

April 6, 2016

[Original]

## Legislation

**Mr. Fitch:** Continuing along the theme of crow gently, I would like to echo the sentiments of my colleague from Fredericton-York and crow gently for the omnipartisan, nonpartisan success at making the Premier listen to the people and turning Bills 26 and 27 over to the law amendments committee. That is the second time that the collective will of the people has forced the Premier to change his mind.

Of course, we all remember the seniors' asset grab. That was during an election campaign. The people were saying that they did not like it, and the Premier was forced or told or decided to reverse it. I wonder if the Premier will continue along that vein and listen to the people and the omnipartisan part that they play in developing policy here in the province. Will the Premier continue to listen and move Bill 24 to the law amendments committee?

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** I thank the member opposite for the question.

[Translation]

First of all, I want to inform New Brunswickers and the Leader of the Opposition and his team that we are here to have a dialogue. We are here to discuss the priorities of New Brunswickers and the ways to move them forward. We are here to listen to the ideas, suggestions, and even concerns of New Brunswickers.

We are very proud to have been able to ensure further discussion on the bill the Leader of the Opposition mentioned earlier.

[Original]

We think that having the *Inquiries Act* go to the law amendments committee is a good thing. It will be a great venue for discussion and a great venue for experts, stakeholders, and others to chime in on what they think that we should do with that bill. As I made it very clear yesterday, we are more than willing to make some of the changes. We want to have an approach that will be consensus building. If the bill is not suited for what people think we should be doing, then we will let it die. It is as simple as that.

**Mr. Speaker:** Time.



**Mr. Fitch:** One of the reasons that we got to this point is that the consultation was not done properly. Yesterday, we had the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development admit that part of the consultation was just a phone call and a message left on a phone.

We know that the firefighters are concerned and the police are concerned about the binding arbitration portion. We know now that even industry is starting to weigh in. We are getting emails from industry people saying that they are concerned. There has been general goodwill among labour and management over the past number of years. Even this government has finalized a number of contracts without this piece of binding arbitration legislation in place.

Again, I would suggest that the Premier should listen to the people, listen to the opposition, and listen to the stakeholders. Even if he segregated out the binding arbitration part of the omnibus bill, that would be a step forward. Will the Premier agree today in question period to do that?

[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** First of all, I want to say that we talked about *An Act to Implement Strategic Program Review Initiatives* many times. I am very proud of the work done by the ministers in charge of the Strategic Program Review, namely the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Health, as well as the member for Miramichi Bay-Neguac, to make sure that extensive consultations were held throughout the province. We exchanged ideas, listened to suggestions, and had good discussions with New Brunswickers about what to include in the Strategic Program Review. So, very extensive consultations were held.

With regard to arbitration, which the Leader of the Opposition is highlighting, we are in the process of consulting stakeholders. In fact, yesterday, several meetings took place with them to see if we could work together on this file. We are certainly going to continue consulting them, then we will let the House know the results and what we are going to do.

[Original]

**Mr. Fitch:** I am sure the Premier will remember that the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour stood on the floor and in the rotunda and said: We can meet, but nothing is going to change. That was recorded in Hansard, in the media, and on TV. That is the concern that we have. It is easy to stand up in this House and say that we will continue to consult, but the fact of the matter is that there needs to be a process going forward, not just lip service paid to the firefighters and the police and industry, which is now weighing in on this very, very important legislation.

Having Bill 24 or at least the portion on binding arbitration go to the law amendments committee would certainly be a process that would be in place, and we would know that there would be an opportunity for all the stakeholders to weigh in and not just receive a voice mail as part of the consultation. Will the Premier agree to do that today? Will he move Bill 24 or at



least the binding arbitration portion to the law amendments committee before the House recesses?

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** Ensuring that there is good debate and discussion on any law or any policy put forward by government is important. We recognize that. We have said it many times. We, as members of the Legislature, do not have all the answers. We have to listen to other political parties. We have to listen to the people of New Brunswick. We have to listen to stakeholders and experts, and that is what we are doing.

Although the member opposite wants to try to gain some political points and take credit for the fact that this is going to the law amendments committee, I think that this is just the way democracy should work. He can take the credit if he likes, but we believe it is important to include different parties, different stakeholders, and experts in the conversation. The *Inquiries Act* going to the law amendments committee... We think it will be a great venue for that.

