

December 13, 2016

[Original]

French Immersion

Mr. Higgs: I am not giving up hope on the Premier. I continue to hear from parents, teachers, and administrators who know this political change to the early entry point for French immersion is the wrong thing to do at this point in time. I know that the Premier is hearing the same concerns. There is no plan developed, no curriculum developed, and few details have been shared with the public. Parents attending information sessions left with more questions than when they arrived. Let's listen to the parents. Let's listen to the 2 700 retired teachers. Let's listen to our classroom teachers and give them a free voice. Let's stop this change to the entry point for early immersion. Will the Premier listen to the people?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We are still hearing the same rhetoric from the Leader of the Opposition. As we have explained several times, our decision was based on a report that was done in 2012. This report was commissioned by the previous government, in which the Leader of the Opposition was the Minister of Finance, and it had two former Education Ministers, one from a Liberal government and one from a Conservative government, who spoke to over 200 people. They spoke to literacy leaders, immersion teachers, English teachers, resource and methods teachers, intensive French teachers, students themselves, and community leaders. After doing all that consultation, after talking to experts, educators, and many more, they came out with the recommendation that this province restore French immersion to Grade 1.

For the Leader of the Opposition to try to insinuate that our decision was based on anything else is unfortunate. It was based on a report that he commissioned when he was the Minister of Finance in 2012.

Mr. Higgs: In the Saturday newspaper, I read that the Anglophone West DEC Chair, Kimberley Douglass, was invited to only the first half of a day-long session on delivering French language instruction to rural schools. This is just unacceptable, and this is only the latest issue between this government and the DEC's. Councillor Mark Noël voiced his frustration with the relationship, saying:

Their communication style, which is not inviting the chair or the DEC to different things, or giving us invitations at the last minute, I think speaks to either a bigger problem or a deep-rooted philosophy that maybe we're not really partners in education, and I hope that's not the case.

This is how the DEC's are feeling. Can the Premier put down the speaking notes, stop the rhetoric, listen to the voices of the experienced, and scrap the early immersion change at this time? Thank you.



Hon. Mr. Gallant: He wants me to put away the notes as he reads off his question from his paper.

We have made a decision that is in the best interest of the students of our province based on evidence, based on consultation, and based on stakeholders being involved in the report that was done in 2012, which was commissioned by his government. I want to let you know that we want to work with all educators and we want to make sure that we move our province forward by making strategic investments in education and that we invest more in education than we, as a province, ever have before. That is the plan of our government.

I have to take issue with the Leader of the Opposition getting up to talk about his experience. If he wants to talk about his experience, I would be glad to do so—his experience of not hitting any of his deficit targets, his experience of being the Minister of Finance under the worst government in terms of economic development, and his experience of cutting into education and health care. If he wants to talk about that, I will stay here all day to talk about his experience.

Mr. Higgs: The speaking notes and rhetoric continue. Nobody sees the way that this change to early immersion is in the best interest of our children.

The most recent results of the Grade 1 entry point were dismal. Only 10% of our children who graduated from this program did so with an acceptable level of bilingualism, and most of them did not even have enough to qualify for employment requiring bilingual abilities. That is not success, and we are going to do it again. We are going to press pause. We are going to stop. We are going to reinstate a program that has already been proven not to achieve results.

As an overall percentage of our total graduates, less than 4% graduated with an acceptable level. We have yet to learn the initial results of the Grade 3 entry point because none of those young people have graduated yet. How could the government make this decision without evidence and call it anything but a political decision? Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: As we have said several times, we based our decision on a report prepared in 2012. This report was sanctioned by the previous government, in which the current Leader of the Opposition was Minister of Finance.

This report was written by two former Ministers of Education, one Liberal and one Conservative, who met with experts, teachers, students, stakeholders, and community leaders. After consulting over 200 people, these former ministers came to the conclusion that the early French immersion entry point should be Grade 1.



Therefore, we based our decision on this report prepared in 2012 and commissioned by the government in which the current Leader of the Opposition was Minister of Finance. Contrary to the previous government, we are implementing the recommendations.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: It is really interesting when we can talk about a report but we cannot listen to current people, 2 700 or 3 000—a number of people... We can spend our time talking about a report that these people that I am speaking of do not agree with.

