

March 22, 2019

[*Translation*]

Collective Bargaining

Mr. D. Landry: First of all, I want to acknowledge the people representing nursing home workers who are here today.

[*Original*]

I am sure that they would rather be around the negotiation table than in the gallery, Sir.

[*Translation*]

Yesterday, a judge issued the most recent ruling regarding the crisis caused by the Conservatives when they did not negotiate in good faith with the nursing home workers and refused binding arbitration.

[*Original*]

Premier, can you tell us how you interpret this ruling and inform New Brunswickers as to what the next steps are?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question. The ruling yesterday was about protecting seniors in their homes. It was about having a program that we work on together to solve, not one that we just work on together with our backs against the wall in terms of people threatening to walk out and leave seniors vulnerable. That is the concern, Mr. Speaker.

The concern is that, over the past 28 months, there have been discussions going on. The concern is that we see a complete flip by the now opposition members who were in government before from the position that they took 21 months or 22 months ago. Now, they have a new position, Mr. Speaker. The consistency that we need in New Brunswick is how we move forward together and how we address problems that are real. Our problems are real, Mr. Speaker. We do not have the people going forward to serve the needs that we have in this province. We have to think differently, we have to act differently, and we have to do differently, Mr. Speaker. It is time that we all sat down and had real, frank discussions, not about wages, but about care, about skill sets, and about a whole requirement for meeting the challenges going forward, Mr. Speaker.



[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: I think the nursing home workers are prepared to do part of what the Premier said. They are prepared to do it sitting at the bargaining table, not before the courts. The Liberal Party proposed binding arbitration to end this crisis. The day after, the Green Party and the People's Alliance proposed the same thing.

[Original]

I am happy that the Greens and the Alliance have decided to join the Liberals in proposing binding arbitration to end this crisis. The opposition parties are uniting to defend seniors and nursing home workers. We have the majority, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

We have a majority: the members of the three opposition parties support nursing home workers and residents. Is the Premier prepared to seek binding arbitration?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, let's talk about binding arbitration and how we find ourselves in this position at this point in time. A new offer was presented back in July and August. A whole new realm of negotiations started in the process, when the process was well under way, Mr. Speaker. Why did it jump to 20%? It jumped to 20% because the hope was that we would go to binding arbitration and that the arbitrator would say: Oh, you are at 20%, and you are at 4%, so we will split the difference and end up at 12%. Mr. Speaker, that is not a solution. That is just a road map that says: How do we pay for this? The 20% is \$7 000 more per bed or \$28 million more per year. Are our residents going to incur that cost? Is that the goal? Is that what we are going to do? Are we going to raise taxes?

Mr. Speaker, the previous government members held onto their position of a 4% increase, and they held onto it for as long as they were in government. Then, all of a sudden, when they were no longer in government, they had a new attitude, Mr. Speaker. It is time that people stood by their convictions and that we worked together for solutions. That is what we are looking for.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: I would like the Premier to stop blaming others, step up to the plate, and negotiate. The Premier must finally sit down at the bargaining table to solve the problem.

I am coming back to what I said last Tuesday. We sought arbitration in the case of correctional officers, and that did not break the bank in the province. There was no bankruptcy. I am therefore asking if the Premier can find other ways to negotiate with these people. The three opposition parties, who make up the majority, are asking the Premier to seek binding



arbitration to resolve this conflict. This will ensure that nursing home residents... Nursing home workers will finally be able to go to work without wearing themselves out every day. This crisis would finally be resolved.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, if we want to go to binding arbitration on the original offer of 4%—and they could not agree to that—that is fine. Let's do that. However, to invent an offer in the middle of the process and to say that everything that everyone else accepted in the past several rounds of negotiations... Is the very acceptance of the offer by hospital workers not good enough anymore? This is not the time, Mr. Speaker, for invention—invention—of an offer. This is the time for a solution for the long term.