We are in consultation yet again. We have to say that we did talk to many of the stakeholders. We are talking to them again about the arbitration changes. We have just announced that there is going to be a nonpartisan committee on climate change, so we are consulting and working with all parties.

**Mr. Fitch:** I enjoyed the column by Roger Ouellette in today's *L'Acadie Nouvelle*. I am sure the Premier saw it. If he did not, it was right next to the story about the government backing down on the Auditor General changes. It did talk about the Premier putting the key under the mat and running away from question period.

Again, I just want to ask here today if the Premier continues to expect the House to adjourn at the end of this week—put the key under the mat. It will be a month before the House comes back, which, according to the calendar that was given to us by the House Leader, will be on May 17. Again, that leaves us without the opportunity to ask these questions and get things done, working with the people and working with the stakeholders.

Again, before the Premier puts the key under the mat, will he have a plan to move Bill 24 to the law amendments committee?

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** Yet again, I would like to clarify. We have had some great discussions regarding the *Inquiries Act*. We have made it very clear that it is not a priority for the government. This is something that we are doing because we saw many governments for years—almost 11 years—consulting with stakeholders and with the Auditor General as well. It was done under the previous government.

We put it forward. If there are still concerns or people who have questions, that is not a problem. We will bring it to the law amendments committee. We think that will be a great venue for ensuring that everybody is heard. People can chime in, and we can try to have a consensus-building exercise.



When it comes to the arbitration changes, as I said, we had some great meetings yesterday. I participated in a few of them to see whether there is a path forward. We will certainly let the member opposite know as soon as we have any sense of whether that is the case.

Regarding climate change, we think that this is a nonpartisan issue. It is one of the greatest challenges facing humans and the planet. We want to work in a nonpartisan fashion, so we are very excited about the committee that will be struck...

**Mr. Speaker:** Time, Premier.

## Tobacco

**Mr. Northrup:** Last week, I caught the Minister of Public Safety a little flat-footed with some simple questions about the cigarette police. He did a good job of reading his prepared speaking notes, but they did not contain an answer to my question. I am sure that he has new speaking notes by now, so let's go for that answer on last week's question.

What I would like to know is this: Were all the positions awarded through an open and transparent competition? Was anyone hired in any other manner? I refer, of course, to the 2014 Liberal platform of broken promises, which says this: "Ending the practice of non-competitive hiring to permanent positions in the public service." Was anyone hired for this million-dollar cigarette squad in any other manner?

**Hon. Mr. Horsman:** I am glad that the member opposite continues to press this issue because it gives me a chance to rise in the House and thank the people at Public Safety and around the province for what they do to continue to make our province safe.

I do not know whether the member opposite understands what these units are supposed to be doing, which is to obstruct the trade in contraband tobacco. There are public safety issues, and there is the fact that it does not create revenue that goes back into our coffers. It is also a public health issue. The people who make contraband tobacco do not have anything to follow as far as what goes into the product.

We want to make sure that our people are safe in our province, and we will continue to do that. It has always been our number one priority. It is job creation and getting our fiscal house in order as well as the safety of the people in our province. I do not know what is flat-footed, but we are very proud on this side of the floor that this tobacco unit will start up very shortly. Thank you.

**Mr. Northrup:** I am very proud of the people who work at Public Safety. During the year that I was there, I was very proud to be the Minister of Public Safety. The people do a tremendous job, and, when you ask them a question, they answer you back. What I am saying here, again, is this. I will ask the minister to flip through his prepared speaking notes, just to be sure that he does not have the information.



It is a simple question. All I am asking is this: Will the minister tell us how many members of the million-dollar cigarette squad were appointed to their positions without going through an open, transparent, and competitive way of hiring people? Was every member in this unit hired in the right way, or was it just the head of the squad? Perhaps we will go through them one by one, starting at the top. If the minister could say that this was an open and transparent policy, let's go from the top and down to the bottom. Was the head of this million-dollar police squad hired...

**Mr. Speaker:** Time, member.

**Hon. Mr. Horsman:** Listening to the member opposite, I am not sure that he is proud of what he perhaps accomplished because of his words and contradictions. This is not a million-dollar police squad. It is a contraband tobacco enforcement unit that is going to help generate... It will help disrupt the tobacco products that are coming through our province.

