

March 22, 2017

[Original]

Government Loans

Mr. Higgs: Today's business headlines are blaring that the Sears owner says that there is substantial doubt that he can stay in business. The company lost \$2.22 billion in the year ending January 28. Since 2013, it has accumulated \$7.4 billion in losses and has seen revenue fall 44%, to \$22.1 billion. Its total liability stands at \$13.19 billion. Can the Premier describe the process that led him to believe giving millions and millions of dollars to Sears was a good idea? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We are focused on growing the economy. We are focused on helping New Brunswickers be able to stay in our province, come back to our province, and raise their families here in our province. We want to make sure that we provide them with good, solid jobs so that they can stay here in this beautiful province, and we are working with multinational businesses to have them invest in the province.

Now, unfortunately, the member opposite will not celebrate when a multinational wants to invest in New Brunswick. Instead, they want to try to make it look as though this multinational...

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Instead, the Leader of the Opposition wants to criticize these multinational businesses that are investing in our province. Does Sears have challenges? Absolutely. We actually hope that New Brunswick is going to be able to help it with its challenges. We are going to be able to have top-of-the-line services because of good New Brunswickers who are good at providing services to people around the world. It will help save Sears money and deliver the best services for that business.

Job Creation

Mr. Higgs: Once again, we see that the facts do not matter for this government. On Monday, 33 people lost their jobs in St. Stephen when Superior Tanks closed down. We want those employees and their families to know that we are thinking of them. Today, 35 000 New Brunswickers need a job. So far this year, the labour force is down by 5 000 people and 3 000 jobs have been lost. The Premier says that he has a plan for jobs. What we have seen is a plan for press releases and ribbon cuttings. Could the Premier take his allotted minute to respond, without spin, insults, or rhetoric, and tell the House what he has for a plan to create 10 000 jobs by the end of his mandate?



Hon. Mr. Gallant: Unfortunately, the Leader of the Opposition, in his preamble, mentioned about five things. I would like to comment on them, but I have only a minute.

First, I want to say that all our thoughts are with the families of those in St. Stephen who have lost employment. We are going to work very hard to ensure that we continue to grow the economy and create jobs in all regions of the province, including St. Stephen. That is why we have done things like promising and committing to invest in downtown centres like St. Stephen's. This will help them revitalize their downtown, help businesses grow, and invest in their communities. That is why we have committed to ensuring that we will never close the Charlotte County Hospital, because that is important to the families and businesses of that area. That is why the Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries and I were in Boston. Over the past few days, we were in Boston trying to get business for the Charlotte County fishermen and producers of seafood and get it around the world so that we can create jobs.

Mr. Higgs: Does the Premier know the number of jobs lost or added during his mandate thus far, as reported by Statistics Canada, from October 2014 to February 2017?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I want to go back to the preamble that the Leader of the Opposition mentioned. He asked how we are going to create jobs. We have an Economic Growth Plan that is focused on investing in the priorities of New Brunswickers. It will help stimulate our economy.

[Translation]

In accordance with the New Brunswick Economic Growth Plan, we will invest in our infrastructure. We are very proud to be working with the Trudeau government to make strategic investments that will not only create jobs, but will also help our businesses compete internationally.

We will help our businesses. With agility-fostering measures, we will make sure we can respond quickly when opportunities or challenges arise for our industries. We will also invest in people. We will invest in the education and training field, since having a skilled workforce is very important for the New Brunswick economy. In addition, we will continue to make innovation investments, which will, once again, help our businesses compete internationally.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: The short answer is that the number of jobs is a net gain of 100. However, given recent statistics, that likely has changed downward. The Premier has a year and a half to create 9 900 jobs in order to keep his platform promise—10 000 new jobs in the mandate. That is the basement. That is the guarantee. It is how the Premier presented his promise. Other than taxpayer-funded jobs, does the Premier have any other plan to create jobs in this province and to meet the goal of 9 900?



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: As we have said a significant number of times over the last few years... It is unfortunate that the Leader of the Opposition does not want to listen to the answers.

However, we were very clear during the election campaign. We said we would invest in various sectors, such as infrastructure, and in programs, like the Youth Employment Fund. We said we would lower the small business tax rate and increase the minimum wage. We said we would tax the wealthiest 1% of taxpayers more heavily, so we could offer programs such as free tuition for postsecondary education.

