

April 7, 2016

[Original]

Legislation

Mr. Fitch: Yesterday, the Premier had a chance to score a hat trick. He sent Bills 26 and 27 to the law amendments committee, and we gave him a chance to send Bill 24, the omnibus bill, to law amendments as well. It is too bad that he did not seize the day yesterday. However, maybe the Premier is concerned about giving the opposition another victory or, more importantly, giving the people of New Brunswick and the media another victory, by having the Premier change his mind.

The point of the matter is that I know that they had a Cabinet meeting last night. I will give the Premier an opportunity to stand up today and do the right thing. Do a redo, and send Bill 24. Break it up into separate bills. Stay in the House, and we will work and examine them all, or send it to the law amendments committee and score the perfect hat trick.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: There was no Cabinet meeting last night; I do not know why the Leader of the Opposition wants to talk about our schedule. If he wants to know, I can tell him that our meeting was this morning. I do not know what the Leader of the Opposition is getting at, but his statements show that he likes to say certain things even though he is not sure they are true.

We have very clearly said that we consulted New Brunswickers very comprehensively. We consulted them for over a year before implementing the recommendations from the Strategic Program Review, in the budget that was tabled a few weeks ago.

Our last budget is very important for New Brunswickers. In fact, it aims to help the province invest in the priorities of New Brunswickers, which are job creation, health, and education. We will continue to consult and listen to New Brunswickers, and we will continue to move our province forward.

[Original]

Mr. Fitch: That is interesting, Mr. Premier, because a number of ministers, last night, were at a reception at the Crowne Plaza and they told me directly that they were going to a Cabinet meeting. Maybe they are having Cabinet meetings without you, Mr. Premier, trying to get something done. Mr. Premier, again, I think that your ministers, when they are out in public, have to be very careful about what they are saying because it will come back to them.



This is an opportunity again. They are getting slammed on the seniors' asset grab. They are taking a beating over a number of things. Even the bookmobile is coming back as a topic because it was only \$140 000 and the Cabinet and the Premier are out talking about their \$1-billion that they are going to spend. Why can they not go back and revisit the bookmobile? They are getting beat up over that.

Again, will the Premier take the opportunity today, whether the Cabinet meeting was last night or this morning, and split Bill 24, stay in the House and work on it, or send it to the law amendments committee?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Are the questions asked this morning really relevant? Indeed, a Cabinet committee meeting was held yesterday. I certainly want to clarify this point for the Leader of the Opposition, since it seems really important to him to know the Cabinet schedule. So, a Cabinet committee meeting was held last night. This morning, the Cabinet met. We had a meeting this morning which lasted from 7:30 a.m. to 9 a.m. I think it is probably important for the Leader of the Opposition to be notified of that.

The Leader of the Opposition also mentioned education. We are very proud to have created the Education and New Economy Fund. We are very proud of it, since this fund will help us invest in innovation and make important, historical investments in education. We are very proud of it, since this fund will help us make sure that postsecondary education is more affordable and accessible than ever before, here in New Brunswick.

[*Original*]

Mr. Fitch: Thank you very much, Mr. Premier, for clearing that up. Again, the reason I mentioned the Cabinet schedule is that this is, in fact, an important issue. It is an important issue for the people of the province. The government has cobbled together the omnibus bill and put "Strategic Program Review" across the front of it. There are so many things in there that need to be discussed and that are offensive to various groups here in New Brunswick, students included. When they look at the opportunities going forward, if collective bargaining is taken out as an option, that may affect fair wages in the future for various groups that they may be wanting to work for.

Again, I will give the Premier one more chance. The schedule is such that we will be off for the next couple of weeks before the committees reconvene and before the House comes back in May. I am trying to give the Premier an opportunity to stop getting beat up in public by doing the right thing and taking this bill to the law amendments committee or staying here, breaking it up, and having a good discussion on it. Will the Premier do that today? Yes or no?



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I was patient the first time, but the member opposite is addressing me directly for the fourth time. We try to respect the Standing Rules here in the House. We are supposed to go through you, Mr. Speaker. I am therefore asking the Leader of the Opposition to respect the Standing Rules.

I want to reiterate our commitment to education here in New Brunswick. We are going to make historic investments in education, whether they be in early childhood, kindergarten to Grade 12 education, or postsecondary education.

[Original]

We are also going to invest to make sure that we are helping people to gain extra skills and upgrade their qualifications so that we will have the best skilled workforce here in New Brunswick that we can possibly have.

