

March 13, 2018

[Original]

## Economy

**Mr. Higgs:** Much has transpired since our last question period on February 8. Just four days later, on February 12, we learned that the Gallant government did some creative accounting to make New Brunswick appear to be tied with Newfoundland for last place in economic growth. The Gallant government even went a step further and made a graph that placed New Brunswick ahead of Newfoundland. In budget estimates, the Finance Minister was unapologetic. Did the Premier approve these dubious actions by his government?

[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** We are working very hard on the priorities of New Brunswickers. I can tell you that, as a government, we are very aware that economic growth is the number one priority of the people of our province. People want us to focus on creating jobs and economic opportunities to grow the New Brunswick economy. We understand very clearly why this is so: It is because people want their children to be able to stay here, in New Brunswick, to work. People want those who have had to move away to find a job in another province or another part of the world to be able to come back here to work.

We are therefore very proud that, since we have been in government, working with New Brunswickers, we have grown the economy year after year. We have created opportunities for our young people to stay here and for New Brunswickers who have moved away to come back to work in the province.

[Original]

**Mr. Higgs:** I guess that means, yes, the Premier did approve the dubious actions by his government.

I want to ask the Premier about the downgrade to New Brunswick's credit outlook by Dominion Bond Rating Service. It was made public on February 27 that Dominion had changed the outlook from stable to negative—the worst that it can be. The outlook could be positive, stable, or negative. The actions of this government have caused the credit rating agency's outlook to go negative for the first time in 14 years. Would the Premier tell us when he learned that the outlook was to be downgraded?

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** We are working very hard on the number one priority of the people of our province—creating jobs and growing the economy. We are very proud of the fact that since we have been the government, by working with leaders, with industries, and with businesses in our province and by getting some businesses to invest in our province for the first time, we have



seen economic growth every single year since 2015. In fact, if you take the estimates for 2018 and the projections that it had for 2017, we have grown the economy at the sixth-fastest rate of all the provinces in the country from 2015 to 2018.

Let's compare that with the Leader of the Opposition when he was the Minister of Finance. By promoting his austerity measures, cutting into health care and education, he actually retracted the economy. During the previous Conservative government's mandate, New Brunswick was 10th when it came to economic growth. During ours, we are 6th and we are not satisfied. We are going to keep going and keep growing the economy and creating opportunities.

**Mr. Higgs:** I will ask for a second time. When did the Premier learn that his government had caused the outlook to be downgraded to negative? What steps have been taken to reverse that outlook? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** Again, there was not a downgrade. The only downgrade that we have seen in recent years was when the Leader of the Opposition was the Minister of Finance. That is the only downgrade that we have seen over the past few years. The Leader of the Opposition, when he was the Minister of Finance, did not get it. He thought that his austerity measures were the right approach. He still thinks that today. Well, we do not agree.

We believe that we need to invest in the priorities of New Brunswickers, growing the economy in a way that works for all people of our province and investing in education to help our children to get the best start in life and to help our people have the skills that they need to be able to get a job here in the province and contribute. We believe that we have to invest more in our health care system and in senior care, giving our people the quality of life that they deserve. We know that the Leader of the Opposition would like to see government make cuts and do everything that it can to balance the books right away. We do not agree. We have a growth agenda, and we are going to invest in it.

**Mr. Higgs:** On February 8, when we last had question period, Moody's Investors Service had called the latest budget of the Gallant government "credit negative". Dominion Bond Rating Service questioned the credibility of the multiyear plan to return to balance because the deficit is going back up. TD Economics said that "The cost of servicing debt will undoubtedly climb". RBC Economic Research said: "With that in mind, we are disappointed that the province is allowing the deficit to rise this year and is postponing the elimination of the deficit."

RBC, TD, Moody's, and Dominion Bond Rating Service were all critical. Is the Premier aware today of any further downgrading in the credit rating or outlook for the province that is coming from these or any other companies that issue credit opinions? Third party opinions matter.