On September 30, the Premier made the shocking announcement that early French immersion would return to Grade 1. On October 31, his government brought forward the change to the teachers' licences in New Brunswick. When I asked the Minister of Education to explain this move, I did not get an answer. The minister would not scrum with the media either. Later, the minister came up with the excuse that it was to comply with the AIT, the Agreement on Internal Trade. The Agreement on Internal Trade came into effect in 1995—21 years ago.

Let's review. The change to immersion was announced on September 30. The change to teachers' licences was on October 31. Does the Premier wish to stay with the excuse that this change was made because of a 21-year-old internal trade agreement?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I have to take issue with the Leader of the Opposition trying to pretend that there was some shock when the announcement was made. Let's go through our timeline and our dates in the universe that we are living in while the Leader of the Opposition seems to be by himself somewhere else.

In the 2000s, this was debated for years. There was a previous government that made changes to the French immersion program. It was debated and discussed—at times very hotly—in this province. Then there was a government that went in—and it was actually the government of the Minister of Finance—making a promise that it would restore French immersion to Grade 1. It commissioned a report. The report, after listening to many New Brunswickers, came back and said: Yes, restore French immersion to Grade 1. That government did not do it. We, during the campaign in 2014, promised that we would restore it to Grade 1.

Since then, since we became the government, we have been working to restore it to Grade 1. We made an announcement that this will be happening in September of next year. Why would the Leader of the Opposition be so shocked?

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Mr. Higgs: The shock is that this was not part of the 10-year plan. The shock is that our results are dismal and we are ignoring that by repeating a program that did not work before. The shock is that we do not have a plan.



As I mentioned, we have 7 000 teachers in the province who are underemployed or unemployed. This political change to early immersion will only serve to hurt them and to drive them out of New Brunswick. I have been informed that the Department of Education is already providing New Brunswick schools with the telephone numbers of out-of-province teachers whom the schools should call to fill the need created by this political change to early immersion. In one instance, two thirds of those numbers were of the area code 418, eastern Quebec. What does the Premier or the Education Minister have to say to our New Brunswick teachers, 7 000 of whom are unemployed or underemployed?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: For a guy who said that he would do politics differently, it is very unfortunate to see the Leader of the Opposition fearmongering, as he is doing today. We have asked parents and students themselves, of course, to participate and to let us know whether they want to take French immersion in Grade 1. At this time, no decisions have been made as to how many classes there will be come 2017. We do not have that data yet. For the Leader of the Opposition to insinuate anything else but that is unfortunate. It is fearmongering, and I think that the people of New Brunswick deserve better.

The Leader of the Opposition keeps calling this a political decision. When will he acknowledge that there was a report that was done in 2012, commissioned by his government, and that was nonpartisan and independent? Former Ministers of Education from two different governments, a Liberal and a Conservative, listened to hundreds of people and came forward with the recommendation to restore French immersion to Grade 1. That is what we followed.

Mr. Higgs: If we are following the past Conservative plan so closely, would you not think that it would have been in the 10-year plan? That is the discrepancy here. It was not in the plan. That meant that it was not something that the people who were developing the 10-year plan for this government saw as the right move at this time. It was not in the plan that 2 700 retired teachers think is the right move at this time. That is why we need to stay current with the situation. It was not a case where we saw that the results were so poor that we needed to rethink.

We have researched the labour and mobility chapter of the Agreement on Internal Trade that relates to the teaching profession, and we have been unsuccessful in determining the recent changes that must have occurred to compel the government to bring forward these changes to teachers' licences at this particular time. Can the Premier or the Education Minister provide those changes to the labour and mobility agreement to this House and to the people of New Brunswick, including the 7 000 unemployed or underemployed teachers who are in our province right now?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The Leader of the Opposition is giving the impression that, when we restore the early French immersion entry point to Grade 1 next September, the implementation will be done exactly as it was before. However, this is not the case. In fact, we have said several times



that, as a government, we would do everything in our power to reduce the challenges and problems that could arise as the early French immersion entry point in Grade 1 is implemented.

We were very clear that we did not want to do things as they were done in the past. We realize that improvements are necessary, and this is why, when we made the announcement, we clearly said we would invest more in education to ensure we give all our students the best possible chance to be well educated in a first-rate system.

[*Original*]

Mr. Higgs: It is interesting to hear that things may be done differently this time. I would like to think that the classroom teachers would be part of that discussion. “Done differently” means that you do not put a whole new curriculum change into the classroom and then just cause the teachers to make it work as best they can. You need a plan, you need well-thought-out execution, and you need the teachers’ direct involvement so that we do not disrupt the classroom once again.