When it comes to the Strategic Program Review bill, if you will, we consulted thousands of New Brunswickers for months and months—over a year, so there are no surprises in this. We are willing, of course, to debate this on the floor of the Legislature, so, if the leader has specific concerns, I would ask him to raise them now.

Tobacco

Mr. Fitch: It seems the Premier is thin-skinned about the way I am asking my questions today, so I will give him a break. I would like to go to the Deputy Premier and ask him a couple of questions, though. Yesterday, he said that three of the members of the new cigarette police were retired or about to retire from his former place of work. Let me be clear. I would never presume to question the knowledge, the professionalism, the integrity, or the experience of those people. I will leave that for the Gallant government.

I would like to ask the minister this: Of these three people, how many did he personally work closely with, and for how many of these three that he has hired did he personally intervene to make sure that they were hired for his cigarette squad?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: It is an honour to get up and answer these questions because, as of yesterday, the members opposite have had no respect at all for this. It is a shame that they said that we were flat-footed. Well, they must have had their feet in concrete. They have done nothing.

This is the Contraband Enforcement Unit. It is not a million-dollar cigarette club or whatever the member opposite states. I do not know whether or not I have met these people during a 25-year policing career. We live in a small province. I never say that negatively. I think that it is a positive thing.



(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Horsman: I worked with many police officers throughout this province, and I hope that I had a chance to meet the people who are being hired.

I would also like to welcome the people from the Atlantic Police Academy who never got a position in policing. We want to welcome them to New Brunswick. They are staying in the province, and they are going to be hired. These were personal service contracts. They were not permanent positions. I welcome them, and they are going to do a good job for this province.

Mr. Fitch: The Liberal platform talked about ending the practice of noncompetitive hiring for permanent positions in the public service. Is the Deputy Premier now saying that he circumvented that platform commitment by putting a personal contract in there? If that is the case, did he personally intervene to make sure that the people in his former workplace got the top three positions on this force? Would the minister please stand up and clarify that today? He may not have his feet in concrete—his feet are in sinking sand right now.

Hon. Mr. Horsman: As far as I am concerned, the respect shown to all our first responders is not being met by the members opposite. They call us the cigarette police or the million-dollar... This is the contraband unit. If they showed respect for the first responders—these people are going to do great work for our province—they would at least mention their name properly.

Referring to the member's first question, I knew Gary Forward from the Fredericton police force and so did the member for Carleton-York. I am surprised that he has not stood up and said anything about the good work that Mr. Forward has done with the Fredericton police force and the good work that he will probably do for our province.

I want to welcome these people. They are going to do great things. This is a public issue. It is going to be a public safety issue for the people of this province. People need to know that, when they are purchasing contraband tobacco, part of that money is going back into organized crime. We do not want that to happen here. It is also a public safety issue, so I want to make sure that...

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Mr. Fitch: The minister is clarifying some of the statements that he has made. First, he did not meet them. Then he knew them. Now, he knows their names. Again, I want the minister to be very specific. It is important for his integrity and the integrity of his government.

Did the minister use a personal service contract to circumvent the public hiring, the public competition, for these positions? Did he go around the rules in order to get his friends, the



people that he worked with, hired? Did the minister hire the head of this force and circumvent a public competition for this job? Yes or no.

Hon. Mr. Horsman: Every chance I get to stand in this House and thank the first responders and what they do in our province, I will do that. I will continue to do that, unlike the former minister from the other government. As a minister, he should have spoken with the former Minister of Public Safety. He knows that the minister is not responsible for any hiring whatsoever. That should stop that line of questioning.

Again, to be respectful to this unit, I have the utmost respect. Its members have been training hard for the past two weeks, and they are going to do a good job for our province in stopping contraband tobacco from going through our province.

Again, I want to reiterate that, as a minister, I do not have any qualms whatsoever—or any role or involvement in hiring. These are personal contract services. They are not permanent employees. The only two permanent employees came from within the Department of Public Safety, from another unit.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Horsman: Again, the expertise that we are bringing to this unit, the youth and enthusiasm that is going to come to help our province...

(Interjections.)

[*Translation*]

Closing of Offices

Ms. Dubé: Today, my question is certainly going to be for the Minister responsible for Service New Brunswick. People in the Saint-Quentin area are still reeling with shock after the Gallant government announced the closing of the Service New Brunswick office in their community. Now that we know the file is no longer before the courts, I want to ask the minister if he is prepared to review the whole file and consider reopening the office that existed for many years.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Doherty: To the member opposite, thank you very much for the question. As you know, this has been in the courts, and the decision has been rendered. We want to make sure that the citizens are receiving exactly the same services that they would have when the facility was open. We are very, very proud that this is now being looked after.