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** I would like to quote a senior economist at the Bank of Montreal who said:

*The Province of New Brunswick is projecting a \$189 million deficit for FY 18/19, or a moderate 0.5% of GDP.*



He refers to “firmer underlying economic momentum, which will help hold net debt steady at 40% of GDP this coming year”.

He goes on to say:

*Interestingly, New Brunswick has seen the **economic backdrop** improve significantly. After stagnating earlier in the cycle, real GDP likely expanded 1.5% in 2017, which would leave three-year average growth at 1.7%. While still lagging well behind the big-three provinces, that is a well-above-potential pace from New Brunswick, and has come alongside an upturn in population growth and stability in the labour force.*

We are on the right track. We are going to continue to have a balanced approach where we ensure that we tackle the financial challenges before us in a responsible way while ensuring that we are investing in growth and creating jobs in the province.

**Mr. Higgs:** We are last in the country in economic growth—last in the country.

In 2014, the Premier said that New Brunswickers were taxed out. Then, he got elected and taxed them another \$1 billion—\$980 million, to be exact. It was an average of \$3 000 per household. Does the Premier recall saying in 2014 that he thought then that New Brunswickers were taxed out? That was before he added \$980 million to their tax bill. Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** The only government in recent memory that has had a downgrade was their government when he was the Minister of Finance and he was doing his austerity with the books. The only government in recent memory that had us at 10th when it came to economic growth was actually, again, the Leader of the Opposition’s government when he was the Minister of Finance.

During our mandate, the economy of New Brunswick has grown every single year. In fact, when you take the collective analysis, you can see that we fell into 6th place of all provinces when it came to growing the economy from 2015 to 2018. Of course, there are some estimates and projections for 2017 and the current year.

With that, we would like to compare it with the record of the Leader of the Opposition when he was the Minister of Finance, slashing into health care and education, and he actually retracted the economy during his four years as the Minister of Finance. That is when we were 10th when it came to economic growth.

**Mr. Higgs:** By the Premier’s very own estimates coming out of the Department of Finance, the outlook in this province is 10th. After \$1 billion of new spending—\$1 billion per year of new spending by this government—our economic growth is 10th. The government fudged the figures to get tied with Newfoundland, but that was exposed.



I would refer to the Standard & Poor's rating that the Premier referenced in his response. The Premier refers to a Standard & Poor's report in 2012, I think. As always, he has a habit of not giving all the details. Would the Premier advise the House what Standard & Poor's had to say about the government at that time when it gave that report? It was very specific, so I would be interested to hear him actually repeat those words.

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** I do not have to repeat the words. I am very interested in the former Minister of Finance, who is now the Leader of the Opposition, telling us what the credit rating agency said when it downgraded his government's rating.

**Mr. Higgs:** I would be glad to because what it said was that it believed that the Alward government was on the right track to solve the fiscal situation. That is right from the document. Maybe I can understand why the Premier would not want to say that because it does not fit into the three-, four-, or five-point narrative that we so often hear.

On Wednesday, March 7, in the *Telegraph-Journal*, there was a story:

*A small group of New Brunswick leaders—including experts in several fields, former politicians,*

*—including a former Liberal Cabinet minister—*

*business leaders and high-ranking civil servants*

*—25 or so people—*

*have launched a grassroots group they hope will help governments strategically solve some of the province's most pressing problems.*

They want to help New Brunswick get back on track.

*The group is called the Coalition of Concerned Citizens Inc. and considers itself non-partisan—willing to work with whatever party is in power*

From the *Telegraph-Journal* story, we learn that the coalition has not had any response or much response from the current provincial government. My question for the Premier is a simple one: Why not, and will he talk to the coalition? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** The credit rating agency had such good things to say about the former Minister of Finance's performance that it downgraded the province. The member is bragging about an intervention from a credit rating agency stating that, in its opinion, the former government was on the right track. If it had been on the right track, the credit rating agency would not have downgraded it. It is very unfortunate that this is the straw that the Leader of the Opposition has to grasp at.