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Speaker:** Order.

**Hon. Mr. Horsman:** It is a public issue. It is a public health issue. The people who were hired...

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Speaker:** Order.

**Hon. Mr. Horsman:** As I stated before, there are nine members. We reached out to our police community throughout the province for those who might be retiring or who are about to retire and who would be interested in this type of work. Those are three people. We have transported two people from within Public Safety. The member opposite said that he is proud of the work that Public Safety does and of the people who work there. We have taken two of those people. We have also gone to the Atlantic Police Academy, and we have recruited people who did not get employment through their policing. We have taken them on. We have asked the Atlantic Police Academy to give us our top people, and that is what we have done.

**Mr. Speaker:** Time, minister.

**Mr. Northrup:** I am starting to get there. If I ask enough questions, maybe I will get a full answer instead of 45% or 50% of the answer. For the sixth time, were these members of the million-dollar squad hired through an open and transparent way of hiring people in this province?

It was plain and simple. You can read the 2014 platform, which says that everybody in the civil service will be hired by the present Liberal government with an open and transparent policy. Can the minister confirm that there is no one First Nations member on this million-dollar squad



who was hired through an open process or even appointed? Can the minister tell the House whether this million-dollar police squad will have one of its offices located in any of the First Nations communities? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Horsman:** Again, I am very proud that this unit is going to be starting early next week. Its members have been working very hard in the past couple of weeks. They have been training and have been making sure that they are aware of the laws and what they can and cannot do.

They are all peace officers. They will be trained as such. It is a nine-member unit. The members will be going around every corner of this province where contraband tobacco is, and they will be doing their job. I expect that they will be doing a great job. The people who are in place are all well trained. They all have police backgrounds. Three of them are retiring, so that brings a wealth of information and expertise to the enforcement unit.

I am very proud that they are going to be doing this for our province. It is going to cut down on public health issues. It is going to make sure that the tobacco that is bought and sold in our province legally, or that which is not, brings back taxes to our province. That is so important for us. I am very proud of this unit, and I wish it the very best and every success.

### Nursing Homes

**Mr. Steeves:** The treatment of our citizens in nursing homes continues to worsen under the Gallant government. The latest attack is on cleanliness. The Gallant government is planning to reduce care ratios. It cut the food budget. Now, the Gallant government is cutting the cleaning supplies budget by 17%. Can the minister explain just what our government's endgame is? Can she tell the House what we are to assume when we witness the reduction of food, care, and cleanliness for our citizens in nursing homes?

**Hon. Ms. Rogers:** In response to the member opposite, I would like to make a clarification. First of all, our budgets for nursing homes this year are the same as they were for last year. There is no change in the food budget, as I have heard several times, over and over, from members on the opposite side.

Continually, nursing homes are providing the care to the most vulnerable people in our society, and this is of utmost importance to us. We are making some very good headway in this direction. We are working very closely with the New Brunswick Nursing Home Association and with the nursing home directors, and we have also taken the recent initiative of establishing a Council on Aging to work closely with all the community stakeholders. We do not make any changes that affect our nursing home residents without full consultation with the New Brunswick Nursing Home Association.

**Mr. Speaker:** Time, minister.



**Mr. Steeves:** For a government that seems obsessed with perceptions, the optics on this one seem a little off. We have an aging population—the grey tsunami, as it is referred to—of which I, of course, am part, but you are not, Mr. Speaker. Congratulations. We know that New Brunswick could actually establish itself as the nation’s centre of excellence when it comes to seniors’ issues. We need to have a good reputation for this idea to proceed. What does the Gallant government do? It reduces care. I believe that the optics show differently on the food budget reduction and, now, the cleanliness in our nursing homes.

Can the minister explain why her government is making these dreadful changes to nursing home policy? Is it completely driven by money, or is there another reason or an endgame here somewhere that I am not seeing?

**Hon. Ms. Rogers:** I take great exception to such accusations about changing the policy that impacts our nursing home residents. This is not happening.

