

May 14, 2015

[Original]

Senior Citizens

Mr. Fitch: There was an interesting dialogue last night, and it went into some of the bigger questions that we have been talking about. Setting up a contingency fund when you have a surplus makes sense. That was done under Bernard Lord's reign, and the federal governments have done it because they have had a surplus. Having a contingency fund here when there is a deficit projected and the contingency fund actually increases the deficit is very, very telling about the management, or management inability, of this government.

Last night, we found out that the unrest that the Premier has caused the seniors in the province is for \$7.8 million. Again, we talked about ideas and about how to help. This unrest has caused seniors to make moves financially, and it has caused a lot of unrest within various sectors right across the province. Will the Premier, now that he knows it is only \$7.8 million, reduce the contingency fund by \$7.8 million and leave the seniors alone?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: It is really unfortunate that the member opposite still does not understand what a contingency fund—contingency reserve—is. His counterpart the federal Minister of Finance, a Conservative, has said that a contingency reserve makes sense. He says that is something that the federal government does as well. The only people creating fear among the people of New Brunswick are the opposition members. They have been fearmongering about every decision.

I want to put this in context. Day after day, the opposition members have been getting up and trying to scare New Brunswickers about our policies, which are very progressive. Now, the member opposite is getting up and saying that \$7.8 million is not that much. Well, if it is not that much, will the member opposite apologize for fearmongering the seniors of our province and for trying to make them feel that more is going to be taken from them than, in reality, will be taken?

Mr. Fitch: The Premier is trying to do damage control again today because the first question that we asked when this all started, apart from the fact that... We asked him to own up to promising the seniors that he would not touch their assets. That would have allowed him to make an apology to the seniors and to move on from there. However, the first question we asked was: How much is this going to amount to, as revenue from the seniors? The Premier did not know or refused to answer.

It was that lack of information, which he either failed to give to the public or did not know, that started the unrest. It was the fact that he had witnesses and they were saying that he made the promise. Then he broke that promise, but he would not own up to it and tried to be cute about it and say: If you do not have it in words, then, it does not... The minister, last night, talked about people, about seniors, who are saying that this is a good policy. Unfortunately, there was no script



or anything to back that up. Again, will the Premier own up to the fact that he broke a promise? Will he rethink this policy and put the seniors at ease?

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am not the one who has made a flip-flop, as the member opposite has. I simply ask him to apologize to New Brunswickers for making them fear our policies.

Those members tried to make it sound as though the sky was falling for seniors when, in fact, had they read the policy, they would have seen that it was progressive. It is giving more money to those who are vulnerable and those who need more support. Now, this member gets up and says: Is that it—\$7.8 million? That is not a lot. That is not too bad. The only reason people thought it was going to be potentially bad was the opposition's fearmongering.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I ask the opposition to apologize to the seniors in our province. Fearmongering is something that this opposition has been doing since day one. Read our policies. Find the things that are good about them. If you do not agree with something, work with us to make sure that it will be progressive, it will be fiscally responsible, and it will help us get our province on track.

Mr. Fitch: We can go back to the preelection time and know that the Premier has a hard time apologizing to people. We saw that during the debates of the leaders.

Let's just look at history. On March 31, the government came out during the budget speech and said: We are going to take the assets of seniors. There were no details—no details at all. On May 4, the government members finally came out with a policy. The Premier says that we should have read it, but I will tell you this: It was only on May 4, in damage control, that they came out with a policy. On May 13, last night, it was the first time ever that a dollar figure was attached.

If anyone has to apologize to the seniors for the lack of information and the lack of understanding of what this policy is, it is the Premier sitting right there. I will give him an opportunity to apologize to the seniors because we have the facts on our side. The government members brought this out on March 31, with no details, and they are the ones who caused this panic.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: In our budget speech, we made it very clear which principles we would follow. This is exactly what this policy is doing. It is following the principles of being progressive, making sure we protect the most vulnerable, and, in fact, making sure that we protect the most vulnerable even more than we were under the old policy.

Because the member opposite does not understand how we wanted to engage and to listen to New Brunswickers' concerns and ideas, he figured that he would fill the void by fearmongering. I



ask the member opposite, who himself... I am not the one who said this. The member opposite got up on his feet today and said: All of this for \$7.8 million? Well, will you apologize, because that is not a lot of money?

