

March 29, 2016

[Original]

Mr. Urquhart: Due to the extended period that we have been out of the House and the serious issues facing the province, we are asking for unanimous consent to have an extension of a mere 15 minutes for question period today.

Mr. Speaker: Do we have unanimous consent?

Hon. Members: No.

Mr. Speaker: We do not have unanimous consent.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Government Agenda

Mr. Fitch: A lot has transpired since the Premier bolted from the Legislature and question period six weeks ago, so I will just give him a quick update on what has gone on here in the province while he has been away.

We learned that our economy has lost 8 600 full-time jobs so far this year, we have the highest youth unemployment ever, we have the largest increase in EI claims in all of Canada, and we have the lowest number of workers in our workforce in a decade. There are at least 38 000 New Brunswickers out of work at this point. Also, in case the Premier did not recognize it, we have a full-blown crisis when it comes to jobs and the economy here in the province. The government is 11 000 jobs behind in what was promised during the election.

I know that the Premier probably has a well-rehearsed speech for this question, but I am going to give him an opportunity now. In light of these devastating facts, what does he have to say for himself?

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I would like the record to be set straight on where I have been over the past two and a half weeks. I am very pleased to go through it. I may forget some of it, so I will ask my colleagues to help me if I do.

(Interjections.)



Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We have been to St. Stephen. We have been to Sussex. We went to Perth-Andover. We went to Kedgwick. We went to Miramichi. We went to Edmundston. I went to Shippagan. We found ourselves in Memramcook this morning. We went to Bathurst as well. We went to Saint John. We went to Moncton. Am I missing any, colleagues?

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We have been to Fredericton, of course, and Florenceville-Bristol to make an announcement as well regarding the IBM investment. Over the last two and a half weeks, I have probably been to about 20 communities, if not more, within New Brunswick to meet with the chambers of commerce...

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: ...to meet the community leaders, to meet the people who are going to help us overcome the challenges that we have before us as a province and seize the opportunities before us.

I am going to continue to travel, meet with the people of New Brunswick, and ensure that we are working together to move our province forward.

Economic Development

Mr. Fitch: It reminded me of Hank Snow. The Premier's speech was like Hank Snow's song—"I've been everywhere, man". Certainly, from a standpoint of what was accomplished, we are glad that he finally got to see the people of Sussex as well, because they were hit hard with the closure of the potash mine.

Once again, there are still 38 000 New Brunswickers out of work here in the province. That, in my mind, is a crisis that the Premier needs to address, and he needs to address it right now. We have a lot of people from out West who have experience in mining, but, unfortunately, the whole mining, mineral, and resource development sector has been shut down. The Premier's policies have killed it—the pipeline, the mining, the potash, the shale gas, the fertilizer plant, and, of course, as we heard, the latest victim, the LNG export. Those are based on policies set by this government. Are you going to change your policies? Are you going to change your direction and start creating real jobs?



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: As we are well aware, and as New Brunswickers know, too, the Canadian economy is stagnant at this time. This is a challenge we are facing as Canadians, and here in New Brunswick, we will work with our partners. That is why I went to talk to the leaders in all the chambers of commerce two and a half weeks ago. The government wants to work with New Brunswickers and be a constructive partner to overcome these challenges.

[Original]

I am a bit confused, though, when the Leader of the Opposition talks about no mining happening. The Trevali mine is something that we are very proud of and that we have supported. We have actually given the EIA to the Sisson mine, to the private sector group that wants to develop that mine. That EIA was on the desk of the Leader of the Opposition for years, and they never approved it.

I would like to ask the member opposite: How many pipelines for oil transportation were built under his government? When he was Minister of Economic Development, how many pipelines did he actually get into the ground here in New Brunswick?

Mr. Fitch: When we look at when we left office, we see that the west-east pipeline for oil was a lot closer than it is now, under this government. We can tie that fact to the policies of this government.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Fitch: We can tie the policies and the mismanagement of the resource development sector here in the province right back to the Premier. He knows very well that the Trevali mine was under way when we were in government. He knows very well that the west-east pipeline was moving along. It has been a fact that the Premier sidled up to the other Liberal Premiers from Quebec and Ontario and said that their expectations of further scrutiny of environmental issues were reasonable. That opened the door for other people to become intervenors in that pipeline. This has caused a delay. I wonder whether the Premier could tell us...

