

March 23, 2017

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: First of all, I believe that everyone gathered today has the people of London in their thoughts and prayers after yesterday's terrorist attack. On behalf of Her Majesty's loyal opposition, I want to wish them continued strength and courage.

Tendering

In November last year, Service New Brunswick had a series of vendor outreach sessions around the province and the Minister of Service New Brunswick was quoted as saying that the goal was to increase the number of bids we receive from New Brunswick businesses on our tenders. Can the Minister of Service New Brunswick inform us whether there has been an increase in New Brunswick-based bids since last November? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Doherty: Thank you very much for the question. As you know, the tender process is a process that must be transparent. It must be open to all. As a department, we are continuing to improve this, and we are looking constantly at ways in which we can improve the opportunities for New Brunswick companies. We have done an education program in which we consulted with many, many New Brunswick companies, informing them of the procedure in which they can bid on tenders as related to government.

Property Tax

Mr. Higgs: I think that the question was: Can the Minister of Service New Brunswick inform us whether there has been an increase in New Brunswick-based bids since last November? However, I will move on.

As the situation currently stands, the deadline to appeal a property tax assessment is just nine days away. All around New Brunswick, we are hearing assessment horror stories from the homeowners, except maybe from the Minister of Finance. Businesses, campgrounds, apartment owners—you name it—are all concerned. This is another huge tax grab by the Gallant government. Will the Minister of Service New Brunswick tell the House how much more money is being taken out of our economy with this latest tax grab by this government? That should be a very easy figure to provide. How many more tax dollars are there in total, please? Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: I have been hearing opposition members say for a while now that they need a leader. I think that, on their side, they do in fact need a leader.



As you know, we are taking this issue very seriously. We have been transparent since the beginning; we have said that errors had been made, and we acknowledged them. We are not like the members of the previous government, who, when they were in power, never issued as many public announcements as we have saying that errors had been made. At the time, 35 000 errors were made, which, on average, is about 9 000 errors per year.

When I hear the opposition members say it is time we had a leader who assumes responsibility, I tell them that we have one, because he has always wanted us to be transparent and responsible for our actions, and we are.

[*Original*]

Mr. Higgs: We continue to hear accounts of homeowners whose assessments have exceeded the legal limit. There could be many thousand, yet this government has not explained how this happened or what it will do about it. The opposition has requested a publicity campaign and an extension on the deadline to appeal, but, so far, there have been no changes. The government has stubbornly refused. Once again, I will ask the minister to extend the appeal deadline for assessments and advise the public that there is a major problem, this is what caused it, and this is what we are doing about it—not talking about it, actually doing about it. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: We have said this very clearly: People can request a review at any time if their assessment contains a mathematical error. We will not stick to the end-of-the-month deadline. We have said that, at any time, these people can request a review.

That being said, I am still waiting for the Leader of the Opposition to explain this to me: Why is it that, with over 35 000 errors made during his mandate as Minister of Finance, he did not send a letter to these 35 000 people or, I should perhaps say, he did not issue any public announcements about making, on average, 9 000 errors per year? Why is it that, today, he is suddenly waking up and saying he wants public announcements made?

Yes, we are transparent people. Everybody knows about the errors made this year, because we acknowledged them very publicly. We did not hide them, whereas, during the mandate of the previous government, I do not think that, at any time, there were as many announcements made about this issue.

[*Original*]

Economy

Mr. Higgs: The Premier has been very fixated on the year 2015 but not able to explain or willing to explain what happened in 2015, such as the change in the U.S. dollar, the oil industry, and the forestry sector. However, I would like to ask this: Would the Premier tell the House how



many people actually lost their jobs in 2015 according to Statistics Canada's figures from January to December? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am very pleased that the Leader of the Opposition would raise this issue. First, though, I do want to extend our sincere condolences and our sincere thoughts and prayers to the people in London and to democracies and people from around the world. We are all here in solidarity with our friends. We know that there were many New Brunswickers who found themselves in the area during the attacks. We are certainly thinking of them during this difficult time as well.