With regard to this group, which the leader calls a grassroots group, I know that one member of the group is John McGarry. I think many people in this Legislature know John McGarry. I have heard... This is just rumour, but I would like the Leader of the Opposition to tell us otherwise if it is not true. I heard that John McGarry is going to Conservative meetings, to association meetings for the Conservative Party, and that he is musing about actually running for the Conservatives. If that is the case and if this is a nonpartisan group with no agenda, will the Leader of the Opposition please confirm or deny the rumours I have heard about John McGarry?

**Mr. Higgs:** I do not know if we want to start talking about people, but I understand there are ministers here who may not be reoffering. It is not exactly public yet, if he wants to get into those details.

I will not go there, because I asked the Premier a very simple question. I asked him about the Standard & Poor's reference in the document. I told him what the words were. Is he denying that Standard & Poor's believed the Alward government was on the right track to resolve the fiscal situation of New Brunswick? Does he deny that this was said in that report—a report that was issued based on the previous government's performance and the state the province was in? Does he deny that in 2012, that was the statement that was made? I would like to hear a yes or no to that.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** Actually, the credit rating agencies said that the former Minister of Finance, the current Leader of the Opposition, had not done the right thing, and these actions have not been repeated since. Now, we clearly understand that a government must balance the budget, but that it must also be done in a balanced manner. More investments in the priorities of New Brunswickers have to be made, and, at the same time, the financial situation of the province must be addressed, and this is exactly what we are doing. Since we took office, we have cut the deficit by more than half, while investing more in education and health and growing the economy year after year.

So, I can tell you that we are proud of the work we are doing with New Brunswickers and that we will continue to invest in their priorities to grow the economy and improve their quality of life.

[*Original*]

**Mr. Higgs:** Investment without results has been a common theme of this government. It is taxing without resolve, without any sort of purpose, just taxing to spend more money. It is in a campaign promising everything to everyone, hoping to buy votes. New Brunswick deserves better.





On February 26, Jon and Leslie Manship unveiled Excellence NB and the For the love of New Brunswick campaign—a campaign they founded, developed, and funded. The Manships commissioned research that showed that just a 5% shift in purchasing New Brunswick products, services, and experiences would create roughly 5 000 jobs and tens of millions of dollars in tax revenue annually for education, health care, roads, infrastructure, and social services. The official response from the government was: “We have to be very, very careful ... not to be seen as protectionist.” I would ask the Premier: For the love of New Brunswick, why is he not supporting this campaign loudly and proudly?

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** In fact, in our multiyear Economic Growth Plan, we have identified buying local as an opportunity for economic growth and job creation. I can tell you that the ministers responsible for these initiatives are working very hard to encourage people to buy local but there is some truth to the fact that we are a trading province as well. We want to ensure that we are doing everything we can to get our products and services to markets around the world. If we want to get our products and services to markets around the world, we have to expect that there are going to be other products and services coming into our markets as well.

There is great opportunity in encouraging people to buy local, but we also cannot lose the fact that when we have open trade with other jurisdictions, it is good for smaller jurisdictions like New Brunswick. In fact, that is why we are working so hard to increase exports in key industries. We are working hard on our multiyear Economic Growth Plan, investing in things that will create job opportunities for the people of our province, and we will continue the economic growth we started together.

**Mr. Higgs:** It is a multiyear Economic Growth Plan that sees us dead last in the country.

As a follow-up to the claim that the Gallant government does not want to be seen as protectionist, does the Premier know how much has been spent to date in the protectionist fight over the interprovincial beer sales and how much his government is prepared to spend? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** I am obviously not going to let the Leader of the Opposition get away with the preamble. When it comes to 2015 to 2018, including, of course, the projections, analysis, and estimates for 2017 and 2018, we saw that over the past few years, we had the sixth-best growth rate of all the provinces in Canada.

Let's contrast that with the Leader of the Opposition when he was the Minister of Finance. He was 10th. He was last during his mandate. He actually retracted the New Brunswick economy. In fact, I would like to quote a piece of an article by Robert Jones from January 2013. It said: “New Brunswick has the worst job creation record in the country over the last three years, losing 13,600 jobs between October 2009 and November 2012. The province also posted a nine-year high unemployment rate of 11.6 per cent in October.” That is the record of the Leader of the Opposition.



