

November 16, 2017

[Original]

Health Care Services

Mr. Higgs: Maybe we are the merchants of reality and that does not really work with the government that is currently here. The Premier seems to have gone silent on the Extra-Mural Program case, despite the public meetings around the province and despite the coalition's efforts and demonstrations around the province that this is a real concern—what is happening with the Extra-Mural Program—and the fact that this is a step change in health care in this province and something that people are not wanting and we are not wanting.

I am not sure whether there is a strategy that the Premier plans to follow today in terms of staying silent or not answering the questions. However, to be fair, I want to give him one last chance to get up and tell this House whether he is willing to press pause on the Extra-Mural Program file and make it an election issue in 2018. Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Bourque: I always appreciate the opposition's questions, because they enable us to demonstrate the importance of this partnership, which will make a positive difference in the quality of home care services provided to New Brunswickers. This is a partnership that will give New Brunswickers access to better home care services.

First of all, I want to reassure people that no cuts or changes will be made to services. The same health-care providers will visit people at home. Everything will stay the same, and, eventually, over time, we will see improvements in the health care system. That being said, people will receive the same quality of care. I can assure you that our government's top priority is making sure people receive the best possible health care services.

[Original]

Property Tax

Mr. Higgs: So, there is nothing new there. I guess what we will do is turn our attention to the property tax scandal.

Every day, we learn of more fallout. Saint John has seen \$61 million in reductions so far. Moncton has had \$43 million; Fredericton, \$41 million; Dieppe, \$30 million; Rothesay, \$16 million; Quispamsis, \$12 million. The final figure will not be known until sometime next year. The final impact on cities and municipalities will not be known for at least a couple of years as a result of the freeze this government has put in place. It is a mess, and the Premier



has been identified as the person who set it all in motion. Is the Premier ready today to stand up and take responsibility for his actions? Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: During the last session, I had the opportunity to repeat this often: Our government takes the whole property assessment issue very seriously. As soon as we heard there was a problem, we did everything we could to correct the errors. We made sure to tell people they could request a review and appeal their assessment if they were not satisfied. Then, we wanted to establish a commission, and the Auditor General undertook a review. We all know that she will submit her report very soon, and you may rest assured that we will read it very carefully and follow up on its recommendations, since we are a government of action and we do what needs to be done. However, the previous government, under which the Leader of the Opposition was Minister of Finance, did nothing to address the whole property assessment issue.

[*Original*]

Mr. Higgs: An action government taking everything but responsibility—that is what we have seen consistently.

Often in dispute resolution, it is important to find out who started it. Three separate Service New Brunswick documents have been made public, and all three say the Premier ordered the fast-tracking that started the property tax scandal. They are saying that the Premier started it. Is the Premier ready to acknowledge these documents? Is he ready to finally admit his involvement in setting the property tax scandal in motion? Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: As I said, we are committed to rebuilding public trust in the assessment process, and we look forward to receiving the Auditor General's report.

That being said, I see that the Leader of the Opposition will not stop talking about taking responsibility. Well, he should put his money where his mouth is. When is he going to take responsibility for the thousands and thousands of errors that were made while he was Minister of Finance under the previous government? When is he going to take responsibility? When is he going to take responsibility for his role in the Canaport LNG file? We are still waiting for an answer. He has said in the House that he had no involvement in the file, when we know he did. When is he going to take responsibility, given that this government, under a strong leader, is looking toward the future and taking responsibility? Yes, we will continue taking responsibility.



[Original]

Mr. Higgs: Taking responsibility is obviously a sore topic with this government because it has been proven to do just the opposite many, many times. It is interesting that even though the Premier will not speak today, the position that is being taken is that we are waiting for the Auditor General's report. That is important because what I would like to say now is in relation to the Auditor General's report that is expected to be presented next week.

I am speaking of the initial report that is being projected because maybe we do not know at this point whether she will have more work to do as a result, as was the case with Atcon. We can be fairly certain that the Auditor General, in her report, will be making recommendations, just as she did with Atcon. I can say with absolute certainty that we will not accept another charade about the implementation of the recommendations, as we saw with this government. The question here is, Will the Premier commit today to establishing an all-party committee to oversee the implementation of the recommendations of the Auditor General in the property tax scandal? Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: You know, we are going to take the Auditor General's report very seriously, and we are going to follow up on it; this is not a charade. From the start, from the moment we heard there was a problem with property assessments, we have taken responsibility and have been very transparent. We are looking forward to receiving the Auditor General's report.

