

November 28, 2018

[Original]

Student Loans

Mr. Gallant: Earlier this year, our Liberal government committed to eliminate the interest on all current and future provincial student loans for the residents that stay in New Brunswick. This program had been included in our Liberal government's last budget. This would provide financial relief for tens of thousands of New Brunswickers, all the while inciting students to stay and build careers right here in the province.

By eliminating the interest from provincial student loans, coupled with the free tuition and the Tuition Relief for the Middle Class programs, we will provide our youth with the opportunity to build their careers right here in our province and help families with the cost of living. Can the Premier please confirm that his government will begin to eliminate the interest on provincial student loans on January 1, 2019, as was planned and budgeted for by our government?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, as part of our evaluation of the entire program on postsecondary education... You know, we get mixed messages here. The Tuition rebate was cancelled. The tax credit was cancelled. The free education was put in place, and now this one is being spouted as an opportunity to keep students in our province. On the one hand, we have done something that we say will bring kids here and will keep them here, but it does not seem that way on the other hand.

Mr. Speaker, as part of our overall analytical work on what works for students, what keeps them here to go through their education, what keeps them here to work in New Brunswick, and what keeps them here to be part of a growing and successful province, we will put the package together, one that is not disjointed, not disconnected, but one that works. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. Gallant: The issue of student loans has long been a point of contention between Liberal and Conservative governments in New Brunswick. A previous Liberal government announced in 2007 that parental or spousal contributions would no longer be considered in the calculation of student loans. However, in 2011, the then Minister of Finance, who is the current Premier, announced in his budget that he would reinstate the parental contribution in the calculation of student loans, in order to save \$1.6 million. In its first budget, in 2015, our Liberal government once again eliminated the consideration of this contribution in the calculation.

Earlier this year, we committed to eliminating the interest on all current and future provincial student loans granted to students who stay in New Brunswick. This measure is in the last



budget of the Liberal government. Can the Premier confirm that his government will maintain this financial relief, which encourages students to stay in New Brunswick and pursue careers here in the province?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, the same response applies. It will be a package deal, looking at the whole aspect of what keeps students going to school here and ultimately staying and working here.

As far as the past ideas in relation to what happened years ago are concerned, the point is trying to avoid the maximum student loan issue to begin with. Why are students coming out with such huge debt? You know, some of that is related to the students' opportunity to work during the summer and have meaningful employment so that they can decrease their debt. Some of it is related to the overall cost of education and accommodations. How do we mitigate that?

Just saying that we will forget about the loan part—which is already a pretty generous program, as I understand it—and do it in isolation of the big picture is not how we are going to do things. We are going to do it as a comprehensive review. We have set a timeline on it. It is a very comprehensive review of the entire package. What works for students? What keeps them here? What gives them a job here at the end of the day? What are the right courses? What are the right costs? Let's get results for the people that we need here.

Mr. Gallant: Mr. Speaker, I can humbly suggest to the Premier that the way that he accomplishes what he was asking in his preamble is the following: You provide free tuition to those who need it the most. You provide tuition relief for the middle class. This is up-front financial support to help people get into the publicly funded university or college of their choice here in New Brunswick so that they are able to study and build their careers right here. To help them with summer employment, we increased the budgets for the SEED program, Mr. Speaker, to help students to be able to work in New Brunswick during the summers and get valuable experience.

We had a holistic approach for after they graduated, with the Youth Employment Fund. It allows them to gain hands-on work experience right here in the province so that, again, they can build their careers here. The last piece that we had in our last budget was forgiving the interest on provincial student loans. This, of course, is part of a holistic package. We ask the Premier to confirm that he will evaluate these programs as soon as possible and start the elimination on January 1.

Hon. Mr. Higgs: I think the whole package we are looking at is where we are going with this. The idea of saying what works... I know the previous government thought that if you put more money out there, something is bound to get better, and we did not see that. We did not see that in any aspect of what we were looking at. We saw more money flowing. We absolutely did.



I have taken the position from the very beginning that the taxpayers have paid enough. Our goal is to get value for the money being spent, and, if we do not find that value being created, we will find other areas to spend money to get value, because value we must get and new taxes we must not have. Our goal is to analyze the full spectrum and come up with a solution. If some of it is working, great, we will keep it. If some of it is not, we will get rid of it. That is our mandate.

