

February 11, 2015

[Original]

Public Consultation

Mr. Fitch: It was interesting to hear some of the ideas that came out of the meeting last night. They were reported by the media because we pushed to have the media present, to be able to go in and to listen to the items that moved forward.

Yesterday, I asked the Premier what his rebranding and politically motivated reorganization of the economic agencies in New Brunswick, Invest NB and the economic department, would cost. He did not know, or he did not want to say. Maybe he could enlighten us and tell us what the budget is for these 14 Engage NB meetings that he is holding around the province. What is the budget? What is the expected cost for those meetings?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: Before I answer that question, I want to be very clear. A few times now, the Leader of the Opposition has said on the floor of this House that media are not allowed to attend these sessions. That is not factual. Media are allowed to attend. They are allowed to be there during the entire session. The only thing that we ask of the media is to respect New Brunswickers. When New Brunswickers are in dialogue in the small groups, at tables of 8 or 10 people, nobody should stick a microphone or a camera in their faces because we want them to have an open dialogue with each other. The media are there from beginning to end, and that is very important to point out. They are not being shut out of this process.

I know that the former government did not consult New Brunswickers as often as it probably should have. We want to consult New Brunswickers. The budget requirements for this...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Fitch: The member opposite did not get to the question or, at least, to answering it. Again, we have seen commercials produced for advertising, and we have seen the cost of renting rooms in hotels for the staff and the minister and the MLA who are involved. A big deal was made about saving \$75 000 the other day, so we are wondering: What is the cost of this program? Is it \$75 000? Is it more? Is it less? If a big deal was made about saving \$75 000, more or less, I would ask the Premier or the minister to answer the question. How much is this particular item costing? They are making a big deal about it as well.

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: What I was about to say when I ran out of time is that, unfortunately, the former government did not see the importance of consulting New Brunswickers on important files. We beg to differ. We think that this is a very particular challenge that the province is facing. It is not an easy task to identify between \$500 million and \$600 million, but New Brunswickers want to be engaged. I think the turnout that we are seeing at these events is



demonstrating that. The dialogue that we are seeing among New Brunswickers is demonstrating that. People are being engaged, and they are offering solutions. We are asking them not only to look at the expenditure side, but to look at the revenue side, to look at the role the private sector can play, to look at how we can be more efficient, and to look at how we can reengineer the government and the various agencies, boards, and commissions to make sure that we are maximizing every last dollar. That is very important to us, as opposed to the opposition.

Mr. Fitch: Obviously, there must be something that is being hidden there. Maybe it is a per diem for the MLA who was named the cochair. The point is that, again, the minister opposite is not being factual in some of the things that he is saying when it comes to some of the consultation that government did when we were in government. When I look at the former ministers, each of them went out to the public and asked questions. They had an open mike, and people could talk directly to the government, as opposed to talking among themselves around the table.

I would ask the minister opposite if, in fact, there is an opportunity for an open-mike dialogue at some point in the tour as it goes along. If he does not want to answer that question, since he did not seem to want to answer regarding the cost, I will give him options: (a) What are the costs of, the budget for, this particular exercise? or (b) Is he going to allow an open-mike opportunity at some point in this dialogue?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: With regard to the question concerning the budget for the consultation process, I do not know the exact amount, but I will commit to sharing this information with the Leader of the Opposition later on. It is important to find out what people are thinking and for people to share their ideas and suggestions with us.

The consultation format we use, commonly known as World Café, involves everyone in the room. When we hold an open forum with a microphone in the room, maybe 8 or 10 people have a chance to speak. Last night, here in Fredericton, there were between 130 and 140 people, and everyone had a chance to speak, engage in dialogue, and offer solutions. Reports on the discussions are prepared at the end. We will be releasing a report that will be available to the public. This report will provide a summary of everything that was said throughout the province.

[Original]

Mr. Fitch: We do agree on engaging people, but, again, when this government is so bent on trying to find every last dollar, we are just asking the question: How much is this particular consultation costing?



When we were in government, we did a significant amount of work with respect to consultation. The former Minister of Finance was out on tour every year with an open mike, listening to people, plus we had a Web site, allowing people the opportunity to put their ideas forward. There were a significant number of hits, almost 35 000 hits, on that particular Web site, with a number of ideas that came forward.