That being said, the real charade is knowing exactly how the Leader of the Opposition was involved in the Canaport LNG file; we are still waiting for his answer.

Moreover, a few days ago, the member for Fredericton-York asked in the House why I was lowering my voice. The question I had asked him was not about whether I should lower my voice; it was about whether he was willing to defend his leader concerning Canaport LNG. Obviously, the member was not willing to defend him, because he merely talked about my tone of voice.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: Once again, it is just a continuous dialogue, a continuous deflection, and a continuous avoidance of taking responsibility. There is no possibility of an answer at all, and there is no commitment—no commitment—to follow the Auditor General's recommendation. This is not surprising. What did we see before? What was it? There were 15 out of 19 recommendations not being followed—in a drawer. We are thinking about it. It is coming soon but not being done. We are not surprised that they will not commit.



Government Policy and Procedure

Given the fact that the Premier has decided not to speak on property tax or on the Extra-Mural Program, we will try another topic and see who pops up on this one. We do not seem to be having much luck getting anything from the Premier today. As I stated, let's try another issue. Is the Premier prepared to rise today to tell this House when he first learned that his former Labour Minister was negotiating for a job with a labour union? Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: We have answered that question a great many times in the House. As early as August 21, as soon as the Premier learned the then Minister of Labour was possibly thinking of accepting a new job, he immediately took the necessary steps.

That being said, the Leader of the Opposition is talking about deflection and commitment. I am going to ask him if he will commit to finally telling the House exactly what his involvement was in the Canaport LNG file. He has also talked about taking responsibility. When is he going to take responsibility for his economic failures and the economic downturn during his tenure as Minister of Finance? Sometimes, when I hear the Leader of the Opposition talk, I wonder if he is talking to himself.

[*Original*]

Forestry Industry

Mr. Higgs: Well, we will keep changing topics until possibly someone will actually give an answer, and that would be an exciting moment. At this point, let's talk about the softwood lumber agreement. We know now that our producers are being hit hard. We know that there is a serious situation and what is being done about it is after the fact, as usual, which has been kind of a Johnny-come-lately scenario. At this point, has the government reached out to the Auditor General for her advice on the softwood lumber issue? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Melanson: I think that we have been very strong on the softwood lumber file. It is a sector of our economy that creates a lot of jobs. It is a sector of our economy that is very valuable in some regions of our province. To be quite frank, we have been acting swiftly on this file. Since the issue became an issue, we have been in constant dialogue with the industry and the federal government, and the Premier has actually met the Secretary of State in the United States to make the case that we need an exclusion in our province.

The federal government made a decision to go through the litigation process, which we support. We will work with the federal government. More importantly, we will work with the industries, the employees, and the communities that may be affected by this decision, which is unfounded and unfair, and we do not support the decision.



Mr. Higgs: I want to applaud the minister for at least addressing the issue and for at least discussing the issue, the actions that are being taken, and the considerations that are being made in relation to this file. It is a serious one for our province and our wood producers. We have paid over \$600 000 in legal fees to this point, and to what gain? We have a duty now that is invoked on all our producers and an unfair duty across the province.

The Premier has failed to take timely action on many issues, and the livelihoods of 22 000 New Brunswickers are at stake. Time after time, business after business, the Premier has failed: the Energy East Pipeline project, natural gas, mining—you name it. Under this government, nothing is happening, only increasing taxes. That seems to be the only game that is working for the government—increase taxes, increase taxes, and spend more to buy votes. That seems to be the economic model going forward.

What does the Premier have planned and what is the timeline to deal with the softwood lumber agreement and to try to get reversed the decision that is going to affect so many people in this province? Thank you.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The minister explained the situation very well. We are taking concrete steps, and we are working with the industry and communities. We are also working with employees in the softwood lumber industry. We are also going to continue working with the federal government to make sure, once again, that we come out ahead in this dispute. This would, of course, enable our softwood lumber industry to continue exporting its products and creating jobs here in New Brunswick.

[Original]

I have to take issue with the preamble of the Leader of the Opposition. He seems to still not understand how we have been able to invest more in education, to invest more in health care, and to reduce the deficit by a lot more than half, all the while growing the economy year after year. He does not get it because when he was the Minister of Finance, he was cutting into education and health care and the economy retracted and he still does not understand why. We need to invest in our people if we want to grow the economy in a way that works for everyone.