We are willing to talk about the wages because, Mr. Speaker, that is correct. We can deal with the wage issue over time, but we have got to find a way to find the money. We need to talk about the hours of care. We need to talk about the high levels of sick time and the high levels of accidents, because it is not right that people are not able to come to work as they should because of the conditions or whatever other reason. We need to talk about the skill set in the nursing homes, Mr. Speaker, because we cannot manage it the way it is going forward, and we need to talk about what is essential and what is not essential. There is a whole lot more than wages, but, unfortunately, there has not been a lot of discussion other than on wages, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Tourism

Mr. J. LeBlanc: My question is for the Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture. The budget of the tourism side of your department has been reduced from \$20 million to \$12 million, a drop of about 40%. That is a massive reduction. Where are the cuts being made? Are they in marketing, jobs, or both? Let's remember that the minister comes from the culture and tourism sector. How can he say he is supporting his professional field and justify a 40% cut in his departmental budget?

Hon. Mr. Gauvin: Thank you very much for the question. I am not certain about the tone, but thank you anyway. I would like to say that, over the past three years, I have worked in the tourism industry, and I have worked in economic development. The opposition likes to forget that part. I realized that, under the previous government, no appropriate action was taken. They preferred to refer to spending as investment.

I am working very hard at the Department of Tourism, Heritage and Culture. Overall, my department is submitting its third-highest budget in the history of this province. We averaged it out. It gave us no pleasure to do so. We are reaching out to people; we will focus on them.



Good ideas are not found with money. Every dollar we spend must count. Thank you very much.

Mr. J. LeBlanc: My question is again for the Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture. The New Brunswick Economic Growth Plan, developed in consultation with the business community in the province, had identified tourism as a real growth opportunity. I think that the current Premier agreed during his election campaign. How can the minister justify this budget cut?

Hon. Mr. Gauvin: Thank you very much for the question. I am always pleased to discuss matters with the member for Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, who is also the only one who came to see me to talk about his riding. Thank you for that. I have realized one thing with this team: We will not work in silos. There is a way to get funding from other departments to share the burden. We will work as a team. I know that it is a new day, but I am aware of five or six departments already that will work with the Department of Tourism, Heritage and Culture. We will find efficiencies. I am not worried about the upcoming season. We will have fun. Let's hope the weather will be nice. Thank you very much.

Route 11

Mrs. F. Landry: On the other side of the House, the left hand does not seem to know what the right hand is doing. I do not know whether to blame the Minister of Finance or the Premier. First, we learned before Christmas that the Route 11 project was cancelled. This week, the Minister of Finance announced that the highway would be widened more or less from Cocagne to Bouctouche, but without the bridges, which would have caused a very strange and potentially dangerous traffic flow on this very busy highway. Yesterday, the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure stated that the highway twinning project was cancelled again. Is there anyone on the other side of the House who has any idea which way Route 11 is heading?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Oliver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the member opposite for that question. As you know, as part of the budget talks, we announced that we will be completing the twinning of sections along Route 11. We are in negotiations with the federal government to determine exactly which phases we can move forward on, and we have asked it to reconsider some of the arrangements that we have made, especially when it comes to the structures along the route. We will discuss that further with the federal government, and when we have its announcement, we will be moving forward and allowing the population to understand exactly what we can do and where we can proceed. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. F. Landry: This crucial project for the economic and tourism development of northern and eastern New Brunswick was 50% funded by the federal government. Does this mean that, by



cancelling this project, your government will leave tens of millions of dollars from the federal government on the table and that you will continue to jeopardize the safety of people, patients, and businesses who use this highway?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Oliver: Further to my last remarks, as the members opposite are aware, the Route 11 project is multiphase. This year, we are committing to completing the section that is just south of the Cocagne River. I should say that, at the present time, there is a tender out for the Shediac bridge and we are expecting the results, since it will close shortly.

Also, we mentioned that there was a section of road that was partially built and needs to be paved. We want to complete that section in order to be able to accommodate the safety of the public so that they can travel farther along that route and so that we will not have to put in passing lanes and other structures. That is what we will be proceeding with at this point in time so that we can complete a part of that section farther. Thank you.