Over and over again, I have stated that we all have messed with classrooms. We all have done it. Now is the time to bring stability. Now is the time for teachers to play a key role in working with this government to develop a 10-year plan that we can all sign off on so that we do not play with this going forward. That is the point. I would like to know more about the modified version of French immersion in Grade 1. I would like to know more of what the Premier is discussing in that regard.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The Leader of the Opposition is giving the impression this is the first time he is hearing that we will do things differently. I have said this several times, and, if the Leader of the Opposition wants, I can certainly find my quotes to show him that I have said this in response to his questions during previous question periods.

[*Original*]

I have to point out again that the Leader of the Opposition is advocating for stability, and I get it. I have listened to many teachers. I have met many teachers and many others in the system as well, and they do want stability. I get it—of course. We are not going to follow only the principle of stability, because I think we all agree that we need to ensure that we continue to improve the results that we get out of our education system.

For the Leader of the Opposition to say that we need stability and that it should be the overriding principle and then to say on the same day, in the same breath, that the system is broken and that we have to overhaul it completely... I think it is a bit unfortunate that he is talking out of both sides of his mouth.



Enbridge Gas New Brunswick

Mr. Stewart: Not long after arriving in the people's House, the Premier stood and proclaimed the importance of perception. He said:

The perception of politics and the perception that the political system is working for New Brunswick is often just as important as, if not more important than, some of the outcomes. New Brunswickers need to believe in their political system if they are going to entrust the government with making important decisions

Today, I would like to ask the Premier whether perception is still as important to him as it was then. Does he stand by his words?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: It is a bizarre question. I figure that I know where the member opposite is going. I guess he wanted to waste his question on that sort of rhetoric, which is fine.

To us, it is important, of course, to ensure that we are as transparent as possible when it comes to everything that we are doing as a province and as a government. It is also important for us to work with New Brunswickers, and that is exactly what we have been doing. We are listening and getting things done. We have been so pleased to work with New Brunswickers and to see their hard work coming to fruition, getting us the results that we all want to see for our province.

In 2015, we saw that the economy grew in our province at a rate of 2.3%—the largest increase of the economy since 2004 in our province and the third-best economic growth rate in the country. On top of that, New Brunswickers are working hard not only to grow the economy but also to get more money in the pockets of all New Brunswickers, because we had the largest wage increase in the country year over year.

Mr. Stewart: On Friday, the Gallant government once again brought the hobnailed boot of its majority down across the throat of democracy in New Brunswick. It brought in yet another closure motion. This time, it was on the Enbridge deal. This is the fifth time in two years that the government has brought closure. This time, it is the subject of a conflict of interest investigation. The situation got to a point where we clearly felt that the perception of the Premier working with a member of his three-person transition team to ram through Bill 6 warranted serious action. What perception should the people take from this situation, in the Premier's opinion?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I had a meeting with the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the third party in which we spoke about the debate with regard to the bill that the member opposite is speaking about. I asked the Leader of the Opposition to make all his discontent known, to debate the issues of the bill, and to make very clear whether or not he is supportive of the bill and why. All that I asked of him was that we would, at one point, be able to vote on the bill. That way, we could make sure that the deal, on which this government has worked very hard to



save \$800 million of liability on the people of New Brunswick, would be able to pass. I told the Leader of the Opposition that he could debate it. He could make sure that it would be very clear that he had problems with the bill, if that was the case, but we would at least be able to vote on the bill.

The minute after, we had the member opposite starting to filibuster. We had the member opposite asking frivolous questions of our minister, with no substance behind his questions. All the while, the Leader of the Opposition knew that we would have to do this, which is an unfortunate message, but it had to be done to pass the bill.

Mr. Stewart: The Leader of the Opposition and the people on this side of the floor worked with the government, but you cannot work with the government. It would not budge on anything, and we knew that the deal was bad. Our former government wanted this to go to a settlement in 2019, knowing that the lawsuit was frivolous. Although the negotiations were wide open, we were never going to settle this unless the deferral account was gone and adjustments were made. We are talking about a company that promised 70 000 customers. It never got past 13 000. Now, it is back down to 12 000.