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I see the opposition members still believe that if they had had two more weeks in government, everything would have been fixed. Everything they were working on was going to be finished in those two weeks. Because of that, those two weeks would have been crucial. The Energy East Pipeline project would be in Saint John if they had had two more weeks in government.



The people of New Brunswick know the truth. They know that, when we look at the economic growth rate over the last few years, from 2006 to 2014, in New Brunswick, the cumulative growth rate of our economy has been 2%. We recognize that this is a challenge that we face and it is one that we have been facing for quite some time.

We did not invent this challenge that we have here in New Brunswick—that we have had for decades—and we are certainly not the ones who made it so that the Canadian economy is going through some challenges as well. However, I can tell you that we are going to be a government that is going to work with its partners, the private sector, and the federal government. We are going to ensure that we develop an environment that is going to encourage investment, job creation, and economic growth.

Mr. Fitch: The results of this government are obvious. Its policies triggered a stop to investing in the province. When we were in government, we made policies that caused SWN Resources to invest \$70 million and Corridor Resources to invest \$500 million. Now, the business climate has been poisoned by this government because of the policies that it has put forward.

In 2012, New Brunswick was number one in the world for mining. In 2014, it was number one only in Canada, and, now, it is at the bottom of the barrel as a bad place to invest. This is largely due to the policies of this government. This Liberal government is making decisions that are hurting the economy of New Brunswick. We have seen that in lost jobs and lost investment. We have also seen that in the fact that 38 000 people are out of work in the province and we have more returning home every day.

Can the Premier tell us how, he feels, the negative publicity that he has brought to the province is going to affect investment in the future?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: It is a bit odd that the member opposite is talking about how, in his opinion, the climate for mining in New Brunswick went down during his tenure as the Minister of Economic Development. He said that, in 2012, mining in New Brunswick was the best in the world and, in 2014, it was the best only in Canada. He was the one governing, and he was the one who was the Minister of Economic Development during that period.

If the member opposite wants to talk about the previous government's record, I have it right in front of me. I want to say again that the economic and fiscal challenges that we face in New Brunswick were not created overnight. They were years in the making. If the opposition wants to talk about the previous government's record, I have it in front of me. In 2011, the growth rate was 0.2%. In 2012, it was -1.2%. The economy contracted. In 2013, it was 0.3%, and, in 2014, it was -0.3%. Cumulatively, there was growth of 0.4%. It is certainly nothing for the Leader of the Opposition to brag about.

Mr. Fitch: It is interesting that the Premier cannot have it both ways. He cannot blame the former government for the bad economic conditions and poor job growth and also say that the poor economic conditions, the crisis that the province is in right now, with 38 000 people out of



work, which is the highest unemployment rate in the youth categories and the highest number of recipients on EI within a decade... He cannot have it both ways. He cannot blame the former government by saying that its results were dismal and that it is the former government's fault and then say that it is not his fault that things are being so poorly run in New Brunswick. It lies directly at the Premier's feet right now.

Tell us today. Does the Premier have a plan to turn this province around? Is he going to change the policies that have been in place for the past 18 months that have driven this province to the highest unemployment rate in a decade, with 38 000 people out of work? Does the Premier have a plan to move this province forward?

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I want to clarify that, in fact, I said the opposite. I said that I was not blaming the previous government because these challenges have developed over decades, over years, and the Canadian economy is not where we want it to be right now. We recognize that. It is the member opposite who wants to say that, had his government still been in power for an extra two weeks, everything would have been solved. I would like to correct that because I do not agree.

Do we have a plan? Absolutely. The Canadian economy is not where we want it to be, but we are not going to sit on our hands. We are going to remain optimistic. I met with the chambers of commerce, and they are optimistic. The reason I am so optimistic after the tour that I did is that I believe in New Brunswickers and our collective ability to overcome our challenges and to seize the opportunities before us. We are going to be a positive partner with the private sector and with the community leaders across the province to make sure that we have a strong environment and climate for investment, job creation, and economic growth.

Mr. Fitch: The Premier said that he had a plan. I would ask him whether he could put that plan on the floor of the Legislature, not just the reorganization of the economic planning department, Economic Development, or Invest NB. That is just a reorganization of a department or two.

