

March 24, 2015

[Original]

Senior Citizens

Mr. Fitch: The Auditor General's report on the Atcon file came out this morning at eleven o'clock, much to the embarrassment of many of the present ministers who were there during the Atcon decision. That file is going to be around for a long, long time, and that file is going to be talked about for many days in the Legislature. We will have some questions on that later today.

However, there is an urgent, urgent file right now that is causing many, many people in the province a lot of concern, a lot of heartache, and a lot of discouragement. As mentioned by the member for Saint John East, it is disgraceful that the government has floated a trial balloon to say that we are going to increase the conditions of the contribution to long-term care. Can the Premier rise today, apologize to the seniors of the province, and say that this is not on the table in this budget? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I would like to be clear about a couple of things. First of all, the only place from which I have heard anything about a cancellation of the Home First Strategy has been from the members opposite. The priorities have not changed with this government. Our priorities are job creation, getting our fiscal house in order, and protecting vulnerable families, and seniors are a very important part of our families. We will continue to invest. In fact, half of our budget goes toward long-term care and taking care of seniors.

Mr. Fitch: I appreciate the minister's getting up and trying to defend the government's trial balloon, and I would suggest to the minister that the question of where the money went in Home First is very similar to where the money went in the Atcon deal.

I remember the Premier of the time, Bernard Lord, being in Albert County and sticking a sign in front of a senior's house and the word "protected" being on that sign. That policy of protecting seniors' homes and assets was followed through in the next two successive administrations in New Brunswick. However, it is shameful today that this particular government wants to spend millions of dollars on pavement rather than protecting the assets of seniors who have contributed so much to the people of the province.

Now, we are hoping that this was a trial balloon floated out before the budget in order to gain favour. Is it a trial balloon, or is it the reality?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I would like to be even more clear about the Home First Strategy and where the money has gone. In fact, there are a lot of insinuations being made about money being lost or not used. I would like to remind everyone that, a couple of weeks ago, the *Daily Gleaner* reported about an interview with former Social Development Minister Madeleine Dubé, who



acknowledged that the Home First Strategy had many details yet to be decided. Had I spent the money without having a full implementation plan or a design strategy, this would have been very irresponsible. We want to be very careful about the use of our valuable resources.

Mr. Fitch: The minister admits today that the money was available and that the choice was made not to spend it. The words that are being used here today are very telling. The Minister of Finance got up and said that we are going to look at the means test for seniors, and the minister across the way wants to talk about Home First. They want to deflect from the real issue. There are many, many seniors who are concerned that the assets that they have accumulated over their lifetimes will be taken by this government. That is deplorable when you think of the time and effort of the seniors' coalition and the people who have fought time and time again to protect the assets that seniors have accumulated over their lifetimes.

I am giving the Premier an opportunity to stand up and defend the seniors in New Brunswick, the most vulnerable, from this situation of their assets being under attack by this Liberal government because the government has made choices to spend money elsewhere—on pavement and on its political friends. Will the Premier defend the seniors of New Brunswick? Will he get up today and say that this a trial balloon and that it will not be considered in this budget?

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: The direct answer to that question is: Yes, this government will defend the seniors.

Mr. Fitch: Can the minister be a little clearer on that? We have seen many times that the government's words and its actions do not line up. What they say and what they do are two different things, and we have seen it happening here today. The minister stands up and says that the government members will defend the seniors, yet their actions are this—they are not going to spend the money on the Home First program. With \$7 million in their budget, they came up the other day and talked about a pittance, a small percentage of that.

Today, we have the Finance Minister not standing up and defending the fact that he stood up in the media and said: We are going to look at the asset accumulation of seniors, and we are going to look at that as a contribution to their long-term care. Will the minister stand up and clarify the statement that she just made in the House? How are you going to look after the seniors? So far, you have attacked them. That is all you have done.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: The problem with the last government was that many things were attempted to be rushed as announcements but were not actually implemented. Our government is absolutely committed to the Home First approach. However, we are looking at this in the whole spectrum and context of long-term care for seniors.

(Interjections.)



Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: We cannot continue to build silos and work at it piece by piece without looking at the context, so we are going to be an evidence-based government. We are going to move forward as we engage New Brunswickers. I have been meeting with stakeholders, and they have been telling me about specific problems that they had with the beginning of the design of Home First approaches. We are implementing some of the stakeholders' input, and we are moving forward on this. I am looking forward to the main estimates, when we can describe some of our...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Steeves: I find myself feeling sorry for the Minister of Social Development today. I know what a qualified and caring person the minister is. I know that she cares very much about seniors, just as all of us do, I am sure.