Government Programs

Mr. Gallant: Mr. Speaker, I have made it very clear. We understand that the government will now want to evaluate some of the programs. Obviously, we want to be able to debate and discuss them because many of the programs that we put in place or enhanced, we believe, are in the best interest of the future of the province.

This is very important for the people who are benefiting from the Free Tuition Program, Tuition Relief for the Middle Class, the free child-care program, or the child-care subsidies for the middle class as well as those who would benefit on January 1 from the elimination of the interest on student loans on the provincial side. They all deserve to know in a very timely fashion whether these programs are going to be implemented in January and February as promised or whether the programs will continue. Mr. Speaker, when can people expect to have an answer on whether the elimination of the interest on provincial student loans, scheduled for January 1, 2019, and budgeted for as well, will continue or not?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, this will be my fourth time, I guess, rising on the same question, and my answer will continue to be the same. We will evaluate these programs on their merits and on what they are actually achieving. I have no debate with the fact that more money is being spent, but I also know that with many of these things on which the money is being spent...

Maybe the Leader of the Official Opposition has a document that says they are achieving this sort of result, but we have not found that yet. We have not found in the system where the results are being achieved. When I find a document that says I am spending this money in this area and getting this result, we will keep it going, but I have not seen that yet on this particular topic. That is why we are doing the full assessment. That is why we have said we will do it in an expedited fashion.

We also will not leave people out along the way. There are students who want to go to different universities or colleges and who want to be part of institutions that we register and certify here in the province, but who were not allowed to because the previous government picked winners and losers. We are not picking winners and losers. We want people to have a choice, a choice that works for them in the province they want to be in.



Hydraulic Fracturing

Mr. Gallant: If the government is pushing for the moratorium on hydraulic fracturing to be lifted in only a few regions and for it not to be lifted in Kent County, why was the member for Saint John East, the House Leader, in his member's statement today, talking about the need to develop the estimated trillion cubic metres of gas in the province when much of it is in Kent County?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question. We have been very clear. We are not looking to expand or develop an industry in Kent County. We have been really clear on that. However, we have been equally clear from the very beginning—from the campaign to getting into office, throughout it all—that we want to pursue and develop a gas resource that exists in the Sussex region, in an area that has had gas production for the past 15 or 20 years.

We have defined that in this subamendment because we want to be very open about our intentions, something I have been saying publicly for some time. That may come as a surprise, but it is not a surprise. It is business as usual to say: Can we work together with communities for what works for them? It is not one size fits all. I know that this does not fit Kent County, and I have no intention of expanding into Kent County.

Our goal here is to say: Do you know what? Industries are going to pay a lot for gas. They already are. We have a mine that has shut down in Sussex. Do you think a 30% or 40% premium on gas is going to help to reopen that mine? I do not think so, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Gallant: Mr. Speaker, it was the person sitting to the Premier's left who talked about the need to develop the estimated trillion cubic metres of gas in the province when much of it is in Kent County. I ask the Premier: Will he correct the member for Saint John East and say that, indeed, they will not be developing the trillion cubic metres of gas because much of it is in Kent County? Or will they be doing that, and it was simply a Freudian slip, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: I appreciate that the leader opposite would like to make an issue where none exists. The subamendment is very clear. The plan is very clear. Do we have a big resource in our province? We think so, and we think that we have a big resource in the area that we have talked about, in the McCully Field and moving in a southeasterly direction. We think that there is a big resource there that we can develop, so, Mr. Speaker, we want to do that and take advantage of the technology that exists. Other regions have seen their emissions drop because they switched to clean gas versus heavy oil. They have shut down coal plants because they have had a clean gas supply. They have brought in industry because they have had a clean gas supply.

We are not inventing the wheel here. We are only inventing this wheel in a very small area of the province that wants to turn the wheel, Mr. Speaker. That is our goal, but we are not forcing it anywhere. My colleague here suggests that we have a huge deposit. We have been told that,



but we are only tapping into it. I do not know how big this area is. I have been told by Corridor Resources that it is significant, but I do not know how big it is. However, I am concerned...