In fact, I also take great exception, as should many of our seniors, to the member opposite referring to a grey tsunami. First of all, a tsunami is unexpected. The aging population in New Brunswick is very expected. It has been forecasted for many, many years. A tsunami is also very destructive. The fact that we are living longer is a good thing. It is not a bad thing. I would add to this that calling our aging seniors anything that is not good is very disrespectful. We have great respect for our senior citizens and our people in nursing homes.

**Mr. Steeves:** Maybe the word “tsunami” was inappropriate, and I certainly take it back. I will take back the “grey tsunami”.

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Speaker:** Order.

**Mr. Steeves:** I will not take back, though, the thoughts that this government is attacking seniors when the minister, in estimates questioning, used words like “projected targets” for the staffing issues and when the government reduced the budget for cleaning supplies by 17%. The food budget has been reduced by 2%. There have been projected targets in the staffing. All these things add up. For a government to say that it respects seniors and that it is out for the good wishes of seniors and the well-wishing...

Yes, we have known that this problem has been coming for a long time. What is the government doing to help the seniors? I do not see a whole lot of that. I see a lot of things that are going to help to destroy seniors and that are going to help to hurt seniors, but I do not see a lot of help for the seniors themselves. Will the minister please reconsider the decisions in terms of the reduction of the budget for even cleaning supplies? Will she reconsider the projected targets for the staffing issue?

**Mr. Speaker:** Time, member.



**Hon. Ms. Rogers:** Again, it is really sad that the member opposite is working to create fear among residents, seniors, and their families. It is the last thing that we want.

I want to correct this again. This budget had zero reductions in food—zero. However, I will say that, the year before, the Nursing Home Association, with which we work very, very collaboratively, recommended that there was an opportunity to reduce food costs by 2% to 4% if we simply opted for a new bulk buying program, which had been done by them. It reduced food costs by 2%, but that was the year before. There has never been a budget cut in food.

I would like to address another thing, and that is the staffing ratio. We have said over and over again that there is no change in staff without research and evidence.

### Public Transportation System

**Mr. Coon:** The federal budget that was released recently has allocated money to support public transit in New Brunswick, which is great news. This is a good step forward, and I am sure that the cities around the province are eager to understand how they can apply that to improve their transit systems. There is, however, a problem with the formula that allocated that money across Canada, basing it on ridership alone and not considering need.

Our transit systems in New Brunswick are not as well developed as in other provinces, meaning that our share of the fund is really inadequate to the task at hand. Nova Scotia, for example, will receive over \$32 million to invest in its public transit system, while, in New Brunswick, we will see \$8.7 million. It is a good start, but it is not up to the task.

Will the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure meet with his federal counterpart to ask that he recognize the unfairness in the funding formula and adjust that funding formula based on our need to improve public transit in New Brunswick?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Melanson:** I am pleased to rise in the House this morning to respond to the question from the member of the third party. I want to reassure him and tell him that I already had discussions with Minister Sohi, who is responsible for the Infrastructure Canada Program. We also raised the issue when we had the meeting of Transportation and Infrastructure ministers, in February, in Ottawa. In New Brunswick, we are certainly asking for more flexibility in terms of federal government investments in various infrastructure, in partnership with provinces and municipalities.

Premier Gallant also said on several occasions that we wanted more flexibility. I want to assure the opposition member that we had this discussion and one thing is certain: When it comes to a national program, things become much more complex, because it contains all the flexible elements that every province or even community would like to get. However, we already had the discussion, and we are addressing the situation.





[Original]

**Mr. Coon:** Prime Minister Trudeau and his government have chosen to invest heavily in public transit because they understand the value that it brings to the economy and to our society. Investments in public transit create good, clean jobs while providing mobility for disadvantaged populations and offering alternatives to driving. A population that can move more easily between homes, workplaces, grocery stores, and the hospital is a stronger, healthier population. Given all of this, could the minister tell us how he intends to spend the public transit dollars that New Brunswick will be receiving?

[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. Melanson:** To get back to the question from the Leader of the Green Party, I want to assure him that we are very interested in the issue, since we want to maximize infrastructure investments made by the federal government, in partnership with the province and the various communities here in New Brunswick.

I also want to note that, before his career in politics, not only was federal Minister Sohi an elected municipal officer, but he was also a municipal bus driver. Therefore, he is very familiar with public transportation, and he definitely strongly supports the sector. He would even like to see more investments in technology to establish a far more effective and innovative public transit service.