First, we have the cancellation of the Home First Strategy for seniors. The \$7 million for this program has disappeared. I know that they say it is still there, but I would like to know where it is because we have not heard any details. I know that the minister must have found this troubling. Now, we have a minister in charge of the blame-the-people tour suggesting that seniors will be targeted for more revenue for the government.

My question is—I am sure there are some speaking notes from the Premier there somewhere—for the Minister of Social Development. I am sure that she feels badly for the seniors. I would ask the minister to go ahead, though, and recite the speaking notes that the Premier has given her in this case.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I am sorry, Mr. Speaker, but I did not pick up a question out of that.

Mr. Steeves: We assumed that there would be an answer from the Premier. The Premier seems to be giving speaking notes to everybody.

I would like to reference an excellent article, an editorial from today's *Telegraph-Journal*. It reads in part:

Governing is the art of juggling priorities and the Liberal government should take a hard look at its list before targeting seniors.

It goes on to say:

We fail to see the logic behind spending \$30 million in new provincial money to twin a road while we ask our most elderly citizens to sell their houses or dip into their RRSPs to help pay for their care. After contributing to our province and paying taxes for decades, our seniors deserve to be more of a priority than asphalt.



The article says: “our seniors deserve to be more of a priority than asphalt”. I have a very simple question for the minister. Does she agree with that—that our seniors are actually more of a priority than asphalt?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: Seniors are a priority of this government. All vulnerable people are a priority of this government. Again, nothing has changed with regard to our priorities of creating jobs, getting our fiscal house in order, and taking care of families.

I have reiterated that the Home First approach has to be looked at in the whole context of long-term care. Seniors are very, very important. We have a system that has to be sustainable. We are acting to make sure that the system is there for all people who need it, when they need it, and with the right levels of care.

Mr. Steeves: There is a system that is sustainable, as long as you are part of the big red machine. It sustains them very well.

The Liberal election platform, on page 31, states in big, red letters: “We will help seniors live independently at home and receive the healthcare they need.” It is the first step of the first pylon, the first pier, of this Home First situation about which we are talking. It is \$7 million to keep seniors in their homes and to get them an assessment of what they need in their homes so that they can continue to live there. The first move that this government made concerning seniors, despite what we heard this morning, is, effectively, to cancel the Home First program for seniors. To add insult to injury, the government is talking about taking more money away from seniors who need it in the long term.

Once again, I must ask this of the minister: Which disappoints her more? Is it the cancellation of the Home First Strategy for seniors—I guess she will not admit to that—or is it the latest insult of announcing a possible money grab by her government for our seniors?

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: Our budget has not been announced yet. Our budget will be announced on March 31, and we will be doing the main estimates after that and going into details. Nothing has been decided yet for next year’s spending.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Ms. Rogers: We are in discussions. As we have said, our fiscal house is in rough shape right now, and we are putting everything on the table to look at how we can govern better and have sustainable social programs for the people of New Brunswick.



Health Care Providers

Mr. Coon: The waiting list for New Brunswickers seeking family doctors is, frankly, appalling. In Fredericton alone, the waiting list now numbers 5 600 people. Some families have been languishing on that list literally for years. To make matters worse, we are seeing a number of family doctors on the verge of retirement.

My question is for the Minister of Health. What is the minister doing to ensure that New Brunswickers are moved off the waiting lists and into family practices so that they no longer languish in emergency rooms for endless hours to seek the most basic of health care services?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: I thank the Leader of the Third Party for the question. It is a very valid question, and it is one that we, as a government, are very much attempting to address. It is true that there are many vacant doctor positions in the Fredericton area. If the member opposite or any members of this House can help us to recruit doctors to the Fredericton area, we will gladly sit down with them and try to work out an arrangement. There are vacant billing numbers here in the area. It is a priority of government. We have people within the department who work on recruitment of doctors. We go out to every medical school in the country. We reach out to the various job fairs and whatnot, but it is a very competitive business. Whatever the member opposite or anybody else can do to help us attract doctors...

