

May 14, 2019

[Translation]

Government Services

Mr. D. Landry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Doing politics differently. Today, my question is for the Premier: Does he believe that announcements about spending taxpayers' money and using public funds should be made during Conservative fundraising events?

[Original]

Does the Premier believe this is appropriate?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question, Mr. Speaker, but I am not sure I got the question. I did not really hear the question. Maybe translation did not work.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: Mr. Speaker, I will repeat my question for the Premier. Does the Premier think it is appropriate to make announcements involving public money during Conservative or partisan fundraising events? That is the question I am asking the Premier.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: I do not know whether this, Mr. Speaker, is a particular issue or not, but I think that our announcements are not as prevalent as we might have seen in the past government, by any stroke of the imagination.

I do not know whether it is an information thing, talking about the awareness issue around the nursing homes and the employees and what our offers were. We put that out there. I feel that it is right for people to know about that. If it is certain things that the government is doing in relation to where our current, let's say, priorities are or what we are focused on, I think that is appropriate.

If there is a particular issue that the Leader of the Opposition wants to reference, certainly, I will comment about it, but I believe that part of using government resources wisely is ensuring that the people who pay the taxes know exactly what the government is doing with their money. For me, there is a lot to be put out there, and I want to have a more open, honest government so that people can actually see where the money is going. Thank you.



[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: Mr. Speaker, the Premier should ask his Deputy Premier to explain to him what I am talking about.

When we were in power, we made many extremely difficult decisions, and we set up the Strategic Program Review. The civil service, people in general, and the business community gave us very good ideas on the way to move forward. One of the very difficult steps we had to take was to close some Service New Brunswick offices. We had to close some of them because, nowadays, more people use the Internet. Consequently, we decided to reduce the number of Service New Brunswick offices in the province.

Since the Premier did not seem to understand what I asked him earlier, I am going to repeat my question: During a Conservative fundraising dinner...

Mr. Speaker: Your speaking time is up.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you very much for the question, and thank you for the clarification. With regard to that, the point of evaluating the opportunity there is to say this: Okay, was it a political decision that moved SNB from one location to another, or was it actually based on the usage requirements? We will do that with all other decisions.

I reference what the Leader of the Opposition said, that they made many difficult decisions. Unfortunately, the difficult decisions were only on where they were going to spend the most money and how they would get the most bang for the buck as a party, to get to do it. That seemed to be the big challenge that was ongoing.

In this case, we said—and I was interviewed on it and I said—that we will look at the actual numbers and we will share the numbers and we will understand clearly. Was it a political decision that caused the move from Saint-Quentin to Kedgwick, or was it a reality-based decision based on the usage? That is what the Leader of the Opposition just said, based on facts. That is exactly what we will do, Mr. Speaker, based on facts. Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: The Premier may say his decisions are based on facts, but I can tell you that the Deputy Premier's announcement was not fact-based. This is an announcement he made during a fundraising event for the Conservative Party in the Saint-Quentin area. Even the minister was not aware of this announcement.



Ultimately, this is what I am asking you: Will other Service New Brunswick offices be reopened in the province? Was the minister able to find the funds to open them? She seemed extremely surprised last week when she was asked questions.

So, Mr. Premier, will you reopen the other Service New Brunswick offices in the province?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Again, thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, no, we are not going to go around—I have said this before—and undo everything the last government did. There is no future and no merit in that. I think we have said that we have already done that with several things—when we carried on with home care workers and day care workers, with improvements in their salaries and by working in that direction, and there are other issues that we have been working on together.

The goal is not to reverse what others did. We did not change the Grade 1 immersion point. Everyone expected us to do that. Most notably, the members opposite expected us to do that. It has to go deeper than that, Mr. Speaker, in terms of going back and forth between Grade 1 and Grade 3. That is not doing it, but can we find the right solution so that we can actually have all our kids graduating and speaking at least conversational French so that they can talk to each other anywhere in the province? That is our goal.

No, we are not just going to change for the sake of change, but we will share any facts relating to this situation. We will share the facts. If a decision is made on where we will go, it will be one where we can say: Wow, this only makes sense, Mr. Speaker. That is our goal—only to make sense.