We are going to continue to do what we have been doing—investing in our multiyear Economic Growth Plan.

### Health Care Services

**Mr. Higgs:** Have you ever heard anyone try to defend last place so vehemently? It is quite shocking.

On the front page of both the *Telegraph-Journal* and the *Daily Gleaner* today, we see the headline: “It’s getting harder to see family doctors”. In the story, the New Brunswick Health Council says: “Until there are measures in place that look at how to standardize [the way doctors see their patients], we don’t expect that to improve.” The Health Council suggests that “the government introduce stipulations that would ensure newly hired physicians adopt effective scheduling practices to improve access”. The Health Council has identified scheduling as a solution to this problem. What are the Premier and his government going to do to implement the Health Council’s solution? Just throwing money at it has proven not to be the answer. Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** We appreciate the work done by third parties like the organization the Leader of the Opposition just mentioned, and we look forward to continuing to work with people and organizations throughout the province that are willing to provide ideas and suggestions on ways to improve the quality and accessibility of the provincial health care system.

We are investing more, absolutely. We are proud to be the government that has invested the most in the health sector in the history of the province. We are also making strategic investments. We have seen this in the budget tabled by the Minister of Finance. We are making investments to hire new family doctors and specialists to enhance access to health care here in New Brunswick. We are increasing the number of nurse practitioners and introducing further innovation to the system. We will have two new autism centres set up in New Brunswick, and many other steps will be taken to improve the accessibility and quality of our health care.

[*Original*]

**Mr. B. Macdonald:** As usual, the Premier talks in platitudes, but there are some cold, hard facts that the government has to face. Recently, even more alarming statistics have been released about ambulances being off-road in New Brunswick. The statistics are public not because the government released them but because journalists had to fight to get the information. They revealed that this year alone, more than 7 500 times, ambulances were off the road and that, indeed, they were off the road for over 30 000 hours. Add to this that we currently have the longest wait times in Canada, and we see that the Gallant government is piling crisis upon crisis.



Let's start at the beginning. Will the Premier finally acknowledge what is now obvious to everyone, that the government's mismanagement of our health system is creating a crisis in ambulances in New Brunswick?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Bourque:** I always appreciate the opportunity to answer questions, since it gives me the chance to refute statements from opposition members, who proclaim that we are in a crisis. The facts show no such thing.

What I can say, though, is that we do recognize that difficult situations can arise at times. We are aware that, as is true with any system, we cannot fulfill every single one of our obligations. Of course, certain situations can occur—they can end up in the media—and we are sorry about that.

However, I can tell you that, in the vast majority of cases, every service provided by Ambulance New Brunswick is of superior quality. The extraordinary work done by paramedics must also be recognized. Of course, opposition members do not like to talk about this because it goes against their message. We, however, are very proud.

[*Original*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Time, minister.

**Mr. B. Macdonald:** The minister wants us to believe that, oh, well, nothing is one hundred percent. The statistics speak for themselves. In 2017 alone, there was a 55% increase in the number of ambulances off-road. Since the members opposite took government, those statistics have more than doubled. They had the opportunity to do something about it in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, and now 2018, and they are doing nothing about it.

The situation has gotten worse, and yet, instead of fixing the situation, the members opposite decide now is a good time to pile crisis on top of crisis and ask paramedics to do even more. They signed a 10-year, noncompeted, sole-sourced agreement with the same management company to make the problem even worse. They have invested \$4.4 million not in new paramedics but in new managers. Dozens of new staff are going to tell the existing paramedics what to do better.

When will the members opposite revisit this decision to put more burden on top of our New Brunswick paramedics?