The Premier said that he has a plan. We would welcome even a draft plan—a draft plan that may not be fully developed. Let's have a discussion on it. Put the draft plan on the table. We know that there is one that they have been working on for a while. That is why the Premier hired so much high-priced help. Let him put the draft plan that he has for the economic development of the province on the table. Let's discuss it. Let's see whether we can get these 38 000 people back to work here in New Brunswick.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: This is the most constructive question and comment that I have heard from the Leader of the Opposition. Absolutely, it will be our pleasure to ensure that we put our growth plan on the floor of the Legislature. As I am sure the member opposite knows, we have been consulting with New Brunswickers. We have been meeting with industry leaders,



community leaders, stakeholders, researchers, experts, and New Brunswickers to develop a strong plan to ensure that we are helping our traditional industries and that we are transitioning and preparing for the knowledge economy that is before us. Therefore, it will be my pleasure, absolutely, to ensure that it is going to be presented on the floor of the Legislature.

Another reason I like the comments and the question of the member opposite this time around is that he says: Let's talk about it, and let's make sure that we work together to get people working. I think that it is fantastic and that it is the best thing that I have heard from the Leader of the Opposition. Right now, given the challenges that we face as a province and given the challenges that the country faces, some nonpartisan cooperation is exactly what we need.

Communications

Mr. Fitch: If the Premier had been listening for the last 18 months, he would know that we were ready to cooperate long before today.

When the article from *Maclean's* magazine came out a little while ago, I was really disappointed about some of the light that it shed on New Brunswick. We feel very, very strongly that the people of New Brunswick are one of our main resources, and we have a lot of faith in those people. I talked to *Maclean's* magazine, and I was not quoted. I guess I put too much of a positive spin on where the possibilities are for us to go. It is interesting that the Premier's Office did not even respond or grant an interview. Probably one of the negative issues that caused the article to be so negative was that the Premier would not even talk to the reporters from *Maclean's* magazine.

Since the Premier has been out of the province and out of the Legislature and since we are back in for a very short time, will the Premier commit to making himself available to the media every day after question period so that we can get some of the issues answered?

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I can tell you that I have had the chance—and I am very lucky to have had this chance—to talk to thousands of New Brunswickers. I borrow the position of Premier from the people of New Brunswick, and, with it, I get the opportunity to meet so many incredible people in our province. They are optimistic. It is unfortunate that one person who came to town wrote such an article that I certainly do not agree with. I am happy to see that the Leader of the Opposition does not agree with it either. I know that the people to whom I have spoken during my tours in recent days do not agree either.

However, I can tell you that I have found the last couple of weeks interesting. A reporter was quoted in *Maclean's* magazine. I will certainly allow him to make his comments. It was interesting because, in the last two and a half weeks, I have had at least 16 scrums. I do not know how many the Leader of the Opposition has had. I would argue that it is probably fewer



than that. The reporter who was quoted in *Maclean's* magazine was not there once, but I will continue to talk to the media to get our message across.

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Collective Bargaining

Mr. B. Macdonald: It is good to hear the Premier tell us about all the groups that he has consulted with in New Brunswick, but one of the groups that he has not consulted with, as I understand it, is our firefighters and police. As we know, these emergency services and other groups are denied the right to strike, and they rely on binding arbitration or arbitration methods to solve their problems and protect their rights.

On page 12 of the budget, I see that there is language in which this government promises to make changes to binding interest arbitration. I wonder whether the government could now tell us what those plans are. Since it has not conducted consultations, will it now commit today to consulting with these key stakeholder groups—our first responders and their families—and tell us exactly what it plans to do going forward with regard to binding interest arbitration?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Ms. Landry: You know, in recent years, arbitrators have often granted wage increases to employees that exceeded our municipalities' and universities' financial means.

In the past few months, we have been approached by municipalities that asked us to look at different ways we could review the whole issue of wage increases granted through binding interest arbitration.

You know, our primary goal is to make wise choices and table budgets that will enable us to invest in education, health, and job creation. When a number of our partners—such as municipalities and universities, for example—are subject to wage pressures, this has a major impact on the money invested by taxpayers.

[*Original*]

Mr. B. Macdonald: I know that the minister seems to have a clear understanding of the problem here, but what I am asking about are the solutions that have been proposed. On page 12, the budget says very clearly that this government plans to introduce “changes to binding interest arbitration.” I am wondering whether the minister can tell us now what those planned changes are and what groups she plans to consult with to ensure that she has buy-in from those key stakeholders, the people who protect our province.