With regard to the GDP growth, I am very happy that the Leader of the Opposition has raised this. Again, I want to reiterate that, in 2011, the GDP grew by 0.2%. In 2012, it retracted by 1%. It retracted in 2013 by 0.3%, and it retracted in 2014 by 0.1%. Those were terrible economic years under the Leader of the Opposition when he was Minister of Finance. Over the last two and a half years, we have seen positive growth, and we are going to continue to focus on that.

Mr. Higgs: That is not an answer, not unexpectedly. Some 1 800 people lost their jobs. Will the Premier tell us how many people left the labour force in 2015? Some 1 800 people lost their jobs in 2015. How many people left the labour force according to StatsCan figures from January to December?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: If the Leader of the Opposition wants to quote statistics from Statistics Canada, I think that is great. That is fine. However, I would like him to apologize to New Brunswickers and to set the record straight on his comments yesterday.

Do we still face economic challenges in New Brunswick? Absolutely. Do we have lots of opportunities ahead of us? Absolutely. What we need to do is continue to work very hard to stimulate the economy and create jobs, but we also need, from time to time, to celebrate when we see success. New Brunswickers and businesses in our province worked very hard to grow the economy in 2015 and are estimated to have grown the economy in 2016 and are estimated to grow the economy in this calendar year.

Will the Leader of the Opposition get up and correct the record from yesterday? Will he say that, in fact, New Brunswickers have been growing the economy over the last two and a half years? That was not the case when he was Minister of Finance.

Mr. Higgs: No answer again. In fact, 6 800 people left the labour force in 2015. I guess the Gallant government feels it is above the law. It will not let a little thing like standard accepted reporting practices change its spin, just as the Premier will not let a little thing like universally accepted rules for reporting and recording GDP numbers stand between him and what sounds better as a sound bite.

Yesterday, I tried to help the Premier understand the importance of accuracy, and I am willing to try again. To start, I would like to ask a question. Can the Premier tell me what the CPI, or



Consumer Price Index, numbers are for each of the last three years—2015, 2016, and what is anticipated for 2017? What is the rate of economic growth for our province for 2015 to 2017? I want to know what the Consumer Price Index numbers are for the same period.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I still have not heard the Leader of the Opposition correct his comments from yesterday. Statistics Canada, which he wants to quote today, states that the economy grew in 2015 by 2.3%—the best growth rate since 2004 in New Brunswick and the third best in the country that year. On that cumulative growth, in 2016 and 2017, we are expected to grow in every one of those years. Let's not forget that, in 2016, New Brunswick actually led the country when it came to increasing weekly earnings for New Brunswickers, meaning that New Brunswickers are making more money after 2016.

The Leader of the Opposition wants to ask condescending questions with regard to reporting. I have one for him then. This week, Brad Wall introduced a budget where there is a contingency reserve. Is the Leader of the Opposition going to criticize Brad Wall for a contingency reserve, saying it is some mystical math, or will he say that it is prudent management?

Mr. Higgs: I will carry on. I have not looked at Brad Wall's budget numbers, but I think Saskatchewan is in surplus mode. There is quite a difference between a contingency fund in surplus and one in debt. Therein lies the fundamental principle that escapes this government.

Given these numbers on the CPI, I would like to reiterate what they actually are. The CPI numbers over the last three years are 0.5%, 1.4%, and 2%. These are reported in the government's *Economic Outlook*. Given what the CPI numbers are and following the same formula that the Premiers used to calculate GDP for 2015, 2016, and 2017, does the Premier believe that the rate of inflation in this province is now 3.9%, which would be the cumulative total of the CPI—0.5%, 1.4%, and 2%? That means that our inflation rate is 3.9%, Mr. Premier?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: What is he talking about? The Leader of the Opposition is saying that I used these numbers to calculate the GDP. I did no such thing.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The Leader of the Opposition is completely out to lunch. The 2015 Statistics Canada number has the growth rate of our GDP at 2.3%.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: The member for Portland-Simonds will come to order. The member for Oromocto-Lincoln will come to order.