Appointments

Mr. C. Chiasson: Mr. Speaker, my question is for my friend, the minister responsible for NB Liquor, or my other friend, the Premier. On election night, at the Premier's campaign headquarters, Global News interviewed a supporter, John Correia, who described himself as the new Premier's best friend. We noticed in the *Royal Gazette* that Cabinet just appointed Mr. Correia to the NB Liquor board. We suspect that this is because he is the Premier's best friend.

This is my question to the minister, my friend, or to the Premier, my other friend: Were there other candidates for the job, or are you just picking from a list of besties and party hacks?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question. You know, this is great to hear in terms of Mr. Correia's position on the NB Liquor board. Mr. Correia was on before, as you might know, for three years, and he was promptly removed when the government came into power. He was removed—he's off there. Now, he was removed despite—despite—the board wanting him to stay because he was a valued member of that board. He did his homework. He studied the



rules. He studied the presentations that were brought forward. He was a valued member. Do you know why he could not stay, Mr. Speaker? It was because he was a friend of mine.

He is a regional Eastern Canada manager in retail. He knows business, Mr. Speaker. I know that it might come as a novel concept to many to have someone who knows business be on a board that is running a business in our province, but I think that it happens to be of value. I am proud to have him on that board because I know that he will get results. Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? We will not keep losing \$12 million on Cannabis NB. That is for sure.

Mr. C. Chiasson: Mr. Speaker, even though the Premier thought he had to yell at me, I am still going to consider him to be a good friend.

We are going to talk about other friends. I think that this is for the Finance Minister, another one of my friends. Cabinet also recently appointed a defeated Tory MLA—another friend, Kirk MacDonald—to the Insurance Board. Also appointed to that board was Marven Grant, an official agent for the Conservatives.

To the minister, it is almost like the friends-and-family sales you see at some of the retail outlets. If you are a friend, you get rewarded. If it looks like patronage and smells like patronage, most likely, it is patronage. Were these the best-qualified people you could find in the province for these positions? It really sounds as though they were just picked from a list of friends and family—patronage at its worst.

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, I am standing up. Do you know what I want to do now? What I would like to do and what I think I will now do... I am going to go back through the records and look at the past four years. I am going to look at the shopping list, Mr. Speaker, not only on boards and commissions, but also on all those leases for Cannabis NB—those 15-year, locked-up leases on a business that is losing its shirt. What about those, Mr. Speaker? Let's go back through the deposits of RDC throughout the province in Liberal-friendly ridings. If we want to talk, let's look at the contracts in terms of paving and excavation and work.

I think that if we want to open this box about a few of these positions, versus the Pandora's box that we saw from the Liberal government in the past, I am willing to take that on and lay it all out there for the world to see, Mr. Speaker.

Ms. Rogers: On this side, we believe in tendering, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, when it comes to appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions, we had a clear policy to have more women leading in the social and economic development of this province. The appalling, condescending, and paternalistic remarks by the Health Minister here on Friday, as if he were everybody's daddy, show why this is more important than ever. It is as though the good old boys' club is in charge again. You know, more than half of our appointments were women, and these included chairs. Even with the patronage appointments that we are learning more and more about, I am hearing that they are all men.



My question is this: Is it still a government priority to have women play a more prominent role in government leadership?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question. I guess, first, this is to the member opposite about the patronage appointments you talked about, the learning... The members of the previous government know well about patronage appointments. They invented the program, Mr. Speaker. But I do commend the previous government on its equity balance and gender balance within the boards and commissions, because there is no question that it went to 50-50—practically 50-50—across the board. Was there any patronage involved in that? Absolutely, Mr. Speaker, but that is not what we are talking about.

We are talking about gender equality within the boards, and I respect that and promote that myself. The only thing I would add to that is the process that we put in place to ensure that we have a board composition that makes up the right skill set to have that board do the job it needs to do. Mr. Speaker, we have, I think, somewhere around 140 boards, and I have asked the questions many times: What do they do? What reports do they put together? What is the basic outcome of a board? I would like to go through that exercise, because we need to know. But having a good skill mix and a good gender-equality mix? Absolutely, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Social Programs

Mrs. Harris: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is very evident today that we see this heartless Higgs-Austin government coming together, going as low as it can go, and looking for political points on tragedy—pretty pathetic.

Mr. Speaker, my question today is this. I want to ask the minister why she scrapped the caregiver benefit, which was designed to help those who do not get paid but who assist or care for a Social Development client living at home with physical, cognitive, or mental health conditions.