Well, if it is not a lot of money, the member opposite should say “sorry” to the people of New Brunswick, to the seniors of our province, for fearmongering and for trying to make them think that our policy is something that it is not. The only thing that our policy does is to ensure fiscal responsibility and sustainability for many years to come. It is progressive, and it ensures that the most vulnerable and those who need support get even more.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. B. Macdonald: It is disheartening to get up in this House every day, try to stand up for seniors, and watch the members of the government stand up and applaud their Premier, with a standing ovation, for his attack on seniors.

What we on this side of the House are saying is that, after last night’s questioning, finally, we understand that the impact of this policy on the government is not severe, but it is a severe attack on seniors who have a fixed income. The impact for them is severe. This Premier has tried to make up policy on the fly, and we are getting very tired of it over here. He has tried to bully seniors at every opportunity, to seize their assets. The problem is that this does not make good policy. The Premier claims it is progressive, but the reality is that it is regressive. It is going back to a time well before we were in government, when assets were seized, and we are very concerned about that.

My question for the Premier is this: Will he go back to the drawing board and figure out a policy that is going to be fair to all seniors?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I agree that this is an important policy. It is important for couples that have an income of \$60 000 or less. They will see more money in their pockets for their spouses and dependents at the home under our new policy than they would have seen under the old policy. You are right, it is an important policy for seniors.

The opposition members have been fearmongering since they sat in those seats for the first time as an opposition. In fact, the member opposite got up day after day and said that the rule changes for the Legislature were an attack on democracy. The whole sky was going to fall. The chandeliers in the Legislature were going to fall.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.



Hon. Mr. Gallant: Day after day, they were fearmongering about the rule changes, saying that there would be only a limited number of question periods in a year—nine, in fact. What really happened was that, one month after the changes, we had had 15 question periods. The sky has not fallen. The Legislature is more efficient. The only ones who were fearing were the members opposite, and they were trying to make everyone fear what we were doing.

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Mr. B. Macdonald: It is clear that this Premier wants to change the channel to rule changes. I can tell you that he has taken away my right to vote on all bills in this Legislature and I do not support that.

The reality is that this Premier is still making up policy on the fly. The problem is that policy on the fly is not good policy. In fact, the policy that the Premier did produce, he has not even introduced in this Legislature. He has posted it online and leaked it to the *Telegraph-Journal*, but he has yet to present that policy in the Legislature. The reality is that that policy is like Swiss cheese; it is full of holes. Accountants all over this province are already coming up with ways to circumvent it.

My concern is that this does not protect the seniors the Premier intends to protect and these are the seniors who do not have the financial means to shelter their assets, to get around this weak policy. I want to know when this Premier is going to go back to the drawing board and come up with a real policy, in consultation with experts, that benefits all seniors in this province in a fair way.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I really invite the opposition to read the policy, because we have made it very clear that our policy is actually going to help those who are vulnerable and need more support. People—couples with incomes of \$60 000 or less—will see more money in their pockets under our policy, so I have to take issue with what the member is saying, just based on that.

I would also add that it is ironic to hear him say what he just said when the opposition does not support our taxing the wealthiest 1% in this province to help to get our finances in order. We could take some of that money and invest it strategically to create jobs and to ensure that we have strong social programs. I find it ironic to hear the member opposite get up and say what he just said when he and his colleagues voted against raising the minimum wage to help those who are most vulnerable, those who are trying to make ends meet, and those who are sometimes the working poor in our province.

The opposition members cannot have it both ways. They cannot fearmonger out of one side of their mouths and then say they are for things out of the other side.

Mr. B. Macdonald: It is becoming increasingly difficult to keep this minister on track.

(Interjections.)



Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. B. Macdonald: The questions we are asking are about his policy on seizing seniors' assets, and that is clear. These seniors have already made their contribution to society. They have already paid more in taxes than many of us will ever pay.

The funny thing about liquid assets is that, once you buy something with them, they are no longer liquid. That creates a gaping hole in this Premier's policy. I want to know what he is going to do. Is he going to find a way to protect those seniors who do not have the ability to turn their liquid assets into nonliquid assets just because he has put in place a policy that creates a huge loophole?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I think the member is trying to say that people cannot afford to hire lawyers or accountants, but, as far as I am concerned, I presume that these are often couples who have an annual income of \$60 000 or less.

So, to answer the question, yes, we are helping the most vulnerable seniors; our policy will indeed put more money in their pockets. They will have more money, which will enable them to have a decent quality of life. So, our policy will further help these people. In addition, it will help us with our finances, since it will enable us to raise \$7.8 million. This money will enable us to balance the province's books and to have the fiscal capacity to invest in initiatives that will help us create jobs.

