500 students who applied for summer jobs. We gave out 1 600 vouchers. There are over 275 other positions in museums, libraries, and VICs, along with 3 000 summer jobs. If a student wants to work, there will be ample opportunity, and that is not even counting the over 3 400 jobs available through NBJobs. I went through the list of jobs available in the member's riding. She has not responded to me yet.

Tendering

Mr. Jeff Carr: Here we go again. Just two days after hearing the news that the Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont Hospital will be built by a Quebec company, here we are again, seeing this Premier sell out New Brunswickers once again by allowing our Crown utility to buy NB Power poles outside the province. It is shameful. It is shameful. These are the very same people who stood up to defend NB Power when Shawn Graham tried to sell it, because we wanted to keep our Crown utility here. The people of this province are sick and tired of this poor leadership coming from the Premier.

When the snowplows were going to Quebec, the Premier had to step in from his office and change that contract. Will he step in today and protect New Brunswickers, protect our power poles, protect Marwood, and keep our poles right here in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Fraser: The member opposite is going on about building walls around our province, just as Mr. Trump did in the United States. Our government is about tearing those walls down. We are an export-driven province. New Brunswick companies do business all over the world. If we start building walls around our borders, as the member opposite wants us to do, it is going to be very detrimental to New Brunswick companies, New Brunswick entrepreneurs, and the people who work in those companies.

Our government made a commitment that we are going to do everything that we can to help New Brunswick businesses grow and prosper so that we can grow our economy and so that we



can continue to invest in our priorities, such as investing in infrastructure. We know where the Leader of the Opposition, the former Finance Minister, stands on that. He said that he would cut infrastructure dollars. In fact, when he was the Finance Minister under the former government, he gutted the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure. He fired engineers and let frontline workers go. That is why we are in the shape that we are in today, and we are getting it fixed.

Mr. Jeff Carr: There is one thing that the minister forgot to mention. The Premier, right now, is selling off New Brunswick piece by piece. He is doing it in a roundabout way. He is trying to clean up what Shawn Graham could not get done. That is what he is doing today. If he is not willing to stand beside everybody in this Legislature and all New Brunswickers, to stand up for New Brunswickers and for our resources right here in this province...

When Marwood sends a pole to NB Power, it comes off our Crown land at one of the highest stumpage fees paid to the province. That is all going away. The men and women who go to the woods and cut these poles are now going to lose their jobs. It is shameful.

I want to read the Premier a little quip from his 2014 speech from the throne. It says:

A new economic filter will help guide government decisions across departments. No longer will policies be enacted without first asking: what impact does this decision have on jobs in New Brunswick?

Well, what impact will this decision have on jobs in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Fraser: The member opposite might want to look at the years that the members opposite were in government under their leader, when he was the Finance Minister. There were major contracts—SNC-Lavalin, a Quebec company, for the Princess Margaret Bridge, and the Campbellton hospital, a Quebec company—under the Leader of the Opposition when he was the Finance Minister. You look at the facts.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Fraser: In 2012-13, under the previous government, the percentage of tenders awarded to non-New Brunswick firms was 16%. In 2016-17, under the leadership of our Premier, this side of the House, and our government, the percentage of business awarded to non-New Brunswick companies was 1%. There are no lessons to be learned from that side.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Mr. Jeff Carr: This is a government that is led by a fabricator, not a leader. That is one thing that is for sure. Maybe there is some fact-checking that needs to take place with those statements.



It is becoming very clear to New Brunswickers right now, more than ever, that New Brunswick needs a leader and a Premier who is built on experience. No longer can we elect a Premier who is not ready to lead. This is a Premier who needs training wheels to get around this province because he has a lack of experience, because he has not raised a family in this province, and because he has not sat in those rooms and negotiated big deals for New Brunswick, as this leader on this side of the House has.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Jeff Carr: This leader is ready to get things done for New Brunswick and to protect New Brunswickers right here.