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Mr. Coon: It is interesting. My question was about family practices and not specifically about doctors because nurse practitioner-based family practices could alleviate the doctor shortage. Nurse practitioners are able to diagnose, prescribe medications, order diagnostic tests, and refer patients to specialists. One nurse practitioner can take 1 000 people off the waiting list, yet, unbelievably, nurse practitioners are leaving New Brunswick for lack of work. It is not a question of attracting them to the province or trying to find them—they are already here. Why is the minister not pulling out all the stops to make sure that nurse practitioners can establish family practices in New Brunswick to alleviate that shortage?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: Again, I thank the member opposite for that question, and it is a very valid one. One of the commitments that we have in our platform is to make sure that we are fully utilizing the scope of practice of all our medical professionals, and that does include nurse practitioners.

Just before coming to the Legislature here today, my colleague the Deputy Premier and I participated in the official opening of the Fredericton downtown community health centre in its temporary location. Unfortunately, I saw the Leader of the Green Party only as I was exiting or I would have recognized his attendance there as well. It was good to see him there. It is a priority of our government to open more community health centres across the province. Here in Fredericton, this is a temporary measure. As we know, there has been a lot of talk on the floor of



the Legislature about money being put aside to build a new downtown Fredericton community health centre, and that will happen in the next fiscal year.

Mr. Coon: I am not talking about buildings, of course. I am talking about people. There are 11 nurse practitioners currently looking for work in New Brunswick, and they are going to leave unless we provide them with work. Another 11 will graduate from UNB this fall and 12 more next fall. It makes absolutely no sense whatsoever to have New Brunswickers sitting in waiting rooms waiting for a family doctor when there are nurse practitioners available who could take them on as patients now. Will the minister undertake to report back to this House on any barriers that stand in the way of moving nurse practitioners into family practices so that New Brunswick families can access health care now?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: As I said, we are certainly doing what we can to address the doctor shortage here in the Fredericton area. We are actively recruiting new doctors. We have just officially opened a downtown community health centre in its temporary location. We have committed money to a new location for the building, which will be built in the coming months.

We also made a commitment in the platform that we would fully utilize the health care professionals that we do have, including nurse practitioners. I agree with the member opposite that they are not being utilized to their full capacity here in the province. We are certainly going to look at ways and areas where we can improve the collaboration with nurse practitioners, just as we can improve the collaboration with our pharmacists, our paramedics, and our advanced care paramedics. The list goes on. We want to utilize fully the health care professionals that we have. We will certainly be reporting as progress is made on this file.

Atcon

Mr. Holder: As the chairman of the public accounts committee, I want to say that we received a report today from the Auditor General on the Atcon issue, which was long awaited. Some things in it, we knew; some things, we did not know. More importantly, there was a list of recommendations from the Auditor General.

My question today is for the Premier or the Deputy Premier—whoever wants to answer the question. Can we be guaranteed that each and every one of those recommendations is going to be followed up on?

Hon. Mr. Melanson: As everybody here knows, we take very seriously the responsibility of the Auditor General's Office and the work that it does. We will certainly analyze the recommendations that she brought forward.

We want to remind the official opposition and New Brunswickers that, when the previous government came forward on the floor of the Legislature to have the issue audited by the Auditor General, we, as an opposition party, supported that. We were agreeing to bring some light onto this situation and this file.



We will take this very seriously. We are taking it very seriously. We will look at the recommendations from the Auditor General and respond in due course.

Mr. Holder: What we are asking for today is a commitment that the government is going to follow through on these recommendations. I know that, in the past couple of weeks, the government has said that we have asked ridiculous questions and that we are wasting time. Do you know what? If you look at the One-Job Pledge, the Youth Employment program, and the forestry contracts, you will realize that we pushed the government on many occasions to make decisions. What we are asking for today is a one hundred percent commitment that it will follow through on these recommendations.

Hon. Mr. Melanson: As I have mentioned, as a government, we are taking this very seriously. I also want to remind the members of the official opposition that the Auditor General made some recommendations in 2010 on how to improve economic development assessments in terms of the types of investments that should be made. She declared today that only 29% of her recommendations had been implemented under their watch.

We are taking this very seriously. We are going to analyze the recommendations that the Auditor General has brought forward. We will also make a commitment that, when we bring in the *Opportunities New Brunswick Act*, we will take into consideration what the Auditor General has recommended.