Hon. Mr. Gallant: In 2016, it is estimated to grow again, and, in 2017, it is estimated to grow again.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: The member for Oromocto-Lincoln will come to order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We cannot even compare that to the record of the Leader of the Opposition when he was the Minister of Finance.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: The member for Oromocto-Lincoln will come to order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The economy retracted under his leadership because he was cutting into education and health care. He still does not get it. Instead, he wants to pretend that there are numbers that he can find that will demonstrate that he actually grew the economy, when he retracted it, and that we are not growing it by working with New Brunswickers, when clearly we are.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I ask the question again. A contingency reserve—does it make sense under Brad Wall's budget?

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Mr. Higgs: When the members opposite cheer and then when they finish hooting and shouting, I would like to remember that we have 35 000 people without work in this province. There are thousands of families, some of them middle class, wondering whether they can hold on to the gains that they have struggled hard to make. Some of them who have worked hard and raised their families out of poverty... Now a cheer will rise in this House of comfort. These debates are serious, and what we are trying to determine is the methodology to tell the real facts about the state of our province so that we can move beyond it. The Premier crows, and the government cheers. There is a province outside feeling insecure, feeling worried. The people just want the real facts.

Now, what I am trying to validate... I am using the same methodology that the Premier has used for the GDP calculation, and I am applying it to the CPI. We both know that you do not add one year over the other. You average. Given that, the average growth of the GDP would be 1.1%. Fair enough. That is great. I understand that. It would mean that the rate of inflation is 1.3%. What I am saying is that we are growing at less than the rate of inflation.



Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Statistics Canada stated that, in 2015, the economy in New Brunswick grew at the third-best rate in the country, at 2.3%. It will grow again in 2016. The estimates in 2017 would grow again as well.

Under the previous government, when the Leader of the Opposition was the Minister of Finance, the economy retracted three of the four years, making it that the economy retracted during that government's mandate. He cannot get away from the numbers. He cannot try to lead people to a fact that this was not the case.

If the Leader of the Opposition wants to talk about real numbers and real facts, Saskatchewan just presented a budget where the deficit is \$685 million. It is not in surplus, as the Leader of the Opposition just said, and Saskatchewan put in a contingency reserve. We got criticized time and time again for the contingency reserve.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I ask the Leader of the Opposition to stand up and criticize Brad Wall. Pick a fight with him about the contingency reserve.

Mr. Higgs: Clearly enough, I am following just basic principles on how the calculation is done by averaging, not by adding. I guess that I will use another analogy. Let's say that the weather on Tuesday was 20°C. Let's say that Wednesday was 20°C, and let's say that Thursday was 20°C. Does that mean that it is 60°C today, or does that mean that the average is 20°C?

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Higgs: It is the same concept. This is not difficult. This follows the same erroneous logic, however, that the Premier uses to promote the GDP. Can the Premier defend anything other than how the facts are calculated?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am shocked. I am absolutely shocked. If the previous Minister of Finance of our province thinks that weather on a daily basis is the same thing as the GDP cumulatively growing, as our economy cumulatively growing, it worries me. I should not be surprised because we can see it in the record of the previous government, when he was the Minister of Finance. That government retracted the economy. There is nothing that he is going to be able to say. There is no number that he can throw up in the air that will deter from that fact. The previous government retracted the economy because it cut into education and health care.



We have grown the economy because we are working with New Brunswickers and businesses, investing in infrastructure, investing in education and training, investing to foster innovation, and making sure that we are cutting taxes for small businesses. The Leader of the Opposition is out to lunch, and I ask him to correct his facts and to stop digging his hole. His analogy about the weather is the most ridiculous thing I have heard as Premier of this province.

Mr. Higgs: It is about accountability. It is about real transparency. It is about telling the real facts. I am not surprised that the Premier is shocked because maybe he does not know the difference. I am not surprised.

Let me say the most shocking thing. I would turn the attention to perhaps the most shocking fact of all. This government is spending our tax dollars at four times the rate of growth of our province. It is increasing the annual spend with only the intention to spend more and no actual commitments to do better. What I want to know is this: If we are spending at four times the growth, how does the Premier expect our economic situation in this province to improve? When we are spending at four times the rate of growth in our economy, do we really believe that we can tax people—carbon tax, marijuana tax—and keep on taxing until people leave or fall broke and declare bankruptcy? Is that the plan of this province—tax and spend?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: On accountability, I would, again, ask the Leader of the Opposition to clarify whether a contingency reserve, when there is a deficit position in Saskatchewan, is as terrible as they made it out to be here in New Brunswick with our government.