So, this discussion is ongoing, and we are at the table and ready to discuss this file. When I have more details, I will be pleased to share them with you.

[Original]

**Mr. Coon:** I am sure that the mayors of New Brunswick cities are eager to learn what support they can expect for their transit systems. I know that cities with transit systems and MLAs in those cities, including Fredericton in my own riding, hear about a wish for a better, more convenient transit system from their constituents. The question for the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure is this: When does he plan to call a meeting of city mayors to discuss rolling out these funds?

**Hon. Mr. Melanson:** I meet regularly with the different municipal associations. There have been ongoing conversations on many different files. Certainly, infrastructure is a big issue for the municipalities and for us. We see the level of investment that is going to be coming nationally, and we are certainly working very hard to get the maximum for our province from the federal government. Municipalities will certainly be part of those investments.

The mayors of different municipalities certainly have public transit on their radars, but they also have other demands for infrastructure dollars. I know that the municipalities are looking to have good drinking water infrastructure and municipal recreation infrastructure. We are



discussing the full magnitude of what the municipalities need, and we are certainly trying to find a way to fund this, in partnership.

### Property Tax

**Mr. Fairgrieve:** In New Brunswick, we look forward to spring, with the exception of the arrival of property tax bills. Last year in New Brunswick, we had a record number of residents and homeowners who appealed their property tax assessments. This year, it looks as though that trend is continuing. My question is for the Minister responsible for Service New Brunswick. Could he update us on New Brunswickers' responses to their current property tax bills?

**Hon. Mr. Melanson:** As the member is fully aware and has said, this is the time that New Brunswickers receive their property tax assessments. As a government, we want to be very, very fair in how these assessments are made. Certainly, the taxes that are generated through property tax are also very fair. The member should be fully aware that the assessments are done through market value. There is a formula in place. It is very complex, but it is based on market value. That is how the assessments are made.

We would remind the member that the previous government had brought up a scheme whereby it was going to freeze the property tax for seniors. Obviously, that never happened. We fully understand that it is a challenge to make sure that there are no spikes in the way the assessments are made, but it is based on market value. That is the formula that has been followed for many years.

**Mr. Fairgrieve:** Let's talk about market value. The New Brunswick Real Estate Association has described the New Brunswick housing market as flat. An increasing number of properties are selling not just below market value but below assessed value, especially outside our three largest urban areas. What steps will the minister take to address the assessment imbalance and the process so that assessments in New Brunswick will more accurately reflect market value, especially in rural New Brunswick?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Doherty:** I thank the member for Carleton for his question.

[*Original*]

As you know, Service New Brunswick assesses some 465 000 properties each and every year, based on the market value as of January 1 of that year. You receive your tax assessment from the Department of Finance. You have 30 days to appeal, using the form at the bottom of your tax assessment. If you are not happy with the appeal that you receive, you have another 21 days to appeal it before the Executive Director of Property Assessment Services.



Last year, for instance, of the 465 000 properties that were assessed, approximately 6 000 were appealed. Of those 6 000 that were appealed in the first step, some 200 went on to be appealed to the Executive Director of Property Assessment Services.

**Mr. Fairgrieve:** I thank the member for that information. It is outlined on the back of everyone's property tax bill.

In our declining economy, most New Brunswickers are being impacted where it hurts most, through their largest assets—their homes. Declining property values are now a trend in the province. Can the minister explain what proposals he or his department will be making to Local Government so that towns, villages, and local service districts can address a diminished level of funding coming from lower property taxes?

**Hon. Mr. Doherty:** Of course, at Service New Brunswick, our goal is to be fair and transparent. As a result, we are improving our methods of assessments, as a matter of fact, with new technologies and new software known as aerial pictometry. A lot of the assessments will be done by a new method, by satellite. This will avoid the peaks and valleys that one sees in the assessment. At the same time, it will provide a much more accurate assessment value so that municipalities will know the exact amount of money they will have to work with in determining their tax bases.

I am also very pleased with the appeal process. The appeal process has worked very, very well. I encourage anyone who has questions to take full advantage of the appeal process as offered by our government.

**Mr. Speaker:** The time for oral questions has expired.