[Translation]

Hon. Ms. Landry: I would like to inform the House that we met with and consulted these groups and that we certainly listened to their points of view. That being said, I can tell you that these changes are necessary, because we want to spend New Brunswick taxpayers' money wisely on organizations, municipalities, and so on. As there is enormous pressure with respect to wages granted during arbitration, we want to look at this process. To this end, we proposed a four-point plan.

[Original]

Mr. B. Macdonald: Again, I ask the minister this. I am not clear on what the changes are that the members opposite have proposed. I have heard that the minister has consulted with groups, but I have been approached by a number of groups that have not been consulted. This is a pattern that has developed with this government. The members opposite say that they have consulted when they have not. They hold consultations when they have already made up their minds about what they are going to do.

In this case of binding interest arbitration, I would like to again ask the minister to clearly outline for us what changes she has proposed. Is she going to go to mandatory arbitration? Is she going to force parties to pick an arbitrator from a list? What are the changes that have been proposed? Commit today to consulting, at least, with the firefighters who are here and with other first responders to make sure that not only the municipalities are being consulted but also, in fact, the people who will suffer under an egregious plan for arbitration.

[Translation]

Hon. Ms. Landry: Once again, I would like to reiterate that we met with firefighter and police associations, as well as with municipalities. We will introduce a four-point plan. I am going to switch to the other language for the rest of my answer.

[Original]

The first point is the creation of a permanent roster of arbitrators. The second point is final offer arbitration. The third one is a list of criteria for taking into account the economy of New Brunswick and the local economy, as I said. The final one... I am sorry. I do not have it in my notes here. However, certainly, this is to...

[Translation]

We certainly want to recognize the principle of free collective bargaining. Making sure that this principle is upheld is certainly one of our goals.



[Original]

Senior Citizens

Mr. Steeves: The relationship between the Gallant government and our seniors got off to a bad start right away with the asset grab and all the rest of that. Things just are not getting better.

The Premier's Council on Aging sounded like a noble idea at first blush. Then we learned that many of the individuals and groups with expertise on aging that had asked to be part of this council were turned away. Some were even told that they were going to be part of the council and then were later told: No, we have changed our mind.

In order for this council to have any credibility, those impacted by its actions, namely, our seniors, must have faith in the council for it is designated and designed to serve their interests and not the interests of the Gallant government. My question for the Minister of Social Development is this: Will you hit reset on the Council on Aging and open its membership to those nonpolitical people who might want to help?

Hon. Ms. Rogers: I am really pleased to have the question brought to the floor today by the member opposite. I am very happy to say that we had our first meeting with the Council on Aging. I was very, very impressed and very, very hopeful. I know that we are going to be successful and we are going to be leaders in New Brunswick in the development of a strategy on aging with this new aging council.

It is the first time for New Brunswick ever to have this. I really believe that we have the opportunity to lead the way. I am very, very excited about this. The individuals who make up the council bring experience and expertise from a wide variety of areas. Together, they make a great whole. They are led by two excellent, very confident, very well respected cochairs. This is very good news for New Brunswick.

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Mr. Steeves: The Gallant government is having a tough job getting any buy-in from the public on these consultation groups. The Strategic Program Review consultation appeared to the general population just to be a way to raise the HST and then blame it on the population. The shale gas panel gave \$200 000 through an untendered communications contract to an associate of one of the three panel members. I wonder if other untendered contracts will be given to associates of the Council on Aging. I certainly hope not.

The minister started to go into exactly what the Council on Aging is going to do. I guess that is what we are wondering about. There has already been a 2% reduction for food. That has been decided on. There has been a 17% reduction for cleaning in nursing homes. The skill mix ratio seems to have been decided, with three months of evidence in this new computer program. We are wondering what the council is for if these decisions have already been made.



Hon. Ms. Rogers: I would like to thank the member opposite again for the opportunity to speak about this great initiative that the government is doing. The first thing I would like to clarify, again, is that the role of this council is to develop, in consultation with the community stakeholders, partners, and government, a first-ever strategy on aging for New Brunswick.

As the members and the public know, New Brunswick is first at the gate with an aging population across the province, and we have some challenges that accompany this. This is good news. It means that we are living longer. It also means, really, that we are living healthier and more active lives. We want a strategy that takes all of this into consideration. We want a strategy for aging that helps people to live well and to be healthy all their lives, to be engaged, and to have systems of care that are responsive, seamless, and available when they need to be. This is what this council is going to do.