When we add all this up, we see that all the campaign commitments fulfilled will create 10 000 jobs. We are actually fulfilling our platform commitments and creating jobs and opportunities for the people of the province. We saw this in 2015, when the economy grew by 2.3%, the best growth rate since 2004, here in New Brunswick.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: The question was about jobs other than taxpayer-funded jobs because we believe that the economy is supported by private sector investment and that is the long-term, sustainable growth. Taxing and spending and buying jobs through taxpayer dollars does not achieve that result.

Does the Premier know the number of people lost or added to the labour force during his mandate, as recorded by Statistics Canada, from October 2014 to February 2017? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I would be very happy to get back to the member opposite, when we can have a look at Statistics Canada to ensure that we have the right number for what we have seen when it comes to the labour force since we became the government.

I think it is important to note, though, that, in 2015, our first full year as the government, the economy grew by 2.3%. This was the best economic growth rate since 2004. It was the third-best economic growth rate in the country. The economy is estimated to grow again in 2016 and again in 2017, meaning that we will have three consecutive years of growth. We are focused on ensuring that we create jobs and opportunities for the people of our province to stay here or to come back here.

I have to ask the member opposite this, if he wants to talk about all these statistics: Can he tell us how many jobs, net gain jobs in the economy, were created when he was the Minister of Finance?



Economy

Mr. Higgs: Given the punch lines that always come out about 2015—and then, of course, there was a decline in the following year, 2016-17—if 2015 was such an accomplishment by this government, as it continues to promote that it was, I would like to have the government indicate exactly what happened in 2015. What did this government do that caused that spike? If it did something, then why does it not keep doing it? I would suggest that it had a whole lot to do with the exchange rate, the forestry sector, and the refinery investment. How much, if anything, did this government have to do with any changes in 2015? If it had its finger on the pulse, why did it not keep doing it in 2016-17? Why have we seen that drop-off? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: To use words that have now been passed as being parliamentary, that is inaccurate and nonfactual. The member opposite clearly does not understand the economics of our province. In 2015, the economy grew by 2.3%. For him to say it declined in 2016 is false. For him to say that it is estimated to decline in 2017 is inaccurate. The economy grew. This was the economy in 2014, this was the economy in 2015, this was the economy as it was estimated to be in 2016, and this is the economy as estimated for 2017. That is growth every single year. The member opposite is pulling a fast one on New Brunswickers. I ask him to retract his comments and make it very clear that he knows the economy has grown for three years in a row.

Mr. Higgs: Clearly, the Premier does not understand how GDP growth is calculated. It is not accumulated year after year. It does not become something you just add year after year. Sustainable growth comes from... You have 2.3% one year, and I ask: What did the Premier do to accomplish that? The answer is: Nothing. Then, you have a decline the next year, from 2.3% down to 0.6%, and then the next year, to 0.4% or 0.5% or whatever the number is.

Our growth is less than 1% and is projected to be less than 1% by all credible agencies, so let's not pretend it is something it is not. Let's not pretend that the only issue that is driving any sort of activity is tax and spend, and that is what this government is really good at. Will the Premier admit today that the tax-and-spend philosophy of creating jobs is digging us deeper into a hole and will continue to do so?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: This is absolutely fantastic. I would like the Leader of the Opposition to explain his alternative facts in detail. I would like him to explain how an economy like ours in New Brunswick could grow by 2.3% in 2015 and then grow again, not at the same rate, in 2016 and be estimated to grow again in 2017. I would like him to explain how that is a decline. At what point in his alternative facts is that a decline? I cannot believe that the previous government obviously appointed a Minister of Finance who has no idea how to do statistics, has no idea how to run the numbers.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.



Hon. Mr. Gallant: We should not be surprised, though. Every single time he missed his targets to reduce the deficit—every single time he missed his targets—he blamed everybody in his Cabinet. It was the Premier’s fault. It was Paul Robichaud’s fault. When will the Leader of the Opposition take responsibility, and when will he explain the right numbers to the people of our province?

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Higgs: I do not think that there is any area in the alternative fact category that could supersede what we have seen from this government. I would suggest that the Premier talk to the economists, talk about how the GDP is calculated, and talk about what it means when it goes from 2.3% to 0.6%. Ask them whether that is a growth in the economy. I would ask him to talk to the experts because, obviously, there seems to be a big misunderstanding of how the economy works and what demonstrates growth—sustainable growth or taxpayer-funded growth.