I will also remind the opposition that this is a serious issue. It is an issue that has been ongoing for almost eight years or so. We, as a new government, want to do things right and use all the checks and balances to be sure that, when we do make investments, we will get a return...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Holder: I guess the minister has been promoted because I asked my questions of the Premier or the Deputy Premier. Having said that, I congratulate him on his promotion.

There is one revelation in this report, which is that the company in question, Atcon, did not actually apply for the funding. All of us on this side of the House cannot imagine people getting government funding that they did not apply for. Apparently, somebody within government filled out the application. Will the minister stand up today and say unequivocally that that is wrong and that should never have happened?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Melanson: I think I have said this clearly this afternoon: we take the recommendations of the Auditor General and the work of her office seriously.

When we are looking to invest New Brunswick taxpayers' money in economic files, we know very, very well that it is important to have mechanisms in place to ensure a good return on investment



for taxpayers. We want to make sure the economy and GDP grow, and we also want to create jobs.

Therefore, we are going to thoroughly analyze the Auditor General's recommendations. We will see which recommendations we can implement to ensure a good return on investment, as well as job creation, when we invest in economic growth; New Brunswickers will be able to benefit from that.

[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Hospitals

Mr. Flemming: I have decided to ask a question of the Minister of Health. I have watched him adroitly bounce around the issue with respect to the Dr. Everett Chalmers Hospital project. I have watched him apply the reasoning that the cancellation is because of the fiscal issue with respect to the Department of Health. I reject that in its entirety.

When we formed government, the Department of Health was out of control. It was growing at 6% per year, and it was in a free fall. Last year, the Department of Health had a \$44-million surplus. I know that is a word that a lot of people over there do not know—"surplus". It is not about the money. I did that budget. I know that budget inside out. I want to know this: If it was not the money, why was the project cancelled?

Mr. Speaker: Time. Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: It seems as though the opposition members have a strategy on this file that, if different members get up and ask the same questions, eventually they are going to get a different answer from me. However, that is not how we on this side of the Legislature operate. No matter which members get up and ask questions, they are going to get the same answer because the answer is pretty straightforward.

This is the very member who stood on this side of the House and made the announcement that day. He said: Now that we have our fiscal house in order, we can proceed with this project. I would remind the member that, when he left government, there was still a \$400-million deficit on the province's books, and that is a deficit that needs to be addressed. That is why my colleague the Minister of Finance and all my colleagues on this side of the House are committed to dealing with this situation. We had tough choices to make in the capital budget. Not every project could move forward, and, unfortunately, the Chalmers hospital did not make the cut this...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.



Mr. Flemming: Facts are difficult things. The fact of the matter is that the Department of Health had a \$44-million surplus.

I ask the minister this: Have you ever been to the Chalmers hospital? I have. I toured almost every hospital in New Brunswick when I was Minister of Health. What went on up there is appalling. I saw people climbing over bankers' boxes, overcrowding, and patients in hallways. I saw the infrastructure failing, and I saw the air conditioning failing. What I saw was absolutely appalling. I considered it the single most important capital project of the Department of Health, and I want to know this: Why was the project cancelled?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: I have a lot of respect for the member opposite, and I know that he knows very well the two points that I am about to make. First of all, the Department of Health does not operate in isolation. It operates within the government of New Brunswick. Second, I think that the member opposite also knows the difference between an operational budget and a capital budget.

The bottom line, which I have said many times, is that, when we, as a government, got together and had to put forward a capital budget, there were more asks than there was money to invest. We had to look at it case by case and project by project. Which projects were further along? Which projects were ready to move forward and in what sequence? By doing that, we stopped at five projects that were part of the capital budget. The new Fredericton Downtown Community Health Centre is one of them. Unfortunately, the Chalmers hospital is not one of them. It does not mean that it will never happen. It will be...

Mr. Speaker: Time. Time, minister.

Mr. Jody Carr: My question is regarding the justice...

Mr. Speaker: My apologies. It is the member for Rothesay's third question.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Flemming: He can have it.

I find it ironic that the minister has not visited the Chalmers hospital. I asked him the question. I do not know if he has visited, but he did not answer the question. Assuming that he has not, I urge him to do so. I believe that his position will change. I have gone up there. If you go up there, you will see that surgeries are being cancelled because there are no beds. You will see the bankers' boxes and the files. You will see the mechanical issues falling apart. You will see the problems that are there. You will see that it is outrageous that health care in New Brunswick has deteriorated so badly up there, in the capital city.