I am saying today that I want to know, in the Premier's opinion, what is in this for the government. What is in this for the Premier? What is in this for his whole Liberal government? We want to know why they would sign this deal without renegotiating a new one. They could have easily repealed our old legislation.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Let's go back to the heart of my answer. I told the Leader of the Opposition that we would like to pass this bill and that we had no problem with him being against it and voicing his discontent on what he did not agree with in the bill. I asked him that we be able to vote on it instead of having to bring closure.

The Leader of the Opposition has no interest in working with us. The Leader of the Opposition, in fact, saw an opportunity—a political one, at that—and told his critic to rev up his criticism and to waste time by asking frivolous questions of the minister so that we would have to bring closure. If that is the way that the Leader of the Opposition wants to do politics differently, that is okay.

When it comes to the legal battles, I very much appreciate the opinion of the member opposite, the QC, who, in his opinion, thinks that the lawsuits were frivolous. From the advice that we got, that was certainly not the case. There was a potential liability of \$800 million that the people of New Brunswick would have had to pay, so we came to a deal that was right for the province, right for our economy, and right for the people of New Brunswick.

Mr. Higgs: I think that it is only fair that I comment on this. The Premier and I did have a discussion about this bill. We did meet. There were several of us, with the legal folks who looked at this bill. We also learned that the opportunity to renegotiate it was in 2019, and we



suggested repealing our own Act, Bill 18. Repeal it, and that would settle the lawsuit. There would be no more discussion as to whether it is frivolous or not frivolous. It would settle it.

My point is that here we are, putting forward a solution to help the government not bind us for 50 years in a situation where our ability to provide gas at a competitive price throughout this province is severely limited, on a business case that was flawed from the very onset. The opportunity is to repeal Bill 18, put it off the table, and negotiate the right deal for this province in 2019. That was our solution. I have worked with big companies, and I know that we can get a better deal.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Do not worry. We know that the Leader of the Opposition worked in the oil and gas industry. We are very well aware of that.

I have to say, then, that, if that was such a magical answer, when the member opposite was the Minister of Finance, why did he and his Cabinet not do exactly what he is proposing? I would like him to tell us whose fault it was then, in his Cabinet? Whom in his Cabinet would he like to throw under the bus, for him to say that it was not possible to do when he was the Minister of Finance? All the facts were the same back then.

(Interjection.)

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

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I ask that the Leader of the Opposition explain to us why in the world he could not get it done when he was the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Higgs: I think there is some confusion here. Bill 18 was what we put in place in 2011 or 2012. Bill 18 was to allow an open market and to let the gas flow in this province, allowing companies in central and northern New Brunswick to take advantage of a gas supply that they would otherwise not see. Bill 18 was what we put forward, and we saw no reason to repeal it.

However, in order to save this government and our province from a 50-year deal that not only is unfortunate but also is tying the hands of gas supply in this province... It is creating and perpetuating a deal that was flawed from the very beginning, a deal that saw only 12 000 customers out of 70 000, and we are going to perpetuate it. The offer for us to repeal our own Act of 2012, I would say, goes beyond politics. When have you heard that before? That is what we wanted as a solution, and it still could be a solution, Mr. Premier.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Once again, I do not think the Leader of the Opposition asked me a question, but it is fine; I understand his arguments.



We were facing a situation that could have required taxpayers to pay \$800 million in connection with two lawsuits filed because, when the Leader of the Opposition was Minister of Finance, his government tore up a contract with this company.

We worked very hard for a very long time to try to reach an agreement that would make sense for our economy and the people of our province.

[Original]

Having the Energy and Utilities Board be able to monitor and to do the job that it was built to do, we believe, is a great alternative for the people of New Brunswick. We have seen time and time again the EUB play its important role, and we have no doubt that, come 2019... We will have frozen rates and very competitive rates from now until then. After that, the EUB will do a great job of providing the right oversight over energy costs when it comes to natural gas.

Mr. Higgs: Again, I think that we are talking past each other. Repealing Bill 18, which we put in place in 2012, will eliminate the lawsuit. There are no grounds for the lawsuit. The deferral account will continue to grow to 2019. The opportunity is to discuss this directly with the Premier... We were not able to do that. The opportunity is to have the lawsuit dismissed—not bind the hands of our province for the next 50 years—and to create a deal that is best for New Brunswickers going forward, not a deal that was created 20 years ago and that has proven to be flawed. That is the opportunity.