Again, if the government made such a big deal about saving about \$75 000 earlier this week, why does the member opposite not know exactly or at least approximately what this particular exercise will cost? If the government is throwing away the opportunity to have a significant amount of revenue because it has shut down the gas and oil industry in New Brunswick, should it not know exactly what is the budget for these particular consultations?

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: It just goes to show how the opposition members are focused on their talking points and not on the answers that they get. I committed to the Opposition Leader that I would come back with the budget for consultation. I do not have that figure now, and I am not going to make one up. I will get back to him with that budget. The important thing here, again, is that the town hall format of consultations, which they did in the past and in which I have participated in the past, in my opinion—in our opinion—is not the proper format.

With the World Café format, every single person in the room is engaged, every single person in the room is participating in the discussion, and every single person in the room has a chance to provide input. We are accepting input until the end of this month. People can do it on the Web site, they can do it in writing, and they can do it by email. In March, we will be publishing a report of everything that was said. All the comments that were gathered around the province will be published in a report that the opposition will be able to take a look at.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Mr. Fitch: Again, we asked the budget question the other day as to what it is going to cost to reorganize Invest NB and the Economic Development Department. We did not get an answer for that because they either did not know or did not want to tell. I appreciate the minister saying here today that he will get those numbers, but I expect that there would have been a budget estimate for this particular exercise before they went into it.

Again, a big deal is being made about saving a couple of dollars here and there. In the broader picture, they know they have to save \$600 million, yet they have not changed the date for a balanced budget in their projections. Either they will fail to meet their projections for a balanced budget because... If they think they are going to be successful with respect to the \$600 million, they should move up their target date for a balanced budget. Is the minister also going to move up the target date for a balanced budget, based on the exercise that he is going through now?



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The Leader of the Opposition has said a few times that we are bragging about finding efficiencies worth a certain dollar amount. That is not the case; it is not pleasant to have to find efficiencies, but it is something that must be done. So, we are not bragging about this at all.

[Original]

Actually, it is not easy to find the efficiencies that we have found so far and that we are going to continue to find. It is a hard conversation to have. We have to make difficult choices, but we have made it very clear that we want to make these choices with all New Brunswickers. That includes the people in the regions, experts, stakeholders, and people who depend on important social programs that the government provides. That is why the Minister responsible for Strategic Program Review has been doing such an important, exhaustive, and inclusive engagement process. It is important to get the ideas, suggestions, and even concerns of the people of New Brunswick. Every single dollar that we have invested in hearing from New Brunswickers, I can tell you, is a dollar well spent.

[Translation]

Nursing Homes

Ms. Dubé: The biggest promise the Liberal government has broken since coming to power is certainly the one to make a \$250-million cut within government. That is what this government promised during the election campaign, but now it is talking about a \$600-million cut. We cannot predict what the future holds, but we may find out in a few weeks.

We have also heard that the government might convert some small rural hospitals into nursing homes for seniors. So, my question is for the Minister of Social Development. I would like to know whether she can confirm that her department is currently preparing a strategy to use these small New Brunswick hospitals as nursing homes.

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: I thank the member for her question. I would like to clarify two points here. First, in our platform, we indicated the need to find at least \$250 million, but, obviously, it was difficult to know the exact amounts before having access to the province's books. We want to make sure we address the financial situation once and for all. Second, no decision has been made about closing certain small hospitals to convert them into nursing homes.

Throughout this discussion, we have said that all options were on the table. We want to have this kind of discussion with the public, but the opposition keeps trying to make it look as if decisions have been made, when that is not the case. You have to wonder about our biggest departments, whether it is the Department of Health, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, or the Department of Social Development, which account for 80%...



[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

[Translation]

Ms. Dubé: Again, we are getting shades of meaning and wordplay. My question was for the Minister of Social Development. We know the government has already found \$90 million, and we are waiting for the budget in order to find out the more specific amounts.

My question is for the Minister of Social Development: Can you confirm today that your department is preparing scenarios for converting certain small New Brunswick hospitals into nursing homes?

[Original]

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I would like to thank the member opposite for her question. I would like to echo my colleague that our government has been very clear that our main priorities are job creation, getting our province's fiscal house in order, and helping families in all stages of their lives.