[Translation]

Ms. Dubé: The court issued a decision. Justice LaVigne was very, very clear that the government decision was purely political. I ask my question once again to the minister: Now that the case is closed—at least, from a legal perspective—is the minister prepared to review the file, or bring back these services as they always existed in this region? This means reopening the Service New Brunswick office in Saint-Quentin.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Doherty: As the member knows, there is still an opportunity for an appeal. We will not comment on this at this point.

[Translation]

Ms. Dubé: That does not work. I think this answer may even be insulting to the people of Saint-Quentin.

The question is very simple. The court provided its response; a judge said that the government decision was purely political and that the court would not get involved in a political file. So, the question must be put to this government.

Now that we know the court's response, are the government and the minister ready to meet the municipality again and review the decision? Are they prepared to reopen the Service New Brunswick office in Saint-Quentin, as it had always existed in the past? It is a simple question, and the answer should be simple. In fact, the answer should be this: Yes.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I do not think that the member should be laughing, since it is not funny. As the minister said, this file could still go before the courts if ever there is an appeal. As the member knows, since she has been a minister, the government will not make further comments on this subject, because the file could still end up in court.

That being said, I think it is important to note that, when our government took office, we were facing financial challenges created by several governments, including the one in which the member was a minister. We had to make difficult choices, but we made the right ones, because we listened to New Brunswickers. We made education, health, and job creation priorities in our two budgets. I can assure the member that we will continue to give priority to these files.

[Original]

Postsecondary Education

Mr. Holder: I have one question today. In the interest of time, there will be no supplemental question because this is a yes or no answer.



We have students in the gallery today. We have consistently asked the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour for a plan for postsecondary education. We keep hearing that it is coming. We do not even see a plan, as I said the other day, to make a plan. We have consistently asked for a facilitated, province-wide process similar to that of the Poverty Reduction Initiative of a few years ago. The members opposite had supported that. That is the type of process that we are looking for here today. It is yes or no. Will the government commit to a process, or is it going to keep ragging the puck and make sure that this does not get addressed?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I have to point out the irony. We have made it very clear that we have an announcement that is looming, that will be historic, and that will invest in ensuring that postsecondary education is accessible and affordable. We have made that very clear to the media and to the member opposite. What I find ironic is that we have made it very clear that it is coming yet the member opposite says: Hurry up, already. Then, he says: We want another process to develop policies to help students going into postsecondary education.

I am sorry, but that makes no sense. It makes zero sense. If he wants the announcement to be made, as in the first part of his question, I can tell him that it is coming. If he wants to have a whole other process that will take months—the poverty reduction strategy took months, if not years—well, I am sorry. We have been consulting for a year and a half, and we know that we have the right policy to ensure that postsecondary education will be accessible and affordable and that we will have a strong economy right here in New Brunswick.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order, member.

Labour

Mr. B. Macdonald: I look into the gallery. Yesterday, it was labour. Today, it is labour and students. We seem to be going from crisis to crisis with this minister, but the Premier has all but replaced the Minister of Labour. In fact, it is the Minister of Energy who has been put in to salvage this labour crisis. The Minister of Labour seems to be fading into the background, and the Minister of Energy is emerging to deal with labour. Although it is highly irregular, it is the Minister of Energy who is now leading stakeholder relations and who is now meeting with labour and unions. It is now the Minister of Energy who is talking to the media about the government's plan and trying to convince New Brunswickers that it has a way forward. I am going to ask the Premier this: Who in your Cabinet is leading on labour?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The answer is the entire team. For us, it is important to have a skilled workforce and to ensure that we consult people to understand their ideas and concerns.



I can tell you that the Minister of Finance and I met with labour stakeholders, and so did the Deputy Premier. Our entire team will continue to meet with these stakeholders so that we can work together.

[*Original*]

Again, I want to tell the member opposite that we, as a government, are going to work together to ensure that we have the best skilled workforce possible. That will be done by working with stakeholders, making sure that education is of the top quality, and making sure that postsecondary education is of a high quality and is accessible and affordable.

However, I have one question for the member for Portland-Simonds. I do not know why he had just the one question. When is he going to come out and criticize Rodney Weston for doing nothing on the port of Saint John?