Nurse Practitioners

Mr. D'Amours: Mr. Speaker, access to health care in many parts of New Brunswick is a big challenge. Many citizens are left without even a family doctor. Emergency rooms should be used for urgent needs and not for regular medical needs.

We all know that nurse practitioners are one of the solutions. On the other hand, when it is time for government to promote the profession and to recognize the benefits of having them in our province, the government makes sure to limit the services they can offer. When will the Minister of Health put in place a process that will allow nurse practitioners in private clinics, like the one in the northwest, to adequately serve the citizens of New Brunswick who wish to receive that service?

Hon. Mr. Flemming: Mr. Speaker, if the member opposite would take the time to read the budget, he would have his own question answered. Our budget sets forth projects and amounts to be spent on nurse practitioners, on their scope of practice, and on a nurse practitioner clinic in Moncton that we are going to build, open, and staff. Instead of getting up and asking questions that he is clearly unprepared for, I would suggest that the member get some reading material. It is called the budget.

[Translation]

Mr. D'Amours: Obviously, the Minister of Health has trouble understanding the questions, so I will try again.



Access to health care in many parts of New Brunswick is a big challenge. A lot of people are left on their own, without family doctors. Emergency rooms should be used for emergencies and not for regular medical needs.

We all know that nurse practitioners are part of the solution. On the other hand, when it is time for government to promote the profession and to recognize the benefits of having them in our departments and in our province, it limits the services they can provide.

When will the Minister of Health establish a process to allow nurse practitioners to practise in private clinics, like the one in northwestern New Brunswick, so that they can adequately serve the people of this province, including those who need them today? It is not complicated. People without a family doctor are left out in the cold. What is the reality, and what can the minister do? When will he take responsibility?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Flemming: I have some more reading material for the member opposite. It is called the platform of the PC Party of New Brunswick, from the last election. It sets forth clearly our commitment to nurse practitioners. It sets forth clearly that we will expand their scope of practice. It sets forth clearly our commitment to primary health care. Again, if the member would take the time to read our platform and if he would take the time to read our budget, he would see that we have engaged these issues and that we are implementing these issues—the very issues that the members opposite sat on for four years. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Child Protection

Mrs. Harris: Mr. Speaker, it is very, very obvious that this Conservative-People's Alliance government is turning it back on the most vulnerable people in our province. You absolutely care way more about the mighty dollar than you do about residents living in nursing homes, children who are living with child protection issues, and people who cannot afford to live, and you sit over there, and you celebrate. It is really, really sickening.

Mr. Speaker, in this budget, Child Welfare and Disability Support Services is being cut. We look at the Savoury report. I am going to quote: “the additional demands and the complexity of the problems that children, youth and families are experiencing, exceed the resources that are available”. How is the minister going to provide more resources for child protection, given that she will invest less and has lost her fight with Mr. Higgs on giving her the money she needs to protect children?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity once again to stand to talk about child protection. You know, a year ago, the members opposite were in government and they defended a budget. Today, we stand to defend ours. I can proudly say that we put \$30 million more into the Child Welfare and Disability budget line than they had when they... That is \$8.5 million more for child welfare.



We are going to work toward the Savoury report recommendations, Mr. Speaker. We committed to it. We will provide updates in our annual reports, and my staff and I will be meeting on a regular basis to ensure that those recommendations are being brought forward. Already, we put into place... We are moving on child protection legislation, we are moving on a task force to look at central intake, and we are looking at ways to implement the things that need to be done. There is some analysis that needs to be done, Mr. Speaker. We are doing the work. Thank you.

Mrs. Harris: Let something be very, very clear, Mr. Speaker. Today, on this side of the House, we stand to defend New Brunswickers, not the Alliance-Conservative government budget. Mr. Speaker, there is concern for the people on the front lines, from social workers in the area of child protection to people caring for family members living with disabilities. When will the minister stop speaking in riddles and provide some true answers for the people whose lives are affected by these budget decisions? Are you going to do the right thing, Mr. Speaker? Is the minister going to do the right thing and immediately fill all temporary child protection jobs with full-time positions?