A story in the *Times & Transcript* today talked about a few parents who think it was wrong to get rid of the benefit. “Every little bit helps”, said Kim Daborn, who said that the \$106 per month helped cover her expenses. Or from Peter Henry, who has a 35-year-old son with Down syndrome... For people who are single parents raising kids on their own, it really makes a difference. This cut is affecting them. Can the minister tell the House why she cut this much-needed and...

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, there is absolutely nothing in Social Development that does not affect someone somewhere in this province. What I think is an even more valid question is this: Why did a government implement something when it was already \$22 million over budget



in a department? It did not have the money, Mr. Speaker. It did not have the money to put this program in place. This department ended up \$33 million over budget. We want to help everybody, and everyone who receives this \$106 is able to access other services. It is not that we wanted to cut. We do not want to cut, and in a prosperous province, we would not have to cut. But a previous government chose—chose—to implement a program that it could not even afford to think about. That is why we had to make the tough decision. Thank you.

Mrs. Harris: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The reasons we chose to help people and to give them \$106 per month is that they needed it and it was the right thing to do.

You talk about our not having money, but, my goodness, we have money to hire Irving friends. We do not even know what their job descriptions are or how much money they are making. You have a slush fund. You are doing all kinds of things, but you sit over there, and you say: Oh, we do not have any money, and we are going to hurt people. You are right that you are hurting people, the most vulnerable people in this province, and the sad thing is that there is not one person on the other side of the House that cares. It is really, really sad. You are hurting people that do not deserve to be hurt. They need you and depend on you to help them.

This program has been around less than a year. How did you even determine whether it was achieving the desired outcome?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, if I give everyone a little bit of extra money, everybody is going to be grateful, and I get it. I get that. Mr. Speaker, \$11 million is what this program was going to cost. Those members did not have the money for it. They did not have the money for it. After \$1 billion more per year in taxes for the last three-plus years, they did not have the money to do this. No one wants to take away money from those who can use it, and I know that every single person who got this could use it. But, unfortunately, we had a government without vision, we had a government that stalled prosperity, and we had a previous government that just absolutely could not understand the value of a dollar and where it would come from. We did not have it, Mr. Speaker. I wish we did.

Mrs. Harris: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am going to say probably the most important words I am ever going to say in this House: It is extremely unfortunate that we have a Conservative-People's Alliance government that is heartless and does not care about the most vulnerable people in this province—period.

We can stand over there, and we can say: Oh, we cannot help everyone. Well, we can help the most vulnerable. It is not just the rich people and the big business in this province that need help. It is time that you look at yourselves to see what you can do to help these poor, vulnerable people. They matter. Those 4 800 people matter. Haley Flaro said there was a significant impact on families. It is quite concerning.

You took this money. Do you know what? It is time to be creative, not conservative. How can you take this money from these people?



Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Flemming: Well, I have a little anecdote. I was looking at my bank statement back in January, and I noticed that \$212 had appeared. I said: What is the \$212 for? I do not know where it came from. So, I looked at my wife, who looks after her parents, and said: Where did this come from? She said: Oh, I was at the nursing home, and a person from the government asked me to apply for this. That person said: You should apply. So, my wife filled out the form and everything else and mailed it up to Campbellton, and she got \$106 for each of her parents—\$212. Then I got a letter that said they were going to take it away from me. Dorothy, you terrible person, you are going to take this away from me.

The point is that it is poor management. It is not about doing things right. It is about doing things that are improper. I did not need it, and my wife did not need it. It just shows that there was no sense behind it. It was not passed out properly. It is completely mismanaged. We are going to come back with something that helps people instead of having somebody like me saying: Where did the \$212 come from?

Silviculture

Mr. K. Arseneau: Mr. Speaker, we found out during the budget estimates that the government will be paying the big forest companies \$2.3 million to spray our Crown forests for their benefit this summer. I have a few ideas about how the Department of Energy and Resource Development could better spend this money. It could reallocate it to the private silviculture fund and create stability by committing to funding for 10 years, as has been requested by the private woodlot owners. This would allow for larger blocks of land to be treated in a sustainable way, resulting in a more resilient and adaptive native Acadian forest that enhances and encourages wildlife habitat. In the face of the climate change emergency, a healthy private forest will also help the province hit its greenhouse gas mitigation targets.