The planning was in place. The money was in place. Cancelling it was a choice that you made. You took your pen and wrote it off. You put a line through it. I want to know. It is okay to make a



mistake, and it is okay to stand up to say: Look, I should have done it. I want to know this: When are you going to put the project back on the agenda?

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: Everybody should take note of today's date. I think we just saw the first sparring between leadership candidates for the Progressive Conservative Party of New Brunswick. We just saw it today.

Again, I can keep answering this question over and over and over, if that is what the opposition member wants me to do. I am happy to do that. However, the fact of the matter is that, when the member opposite was on this side of the House, during the year before the election, he tried to pretend that everything was rosy, that everything was balanced, and that everything was great in New Brunswick, and, in fact, it was not.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: The member for Sussex-Fundy-St. Martins will come to order.

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: There are some real challenges that we, as a government, need to face, and we are going to do that. That means making some difficult decisions. When it came time to do the capital budget for the Department of Health, there were many projects on the table. We had to choose from among the projects that we had because we could not do them all.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Jody Carr: We will keep asking the questions until we get the truth for the people of the Fredericton region.

It is clear that the Dr. Everett Chalmers Regional Hospital is a growing problem for the government. We have new information today that tells us that 26 surgery cancellations have occurred since the beginning of this year. There were 11 surgery cancellations in January and 10 surgery cancellations in February, and there have already been 5 surgery cancellations in March at the Dr. Everett Chalmers Regional Hospital.

We are told that one reason the government sidelined the needed renovations—the renovations that were budgeted for and being planned since last October—was the conflicting priorities of the regional minister. A new justice building is his number one capital project. Will the Minister of Justice confirm that his actions are blocking the Chalmers hospital from moving forward? Will he, as Minister of Justice, change his number one construction priority from the justice building to the Chalmers hospital renovations, to clear up the surgery backlogs, to clear up the emergency room backlog, and to represent the people of Fredericton?



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: There is one thing I would like to know: When will the opposition be part of the solution rather than being part of the problem?

Day after day, opposition members ask us the same question. They should know that there are fiscal challenges in each of our departments, as well as in all areas of the province. Consequently, through the Strategic Program Review, we are looking at the whole government and all departments to see what impact this will have on communities in our province. However, one thing is certain: Our budget must be balanced, and that means difficult decisions will have to be made.

When the opposition members were in office, they did not want to make difficult decisions; they wanted to take it easy. However, as a government, we do not want to do that, and we will make the necessary decisions to get our house in order.

[Original]

Mr. Jody Carr: The member opposite asked when the PCs will be part of the solution regarding the Dr. Everett Chalmers Regional Hospital. The PC government had this money in the budget—\$3.9 million—in November 2013. We were part of the solution. We were moving these projects forward, not only the renovations, but also the community health centre.

Now, with 26 surgery cancellations since the beginning of January, the situation at the Chalmers hospital is getting worse. In fact, we are refuting every single point that the government members are saying regarding their sidelining and blocking this project from moving forward at the Chalmers hospital.

The Minister of Justice is the regional minister. Why is he not aware of the lost \$3.9 million for the Chalmers hospital? It was stolen for other projects. When the Chalmers hospital functional plan was completed last October, when we had \$3.9 million, and when we had 26 surgery cancellations... In this region, we want our money back for the Chalmers hospital, and we want it back now.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Jody Carr: Will the Deputy Premier join the rest of us and make sure he fights to get the Chalmers hospital project back on track?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: Politics are alive and well on that side of the House, and the various political races are well on their way. First, it was the member for Fredericton West-Hanwell who was carrying this ball because, as we all know, he wants to run for federal politics in Fredericton. Then, for the last couple of days, we have had the member for Oromocto-Lincoln who, we all know, wants to run for the provincial leadership of the party. He wants to be strong and tall and talk



loudly on this. However, the member for Rothesay does not want to miss out on the action. He got up today and decided to be part of it as well. There is a bit of rivalry going on on the other side. We all know that.

At the end of the day, New Brunswickers elected the Liberal Party to be on this side of the House.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: They know we are going to govern correctly, we are going to reestablish the books of this province, and we are going to provide for New Brunswickers the priorities that they have been asking for.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Leader of the Official Opposition will come to order.