(Interjections.)

Mrs. Harris: Mr. Speaker, we see the arrogance from the other side. Believe you me, it will take more than you to tell me to sit down.

Mr. Speaker, will the minister do the right thing and fill these positions? Yes or no?

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, I think it is pretty rich that the member can stand on the opposite side of this House and demand that we do what the members opposite never did. We are not going to be silent on this, Mr. Speaker. We are going to be doing our work. We are going to be analyzing, and we are going to implement the recommendations of the Savoury report as soon as we can. A switch cannot be flipped, but we know that our child protection workers are working diligently every single day to provide protection to the children of this province. We are going to continue with that work, Mr. Speaker. We are going to be looking at the cost of bringing casuals on full-time, and we are going to be implementing as soon as we can.

I promise this. I made a commitment to the staff of Social Development. I told them that implementations would not happen until they knew about them first, and that is what I am going to do. We will be consulting them, we will be working with them, and we will be bringing to the table their suggestions on how we make this department better. I do it gladly and proudly as I stand here in the government of New Brunswick.



Collective Bargaining

Mr. DeSaulniers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As many will know, I have a background in labour and have done a fair amount of bargaining. I can recognize facts that have happened recently. I recognize the fact that the tactics that the government uses in the courts only serve to deepen the resolve of the workers. We also know that the workers overwhelmingly rejected the government's offer. We also know that the government is worried about creating precedents by changing its offer. It is my opinion that the government is going to have to put new money on the table and it is going to have to get creative. My question is to the Premier: Are you prepared to go to the table, get creative, and put some new money out there? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the member of the Alliance party, I absolutely agree. The opportunity for us is to get creative. I completely support that. I completely support the fact that we should be able to pay a higher wage—absolutely. But it cannot be on the backs of taxpayers just to pay more, so we have to be creative in how we deliver the service. We have to be creative in the skills matrix that is within the nursing homes and look at the number of degreed nurses, the number of PSWs, and the number of LPNs and say: How do we make this work? We have to look at sick time. We have to look at accidents. We have to look at the hours of care. We have to look at how we deliver service.

Mr. Speaker, the member is correct. I am concerned about it setting a precedent because the precedent that we must set for the future of our province is that we are going to fix this. We are not going to keep downloading onto future generations. We are going to fix it.

Mr. DeSaulniers: Thank you, Mr. Pres... Mr. Speaker, I almost called you "President". I am sorry.

I really did not get the answer I was looking for. I know that the parties can come to the table and they can look each other in the eye. That is the best way to get an agreement. That is the best way to resolve the problems. You get a handshake deal, you go back, and you recommend to your membership and your respective parties that you accept the deal. My question is, again: Is the government prepared to put out new money and to be creative at the bargaining table, and when will it do it?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: I actually did think I answered the question. The idea is that we need to be creative in order to find new money. That is as simple as I think I can put this, because it is not one without the other. Unfortunately, the discussions to date have been one without the other. It has been paying more money and putting a new offer on the table from a position that was created in the spring or in the summer. It may have been created in the hopes that the government, during the election period, would fold, but it did not. Those members are only folding now that they are in opposition, and that is sad. It is not about folding. It is about working together for creative solutions.



Mr. Speaker, I am willing to do that, and I would ask the member of the Alliance party to help us, because we need to get creative seriously about how we pay the right salary and about how we do the right things that allow us to carry forward in the future. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Social Assistance

Ms. Mitton: The budget includes \$9 million in cuts to income security. In January, the Minister of Social Development said that she could not imagine that the department could lose any amount of money without hurting services. According to the Regroupement féministe du Nouveau-Brunswick, the percentage of women in part-time employment is 23%, compared to 10% for men, and 23% of women in the province have a low income, compared to 17% of men.