The Strategic Program Review is one tool that will be important in helping our government to achieve its goals. In this process, we are engaging New Brunswickers so that we can hear their ideas and find solutions that will meet the province's needs. Among these needs is finding good care for our seniors in our province—the care that they need so that they can have the quality of life that they deserve.

No decisions have been made about any transformations or about any closures, and we are in the consultation and engagement process.

[Translation]

Ms. Dubé: It is clear to see why New Brunswickers are worried. Based on the response the minister just gave us, the decision may not have been made or been announced, but her department is looking at using small hospitals for seniors. This is worrying, and it is certainly not the vision we had.

[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Please address the Chair.



[Translation]

Ms. Dubé: After several consultations and with the help of various partners, we had established a program called Home First. In the budget for this year, which will end on March 31, over \$7 million had been budgeted for the first year of implementation of this program. Where did those investments go? So far, I have seen no announcements regarding seniors.

[Original]

Hon. Ms. Rogers: Again, most nursing home infrastructure projects are under way with the previous plan, and they are expected to be completed by 2016. We are committed to keeping seniors in their homes as long as possible and to providing them with the supports that they need to do this because this is where they can have the greatest quality of life. When this is no longer possible, we are also committed to providing the appropriate levels of care, again, with the appropriate supports.

Mr. Speaker: Please address the Chair.

Home Heating

Mr. Coon: Despite our province being home to the largest oil refinery in all of Canada, New Brunswickers are paying the highest cost for home heating oil in Atlantic Canada, to the tune of hundreds of dollars per month. Why? It is because, last August, a regulatory change was made in the *Petroleum Products Pricing Act* to give Irving Oil more money. Incredibly, now, our heating oil prices are set by the price of kerosene and diesel fuel, not by the price of heating oil.

My question is for the Minister of Energy. Why is he waiting until August to decide whether to reverse the changes made last August when New Brunswickers who heat with oil are being ripped off right now?

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: I appreciate the question being brought forward. There is no doubt that this is an issue that has been raised publicly recently and also over the last couple of years. It is such a serious issue that the former government hired MJ Ervin to look at this issue and to provide recommendations to the government. It has been a concern, not only for consumers, but also for the retailers and the wholesalers as well.

Having said that, when the recommendations came forward, the government of the day implemented them back in August of last year, 2014. What I want to do is to be responsible. Let's look at a full year with this new formula in place. At that time, we will look at how we compare to other jurisdictions to make sure that there is a balanced approach as well, one that not only benefits the wholesalers and the retailers, but also benefits the consumers. I made that commitment, and I will see in August, to make sure that those recommendations are looked at.



Mr. Coon: We are more than halfway through the home heating season in New Brunswick now. By now, the minister surely understands that the changes that have been made are harming New Brunswickers and are unfair. The problem needs to be fixed now. Will the minister require the Energy and Utilities Board to regulate the price that wholesalers charge the retailers, as is done in Newfoundland and Labrador, so that heating oil retailers are not forced to pass on inflated oil prices to their customers?

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: I looked at some of the numbers as well—all the rates throughout the Atlantic Provinces for the past year. When I looked at just the January rate, in Saint John, New Brunswick, it was 102.8. When I looked at August 2014, the rate was 122.7. Back in January, it was 129.3, so consumers are paying a lot less. I understand that the price of oil has gone down, but they are paying a lot less.

Having said that, I do appreciate that some families are quite concerned. It is a heavy financial burden for them. That is why, for people on low income, we do have programs like the fuel supplement program in Social Development, where they can access, from November to April, \$145 per month, up to \$870. As well, come April 1, in the new budget, there will be the home retrofit program, a program that the former Conservative government cut. These consumers will be able to access those programs as well.

This does not alleviate all the problems, but, definitely, our government is listening to the people of New Brunswick.

Mr. Coon: In fact, heating oil is used disproportionately for home heating by low-income families, seniors living in big, old family homes, and rural New Brunswickers who lack the capital to replace their heating system or even to insulate their homes to cut their costs. The government intends to dismantle the very agency, Efficiency NB, that could help families. The government has a bill before this House right now that will transfer staff from Efficiency NB to NB Power, whose customers heat electrically, not with oil. How does the minister intend to ensure that these vulnerable New Brunswickers can cut their oil heating costs?