Mr. B. Macdonald: Thank you. It is still not clear who in this government is the lead on labour issues, but I am glad that the Premier is now finally taking some responsibility. What is clear to me is that it is the actions of first responders that have caused the government to reconsider its plan. We saw before that the Minister of Labour could not remember the plan. She had three out of four points. I want to know now what the plan is. Is it four points? Is it three points? Is it two points? What is the government's plan on arbitration?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: As we have already said, we are holding discussions with stakeholders. We have already held consultations and discussions with them, but, since they raised certain concerns, we had no problem with meeting them again to discuss and work with them.

I reiterate once more that this is a team effort and that, as private members and ministers, we will all work together with the stakeholders, experts, and people who do great things for our province.

So, I am very proud of the work accomplished by our whole team and the minister. I am also proud of the policies we are moving forward.

[*Original*]

I think it is important to underline, yet again, that not only are we ensuring that we are consulting, yet again, to fully understand what the preoccupations are and whether there is a pathway forward, but that we have also made an historic announcement. We have been working with the opposition on PTSD to offer first responders more support. We are doing everything we can to work with everybody around the province to make sure that we have the right policies and that we move the province forward.



Mr. B. Macdonald: Thank you. I am glad that the Premier is now running this file, and I am glad that he is now meeting with first responders. It is about time. I have heard that they are working together to develop a plan, which is a good step. However, they are still trying to ram through the omnibus bill which, at its centre, has the decaying core of the issue of arbitration.

I am asking the Premier this now: If you are working on a plan, what is the timeline? We do not have a plan, we do not have a real leader, so we at least want to know the timeline. When are you going to take your omnibus bill off the table and bring forward your plan on arbitration?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Once again, we have very clearly said, a few days ago and several times again today, that we are currently having consultations and discussions which, I think, are productive. We are having talks. Opposition members can obviously understand that, if they want us to consult people, we need time to do it. We cannot introduce a plan that would have already been established. We will have a discussion to determine how we will proceed.

That being said, I have a question for the opposition members who wonder about the strategic program review bill. I understand that they are worried about a certain part of the bill. My question is this: Do any other issues concern them? To hear them, this bill would be the worst thing ever for New Brunswick. However, we actually think it was the economy under the previous government. Are they concerned about any other issues that we should know about, or is the only issue the part we are discussing this morning?

[Original]

Legislation

Mr. Higgs: The people of New Brunswick are very proud of our Auditor General—even more so, given her conviction to get to the bottom of the Atcon scandal once and for all. The independent analysis of government provided by this office, the Office of the Auditor General, is crucial to the government maintaining any form of integrity. That is why the inclusion of a bill limiting her oversight—in the omnibus bill, Bill 24—is categorically unacceptable. The official opposition could never support any piece of legislation that limits the power of the Auditor General. This bill, Bill 24, reduces her chance to catch bad spending habits. This is reduced to only once per year from the current once per month.

It is good that the Premier recognized the misdirection of this bill, which is to limit the ability of the Auditor General, and is now sending it to the law amendments committee. Would the Premier agree that we need independent oversight of government now more than ever?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am not sure that I understand why the member opposite would be asking this question. We have made it very clear that nothing is moving forward at this time. The bill is going to the law amendments committee. We are going to discuss it. We are going to work with



the opposition if it is willing to do so. Frankly, we would like to have a consensus-building exercise.

I understand that this is political posturing from the leadership candidate. I get that, but, if we are going to have a dialogue about this bill, which has many sections, I think it is unfortunate that the opposition members say that there is nothing good in it because maybe they have one concern. Hopefully, we will have a productive discussion during the law amendments committee. I think that this is a great opportunity for democracy to shine. I think that this is a great opportunity for consensus building.

I will let the minister explain, if there are further questions, which I am sure there will be. However, I would like to take the time to congratulate the Minister of Finance and, quite frankly, the whole team for having the credit rating agencies say that we are on the right track. They are keeping their rating for our province.

Mr. Higgs: I could understand why the Premier would deflect the conversation and actually move to the credit rating agencies. Yes, when you charge enough taxes, they are quite happy. If you increase taxes to cover your spending, they would agree to that.

Moving back to the omnibus bill, the Gallant government's assistance to business must now be reported, or it is suggested that it will be, only once per year. Before, it was 12 times in 12 months. The omnibus bill proposes to change this reporting to 1 time in 12 months, thus reducing the oversight of the Auditor General twelvefold. She needs more oversight, not less, particularly with this government.