The New Brunswick labour force has shrunk by 1 700 people since this government took office. Since 2014, the Premier has delivered a shrinking workforce, a shrinking population, and no job growth. Yet, three months ago, the Gallant government spent several hundred thousand dollars advertising that New Brunswick was a “growth leader” and had “a soaring economy”. Would the Premier care to defend that waste of taxpayers’ money today in the House? Was the government right to spend \$360 000, claiming that we had a “soaring economy” when, all around us, people are saying: What is he talking about? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I want the Leader of the Opposition to explain again, please, how the economy can grow by 2.3% in 2015 and can be estimated to grow by about 0.6% or 0.7% in 2016 and 2017. I would like him, again—because this is fun—to explain to the people of New Brunswick where, on that track, there was a decline.

Then I would like him to talk about his time as the Minister of Finance when we saw, in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014, three years where the GDP growth was negative. I would really like to hear the Leader of the Opposition. When, from 2015 to 2017, the GDP grew every single year, we would argue that it means that the economy has grown. In three of the four years that the Leader of the Opposition was the Minister of Finance, we saw it actually go in the other direction. In his opinion, is that increasing?

The Leader of the Opposition has really painted himself into a corner, and it is bit embarrassing. I ask him to apologize for what he is trying to do to mislead New Brunswickers.

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.



Mr. Higgs: What the Premier fails to realize is that he is not talking to Grade 6 students now. He is talking to people who actually know how the economy works and actually know how the GDP is calculated and just what it means when you are running along at less than 1% growth. What do you do? You just spend more money. This government spends more money because that is the answer. Tax more. Tax what—\$500 million, \$600 million, \$700 million? Spend \$800 million or \$900 million more? Oh, it is going to get better, trust me.

We are going to hit the wall, and this government does not worry about that because all it is focused on is the next election.

Parlee Beach Provincial Park

Yesterday, the Premier responded to my question about Parlee Beach. Let's talk about Parlee Beach. There could be a perception of conflict, so the Minister of Health recused himself.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr. Higgs: Let me repeat: The Minister of Health recused himself. Is it the Premier's position that the Minister of Health recused himself? Will the Premier acknowledge, for the record, that this is what he stated yesterday, as recorded in Hansard—that "the Minister of Health recused himself"? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: There is no way that I am letting the Leader of the Opposition get away with what he is talking about.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order, members. Members.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: He needs to explain to the people of New Brunswick how he is trying to say today that growth of our economy in 2015, 2016, and 2017 is, in some way, a decline. At what point was there a decline?

(Interjection.)

Mr. Speaker: The member for Moncton Southwest will come to order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: At what point in three of the four years in which he was the Minister of Finance, slashing education and health care, does he think there was an increase of the GDP growth?



I would also like to make it very clear. He says that we are talking to people who understand the economy. The cheap shot would be to say that I am talking to the Leader of the Opposition and, clearly, that is not the case. However, I am not going to say that, because the Leader of the Opposition knows the numbers. It is pretty basic. What the Leader of the Opposition is doing today, therefore, is very misinformed or very sad. He is trying to mislead New Brunswickers. The truth is that New Brunswick businesses are working hard to create jobs and grow the economy, and that is what they have done over the past three years.

Mr. Higgs: The only misleading here is in not telling the province the true story about the state of the province. That is what is misleading. What are the economists saying? What does the book by Richard Saillant say? What has he said about where our province is heading in every sector? What has he said about taxing and spending, as in this is not going to help?

I am going to talk about Parlee Beach. I have asked a question. Yesterday, the Premier responded to my question about Parlee Beach by saying: “there could be a perception of conflict, so the Minister of Health recused himself”. Let me repeat that: “so the Minister of Health recused himself”. Is it the Premier’s position that the Minister of Health recused himself? Will the Premier acknowledge for the record that this is what he stated yesterday, as recorded in Hansard, that it was the Minister of Health who actually recused himself? Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: With regard to this file, our government has been very clear and transparent. The Minister of Health finally received advice from the Conflict of Interest Commissioner to recuse himself from the file, and this is precisely what we did as a government.

[*Original*]

I am not letting this go. The Leader of the Opposition needs to explain. If he is saying that somebody is misleading people in this Legislature, then I would like him to explain how he is going to try to tell New Brunswickers that, in 2015, when they worked hard, rolled up their sleeves, and created jobs and growth, and we saw a 2.3% increase in the GDP... It is estimated that, in 2016 and 2017, we will see the GDP increase yet again. How is that a decline?

This is serious because this demonstrates what he is willing to do to try get a headline and what he is willing to do to try to become the Premier so that he can slash in education, slash in health care, and focus on the deficit, which he was not able to do when he was in the last government. We are investing in growth and are creating jobs. Will the Leader of the Opposition please acknowledge it?