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Mr. Bourque: Certainly, it sounds to me, from what I have been hearing, as though there is clearly an openness to fracking in Kent County, Mr. Speaker. Last week, the Premier told the House that he would be meeting with Corridor Resources in the coming weeks, I believe. My questions are: Has the meeting taken place, and can the Premier or the minister responsible confirm whether or not Corridor Resources has presented his government with a drilling plan in the event that the moratorium is partially or entirely lifted? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Higgs: I said in the House before that I have had discussions with Corridor Resources by phone. I have not met the Corridor people personally. I did it during the election. I said that, remember, I think, when I talked during the election about announcing a localized growth in our natural gas development in Sussex and Penobscis, in that region. When I said that, I had already talked to Corridor Resources. I had a meeting... It was not a meeting. I had a call with the Corridor people in which they said: You know, we are interested. We are interested to keep moving.

Do you know why they are interested? It is because we are paying five times the price that is being paid in British Columbia for natural gas. We are paying a 30% or 40% premium compared to what they are paying north or south of Boston. Do you know why we are doing that? It is because our domestic sources have dried up and we are bringing it by pipeline into our province. We are putting our industries at risk or at a cost disadvantage. What does that mean, Mr. Speaker? People will invest elsewhere. We can bury our heads in the sand, or we can move in a very calculated and environmentally sustainable way that we can all get behind and say: We have got to do something to help New Brunswick.

Mr. Bourque: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, on the Corridor Resources website, a presentation dated this month indicates that it plans to drill five new fracking wells, possibly followed by five additional wells. Some of these would be in the easternmost part of Corridor's lease, which is in Albert County near the Turtle Creek watershed. Is the Premier or the Minister of Energy aware of this proposal? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Holland: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question from the member opposite. At this particular moment, there are no plans in that particular area in Albert County to increase or add drilling sites to that area. What we should mention... The member for Moncton Centre mentioned it in his member's statement, when he said that we were not concerned or we were looking at drilling in the Albert County area. That member was not here for the past four years, but what we should really focus on here is that just putting a moratorium in place four years ago and washing your hands of the issue was not dealing with the issue of natural gas in New Brunswick.



What we want to do is, of course, to be concerned about the environmental impact. To say that we are not is simply not true. We are looking at responsible development, but we are not ignoring the environmental impact. In an open and transparent way, stakeholders from all sides of this equation will be brought to the table so that a responsible plan will be developed.

Ms. Rogers: The government showed its hand yesterday when the member for Moncton Southwest proposed a subamendment that says communities throughout the Corridor Resources lease area “have demonstrated their desire” for fracking. This is an area that runs southeast of Salisbury, very near the Turtle Creek watershed, which supplies drinking water, again, for the cities of Moncton and Dieppe and the town of Riverview. This is very troubling to me, as the advocate for the environment and as a Moncton resident. To the Premier or minister responsible, why is this government willing to put the drinking water of over 115 000 people at risk by allowing fracking near Turtle Creek?

Hon. Mr. Holland: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question. Once again, I want to go back to the subject matter. The question from the member opposite proposes that we are planning on fracking in Albert County. To put words in our mouths on that situation is really unfair. We have been very clear that if regions, whether Kent County or Carleton County, are not interested in this, it will not be imposed. For so long, municipalities, regions, and local governments have felt as though they have been imposed upon by the provincial government, and, for the first time, we are allowing these areas to have a say. Individuals can have a voice, and they can have an impact. We are not going to bully over any area. Nothing could be further from the truth. As the member for Albert, I say that there will be nothing that compromises the environmental integrity of the area around my riding.

Ms. Rogers: Well, there might be an argument that there is a social license for fracking in Sussex, though I doubt that when its own chamber of commerce has refused to take a position on the question. I really would suggest that there is definitely not one in the tri-city area, whose drinking water would be put at risk. Can the Premier please commit to this House that no fracking will be permitted anywhere near the Turtle Creek watershed unless the citizens of that area and the councils of Moncton, Dieppe, and Riverview are consulted and in agreement?

Hon. Mr. Holland: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member opposite once again for the question. Although I love to debate and have lively conversation, I can answer that simply by saying yes—yes.

We are never going to go against the wishes of the regions, the municipalities. I myself have met with virtually all of them in my particular riding, and they have really embraced and appreciated the fact that we are saying that we are going to follow their lead on this issue. They are, for the first time, feeling as though a provincial government is listening to a municipal government. A partnership is being formed, and collaboration is being put in place. When we move forward with an issue, whether it be natural resource development or any other issue that affects municipalities, they will feel as though they are in step and in partnership with their provincial government.