We think our policy is very reasonable and balanced and will help us with our priorities, which are to create jobs, balance our budget, and provide high-quality services to all New Brunswickers.

[*Original*]

NB Power

Mr. Coon: NB Power has contracted with a Toronto-based company to deliver its soon-to-be-announced home insulation program. Four New Brunswick businesses provided energy evaluation services under the late, great Efficiency NB's home retrofit program. Energy advisers who have been building careers in the energy efficiency services industry have been laid off across the province. Local energy efficiency businesses have had to shut down here. Meanwhile, in Nova Scotia, the energy efficiency industry directly provides 1 200 full-time jobs.

Can the minister responsible for NB Power tell this House how many New Brunswickers have been put out of work by hiring this Toronto-based company to deliver NB Power's new home insulation program?

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: I thank the member opposite for the question. I would encourage him not to fearmonger by saying that people are being put out of their jobs. That is not the case. There are many programs that the efficiency division actually provides to New Brunswickers. Various



companies actually provide that work on behalf of NB Power now. The company in question went through a tendering process, a very open and transparent tendering process that was done by the Department of Government Services, and it won the contract, but that did not take away any work from other companies, as the member opposite has mentioned.

Mr. Coon: The minister should mention that to the people who have lost their jobs in the companies that have shut down. One of the mandates of NB Power, which it took over from Efficiency NB, is to promote the development of the energy efficiency services industry to create jobs in New Brunswick.

Under Efficiency NB's retrofit program, there was enough work to keep four local energy evaluation companies going. Many of those have shut down. Homeowners had the choice at that time of whom to hire. It was not specified. They just had to be licensed under the national EnerGuide Program, through Natural Resources Canada, which provide technical support. Now, we have a Toronto-based firm that will be the sole provider of the home energy audits required to be eligible for NB Power's insulation grants, and it is not even required to be accredited by the national EnerGuide Program. It has been eliminated. How does this grow the energy efficiency services industry in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: I can assure the member opposite that the company in question that he is talking about is not going to be the sole provider of efficiency programs in New Brunswick. I have talked to the companies that he assumes are going to close shop. I have talked to those companies. They are not going to close shop. They are actually still doing work that they have contracted under the other efficiency programs that we offer to New Brunswickers.

I would encourage the member opposite not to fearmonger by saying that these companies are going to shut their doors. They are still working to provide energy efficiency services to the province. They continue to do that work. The company from Ontario which you speak of went through a very public, transparent tendering process. It is a small contract of the many contracts that we have out there to provide efficiency programs in New Brunswick.

Mr. Coon: Efficiency NB required our local energy auditors to use the federal energy guide for houses program and its HOT2000 home assessment software to recommend efficiency improvements to our homes and heating systems. That is the standard used across Canada, and it has a stellar international reputation. It generated a score for your home before and after the energy efficiency upgrades. Years of training and investment in partnership with Natural Resources Canada on the EnerGuide Program have now been thrown away, just as Efficiency NB was thrown away.

Can the minister explain why NB Power has ditched the EnerGuide Program and the confidence that it provided to homeowners that they were getting sound technical advice on upgrading their homes from a nationally acclaimed program?



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: Again, I thank the Green Party member for his question. However, what he says is not factual; it does not reflect what is really going on. The member is telling us that a company won a contract following an open and transparent process. It is not a big contract, but the business will provide services under Efficiency NB programs.

I can assure the Green Party member, as well as the other members, that companies currently providing services under Efficiency NB programs will continue to do so, because existing contracts are going to be honoured. What is important is that we have a government that invests in Efficiency NB programs. In February of last year, the former Conservative government cut all the Efficiency NB programs that were intended for people in the province. Our government is investing in Efficiency NB programs, and I am very proud to be part of the Gallant government, which invests in such programs.

[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Atcon

Mr. K. MacDonald: The taxpayers of New Brunswick will not be satisfied until all the outstanding questions about the Atcon fiasco have been answered. The Auditor General has indicated that she would be willing to do a forensic audit. The people want to know where the money went. The people want to know why the Bank of Nova Scotia was put ahead of our interests by the now Minister of Health. The people want to know what will stop this from happening again, given the fact the Liberal government has removed all the safeguards that were in place to prevent this from happening.

Will the Premier stand up today and commit to undertaking a forensic audit of the Atcon affair?