Mr. Higgs: Telling the real facts to New Brunswickers is not about getting a headline. It is about starting on a basic foundation and moving forward. It is not about saying one thing or taking on one hand, giving on another, and saying that is a good policy.



The reason I asked the Premier the question about the Minister of Health's recusal is that, three questions later in a response yesterday, the Premier stated:

[*Translation*]

The government asked him to recuse himself from the file.

[*Original*]

The government asked him to withdraw from the file. That is different from the Minister of Health recusing himself. Any reasonable-minded person would believe that there are two different statements being made. Either the Health Minister jumped, or he was pushed. Did the Minister of Health recuse himself, as the Premier said yesterday, or did the government ask him to withdraw from the file, as the Premier also said yesterday? I am just looking for clarification.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The Minister of Health has acted very responsibly throughout this file by going to see the Conflict of Interest Commissioner. That is the commissioner who is responsible for ensuring that we, as MLAs, are doing everything that we can to be as transparent and accountable as possible. The minute that there was a potential for a recommendation by the steering committee with regard to ceasing development in the Parlee Beach area for a period of time, the Minister of Health very prudently went to see the commissioner again. Because of that, we, as a government, of course made the decision that he be recused from the file, as that was the commissioner's advice. It was only because there was no conflict, but there could be the perception of conflict.

I would like the Leader of the Opposition to answer the question. In 2015, 2016, and 2017, the estimates are that the economy grew every single year. Under his government—the statistics are there; they are not even estimates—it retracted three of the four years. Could he explain why he is trying to tell New Brunswickers that, over the past three years, there has been a decline?

Property Tax

Mr. Higgs: To end the topic of the GDP, the government should actually have an assessment done on 2015 and then come back to the House and say: Here is what caused the 2015 spike. Then it dropped to 0.4%, 0.6%, or whatever the exact numbers were. It dropped from 2.3% down to the 0.6% or 0.4%. There is no indication that it is going to climb or move further. It may stay in the half-of-a-percent range, and that is what the projections are. That is my point. Maybe just define this next time: What does 2.3% mean? How did you, as a government, get there? There are more details than just saying that everyone was working hard. Yes, I am sure that they were, but there are a lot more details.

This year's mishandled tax assessment mess is another tax grab. This government has already taken around \$800 million in additional tax revenue from New Brunswickers. Now, these



assessments are hitting and hurting families hard. Homeowners are paying more and more tax. Families living in apartments will be forced out due to higher rents and their buildings being closed. Does the minister have an estimate...

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I have a very simple question for the Leader of the Opposition. He did this motion while he was talking. Was he talking about the growth of the economy, the growth rate? Was he talking about the economy? He said it again: No, no, there was a decline. It should be going like this. I would like him to clarify it again. The economy, over the past three years, has done this. The GDP growth has not. However, in terms of the GDP growth, one year, the economy grew. It grew again, and it is estimated to grow again.

Would the Leader of the Opposition please tell New Brunswickers what his hand gestures mean? This may sound a little ridiculous, but that is the point that we are at. He said that there was a decline in the economy, which is nonfactual and inaccurate. I would like the Leader of the Opposition to get up and apologize if he has misled the New Brunswickers who are listening and admit that the economy is estimated to have grown over the past three years because of the hard work of New Brunswickers and businesses in our province.

Mr. Higgs: I think that the Premier should talk to an economist about how the GDP is calculated. During the State of the Province Address, he indicated that the GDP is growing by 3.3%, accumulating one year after another. GDP is not calculated that way. I would just suggest that he talk to an economist to understand how it is calculated year after year. When one year is up and the next year is down, that is a decline. I think that what we need is to be clear that this is how it is reported. This is how it has always been reported, and that is the clarification that I would like to see. Thank you very much.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Fantastic. I would actually like to know what the Leader of the Opposition thinks. If the Leader of the Opposition could come back today, tomorrow, or at any point—I cannot wait to see it—I would like him to try to calculate how much the economy has grown over the past three years. He can compare that with how it grew during the four years that he was the Minister of Finance. I would like him to compare that to the seven years before we came to government and to compare that to the three years that we have done. We would love to see his numbers. Of course, we will get people who understand statistics in general. We will get people who are very knowledgeable about the economy to confirm the member opposite's numbers.

Will the Leader of the Opposition commit to coming forward with what we just asked for so that he can explain to New Brunswickers why he is saying that there was a decline in the economy over the past three years? I would like to see the GDP growth, year by year for the past three years, from 2015 to 2017. I would like to see, over the three years, how much the economy has grown, in his opinion. I would like to see the four years when he was the Minister



of Finance and the seven years before we came to government. Will the Leader of the Opposition provide that to New Brunswickers?