I beg the Premier today to go out in that rotunda and to tell the media and New Brunswickers that he is ready to stand up for them and he is ready to keep buying our poles from our Crown properties.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: New Brunswick has the most export-oriented economy in the country. Why is that? It is because, relatively, we are a smaller market, so we need to export to larger markets. It is also because we have businesses in New Brunswick that can compete with anyone around the world. We are going to help by investing in infrastructure and investing in our people through education and skills development. We are going to invest in innovation and make sure that capital is available. We are also going to reduce taxes for small businesses to help them compete.

However, I ask the Leader of the Opposition to clarify something for us today and to clarify it for New Brunswickers: Does he believe in the Trump-era dialogue and the rhetoric coming from people such as Trump when it comes to trade? Does the Leader of the Opposition not believe in free trade? What is coming from the members opposite is certainly all about putting up walls and barriers. If we do that, the New Brunswick economy will suffer. Where does the Leader of the Opposition stand when it comes to free trade?

Water Quality

Mr. B. Macdonald: Well, it is question period, so we get to ask the questions. Because of the government's closure motion, it appears that this is going to be the last time for six months that we stand in this Legislature. I know for certain that the Premier prefers the heat at a Shediac beach to the heat here in question period. Despite the efforts of this government, there are reports, even as recently as this week, of raw sewage still seeping into Shediac Bay. Can this government, before we rise for the summer, at least assure us that there will be no more development in Shediac until the source of the pollution is found and dealt with? Thank you.



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: As you know, our government of action has taken steps and will continue to do so to ensure that there will be no more pollution in Shediac Bay.

You know, we are studying the issue to determine what the pollution sources are. In the near future, I will have the opportunity to announce immediate steps to resolve the issue. We want to have short-term solutions right away; with the studies, we will be able to find longer-term solutions.

As you know, last month, we also publicly announced new water classification and communication systems. Once again, our government is proactive and is taking steps. This has never been done before. I am proud to be part of a government that does not hesitate to move forward and forge ahead in the interest of New Brunswickers.

[Original]

Mr. B. Macdonald: It is the first rule of the Gallant government to deny that there is a problem. We have seen this minister stand up on any number of occasions to deny that there is a problem, only to find later that, indeed, there was a problem. The reports are clear: There is sewage going into Shediac Bay. You can put in place whatever classification system you want, but, if you do not find the problem, you are not going to solve the problem.

When is the minister going to stop denying the issue, denying the involvement of the government, and make sure that the problem in Shediac Bay is fixed once and for all?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: You know, with regard to the possible contamination source to which the member opposite is referring, I was advised on April 24 of a potential source of pollution. My department was on site within 24 hours, analyzing the issue, and we are continuing these analyses. The initial analyses show no pollution in that location, but we continue to monitor the situation.

So, once again, we are assuming our responsibilities. That being said, I am proud that, last month, we announced a proper new water classification system to replace the one established by the Conservatives, which was problematic, to say the least. We will also have a proper new communication system to communicate with people. It will not be a problematic system like the one the Conservatives had established. Yes, our government is taking steps, and I am proud of that.



[Original]

Mr. B. Macdonald: There is no question that the water quality at Parlee Beach is linked to development. We have seen that. Can the minister at least assure us that the moratorium on development will remain in place until the problem is found and, indeed, assure us that the Minister of Health will not take the next six months of legislative silence to advance his project, the development of his campground? Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: Once again, I note that the member opposite does not seem to be familiar with the file. I do not see how we could maintain a moratorium that never existed.

That being said, with regard to everything I said, I am hearing the Leader of the Opposition reply that we must take our responsibilities and that he is proud to be doing so. Back then, in terms of property assessments, out of 160 000 assessments, 35 000 errors were made, which represented a failure rate of 22%. I therefore do not see where the Leader of the Opposition is taking his responsibilities and how he can be proud of doing so. When the same Leader of the Opposition, who was Minister of Finance when these errors were made, talks about the property assessment system of those days as being a good and fair system—while it had a 22% failure rate—are you going to tell me he is taking his responsibilities? No.

We do not have any lessons to learn from the opposition members. I am proud that our government is taking its responsibilities.