Hon. Mr. Melanson: Today's question has been dealt with over many weeks. We have said publicly, on the floor of the Legislature, that we have welcomed the recommendations from the Auditor General and that we are implementing the recommendations she made to make sure that this situation does not occur again. We have also said publicly that staff at Opportunities New Brunswick have met with the Auditor General and they had a very good dialogue to understand her recommendations.

I think it is important to understand that the safeguards are there, and we have made sure... Through better understanding of the Auditor General's recommendations, we can make sure that we will implement the safeguards she has recommended. We look forward to implementing these safeguards to make sure this type of situation does not happen again.



Mr. K. MacDonald: I think the New Brunswick Liberal Party should be allowed to name the Deh Cho Bridge. After all, you paid for it.

Every day, this government makes cuts. It makes cuts to schools, teachers, day cares, or bookmobiles. The \$72 million from the Atcon fiasco would have prevented these cuts.

The Atcon Six are pulling the strings once again, and the taxpayers are understandably concerned. As it stands today, we do not know where the money went and we have not even received an apology from the Atcon Six for putting the Bank of Nova Scotia ahead of the taxpayers of New Brunswick.

Atcon will be part of the legacy of this Premier if he does not take action and give full disclosure, no matter how damaging the details may be. Will this Premier stand up and undertake a forensic audit of the Atcon scandal?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Melanson: We have been extremely clear in response to the recommendations made by the Auditor General. I will remind the member opposite that, when we were in opposition, we unanimously supported the motion brought forward by the previous government in June 2013, calling for the Auditor General to do her job and assess this file.

We also said—I said this this morning, and I will reiterate—that the Auditor General’s recommendations were taken fully into consideration. In fact, the Chief Executive Officer of Opportunities New Brunswick met with the Auditor General to fully understand how to implement her recommendations. The work is under way; we took steps to avoid a situation like the one just mentioned and others in the past.

[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time. Time, minister.

Mr. K. MacDonald: The minister is a great advocate for the people of the Northwest Territories. It is a sin that we cannot say the same thing for the New Brunswick taxpayers.

The Premier must be worried that the Atcon Six will bring him down, just as they did former Premier Shawn Graham. The public has the perception that the Atcon Six are running the show, and rightfully so. The Premier has an opportunity to give the perception that he is in charge and not taking orders from the Minister of Health. We already know that Dominic LeBlanc is calling a lot of the shots. Will the Premier stand up for the people of New Brunswick and get to the bottom of the Atcon scandal?

The Liberals put Scotiabank, Aviva Insurance, and GE Capital ahead of the New Brunswick taxpayers, and the list goes on and on. Will the Premier finally commit to a forensic audit?



Hon. Mr. Melanson: We listen to the types of questions that the opposition members bring forward, and they are just all over. They are not focusing on job creation, which is what New Brunswickers want their government and their legislators to act on. They are not focused on trying to get our fiscal house in order.

I will point out that, in 2010, the Auditor General made some recommendations while the members opposite were in government and they did not act on implementing the recommendations that were brought forward. We are acting on the recommendations that the Auditor General brought forward in the past few months. We have taken action to correct these situations and put in place the safeguards that are needed. We are doing our jobs.

As we are doing this, we are focused on job creation and getting our fiscal house in order, and we are asking the opposition to work with us to move this province forward so that we can be in a position where people will stay here to work.

Hydraulic Fracturing

Mr. Stewart: It has been almost two months since the Minister of Energy and Mines appointed his commission to study hydraulic fracturing. The minister's announcement on March 24 clearly stated: "The commission will report back to the provincial government with its key findings within one year." We would have expected there to be much work done by the commission to this point, such as meetings, studies, or consultations. However, yesterday, we were informed that perhaps the commission has not even met and has not started any work whatsoever. Can the minister please inform the House whether his commission has performed any work since it was appointed? If it has, what exactly have those activities been?

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: This is a pretty weak allegation. This government has been working. Actually, we put 3 100 people to work in full-time jobs last month. I think that we are doing our job.

When it comes hydraulic fracturing, we brought forward exactly what we had been promising for the past two years—a moratorium on hydraulic fracturing in New Brunswick. We did that on December 18.

We also said that we were going to appoint a commission, a very well-respected group of individuals, to study hydraulic fracturing in New Brunswick, based on five conditions. The five conditions are very, very important to the people of New Brunswick. At the same time, I told the commission that it has up to 12 months to provide a report to the government. At that time, we will make a decision as to whether or not we are going to move forward.

I have also said that the commission will have full independence, which is unlike the former government. That is why we are in the mess that we are in today. The former government tried to influence the process and to get people to think a certain way, despite all the concerns that were out there. The former government just put the kibosh on those individuals.