Mr. Higgs: I know that it gives an opportunity, but it is encouraging to see the Premier actually rise and speak on the topic.

Let's get back to the softwood lumber agreement. We have spent over \$600 000, with poor results. There is a lot of talk about having met Governor LePage and having done all this stuff



last spring, but I am not sure... Obviously, that did not reveal the necessary outcome. What do we do now? There is some dispute being talked about in terms of the Auditor General and the report that she had about the situation here in New Brunswick and the issue that was raised with the Department of Commerce in the United States about, okay, well, the Auditor General saying one thing...

Has the Premier spent any time with the Auditor General? Are we going to reconcile the Auditor General's report so that the facts are all clear and so that we can do the right thing by New Brunswick—we get rid of these duties? What is the next step? We do not want to wait and see. We want to see a proactive plan that is actually doing the right thing by businesses in this province and by the citizens of this province who make their living in the forestry sector. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: There is just one thing and then a question for the Leader of the Opposition. I just want to make it really clear. The Auditor General is accountable to the Legislative Assembly. I think it would be highly inappropriate for me to sit down with the Auditor General and try to reconcile her report, as the Leader of the Opposition is suggesting. So I would like the Leader of the Opposition to clarify to New Brunswickers, to the media listening, and to the Auditor General what he means when he suggests that I sit down with this legislative officer to reconcile her report.

Mr. Higgs: I can appreciate the Premier's position and maybe not understanding what I am suggesting here because we have something that trade... The U.S. Commerce Department has said that this is a major issue for it. It basically cited the Auditor General's report and said this: Our decision is very much based on the fact that there is a report by your own Auditor General that states that there is a system of marketing in this province that needs to be addressed.

My point is this: Is the Premier addressing that issue? And does the Premier understand? This is not putting it in the drawer, as we saw with the recommendations from the Atcon report. This is saying that we have a situation identified by the Auditor General in a report on softwood lumber and the marketing discrepancies. Is that being understood? Is that being addressed so that we can get clarity and start making changes, if necessary, but also so that we can start making sure that we are protecting the forestry industry of this province, which is so critical to the future of so many workers?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I would again ask the Leader of the Opposition to clarify what he means when he suggests that I sit down with a legislative officer, the Auditor General, to reconcile her report. Those terms and words that he used in his suggestion, I think, are highly inappropriate. I would ask the Leader of the Opposition to clarify what he meant by his suggestion that I sit down with the Auditor General to reconcile her report. Can the Leader of the Opposition please clarify to the people of New Brunswick what in the world he is suggesting that we do there?

Mr. Higgs: I think that we can go back and forth a number of times on this issue. If the Premier has not read the Auditor General's report that talked about the softwood lumber industry in



this province, then maybe that is the place to start. He should read the recommendations, because I know that reading the recommendations from the Auditor General has not been a key focus of this government and this Premier. If he has not read the report and if he does not understand the recommendations, then I can understand why he does not want to talk about the issue but wants to try, once again, to deflect it.

I will ask this: Would the Premier read the report of the Auditor General, understand the recommendations, and then deal with the trade and commerce rulings from the United States? Would he basically say, okay, where is our middle ground here and how do we fix this situation so that we are not forced with duties in this province? That is the end result: fair trade practices for our industry in this province. We want a Premier who stands up for the people in this province, not one who sits down or runs off.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Apparently, the Leader of the Opposition wants a Premier who sits down with a legislative officer, the Auditor General, to reconcile her report. Apparently, the Leader of the Opposition is suggesting that a Premier do something that we believe would be highly inappropriate.

I have another question for the Leader of the Opposition, because it is really not clear what he is suggesting here today. Is he suggesting that the Auditor General's report with regard to softwood lumber is accurate or inaccurate? I think that is very important to clarify because I, again, do not understand how he thinks that he should be getting up on his feet today to suggest something that is highly inappropriate—the Premier sitting down with a legislative officer to reconcile her report. Again, does the Leader of the Opposition support the recommendations of the Auditor General when it comes to softwood lumber or does he think that she made mistakes?

Property Tax

Mr. K. MacDonald: Perhaps the Premier, because of his inexperience, could benefit from the experience of the Auditor General.