With the Co-op Atlantic situation unfolding, another Atconian story is developing, this time belonging to the Gallant government. In this case, a \$7.5-million loan guarantee was made three months before the company went bankrupt. Does the Premier sincerely believe that the best interests of New Brunswick would be served by allowing his government to pass a bill granting itself 12 times less scrutiny over its business loans and guarantees?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: It did not take the member opposite very long to start using the buzzwords, now, did it? When faced with a leadership campaign, the buzzwords are now okay.

I have to say that I am confused as to why he is asking these questions yet again. He is saying that he is asking about this bill passing. We have said that it is not going anywhere other than to the law amendments committee, and we will take it from there. We have said that we will try to have a consensus-building exercise, and we will take it from there.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.



Hon. Mr. Gallant: We have said that this is not a government priority and we are more than willing to let the bill die if the members opposite still have major preoccupations with it.

What I find interesting, too, is that the member opposite tries to swat down the fact that the credit rating agencies have kept our rating where it is and tries to say—and actually, attack, the credit rating agencies, by saying—Yes, they are okay if you raise taxes. Do you not think that they look at where we think the economy is going to be as well? We made difficult decisions, and the credit rating agencies recognize that these decisions are the right ones to get our financial house in order and to grow the economy.

Mr. Higgs: I am well aware of what the credit rating agencies look at. They look at the ability of the government either to gather money that is being paid out, perhaps by a federal government—which, as we have seen, is on a complete spending spree—or else to just raise taxes. The government made what it calls a tough decision to charge and tax people more to cover its ludicrous spending habits.

In June 2009, a \$50-million loan guarantee was made to Atcon. We are all well familiar with that. Months later, the company was bankrupt. The \$50 million was not all the money that we lost on Atcon, but it might be the most insulting when we consider that our creditor status was changed and was given to Scotiabank. Between the time when the loan guarantee was made and the company went bankrupt, the current Minister responsible for Strategic Program Review gave our preferred creditor status to the bank. Would the Premier not agree that a government with a person who had done something like this in a position of authority should have 12 times more scrutiny, not 12 times less?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Let the record show that it is the member opposite who wants to talk about the past. I will gladly do that. It was actually the member opposite, when he was the Finance Minister, who raised taxes, worth about \$200 million, on New Brunswickers.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. The member for Carleton-York will come to order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Do you know what happened with the credit rating agencies right after that? He got downgraded.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. The member for Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin will come to order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: When the members opposite were in power and when he was the Minister of Finance, the government's marks got downgraded by the credit rating agencies even after the government got approximately \$200 million from New Brunswickers by raising taxes. I am sorry, but we have no lessons to learn from the member opposite.



I can tell you, however, that raising taxes is not an easy decision. I can tell you that asking people to do more with less is not an easy decision. We, as a government, have listened to the people. New Brunswickers recognize that we have to make some of these choices so that we can move our province forward. We have listened to them, and we have assured the people of New Brunswick and the opposition that we will prioritize education, health care, and the economy.

Education and New Economy Fund

Ms. Wilson: It has been a while since I had the Minister responsible for Rural Affairs on his feet, answering my questions. It is high time that he did some more answering. I see that he has put himself in charge of a billion-dollar fund. There have not been a whole lot of details released yet, which is typical. However, this fund is supposed to do something good for education and for our economy. It would be the first time.

What I want the Minister responsible for Rural Affairs to do today is to get up and tell us how this billion-dollar slush fund of his is going to help rural New Brunswick. Will the minister do that?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I would like the record to show that the...

Mr. Speaker: Mr. Premier, I will allow you to finish your question in a moment.

Sergeant-at-Arms, clear the gallery of the students, please. We have warned the students twice now, once at the door and once on the way in here.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Members, you are not to question my call.

Members, if you are going to have guests in the gallery, I would remind you to take the time to explain the rules to them and tell them that they are not to participate in the debate. If there is any affiliation or contrived, predetermined idea of what is going to happen that politicizes the gallery, then that will be on you.

Mr. Premier, please finish your answer.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I would like the record to show that the member opposite is against our Education and New Economy Fund and, clearly, the opposition is against the Education and New Economy Fund as well. I would like the record to show that it is through this fund that we are going to invest record amounts in education. It is through this fund that we are going to actually make postsecondary education more accessible and affordable, and we will have an announcement very soon, as we have already said.



I would like the record to show that we are the ones who will stand up for education. We are the ones who will stand up for postsecondary education and make the investments that are required to ensure that we have the best school system and the best postsecondary education system, which is accessible and affordable, in New Brunswick's history. The opposition is against education and against the program that we will come out with that will ensure that postsecondary education is accessible and affordable.

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