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: I can assure the member opposite that the home retrofit program... People who heat with oil will have access to those programs as well. Again, the programs offered by the Social Development Department also help those individuals, and I will repeat this. From November to April, it is \$145 per month, up to \$870. I encourage people on low incomes to access those programs as well.

There are various reasons that there is a divergence in some of the rates in other jurisdictions. For example, in P.E.I. alone, 83% of consumers heat with home heating oil. In New Brunswick, it is only 21%. Those are some of the reasons. In P.E.I., they charge a 5% tax rate. We have a 13% rate. Those are some of the reasons that there is a price differential.



However, I did commit that, after one year, in August 2015, we would review the whole thing to make sure that it has been a fair, balanced approach. If I have to ask the EUB to review the margins, I will.

Job Creation

Mr. K. MacDonald: In a January 21 newspaper article, the Minister of Economic Development is quoted as saying: “the outlook is good to meet, or even surpass, the government’s commitment of 5,000 new jobs in the first year of its mandate”. I will just repeat that: “the outlook is good to meet, or even surpass, the government’s commitment of 5,000 new jobs in the first year of its mandate”.

My question is for the Minister of Economic Development. We are four months in, and we are 1 300 jobs down. Can the minister please explain to me what particular outlook or instinct he has that makes him feel so confident about meeting the Premier’s promise of 5 000 new jobs?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The quality of the questions being asked today is deplorable. I do not understand why we are still talking about a subject that has been raised about 23 times already. We have not yet had 23 question periods, but the opposition members, one after the other, are raising the same subjects.

[*Original*]

I will say exactly what we have said many times. We did not promise that 5 000 jobs would be created as a net gain. We said that 5 000 jobs would be created with the things that we would implement—investing in our infrastructure, ensuring that we create the Youth Employment Fund, and giving a tax credit for seniors to renovate their homes so they can stay in their homes longer—among such other things as supporting energy projects and natural resource development in a responsible manner. These things would create 5 000 jobs in the first year.

However, that is not a net gain. I do not understand why the opposition members do not seem to get the difference. They would often note the difference when they were in government. I hope that they will finally move on to another subject because we have serious matters that we need to discuss in this Legislature.

Mr. K. MacDonald: It was certainly good to hear the Premier’s standard reply: That may be what we said, but that is not what we meant.

I appreciate that the Minister of Economic Development may not have a firm understanding of each and every job in the province, but one that he may be more familiar with is the position of Executive Director of the Atlantic Lobster Sustainability Foundation, where he worked for a



number of years. I wonder if the minister—the Minister of Economic Development—can give me the name of the person who replaced him in that position.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I very much hope not only that the quality of the questions will be improved, but also that the opposition will respect the conventions that are in this Legislature. The members cannot get up and discuss seven different subjects within three questions. They started with job numbers, so I will get up and talk about the job numbers. If he wants to ask different questions of the Minister of Economic Development in our government tomorrow, he can get up then and do it.

What I would like to talk about is our focus on job creation and our focus on growing the economy. Our focus has been demonstrated by our investing strategically in our infrastructure, lowering the small business tax, and creating the Youth Employment Fund. We are going to be rolling out tax credits for seniors that will help them renovate their homes and stay in their homes longer.

This has started the momentum, and people feel confident that the economy can go in the right direction. We still have a long way to go, and we need to have the help of all New Brunswickers. As their government, we will do the best we can to create the conditions for economic growth, but we need people to chip in, to invest, and to be entrepreneurial, as we know they can be here in the province.

Mr. K. MacDonald: Fine, we will talk about the \$200 000 that the former Liberal government gave to the Atlantic Lobster Sustainability Foundation and how the minister drew it out in salary over a four-year period.

If the minister and the Premier want to talk about job numbers, here are a few numbers for them. The reduction in the small business tax rate of the province puts, on average, \$180 back in the pockets of business. Then the Minister of Finance takes \$1 276 back out with the changes made to the property taxes of the province. That is a net loss to business of \$1 096, on average, per business per year. Tell me how that reduction is going to create jobs in New Brunswick.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I actually encouraged the opposition members to improve the quality of their questions, not to scream louder in the Legislature.