Aboriginal Affairs

Mrs. Harris: Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs made some really positive comments about Indigenous peoples and the need for reconciliation. I want to commend him for those remarks. However, I wonder whether he could clarify to the House some comments he made in the past. On November 5, 2013, he described First Nations protesters opposed to fracking as “ecoterrorists”. Many of these protesters included Indigenous people, and many of them are planning to protest again if the government proceeds with its plan to lift the moratorium. Does the minister still think that these First Nations protesters are terrorists?

Hon. Mr. Stewart: I thank the member opposite. Everybody knows what happened in Kent County. There were radical groups from other parts of the world that went there.

I am going to defend something right now. I am going to defend the First Nations people of this province because they were treated like pawns. They were treated like pawns. Radical groups came from other countries. I would love to see an audit on the entire event down there to see what truly transpired, because there were people from France... Al Jazeera was there to get the story. There were people with oil interests and people from Nova Scotia—people much whiter than I—who were causing all the trouble.

I will tell the member today that I do not think that First Nations people are ecoterrorists. I think they were treated poorly in that situation and preyed upon because Elsipogtog, at the time, was struggling financially. They were used in that fashion, and I am against that.

Transportation

Mr. K. Arseneau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It has been almost one year since the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation released its report *From Surfaces to Services: An inclusive and sustainable transportation strategy for the province of New Brunswick, 2017-2037*, in December 2017. I would like to hope that the hard work of ESIC’s Rural and Urban Transportation Advisory Committee has not gone to waste.

This report included 35 recommendations to various government departments and regional service commissions, while no department has taken ownership over their implementation. One of the recommendations was that a single provincial entity oversee their implementation. Will the Premier mandate the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure to oversee the implementation of this strategy? Thanks.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: I thank the member very much for the question, and he brings up a very, very good point. Transportation is, in fact, a huge barrier to many people in this province getting employment and getting access to health care and to other services, such as education, that they really need.



This transportation report will not sit idle. Actually, ESIC is going to be meeting very soon. I have had one briefing with ESIC on the entire ESIC file to get caught up, and we will be looking at this. I also know that it is an interdisciplinary file where we do need the cooperation from the Department of Transportation and the Department of Finance. We are going to need all our colleagues to come together on this. It is one of those files that must be dealt with with the partnership of other departments. We will be looking into this, and I will report back at a later date.

Mr. K. Arseneau: Thank you very much for the answer.

[Translation]

One of the recommendations in the report *From Surfaces to Services* is that the government dedicate provincial funding to expanding public transit and community transportation to help meet the goals of the strategy. However, the provincial government does not provide any direct funding to support municipal and community public transit. The cities of Fredericton, Saint John, Moncton, and Miramichi fund their own public transit service, while the other municipalities do not provide this type of service at all. As for intercity service, it is very limited. Direct financial support will be required to move forward on this issue and implement the goals of the New Brunswick transportation strategy. Will the Premier make sure to include sufficient funding in the budget for the implementation of recommendations in the *From Surfaces to Services* report?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: I thank the member again for the question. As we have stated many times in this House, we are reviewing all programs to understand what the financial situation is here. I will work closely with the Minister of Finance. We will look to see whether there is something that we can do in the very near future, and we will have a discussion with all parties in this House regarding a transportation strategy. It is important. We need to see where the previous government left us, and we need to see which strategies can be implemented sooner than later. We will try to work for a full implementation of a transportation strategy that truly helps every New Brunswicker. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Roads

Mr. Austin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Minister of Transportation for some documentation on plowing and winter maintenance. I would also like to acknowledge the opportunity to be briefed on some of these areas.

But, Mr. Speaker, I do have some concerns again, with the winter season approaching us, on the number of plow operators that we have and on our equipment, quite frankly. I know that over the last several years, winter road maintenance has not been good. It has been very bad, especially in rural areas. In my area of Fredericton-Grand Lake, the plow operators that we have



are working way too many hours—frankly, in my opinion, to an unsafe level—and some of them are even quitting, so I have to emphasize this again. I will ask this question to the minister: Are there going to be more plow operators coming forward, and will they be sufficient to plow the roads as needed in this winter season? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Oliver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the member for the question. Snowplowing readiness is certainly a prime concern. As I mentioned yesterday, we are approximately 90% ready with our plow equipment, with our assets, and we are continually trying to improve that. We have some new assets coming into the system. Right now, we are also deploying the snowplow operators to the Miramichi area, where they get training on a one-week course on snow fighting. We are continuing to improve the assets—both personnel and equipment. We will be keeping that monitored and making sure that we have the proper assets to cover the roads in New Brunswick.