Second, look, I am not surprised by the last comments by the Leader of the Opposition. That, clearly, is a difference between us and them. They want us to focus solely on the deficit. The Leader of the Opposition wants to slash into education, slash into health care, so that he can finally balance the books as he promised he would do.

We, on the other hand, are taking a responsible approach. We have cut the deficit in half, all the while growing the economy, all the while investing record amounts in education, and all the while investing more than any other government before us in health care.

Health Care

Mr. B. Macdonald: Yesterday, I asked the Minister of Health a simple question. The Premier answered, but, actually, he did not answer the question. Now that the government members have had 24 hours to consider a simple question, can they please tell us what the definition of “urgent” is in the health care system? What does it mean when someone says to you that your condition is urgent and that you require urgent surgery? What does the health care system mean by the word “urgent”?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: I thank the member opposite for his question, although I would say that it is a little too generic to provide an answer. All health care professionals in the province probably have their versions of what urgent would be. It could be disease-specific. It could be



condition-specific. There is a difference when something is caused by trauma, for example. Is it critical? Is it urgent? These are all situations that could be assessed differently by various health care professionals, whether it be your family doctor or whether it be the specialist that is following you. These are things for which, obviously, we rely on the medical judgment of the health care professionals who work within our system. It is impossible to give a specific answer to that question because it really varies on a multitude of different factors.

Mr. B. Macdonald: Having waited 24 hours for that answer, I would have expected something a little more substantive. If the word “urgent” is not used, what is the priority system for classifying surgeries? What is the classification system that the Department of Health uses? It must have something. Can the minister please explain to us what it is?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: Once again, I find the question from the member opposite very simplistic and very vague. Of course, it all depends on the circumstances. There is a system for each specialty and for each illness. If we are dealing with cancer, a car accident, or various types of rare diseases, the treatment can be different in each case.

I can tell you that, as a government, we are investing record amounts. In fact, this year, the 3.3% increase is the largest we have seen in health since 2010. In addition, I can tell you that we will keep on making the necessary investments to be able to provide quality services to all New Brunswickers.

Mr. B. Macdonald: My question was very precise: What system is used by the Department of Health to determine surgical priorities here in New Brunswick? I asked my question in the other language, and now I am asking it in this one. What system is currently used to establish priorities for surgery here in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: Of course, the member opposite does not like the answer I gave him, but I have already answered this question. Each specialty, each type of surgery has its particularities. To go as far as saying there is a general classification system is misleading; it is not that simple. Of course, the knowledge and expertise of our health care professionals are relied upon. For example, it is known that a certain amount of operating room time is allocated to each specialty, and this is also negotiated between surgeons in various specialties from the two health networks; so, I really do not understand what the opposition member is getting at.

However, I can tell you that we are investing record amounts in health and that we are working closely with all our health care professionals to make sure the quality of the care we provide to the people of our province is impeccable.



[Original]

Property Tax

Mr. Wetmore: Many New Brunswickers are confused by their assessments this year. Among them are owners of so-called park model trailers. Can the Minister of Service New Brunswick tell us how many of these park model trailers have been assessed this year in New Brunswick?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: I know the member opposite will have the opportunity to come back to his question, since, today, he wants figures. I cannot get over it. In fact, if I were him, I would look at the figures from when my party was in power, and I would say: How can I talk about figures when ours were so bad?

That being said, as I have repeated a significant number of times, errors were made over the last year. However, I would like to emphasize the following: We are transparent, we are responsible people, and we are advising the public that errors were made. I would like to point out that, in terms of figures, more and more requests for review were made over the last week. This means that, because we are transparent and are telling people that there are problems, well, over the last week, 4 125 requests for review were made. People are aware that there is a problem, and...

[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Wetmore: Unfortunately, our supercluster minister did not know the answer. It was not even the question I asked that he answered.