Children at Risk

Mrs. Shephard: Yesterday during question period, the minister of social development could not really tell us what the national average of child deaths was, so we provided him with that number. I would like to give him a little simpler question today, to begin with.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mrs. Shephard: I would like to ask the minister whether he could tell me how many child deaths were referred to the committee in 2015 and 2016.

Hon. Mr. Horsman: It is always important to talk about this subject so that we do not forget. We do not forget because we need to learn and do better. I can tell you that our government's priority is children and all families of New Brunswick. The Department of Social Development will continue to work hard every day to make things better.

We continue to work with our partners, such as the Child and Youth Advocate, the Child Death Review Committee, and, of course, the Office of the Chief Coroner. All deaths of children under the age of 19 are investigated by those three individuals or committees. In terms of any recommendations that come out of those, we publish them publicly. We act on those as well. We want to make it better. We want to learn from the mistakes of the past, and we continue to make it better.

Again, we want to continue to work hard, and I want to thank the staff members at Social Development who continue to work hard every day so that we can be better for the families and children of this province.

Mrs. Shephard: The number of child deaths referred to the committee in 2015 was five, and, in 2016, there were five pending.

In March 2016, in the estimates committee, I asked the minister at that time how many children were in foster care, because there was a decrease in the budget. The response that came back was that the reason that there was a decrease in the budget was that, in 2007-08, there were 1 320 children in foster care.

Last year, in the estimates for this past year, 2016, the current minister told us that there were 510 children in foster care. That is a decrease of 61%. In this time frame, from 2007-08, where we had an average of four children referred per year, we now have an average of five children for the two-year period of 2015 and 2016. I would like the minister to explain to us how we are doing excellently in this regard.



Hon. Mr. Horsman: We are working hard every day. We continue to work hard. We could go back and forth with statistics going back to the tragic incidents that have occurred in our province and around the country. We want to work harder at that. One child's death is too many in this province. We want to focus on that. As Minister of Families and Children, I feel that having that right in our name shows that we are focusing on that. Our government's priority is families and children. We will continue to work with our stakeholders. We will investigate all of those and learn from those mistakes, and we will continue to do so to make this the best place to live, work, and raise a family.

Mrs. Shephard: In 2007-08, we had 1 320 children in foster care. In 2016, we had 510. That is a decrease of 61% in children in care.

I was very disappointed by the minister's comments that he made in this House yesterday regarding this file. At one point, the minister responded by saying: "What the member opposite is stating is... out there."

I am still going to repeat my question from yesterday and ask the minister of social development: Will the government fast-track legislation to allow the Child and Youth Advocate to fix the long-standing problem of transparency around deaths of children in care, and will the Premier support him on it?

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: As Attorney General, I would like to answer this question that we are taking very seriously. As my colleague very clearly said, these are tragedies; they are things that should never happen. Of course, one child's death is one too many.

You know, in all this work done by the coroner and by the committee that deals with children's deaths, there is a balance to strike between what is public and what is private, since we have legislation to comply with.

That being said, yesterday, I heard the Chief Coroner and the Child and Youth Advocate say that we could have a better balance between the right to privacy and the public's right to information. We will contact the Access to Information and Privacy Commissioner and the Child and Youth Advocate...

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker: Time.



Health Care

Mr. B. Macdonald: I have a pretty simple question for the Minister of Health. How does the Department of Health define the term “urgent”, as in “the procedure is urgent” or “your condition is urgent”? What does the term “urgent” mean within the Department of Health?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We want to provide the best health care possible. Ensuring that we invest more and that we invest strategically is the approach of this government. Unfortunately, the former Minister of Finance, now the Leader of the Opposition, was slashing into important things like education and health care.

I have to get up again. The Leader of the Opposition was stating things that are nonfactual or inaccurate. I ask him to get up and go to the rotunda. I ask him to go and talk to the media and explain how there was a decline in the economy in 2015, 2016, and 2017 and how, in his mind, there was an increase in the GDP when he was Minister of Finance. Statistics Canada does not agree.

The Leader of the Opposition has been doing this since he became leader. He is spreading falsities, Mr. Speaker. I would suggest that he go to the people of the province and apologize for trying to give the impression that their hard work and the businesses that are working hard to create jobs are not being respected by the opposition. They deserve that. The Leader of the Opposition needs to do it.

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