**Mr. Speaker:** Time.

**Hon. Mr. Bourque:** Once again, fearmongering is alive and well on the other side of this House. We are happy with the work that Ambulance New Brunswick is doing. Yes, it is not perfect. Like any system, it is never perfect. We are working with Ambulance New Brunswick to ensure that





it continues to pursue its contractual obligations, which, for the vast majority of the time—a very, very high percentage of the time—it does. It does perform its contractual obligations. We are very proud of the work that it does. Through the partnership that we signed before Christmas, this will continue to improve on that level of service. We will have more visits not only by the Extra-Mural Program but also by paramedics of Ambulance New Brunswick. We also have the advanced paramedic system. All those initiatives will help New Brunswickers get better access to quality care in their own homes. Thank you.

**Mr. B. Macdonald:** The minister wants to talk about contractual obligation. What about the paramedics? There has been a 43% increase in the claims related to mental health among paramedics. How is that acceptable? Is that the contractual obligation? There is a crisis now among New Brunswick paramedics. Under the Gallant government, it is getting worse. We do not have enough paramedics. Of those we have, more and more are burning out, fewer and fewer are able to work, and those who are left are doing more and more to make up for it. Guess what! We are burning them out.

Do not believe me. Look at the statistics. This Gallant government is failing—failing, first of all, to acknowledge the facts and, second, failing to improve the situation for our paramedics. What does it want to do with the extra-mural deal? Give the paramedics more responsibility. What is this government doing to protect our paramedics?

**Hon. Mr. Bourque:** First of all, I do want to say that the Paramedic Association of New Brunswick really appreciates the work that we are doing by acknowledging that the government is recognizing the high-level scope of work that paramedics are performing. That is what we, as a government, are doing.

Not only are we valuing what they are doing, but we are also increasing the quality of their scope, which was not the case with the previous government. When we look at that and we look also at the fact that we are performing a better quality of service—we are respecting all our contractual obligations—honestly, we are working with Ambulance New Brunswick. We are making sure that the patients continue to receive the best possible care, and they are.

Again, I do want to recognize the valuable work of paramedics here in the province. They save lives, and we need to talk about the wonderful work that they will continue to do for us here in New Brunswick. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Coon:** When New Brunswickers go to the emergency room, they expect to be treated, since this is a basic service. I have said many times in this House that long wait times for care in our emergency rooms put the public in danger, and now we are seeing the consequences.

On Saturday, February 24, Moncton Hospital closed the non-acute area of its emergency department for eight hours and its ambulance services for two hours because there were not



enough nurses. The gaps in our health care system are getting worse. Once again, I ask what the minister is doing to ensure our hospitals have enough nurses to fill emergency department positions.

**Hon. Mr. Bourque:** Listen, this gives me an opportunity to recognize the fantastic work done by all hospital emergency department staff in our province. Thank you for all the fine service.

Yes, we are aware that, once again, as in any system, there may be gaps; they happen, and will continue to happen, because there is no such thing as perfection in this world. We are aware of this. As our government is doing in terms of economic growth and development, we will always try to improve the system.

As for the example regarding Moncton Hospital, I can say that a great deal of work has been done in cooperation with Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont Regional Hospital to ensure that patients receive very high-quality care. I can assure you that service has been maintained and that we will continue our efforts in this regard.

*[Original]*

**Mr. Coon:** Fredericton's ER has experienced a 25% increase in urgent cases this year compared to the same time period last year. The first two months of 2018 have been the busiest that the hospital has ever seen. It has been over capacity for every single minute of 2018. Long wait times put patient safety at risk, as I have said time and time again. Huge cracks are opening up in New Brunswick's health care system, and this government seems oblivious to the fact. When emergency services are not available when you need them, it says to me that this government has its priorities screwed up. What is the minister going to do to ensure that emergency services are there when we need them?

**Hon. Mr. Bourque:** I appreciate the member opposite talking about what happens here in Fredericton because we are continuously working to improve the system, not only across the province but specifically here in the Fredericton area. We are making massive investments at the Dr. Everett Chalmers Hospital here in the capital city. We have also worked with the Fredericton Downtown Community Health Centre, which we opened. Those are all things that help with wait times.