I have heard from one constituent who has a 1996 Citation park model. The fair market appraisal is approximately \$5 000. That is the fair market appraisal. His assessment this year is \$46 000. Can the minister explain how the government can appraise something for nine times its fair market value and consider that fair?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: You know, when the opposition members were in power, they created what I would call a white paper in 2012. They studied the issue and made a conscious decision to keep using the fair market value as a model. So, the meaning of true market value is well known. There is a procedure for looking at these figures, and this system that was being used was considered by the current Leader of the Opposition and former Minister of Finance to be fair and equitable.



I therefore do not understand why, suddenly, today, when the number of 10% increases in property value is now lower than it was at the end of the Conservatives' mandate... I remind you that the value of almost 36 000 properties increased by more than 10% in one year of the previous government's mandate. We are now at 5%.

[Original]

Mr. Wetmore: I got half of the answer. Half of the answer was that we are using a fair market value. My question is this: If you are using the fair market value, why would it be nine times more? I did get half of the answer, and I thank the minister. You are using the fair market value. However, unfortunately, in this particular case, it was nine times more.

Can the minister tell us how many appeals the government has received from owners of park model trailers who have seen their assessments go up by outrageous numbers such as this? Now, I am going to take my time and say it slowly to our supercluster minister. How many park model trailer owners have seen their assessments go up by outrageous numbers like this? It is very easy.

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: It is quite easy to answer the question, but I would like to remind everyone in this Chamber that we are doing our job. We are transparent. We are acting. We are working to improve the system. There has been so much publicity and we are so transparent that, during the past week, there was an increase in the requests for review. We are now, in the third week, at 4 125. In the second week, it was 1 790, and in the first week, it was 325. We are transparent. We are working hard to make sure that New Brunswickers know what happened. We should never forget the 35 000 errors made during the mandate of the previous government.

Water Quality

Mr. Fitch: The Minister of Tourism has had a couple of days to get briefed on the employment status of Jacques Paynter and the so-called other people that he mentioned in a comment here in the Legislature. Can the minister now tell us which department Mr. Paynter is working for in relation to the Parlee Beach work? What is that mandate, and when will he be reporting back?

Hon. Mr. Ames: As I always say, it is a pleasure to rise in the people's House to discuss the many great attributes that our wonderful province has to offer. As far as the question from the member opposite goes, Jacques Paynter, as I have mentioned before, has reputable experience in dealing with many types of environmental impact assessments, economic development, and land use.

In terms of the specific department that he would be working for, it would be the Department of Health. However, as everyone is well aware, we on this side of the House are knocking the silos down, and we are working together. I, my colleagues the Minister of Health and the Minister of Environment and Local Government, the Premier, and all my caucus and Cabinet



colleagues care about what is going on at Parlee Beach. We care about what is going on with respect to all the files in Tourism, Heritage and Culture and all files that are important to New Brunswickers.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Ames: We will continue to do so moving forward. If you have any valuable suggestions to add, we are certainly here to listen. We are waiting. Thank you.

Mr. Fitch: It was the Minister of Tourism who made the announcement the other day that Jacques Paynter is working on the Parlee Beach file. Now, we understand that Mr. Paynter is working for the Department of Health. Again, the minister sitting beside the Minister of Tourism said that they are so transparent over there. I know that you are so transparent that I can see right through you.

The fact of the matter is this: Now that the Minister of Tourism is doing the work for the Department of Health, will the Minister of Tourism tell us when the report that Jacques Paynter is working on will be completed? When will it be made public after it is completed? We would hope that the report would include all the costing on what you are paying Jacques Paynter and what you are paying the other people you mentioned. We also hope that it would come with solutions on how to fix the Parlee Beach situation.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I think the minister was very clear when he answered the questions. Of course, he repeated that our government will be transparent.

Since this is the last question for today, I want to take a moment to address the statements from opposition members about the Trudeau government and our work with that government.

We are very proud of the work we are doing with the Trudeau government, whether it be in investing in our universities and our community colleges or investing in water and wastewater systems. We are also investing in projects such as Route 11, the Petitcodiac River restoration project, the Fundy Trail Connector infrastructure project, and the Port of Saint John. The opposition members were unable to access money from the federal government for these files when they were in office. We will also help people with their pensions. We will work with the federal government to obtain an additional \$230 million to invest in health over the next 10 years.

New Brunswick is treated much better by the Trudeau government than it was by the Harper government when it was in office.





Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

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