We may therefore conclude that women are disproportionately affected by this budget cut. How can the Minister of Social Development justify such cuts, when we know that they have an impact on services and the economic prosperity of this province?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It seems that sometimes when individuals are in opposition, they think that a switch can be flipped and things can be changed immediately. But I am very proud that, in this budget, we have provided salary increases for some of the most underpaid individuals in our professions in New Brunswick—home care workers, special care home workers, and day care workers. We brought them up, and it was not easy, Mr. Speaker. In fact, I could not believe how hard it was to find the money, because I thought that after getting \$1 billion more per year in taxes, there would be wiggle room in these budgets. But, Mr. Speaker, they spent it all. They spent it all, not just in the years that they were there in deficit, but also they spent it into the future. It is not going to be an easy road, but we are going to look after the women of this province.

Ms. Mitton: Mr. Speaker, I think, especially looking at these types of professions, that pay equity would be a really great step in that direction.

Mr. Speaker, the purchasing power of social assistance recipients continues to slide every year. Most classes of recipients have not received an increase in their basic rate since 2010. A recent report by the New Brunswick Common Front for Social Justice found that a person living in Moncton would require \$1 300 per month just to make ends meet, yet a single employable social assistance recipient receives only \$537 per month.

Recently, I was speaking with a social worker who told me that she just does not know how anyone could live on this, that it seems impossible. I do not know about anyone else, but I cannot imagine living on \$537 per month. This government is forcing people to choose between paying their rent and putting food on the table. When will the Minister of Social Development



tackle poverty head-on by raising social assistance rates to a level that meets the basic needs of New Brunswickers?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, it is not an easy time. However, I just want to recall the David Alward government. It was the David Alward government that doubled social assistance benefits to single employable people. It was a Conservative government. We again have a leader who has said that we are going to look at Social Development reform. That is going to be done in consultation. We are going to be looking at all the things we need to do.

But, Mr. Speaker, the other ticket, the very important point to what the member opposite asked, was single employable at \$537 per month. I can tell you that I certainly agree that it is not a lot of money. For those who are able to be employed, we need to lift them up, and we need to empower them and help them to move on to the workforce, as has been done in the past. We need to continue that. If someone is disabled, if someone needs more benefits, Mr. Speaker, then it is the job of all of us to make sure that the person gets them, and it is our job to advocate on that person's behalf. We are going to do that, Mr. Speaker. I ask the members to join us in that. Thank you.

Collective Bargaining

Mr. Melanson: Mr. Speaker, the present government seems to be setting a trend. When it does not agree with something, it goes to court and tries to resolve issues through a tribunal. Mr. Speaker, collective bargaining agreements are the responsibility of the President of Treasury Board. When we were in office, we signed 25 out of 26 collective agreements. The President of Treasury Board and Finance Minister also increased the budget item Supplementary Funding Provision, called a "slush fund". There is \$53 million more in that budget. Why can the President of Treasury Board not try to get this issue with the nursing home workers resolved and use some of that money in his slush fund to resolve the issue?

Hon. Mr. Steeves: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. He talks about \$53 million. Do you know what? We are trying to get the books of the province balanced. We are trying to get a surplus. We are trying to pay down the net debt. Yes, the fund that he is talking about is out there. It is disaster financial relief. It is for additional winter maintenance expenses resulting from heavier-than-normal snowfalls. We know that there is going to be a flood. We do not know how bad it is going to be, but we know that there is going to be money needed for it. We are still trying to pay for the rain in Saint John and the storms we had in January. Unexpected municipal by-elections—the money goes for those as well. It goes for additional legal expenses. It goes for extra sitting days of the Legislative Assembly. The member knows this. He was President of Treasury Board, and he knows where this goes. It is the legitimate amount of money to be spent and to be put aside so that we do have the needed funds when we are hit with a big storm, when we are hit with a flood. That is where it goes.

Mr. Speaker: Question period is over.