There are Opportunities New Brunswick and the Jobs Board. I am the Minister responsible for Innovation. There are the small business tax and the Youth Employment Fund. We started the education plan. We support natural resource and energy projects. We are touting the importance of the Energy East Pipeline for our country and our province, talking about the LNG terminal conversion, supporting the Sisson mine and the jobs and the economic growth that it can bring to our province, and investing strategically in our infrastructure.



That is what we have been up to. This has created the conditions—and will continue to create the conditions, we hope—for entrepreneurs, businesses, and New Brunswickers to help us create jobs and grow the economy.

I am very happy to see the job numbers that we have seen over the last month—3 400 extra jobs. Since we took power on October 7, there have been 2 600 jobs created by the economy of New Brunswick and the people of New Brunswick.

Prisoners

Mr. Northrup: The people of the Miramichi and, in fact, people all around New Brunswick are very, very upset with the recent news regarding Allan Legere. Words cannot describe this monster or the impact he has had in the community. The news that he has been transferred to a lower-security institution has understandably raised fears in the Greater Miramichi area. I know that the Member of Parliament and the local MLA from Miramichi have written letters, and the Miramichi city council has also passed a motion.

Today, I am asking the Minister of Public Safety to report on his actions regarding this situation that is of great concern, since he has been very, very quiet on this serious situation in the great province of New Brunswick and in the mighty Miramichi.

Hon. Mr. Horsman: As the member opposite knows very well, this is a federal issue with the Correctional Service of Canada. In saying that, I want to reassure the citizens of New Brunswick and, more importantly, the citizens of Miramichi that this person is in a secure federal maximum security prison. I want them also to know that the good thing about this is that he is farther away from New Brunswick. He is still in a maximum security prison, and we want to assure all families in New Brunswick that this province would like to make sure that they are safe and that they can work and live in this province safely and in a better way. Thank you.

Mr. Northrup: That is not really reassuring for the people of New Brunswick or the people of the mighty Miramichi. It is very clear that, until this situation is resolved and Legere is once again in the special handling of a maximum-security institution, the people of Miramichi will not rest easy or sleep well at night.

Will the Minister of Public Safety commit to the people of the Miramichi and to all citizens of New Brunswick that he will make it an absolute priority to reach out to the federal Minister of Public Safety, Minister Blaney? I will ask him a question. Has he reached out to the federal minister to explain the situation in New Brunswick? Has he called the federal Minister of Public Safety? Has he done that?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: Again, this is a federal matter, and we have reached out to Mr. Blaney, the federal minister, through the Minister of Tourism, who is from the Miramichi area.



We want to reassure the families of New Brunswick, especially the people of the Miramichi, that New Brunswick is a safe and reliable place to live, to work, and to raise a family. As I described, this person is farther away from the province. I want to reassure the people how far away he is. He could not be farther and be in a federal maximum security prison. He is secure, and we believe that this is a better place for him to be, to make sure the people in Miramichi are secure and safe. Thank you.

Mr. Northrup: He is the Minister of Public Safety. It is not the Minister of Tourism. He is the Minister of Public Safety. He should be 110% committed to protecting the people of the Miramichi and the people of New Brunswick, and he is not.

Public Safety

On another very serious matter in the great province of New Brunswick, I have another question for the Minister of Public Safety. There is a campaign going around social media called #ShutDownCanada. This event is supposed to happen on the 13th, which is this Friday. This information is online. There are plans to demonstrate outside city halls, shut down highways, and occupy high-traffic areas. Fredericton is the only location in New Brunswick listed.

Will the Minister of Public Safety advise the House as to what steps have been taken leading up to Friday the 13th? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We are aware of this, and you can be certain that the government is doing everything it can to have the proper precautions in place. We will continue to ensure that we are aware of the situation, and we will see what unfolds across the country and, of course, in New Brunswick. We thank the member of the opposition for bringing this up in the Legislature. Rest assured, the department and all people involved will ensure that the people of New Brunswick and the people in the Greater Fredericton area are safe. Thank you.

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

On two occasions during question period, members of the opposition used their three questions and went outside the theme of the original question. The second and third questions are intended to be supplementary questions to the first question. I caution the members of the opposition. In the future, you will be cut off and you will lose that question.