I believe this commission can do great work. I know that it has been meeting and that it has been working. The commission is independent from us, and I do not control it.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Stewart: The minister's abdication of his role is rather sad, but it is certainly not surprising. One has to wonder at the fact that his refusal to provide any information regarding this commission has followed the same pattern that we discovered earlier this spring, with the minister's and the Premier's penchant for withholding information from the public. Perhaps the commissioner's son-in-law has simply told the Premier and the minister that any work of the commission is to be delayed until the federal election is over, much in the same way he dictated the terms of this government's budget.

If the minister will not inform the House and the people of New Brunswick what work the commission is or is not performing, can the minister at least reconfirm that the commission has until March 23, 2016, to report back to the provincial government with its key findings? That is the date the minister stated was its deadline when he announced the commission.

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: The member opposite should be ashamed that he would put in doubt the credibility of a retired judge who had a prolific career—a chief judge. The member should be ashamed of what he just said.

I have been very clear. The commission is independent from the government. We are not going to influence it. I know that the members on that side are used to it. The former Minister of Education's brother—he was his EA—leaked emails with test scores. There is the former Minister of Health, and, when Dr. Cleary, the Chief Medical Officer, put forward a report on hydraulic fracturing, the government made sure that report did not appear on the Energy Institute website.

We believe in our civil service. We believe in the process, an open and transparent process. I said that the commission will be independent. I am not there filling the members' schedules and telling them whom they should or should not meet. I believe in the commission. It can do the work, and it will report back in 12 months.

Mr. Stewart: One would wonder whether Dominic LeBlanc's father is actually independent.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Stewart: Perhaps an indefinite delay in the reporting of this commission is what the minister wants. As we have recently seen from this minister, task force or commission reports are problematic. They tend to be roadblocks for his political giveaways, or they offer commonsense recommendations that are in opposition to his personal agenda that is based solely on politics and photo ops.



In less than a year, this minister has interfered in NB Power management-approved tenders, has led the charge to ignore the youth mental health task force recommendations on the location for a youth mental health centre of excellence, and has worked with the rest of the Atcon Six to convince the Premier to block a forensic audit into the Atcon scandal, which would tell New Brunswick where the money really went.

Now, we see that the minister is turning his back on his own commission, as he cannot even tell the House what it has been doing for the past two months. Perhaps the minister himself has recognized the farce that this commission is and is preemptively burying its work. Can the minister explain why he has no information about its work to date?

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: It is because it is independent. It is independent, and that is something that the opposition does not recognize. The members opposite, when they were in government, created a website where they were going to study energy projects within the province. On the website, it said very clearly that a moratorium was not the way to proceed. How many reports did they have on that website before they came to that conclusion? Zero. Did they publish the health report given by Dr. Cleary? No. Did they have a lack of credibility in that Energy Institute? Yes. Did they try to get involved? Yes.

Will we do the same thing? No. We will let the commission do its work. It will report back in the timeline in which we asked it to do so. They are reputable New Brunswickers. We very much look forward to their findings, and we very much look forward to continuing to have, we hope, a constructive debate and discussion on how we are going to move our province forward, grow our economy, get our finances in order, and provide senior care, health care, and an education system for all New Brunswickers.

Mr. Speaker: Final question.

Larry's Gulch

Mr. Flemming: I have a question for the Attorney General. It has come to everyone's attention that there is going to be an investigation concerning the Larry's Gulch fishing lodge. I wonder whether the Attorney General would advise the House on how many years are going to be investigated and how much money this investigation is expected to cost.

(Interjection.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I have to point out the irony. I had to get up on my feet. Those members are worried about the cost of that investigation but not about other matters, are they? Another matter has been investigated by many legislative officers, and they wanted to continue, I would



say, probably for political reasons. They are not very interested in having the Larry's Gulch issue looked into, and they are very worried about the costs of looking into Larry's Gulch.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: It is incredibly unfortunate to watch the opposition members fearmonger day after day. They have fearmongered about the day care changes, saying they are cuts when, in fact, we are investing more. They have fearmongered about the seniors policy when, in fact, it is progressive and is putting more money in the pockets of those who need it. They fearmongered about the contingency reserve, despite the fact that the federal Finance Minister thinks it is a good idea. They fearmongered about the rule changes in the Legislature, saying the sky was going to fall. In fact, the Legislature is more efficient. They also fearmonger about infrastructure spending, yet they want us to spend in their ridings.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order.