Mr. Austin: I appreciate the answer from the minister. Indeed, we do have to beef up the Department of Transportation, especially when it relates to winter maintenance. I look forward to working with the minister and the government and helping to make that possible. Again, it is usually the rural areas that suffer the most. It affects emergency responders, and it affects people getting to work, which could affect the economy.

Again, people generally understand. They pay very high taxes in this province, and all they are looking for are basic government services in a reasonable time frame. Again, I believe that winter maintenance is a part of that basic government service. I would just like to say that I look forward to working with the minister and the government to make sure that we have enough plows on the road and enough plow operators to work the equipment. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Oliver: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the comments from the member. I certainly know that we have over 19 000 km of road to look after. I live in a rural area, and I know the importance of proper winter maintenance, so we continue to endeavour to make sure that we do have the assets in place. It is a concern all around the province. As you know, winter conditions are different in the north than they are in the south or in the northwest, so it is always a challenge to face those issues. We will continue to improve and make sure that we have the proper complement of assets. Thank you.

Health Care

Mr. Kenny: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we all know, the Chaleur Regional Hospital provides services to all the people in the northeastern part of the province. Mr. Speaker, safety is paramount for all the residents living in the northeastern part of the province. These residents, along with the MLA for Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore and other MLAs in this Assembly, have serious concerns about the birth delivery services at the obstetrics unit at the Chaleur Regional Hospital. Mr. Speaker, the issues at the Chaleur Regional Hospital have been in the news for the past couple of days.



I want to ask an important question to the Minister of Health. Can the Minister of Health let us know what is being done to correct this situation, which is causing much anxiety and uncertainty for expectant mothers and their families in the Chaleur region and the Acadian Peninsula, especially under these winter conditions? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Flemming: I want to thank the member opposite for the question. I do also want to say that with all the talk of cooperation that we have had in this House in the last while, if there were ever a subject that we all should be in agreement on, that we all should cooperate on, and that we all should work toward solving, this is it. So, I thank the member. I would also thank him for bringing it to my attention, with his colleagues as well, and for the work that we have done so far. I would suggest, not to be petty here, that the Mayor of Bathurst would do well to contact me and to contact his MLAs instead of dealing with this on social media. We are all on the same side here.

Issues are being done. It is a labour shortage. It is a legitimate labour shortage, but we have to deal with it. Vitalité is taking nurses from the Bathurst area and sending them to Campbellton for training and Miramichi for training in birth delivery. This training is being done as soon as possible so that these nurses will be repatriated back to Bathurst so that this can be restored...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Kenny: Thank you for your answer, Mr. Minister. This file is very important for us, in northern New Brunswick, especially for moms and families.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker, thank you for that response. With that said, I, too, have had a chance to speak directly with the CEO of Vitalité, along with you, Mr. Minister—through the Speaker—and also with the former Minister of Health, about taking a look at the situation.

I would like to ask the minister whether he has any idea or any time frame as to when the training for these nurses will be finished. As we all know, there is a deficit when it comes to recruiting and so on. I know that it takes a bit of time to have the training done properly. Can you report back to us to give us an idea of how much time it will take and when you expect the birth and delivery services to be put back in place at the obstetrics unit in Bathurst? I also want to thank you for your response on that. It is looking at collaboration, and that is important.

Hon. Mr. Flemming: Thank you, member. It would be very easy for me to stand up and say that this all happened with the previous government. I am not going to do that because we all have to deal with labour shortages and we all have to deal with this. We are working together.



I will be meeting with the CEO of Vitalité Health Network tomorrow. This is paramount on my items to deal with. It would be irresponsible of me to arbitrarily pick a date and say that everything will be fine on such and such a day. It is important that these nurses from the Bathurst area are taken and trained properly so that they can deliver a level of expertise and return this back to the community in which it is needed. I cannot put a date on it right now. I may be able to after my meetings with Vitalité tomorrow.

However, let me assure you that if there were ever an issue that we are all united on, that we all want the same result on, and that I am doing everything I can to achieve that result on, this issue is it. Thank you, member, for your questions. They are very appropriate.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister. Question period is over.