We get rid of the lawsuit, we get rid of it tying our hands for 50 years, and the case is over. We discuss the right deal for New Brunswick in 2019. No matter who is there, we have the opportunity to do the right deal. That is what I was asking the Premier. That is the opportunity. For us to put forward suggesting to repeal our own Act—how much more nonpolitical can you get than that?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We have gotten a great deal. We have worked with the proponent. We have had, I believe, a very good outcome from those discussions. We have been able to get the liability, the potential liability, of \$800 million off the backs of New Brunswickers. We have been able to get very competitive rates from now until 2019. Then, beyond that, we will have the EUB play its role on oversight when it comes to protecting the consumer.

We have gotten a great deal. It is a very good deal, especially given the circumstances in which the Leader of the Opposition, when he was the Minister of Finance, decided to rip up a contract with the proponent.

We are working very hard to ensure that we have competitive rates. We are going to have a strong energy sector, and we are going to ensure that it plays the role it has to play in growing our economy. We are very happy to see the outcomes that we have had of late when it comes to economic growth. We believe that, with the decisions and the things that are getting done, it will continue to happen.



Property Tax

Mr. Coon: CBC's Robert Jones has published a series of stories drawing attention to the fact that New Brunswick has forgone nearly \$380 million in property tax revenue over the last 40 years. Some of these tax expenditures were designed to meet important social goals, such as preserving agricultural land, but others have long ago outlived their *raison d'être*, such as exempting Irving Oil's petroleum storage terminal or the Irving Repsol LNG terminal.

I have tabled a motion that would see the government publish revenues forgone through tax expenditures so it is transparent to all New Brunswickers where we are giving up tax revenue and for what purpose. Will the Minister of Finance commit to supporting this motion so that New Brunswickers can have a transparent accounting of revenues forgone?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: The province is currently conducting a review of all tax expenditures. Of course, it is very important for us to take into consideration the priorities of our province. We have a fiscal responsibility to get our house in order. Also, we want a system of taxes that is relevant, that is fair, that is progressive, and that also serves both economic and social purposes.

I am happy to say that we are taking on this review. It is a thorough review of all expenditures together so that we are not looking at it piecemeal. There is impact, interplay, among them. It is important that we do stay relevant. Yes, we are committed to doing this review. Results will come back to government, and we will make some decisions. Thank you.

Mr. Coon: One of the things that CBC's Robert Jones found was that large freehold forestland—all forestlands, in fact—have received special tax treatment for years, whether or not the land is owned by a large multinational corporation or a family and whether or not it is managed sustainably. For example, Brookfield, a global asset management corporation, owns 308 ha of freehold forestland in New Brunswick, valued at \$228 million. For tax purposes, the province assesses it for \$31 million. J.D. Irving owns even more land than that.

We want to see fairness, as the minister has said. The question is: Will the minister modernize the property tax treatment of corporate-owned freehold forestlands so that billion-dollar corporations start paying their fair share?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I would like to thank the member of the third party for the question. Of course, we want to consider competitiveness and fairness. In this, we have to consider individuals and small business owners. We have to consider what is fair and what is progressive. All these principles have to guide us in how we go forward with treating taxes. It is also important to say that, with respect to tax credits, tax exemptions, and tax rebates, all these systems were built by multiple governments over many, many years. It is important that we commit to take a look at these, and that is what we are doing.

Mr. Speaker: Final question.



Mr. Coon: In 2012, the Department of Finance launched an initiative to make the property tax system fairer, more equitable, and transparent. It published a white paper, in fact, called *Improving New Brunswick's property tax system*. At public accounts the other day, when I asked the Deputy Minister of Finance whether they had evaluated the effectiveness of this effort that was undertaken just four years ago, she said, no, they had not.

My question for the minister is: When will the minister report back to this House on the results of her reevaluation of the property tax systems, tax expenditures? When will we hear about it?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: We are operating in an arena here where we want to be transparent. We are undergoing this review at the moment. When the review is complete, the recommendations will come to government. We will make some decisions at that time. However, it is going to take a few months to complete the review.

I want to remind people as well that the tax exemptions, rebates, and credits all serve very important purposes that are economic and social. We care very much that they are relevant and that they are still serving the needs that they intend to serve today. We have done some great things on the social front through our tax expenditures, and we will continue to do so. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker: The time for oral questions has expired.