In addition to that, this is the same member who was criticizing the partnership with Medavie and our deal. Well, guess what! More people will get treatment at home. When you get better treatment at home, you go less often to the emergency room. When you go less often to the emergency room, you will have fewer problems there. With all those things we are doing, we are helping to reduce wait times in the hospitals.

**Mr. Coon:** I do not know why the minister refuses to acknowledge that we have a nursing shortage in this province. In fact, nursing graduates from New Brunswick are being snapped up by Nova Scotia because they cannot find full-time work in New Brunswick. How is that even possible? I have a constituent who was on the dean's list of UNB's Faculty of Nursing. She could



not find a nursing job that provided full-time work here in New Brunswick, but she was immediately hired in Halifax after graduation. The minister wonders why we cannot recruit nurses from outside the province, but we cannot even hold on to nurses who are graduating inside the province.

We have a crisis emerging here. Our emergency rooms are clogged. Sick people are placed in the hallways of nursing units, where there is no oxygen supply and there is no suction in the walls to help them if they need that. When a nurse calls in sick, there is no one to replace that nurse. The question is this: When is the minister going to create full-time nursing positions to address this widening crack in our health care system?

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** One thing that will not help the wait times is all the fearmongering coming from the members opposite. What will help reduce wait times and address and ensure that we are strengthening the quality of health care and the accessibility of health care in this province are some of the following things: investing more in health care—we are the government that has invested the most in health care in the history of our province—and investing in the infrastructure of our health care system, such as the hundreds of millions of dollars that we are going to be investing at the DECH, the Saint John Regional Hospital, the Moncton Hospital, the Georges-L.-Dumont, the Bathurst hospital, the Edmundston Regional Hospital, the Perth-Andover hospital, the Miramichi hospital, and the Charlotte County Hospital.

We can keep going. There is the Fredericton Community Health Centre, which I think the member opposite would be well aware of. There is the midwives program that we started here in Fredericton to increase accessibility to reproductive health. There are advanced care paramedics and nurse practitioners. We are hiring more doctors and more specialists. We have more nursing homes, and we are getting seniors out of hospital beds when they do not need to be there and into the right type of care. That is what is going to...

**Mr. Speaker:** Time.

## Nursing Homes

**Mr. Steeves:** The Premier talks about getting people out of hospitals and into nursing homes. Do you know what? He is not. There are 112 nursing home beds right now that are sitting empty in New Brunswick, and over 500 people are being held in hospital right now in New Brunswick when they could be going into a nursing home under appropriate care. But they cannot go into a nursing home because there is a critical shortage of nursing staff. We have talked about that. LPNs and RNs and support workers are included there.

I have ads here from the Spencer nursing home, the Kiwanis Nursing Home, Villa Providence, and Villa du Repos. They are all looking for people on CareerBeacon. Is the government's only strategy to go on CareerBeacon and hope that some nurses, LPNs, and PSWs apply?



What is the Premier doing to alleviate this problem? Does he even have targets? Is there a target goal of whom he wants? What numbers does he want for nurses and for LPNs? What numbers does he want to staff all these new nursing homes that he has? What numbers is he hiring in order to fill the 112 beds in nursing homes that are empty right now?

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** There is a nursing shortage, and we recognize that. There are a couple of things that I want to identify with respect to the last members' comments. First of all, yes, Nova Scotia and every other province in the country are trying to recruit nurses, because the challenge that we have here in New Brunswick is shared by all Canadian provinces. The member opposite, with his last question... Does he think that there are no people on wait-lists to get into nursing homes? If he believes that, then I think he is ill-informed. Does he think that with an aging population, we are not going to have more demand for nursing homes? Again, if he thinks that, he is ill-informed.

I will make sure that I make it very clear to every community from Chaleur to the Acadian Peninsula, Charlotte County, Moncton, Saint John, and the river valley, all the communities where we announced that there will be more nursing home and memory care beds in their communities, that the Leader of the Opposition and the Conservatives are against it—they do not think we should be creating more spaces. Well, we do, and it is going to help create jobs and improve the quality of care for seniors in our province.

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