The Auditor General will very soon bring forward her report on the property tax scandal. We hope that the report will shed light on what happened, the Premier's involvement, and how to prevent a future occurrence. I know that a lot of New Brunswickers believe that the Premier ordered the fast track of the assessments. They also believe that if the Premier had not ordered the fast track of the assessments in the first place, this whole mess would not have occurred.

My question today is for the Minister of Finance or whoever decides to stand up. Will the minister update the House on the latest figures available regarding how much this will impact the province's finances next year?



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: As you know, we have discussed this subject at length.

Over the last few years, until 2011, thousands and thousands of property assessment errors occurred. As soon as we realized there was a problem, we took concrete steps to fix it.

[Original]

The Leader of the Opposition spent all day yesterday and all his questions up until now criticizing me for not answering questions when, actually, I have. Throughout the last few days and weeks, I have spoken in depth about the issues that he has been discussing. Then when he is asked a question about giving an incredibly inappropriate suggestion, he sits down and sends out his attack dog instead. I would ask the Leader of the Opposition to have the gumption to get up and explain to the people of New Brunswick what he means by having me sit down with the Auditor General to...

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Mr. K. MacDonald: I am quite happy to attack Liberal mismanagement and Liberal silliness whenever I see it. Here is an interesting imbalance as well: 8 to 1. Remember that number because for every dollar that the Liberal government has given back to small business in the province, it has taken away \$8 in the form of property taxes.

Still on the topic of taxes and assessments, there are still assessments being adjusted here in the province, and according to the government, it will be sometime next year before all the assessment appeals are completed. However, can the Minister of Finance provide this House with the latest estimate—the latest estimate—on how much this fiasco is going to cost the various municipalities of our province?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: As I mentioned earlier, the Auditor General will soon submit a report on property assessments, and I can tell you that we will take it seriously.

As we have told New Brunswickers, when we realized there was a problem, we resolved the situation once and for all. The system does not work well enough for New Brunswickers, and we are going to fix the problem.

[Original]

With that said, I ask the Leader of the Opposition to get up on his feet. He made an issue of this this morning. Get up on your feet. I ask him to get up on his feet and tell the people what he meant when he said that I should sit down with a legislative officer to reconcile her report.



Also, he should answer this very simple question: Does he agree with the Auditor General's report on softwood lumber, or does he not agree with it? He is the one who brought this issue up today. This is not deflection. This is his getting up and saying that I was not answering questions. He is the one who brought this subject up, so will he get up to explain to New Brunswickers what he meant?

Mr. K. MacDonald: Since the Premier has finally found his feet and, more importantly, his voice, I would ask him another question, staying on the topic of assessments, of course. Can the Premier advise the House as to how much his government paid Nationwide Consulting Company of New Jersey? Let me repeat that in case you did not hear it. How much did his government pay Nationwide Consulting Company of New Jersey for its services in reducing the Canaport LNG assessment by 66% and saving Irving Oil \$5.5 million per year?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I very much appreciate the question. It allows two things. The first is a clarification. Indeed, we took action to repeal the LNG terminal tax break that was given by the Conservative government. Because of that, the LNG terminal is paying more in taxes, and because of that, the city of Saint John is receiving more in taxes from the LNG terminal.

Now for the second reason that I am very happy that the member brought up this subject. Will the Leader of the Opposition please get up and explain to New Brunswickers what he meant when he said that he did not support and promote the LNG terminal tax deal? We know that this sweetheart deal was, in fact, supported and promoted by the Leader of the Opposition. He said in this House, unprompted, that he did not support and promote the LNG terminal tax deal, yet we have evidence that he did. Will he get up and answer the very simple questions that we have been putting to him today on subjects that he himself brought up?

Cannabis

Mr. Fitch: The Finance Ministers from Nova Scotia and Alberta, Karen Casey and Joe Ceci, joined British Columbia in saying that the federal proposal to take 50% of the \$1 per gram tax plus HST and GST on medical and recreational cannabis is unreasonable. Will the Finance Minister tell us whether she agrees with the other provincial Finance Ministers and whether she will also be speaking out against this unreasonable tax grab?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: First of all, I would like to thank the member opposite for the question and for the opportunity to speak about how New Brunswick is getting ready for a legalized environment for cannabis. The top priorities for New Brunswick and for our government are the health and safety of New Brunswickers, keeping this product out of the hands of children and youth, keeping the proceeds away from criminals, and having a product that is regulated, safe, and standardized.