Considering this, will the Minister of Energy and Resource Development commit to reallocating the herbicide spraying budget to silviculture this year?

Hon. Mr. Holland: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member opposite for the question. I could talk at length—for hours—about forestry and how we are moving. Considering that we have a minute, it is important to indicate that there are a couple of factors there. The investment that we are making in this year's budget, of course, factors in to some investments that were made in previous years, and we are going to work that through.

We have also had many conversations in this House about future forest conservation, reviews of the *Crown Lands and Forests Act*, and working to let private woodlot owners have more access to the forest.

There is a \$2.3-million budget that is allocated for silviculture and forestry here, which, of course, looks toward recent history, but I would like to look toward the future, because we are



committed to being a government that has met with stakeholders that have never been to the table before to talk about how we can create that accord amongst all and make the forest of New Brunswick something that we will all be proud of in the future.

[*Translation*]

Mr. K. Arseneau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With proportional supply not being enforced since 2004, the market share of private woodlot owners and the price they get for their wood are falling or stagnant. Low profitability and the uncertain market share have led to a drop in the workforce and production capacity of private woodlot owners.

In the long term, we will need to do our best to revolutionize the forestry world to ensure better management of our forests and a decent livelihood in this field. Enforcing proportional supply is a first step. Does the Minister of Energy and Resource Development commit to enforcing proportional supply based on the percentage of forest land owned by private woodlot owners, which is 30%? Thank you.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Holland: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member opposite for the question. Just so that it is clear, we have had proportional supply in place since 1992. What has been different in the past six months is that we are a government that has decided to stop looking at it from a spreadsheet or from a paper perspective and to put boots on the ground. As the minister responsible for that department, I have sat in meetings at woodlot boards, our private woodlot boards. I have met with stakeholders from industry. I have met with stakeholders from conservation groups.

Do you know what? When you put something in place in 1992 and you get 20 or 30 years down the road, things change. They absolutely do. That is why we were the only party that was committed, in our platform, to reviewing and revising the *Crown Lands and Forests Act* and taking into consideration private woodlot owners and the ability to ensure that more of their fibre gets to market. We are on track with that, Mr. Speaker. We are on track with that, and you could speak to the private woodlot owners. You could speak to the boards. You could speak to any stakeholder. They know that we are on the job and we are going to get results. Thank you very much.

NB Power

Mr. Austin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. NB Power has spent \$13 million in licensing fees for a multimillion-dollar hydrogen partnership with a Florida start-up company, Joi Scientific. This is like taking a trip to Las Vegas, spinning the roulette wheel, and, fingers crossed, hoping that it lands where you have placed your bet. It is gambling with New Brunswick money that NB Power cannot afford to lose on unproven technology.



According to the media, Joi Scientific is the subject of open and ongoing investigations, including alleged extortion, by the Florida Office of Financial Regulation, the state's financial services regulator. NB Power CEO Gaëtan Thomas has stated that he is confident that the investigations involving Joi Scientific will simply go away. Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Energy and Natural Resources. Is he aware of whether NB Power did its due diligence before getting involved with this start-up?

Hon. Mr. Holland: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member opposite for the question. As the minister responsible for NB Power, I am in the position where I have an opportunity to give oversight at a level of 30 000 ft and encourage the Crown corporation to seek and find opportunities that could bring private sector investment to the province. The other side of that is that I am also the minister responsible for the ratepayers of New Brunswick. I balance that responsibility by encouraging a utility to find and to invest in opportunities and ways that we could move into a greener, cleaner economy and, at the same time, create a benefit to the province, all the while ensuring that those investments are in line with what we need to protect and that ratepayers have a solid, stable utility.

In fact, I am meeting with NB Power as early as this afternoon. I am looking forward to hearing some reports and some information. I am always going to be transparent and bring that information to the House, and I look forward to talking about ways that we could use that green economy to move the...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Austin: Mr. Thomas is a member of Joi Scientific's board of directors. Neither NB Power nor Joi Scientific is disclosing secrets behind what is being hailed as a major scientific breakthrough, pending further patents, of course. No other jurisdiction, including the entire state of Florida, which is surrounded by water, is in partnership with this company.