[Original]

Government Agenda

Mr. Higgs: “We are going to keep our promises by making promises we can keep.” Do you remember those words from the Premier? There was the seniors’ asset promise, the 5 000-job promise, the 10 000-job promise, the revenue-neutral carbon tax promise, the day care promise, the tax credit for those caring for others promise, and the procurement promise. Do you know what all these promises have in common? They were all broken. Every one of them—broken. Promises made by the Premier, promises broken by the Premier. Let’s see the Premier take responsibility for those actions.

Will the Premier make himself proud of his actions by rising and apologizing for all these broken promises? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: With all due respect, we have no lessons to learn from the Leader of the Opposition. When he was the Minister of Finance, he promised that he would balance the books within four years. He promised that he would do that without cutting any services, and he promised that he would do that without raising any taxes. He raised taxes—one of the



largest tax increases that we have seen in decades. He cut services to education and health care, and he did not even come close to balancing the budget. He could not even hit his deficit reduction targets. All the while that he was doing these things—trying, I am sure, to accomplish them—he did not realize that he was actually decreasing, he was retracting, the economy of our province.

We are proud of the fact that we have invested more in education than any other government in the history of our province and more in health care, all the while growing the economy.

Mr. Higgs: What have we seen from this government? We have seen absolute record spending.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Higgs: We have seen record-breaking taxes. Where are we now? We are at \$800 million per year of new taxation. Where are we now on new spending? We are at \$900 million. We have seen unprecedented abuse of taxpayers' money by this government. What do we call it? We call it investment. What have we got to show for it? Where are we seeing improvement in any category? Are we getting better in education? Are we getting better in health care? Do we have more jobs? None of the above can be tracked in a way that shows that we are progressing. We continue to hear the rhetoric. We continue to hear the spin. The only people patting the members of this government on their backs are themselves. Those are the only people.

Now, we see a local company losing work—our own work, right here in our province. When is this government going to stand up for New Brunswick? When is this going to happen? We need honesty. When is that going to happen?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The member says that it is new spending. It is investment in education, and it is investment in health care. We understand that it can sometimes take a little bit of time to reap the benefits of investment in education, but I guarantee you that every dollar we invest in education is going to help our economy and the quality of life of the people of New Brunswick. Sometimes, the proactive approach that we have to helping families and communities be healthy can take some time as well.

Investing in advancing women's equality, investing in reducing poverty and lifting people out of the cycle of poverty, investing in helping support those with mental health challenges and addictions, investing in ensuring that we improve access to primary and acute care, and investing in things that will help promote wellness in the province can also take time to reap some rewards. However, they are the right investments. All the while, we have also reduced the deficit by half, and we have grown the economy year after year.

Mr. Higgs: Once again, the only people who are patting them on the back are the government individuals themselves.



We hear the Premier talking on and on and on about investments. I reiterate—investments get returns. Especially when you are throwing taxpayers' dollars around as if they mean nothing... You are trying to get more out of taxpayers by creating fraudulent tax bills and saying: Let's just see if that works. There is no question that there is unprecedented spending. Anyone can tax and spend. That will not fix this province. Listen to the manufacturers. Listen to the CFIB. Listen to all the people who are trying to employ people. Is it easier for them? No, it is not easier. It is not easier because this government is making it more difficult.

Do you know where it starts? It starts with confessing when you make a mistake, owning up to it, and taking accountability. It is not talking about it, but it is doing it. We have tried to make that happen in this House for the past two weeks. Will the Premier finally take responsibility for his actions today, stand up, and be accountable?

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The Legislature is a place to debate, and there is no doubt that, when we debate the future of the province, there is a clear line between the two political parties—the government and the opposition. We do not agree with the former Minister of Finance, the now Leader of the Opposition, that you can cut your way to prosperity. We do not agree that we should be cutting in education and in health care so that we can balance the books faster.

We believe that we should be prudent fiscal managers, and that is what we are doing by cutting the deficit by half. All the while, we know of the importance of investing more and strategically in education and health care. We are not patting ourselves on the back. We are humbly saying that we are working with New Brunswickers and patting them on their backs for growing the economy in 2015 by 2.3% and again in 2016 by 1.4%. That is a lot better than when it retracted under the Leader of the Opposition.