We have done a lot to work toward that. We have a retail model with a subsidiary of ANBL. It has experience and expertise. We have learned from other jurisdictions that have gone before us in terms of legalizing this product that if they could start over again, they would highly recommend that we start in a very tightly controlled model, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Mr. Fitch: The minister is very welcome for the question, and I have another one for her. British Columbia Premier John Horgan has spoken up and said that the provinces are doing the heavy lifting on things from education to enforcement. He said that this tax grab is unreasonable, that the federal government is taking 50% of the tax. Can the Finance Minister advise the House as to whether or not there has been any direction yet from the Premier's Office to the Finance Minister regarding what New Brunswick's position will be with respect to this federal tax grab? Are we going to be for it, or are we going to stand up, as the other provinces have, and say that it is unreasonable?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: Thank you again for the question. I am very pleased again to be able to speak about how we, in New Brunswick, are getting ready for a legalized environment for cannabis. A high priority for us is to have a corporate social responsibility framework. Again, the highest priority is the health and safety of New Brunswickers. We are moving into new territory. We are also trying to recognize, as we outlined in our Economic Growth Plan, that should there be opportunities with regard to supply of the product, New Brunswick will make sure that we are positioned well. We are thinking about this, first of all, from a health and safety perspective, but we are also recognizing that there could be an opportunity. We are always in discussion with our stakeholders and with all levels of government on this matter.

Mr. Fitch: Once again, the minister is more than welcome for the question. When we get to committee, there will be a great deal of opportunity for the minister to be thankful for the questions that we are going to ask on this file, because it is a big one.

There is a deadline of December 10 on the feedback that we are giving to the feds. I am just wondering whether the Finance Minister can advise the House as to what the province's position will be on this federal tax grab. Is it going to be positive, or is it going to be deemed unreasonable? That is where a number of the other provinces have stood up to be counted, saying this is unreasonable.

The minister talks about talking with stakeholders and whatnot. Has there been any communication or direction from the federal fisheries ministry or from the federal Minister of Health? Has there been any direction given from any of the MPs here in New Brunswick as to what the province's position should be on this unreasonable tax grab?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I would really like to hope that this is not the case, but is the member opposite insinuating that the Minister of Finance is a puppet of some sort to other actors?

(Interjections.)



Mr. Speaker: Order. Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The member for Riverview insinuated that the Minister of Finance had to get direction from either the Premier's Office or other ministers who are at the federal level here in New Brunswick.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am going to give the member for Riverview the benefit of the doubt that was not what he meant. I am going to give him the benefit of the doubt. However, given what happened just a few days ago with horrible, disgusting caricatures...

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: The member for Gagetown-Petitcodiac will come to order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: ... giving the impression that, indeed, females in politics are nothing but puppets, we would add that this is at any point a bad thing to insinuate but it is a lot worse when we had that type of caricature a few days ago. Will the member for Riverview get up, correct his statement, and apologize to the Minister of Finance?

Mr. Higgs: I guess thinking of any way to deflect, to defuse, to take away from the subject, and to try to make an issue where there is none is just an example of what this government will do to avoid answering any questions. That is the Premier's whole approach. It is nice to see him getting up, so that is a plus. Mind you, with his whole approach of asking questions of us, it seems to me that he has a real thirst to get back to this side of the House, and we are hoping we can help him with that.

Health Care Services

I want to go back to a question now that the Premier is in getting-up mode. I want to ask a question that I asked at the beginning. Maybe now, he will answer it. In relation to the issue around the Extra-Mural Program, will the Premier make this an election issue? Will he stop the discussions on this file now? Will he make this an election issue in 2018 so we can listen to the voices that are being heard across this province by everyone but this government?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: It is pretty disappointing. There was a real opportunity for the Leader of the Opposition to show leadership there. Instead, he is saying in his questions that it is all about politics for him. He is literally saying: Let's make this an election issue, not an issue where we focus on the patients and what is best for them. He is literally saying: We are doing all of this



because we want to be in government. We will send you to opposition. That is all he is focused on.

The member for Riverview, I think, made a statement that is in bad taste, given what happened just a few days ago. I want to be very clear: I am giving the member for Riverview the benefit of the doubt. All we ask is that he correct his statement and apologize for potentially insinuating something which, hopefully, he did not mean to do. Given what we saw on the poles in Moncton, where we had a horrible, terrible caricature making fun of women who are running in politics, I think that member for Riverview owes that to the people of New Brunswick.

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