Mr. Steeves: I certainly hope, along with the rest of my colleagues on this side of the floor and, I am sure, those on the other side of the floor, that the council does have some good advice for the minister and for the department. I hope that the Department of Social Development continues to work with the groups involved in the nursing homes, the nonprofit organizations like the Atlantic Baptists with the Spencer home and the Catholic diocese with the Villa du Repos. I hope that they are certainly very active in what happens and that the minister continues to work with them. I hope that they are included or that the reset button will be pushed on the Council on Aging and some of these people will be involved as well.

I leave it with the ranks of our members and with your members to ask the minister, please, to reconsider and to consider having some nonpartisan people—people who are not politically affiliated at all—on this Council on Aging, if you are bound to do this. If the minister refuses to listen to me, will the minister please listen to her colleagues?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The questions from the member for Moncton Northwest are a bit funny. To start with, the very idea for the council came from stakeholders and experts, not from our government.

Firstly, we listened to people and we said that it would actually be important to have a long-term aging strategy. So, we listened to stakeholders and created this council.

Secondly, more than 125 people applied to be part of this council. That is fantastic, because it means people want to help and believe in the council. However, it also means we must make choices, since not everyone can be part of the council.

That being said, you may rest assured that all these people will have a chance to participate in the discussions and submit ideas. I find it absurd that the member opposite is questioning the competence of council members. These New Brunswickers are stakeholders, with experience and leadership, who are going to help us develop a strategy.



[Original]

Government Finances

Mr. Higgs: I am interested in understanding the third-quarter report on the financials, which is now late by a month and a half or so. I know that, back when the government first came in, the plan was that it did not need regulations. It did not need any requirements that necessitated that it follow procedures. It would just do the right thing. My question is for the Minister of Finance. He said: All I need... We will do the right thing, and we will follow the guidelines that we make up on our own because that is the way we are. We do the right thing.

My question is to the Minister of Finance. What does the minister take as the meaning of the word “publish”? Why has this report not been published as it was intended to be? We were told by the Minister of Finance that it would be about a year and a half ago. He said that, at every quarter, it would be published by a certain date. The last one was due on February 15, and it is nowhere to be found.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Melanson: The member opposite knows full well that, on February 2, when I tabled the budget, it also included the third-quarter fiscal update from the New Brunswick government. I clearly stated in the budget speech that we were not only able to meet our budget commitments, but also able to do better than predicted in the initial budget, while the member opposite was never able to meet his budget commitments when he was Minister of Finance.

We have an exemplary record: Not only are we respecting the timelines for tabling and announcing the government’s fiscal update, but we are also clearly demonstrating that we are staying within our original budget, tabled on March 31, 2015, and that we are doing better than predicted.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: It is almost laughable. We create \$150-million slush fund. We add it to the budget, and then we have the gall to say that our numbers are better than we projected. We are doing better than we planned. The deficit is up \$200 million from when we started, but we are doing better than we planned, unlike the previous government.

The smoke and mirrors continue. The minister said that he put the numbers in during the budget speech. The third-quarter report, the second-quarter report, and the first-quarter report contain details of department spending. These reports do not create an overall number that looks better than was projected through the slush fund, the smoke-and-mirrors program. These reports state specifics. They state what departments are doing, what they are achieving, and where they look to be at year-end.



I would like to know why it took a month and a half for this story to come out. Oh yeah, we answered that back during the budget speech. The government did not answer it. The details have to be presented in a way that the people can understand. This government avoids that process.

Hon. Mr. Melanson: I think that it is very unfortunate that this actually became news. I was quite clear when I tabled the budget. I got up on the floor of the Legislature on February 2.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Melanson: I gave a complete third-quarter update on the fiscal situation. Maybe because it made the news... For me, this is not news because it should have made the news when I tabled the budget on February 2. It may be because this gentleman is running for a certain position that he wants to get some media exposure. I do not know.

With that said, I think that it is quite important that we stick to the facts. The facts are that I have tabled... Not only did I respect the fact that we had to table and make a public statement about the Q3 financial situation, which was supposed to be done by February 15, but we actually did it on February 2, which was ahead of time. We have respected it. Our numbers are not only doing better than we had expected, but they are doing really well. We are on a path to...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