Joi Scientific claims to have developed an efficient way to generate hydrogen gas from seawater on demand. A Vancouver-based energy consultant has described the technology as, frankly, "too good to be true". My question, again, is to the minister. Is New Brunswick so desperate that it is willing to gamble with ratepayers' money when this or any other start-up company and unproven technology comes knocking on the door?

Hon. Mr. Holland: Mr. Speaker, it gives me pleasure to stand and talk about the innovative approach that this government takes toward NB Power. We have given NB Power lots of direction in the past few months regarding looking for opportunities to benefit New Brunswick in a clean and renewable fashion. With that being the case, the member opposite can rest assured that this is also a government that is responsible for ensuring that we receive value for every dollar that we spend. He can rest assured that this project as well as any project that we endeavour to enter into will go through a litmus test to ensure that it is delivering that value for the dollar.



I know that we will be continuing to find opportunities. We are open for business, but it will not be at the expense of the taxpayer. You have my word that I will bring back reports and accountability on any projects that this government enters into as we endeavour to move forward in a green economy in a way that benefits New Brunswick. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Floods

Mr. Harvey: Mr. Speaker, members of the House spoke in the past few weeks on preparing our communities for floods and on how important it is for us to take advantage of federal funding for things such as raising roads and other flood mitigation and adaptation measures. Can the Minister of Transportation advise this House on the progress of capital projects that are being submitted to the federal government for consideration, and will there be any projects completed during the fiscal year 2019-20?

Hon. Mr. Oliver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the member opposite, certainly, we are very concerned about the effects that we have recently experienced because of the flooding that has gone on over the entire province. At the present time, we are assessing the damage that was done and putting together a list of projects that we see as being necessary to improve the infrastructure that we have. That project list will be going forward to the federal government. We have had discussions with Minister Goodale and Minister Champagne about these projects and about the assistance that the federal government will be allowing to go forward with us. They have said that they will be very flexible with regard to the projects themselves. We hope to have a number of those projects completed this year. When we have the list in place, we will certainly share it with the members opposite. Thank you.

Mr. Harvey: Mr. Speaker, the village of Perth-Andover was fortunate this year to avoid any catastrophic flooding such as we have seen in the lower Saint John River basin. But the people of Perth-Andover know about flooding, having experienced four terrible floods in the past 25 years. Our former Liberal government had a flood mitigation project shovel-ready. It was developed in cooperation with the village of Perth-Andover, and it had many features, including raising roads, Mr. Speaker. Why did the Conservative government, within days of taking office last fall, cancel this project?

Hon. Mr. Oliver: Mr. Speaker, thank you again. To the member opposite, certainly, we are very fortunate that there was no flooding this year in Perth-Andover. As I said, we are grateful for that. We are very aware of the project that has been proposed. That will be one of the projects that we will move forward with when we ask the government to assist us with it, but, at this point in time, as I said before, we have a number of projects that we want to put on the list. The federal government originally told us that in order to do that, it needed a limit of up to \$20-million worth of projects, and we want to make sure that when we put these projects forward, it will cover as many as possible. As I said, it will give us some latitude with respect to the amount of work that has to be done. Whether the projects are shovel-ready or not, we certainly will have some latitude with that. Thank you.



Mr. Harvey: Mr. Speaker, it is nice to know that the government is going to move forward with the project, but it is easy to say that. On the other hand, it cancelled the project. It was ready to go. It has incurred \$2 million in costs for no reason. Mr. Speaker, this is another clear example of a short-sighted government. It cannot make a decision about the future prosperity of the province of New Brunswick, making the right investment at the right time, and it is really unfortunate that it has taken this short-sighted approach to developing New Brunswick.

The project was approved. The project had federal funding. The project was ready to go to address the critical need—a need, not a want. This was a need in the village of Perth-Andover. I am speaking to the government. Will the minister move this project forward in the next few weeks? Will he announce in Perth-Andover that this project is moving forward, and will he do the right thing?

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Oliver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, the member is aware that we have met with the people at the town of Perth-Andover. We have talked to them about their issues. We know exactly what the town is looking for. We agreed to work with them to make sure that the project that we put forward for Perth-Andover is not only one that is acceptable to the people of the area but also one that we certainly can afford, and we want to recognize the issues as they are presented. We know that we have some infrastructure there that needs to be addressed before we go forward with a complete plan, and we will be looking at that very, very shortly. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker: Question period is over.

