

March 17, 2017

[Original]

Children at Risk

Mr. Higgs: It is very disappointing that the Deputy Premier has not issued an apology for the remarks that he made with regard to the death of 53 at-risk children. His remarks came after his refusing to be interviewed on this matter. The minister was asked a question about this matter at an unrelated event, when he made these insensitive and troubling statements. Then he made similar remarks here in the Legislature. I would like to give the Deputy Premier another opportunity today to issue an apology. Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: All members care about children and vulnerable people in our province. I know our government, the official opposition, and the leader of the third party want to work together to ensure the safety of our children. It is also important to learn from the errors made in the past.

Of course, lately, we discussed files related to events that occurred almost a decade ago. These were horrendous, and I think we are all committed to participating in efforts to resolve the situation. This is precisely what several previous governments have done. Recommendations were made and implemented to make sure the system is improved. However, continuous improvement must still be the focus when it comes to protecting our children and the most vulnerable people.

[Original]

Property Tax

Mr. Higgs: Again, today, I will ask the Premier whether he will agree to extend the deadline for all New Brunswickers to appeal their property tax assessment. Also, will he publicize all across the province that there is an ongoing issue? Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: Once again, I want to thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question, and I want to reiterate that our government has very clearly said that people who believe they have an erroneous assessment can contact one of our regional Service New Brunswick offices to request that it be corrected. We will review everything, and, if errors have in fact been made, we will make changes.



That being said, I am very, very concerned by the Leader of the Opposition irresponsibly sending messages to the public implying that the situation this year is so out of the ordinary. Under his reign as Minister of Finance, over 35 000 mathematical errors were found. I repeat: 35 000 errors. Towards the end of his mandate, in May 2014, we could read in the *Telegraph-Journal* that he found the system fair and equitable. Please; that makes no sense.

[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Mr. Higgs: I do not think that the Premier understands the issue. The Premier is the issue. He and his government have employed their communications policy of delay, denial, diversion, and deflection one time too many. We saw the same communication policy play out in a full public review on the Parlee Beach water scandal.

The property tax assessment mess is developing along the same story line, even if it appears that the minister responsible for this file has also now recused himself from this issue. Will the Premier tell the House when it was first discovered that there were so many errors in the assessments? Did the government know that it had a problem before it sent out the assessment notices or after the public outcry began?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: Once again, I thank the Leader of the Opposition, because his question gives us the opportunity to see how unbelievable his remarks are. Can you imagine a person like the Leader of the Opposition who, during his mandate as Minister of Finance, saw more than 35 000 errors made? Do you remember hearing about those 35 000 errors?

When we learned that there had recently been mathematical errors, we immediately said publicly that there had been 2 400 of them. So, we were very, very, very transparent.

Why did the opposition members, when they were in government, not do their job and publicly notify people? Today, because we are transparent and responsible people, the opposition wants to blame us for everything that goes wrong. As I said, one error is one too many, but for the former government, this was a fair and equitable system. Please.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: It is interesting to note that the government has sent letters to some of the people who received these huge increases in their assessments. The letters were dated March 10. It is interesting to note that the Gallant government was still in public denial on March 10. It was not until March 13 that it admitted that there is a big problem. It is too late for a do-over but not too late for the Premier to finally be open and transparent and provide answers instead of



rhetoric. Will the Premier provide a detailed explanation of exactly what was the human error that led to this event? Exactly what happened, and can we find out today?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: Service New Brunswick very clearly explained the causes of errors. However, I will be interested in knowing what caused the 8 801 mathematical errors made in 2011, the 9 472 mathematical errors made in 2012, the 7 791 mathematical errors made in 2013, and the 8 941 mathematical errors made in 2014. So, over 35 000 errors were made.

We are working hard to resolve the situation, something the opposition members did not do when they were in government. I would really like the Leader of the Opposition, who was Minister of Finance at the time and who, at the end of his mandate, was saying after four years that the system was fair and equitable... For us, a system that causes 35 000 errors is certainly not fair and equitable. We are making the necessary adjustments.

[*Original*]

Mr. Higgs: Attack and deflect seems to be an ongoing communications strategy. Its origins were in grade school playgrounds with the response: I know you are but what am I? I would like to think that we are progressing, have progressed, or even could progress beyond this point. I know that, on this side of the House, we are asking substantive questions. However, thus far, we have not received any substantive answers from the government. How did the assessment mistake happen and when did the mistake happen are not difficult questions. We will eventually learn the truth. Does the Premier know the truth? Would he like to share it with the people of New Brunswick? Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Rousselle: As you know, we are transparent. Yes, we are providing the real facts. This is why people are discovering that for four years—the four years of the Conservative mandate—they were not clearly informed that there had been 35 000 mathematical errors. I repeat: 35 000 errors, or over 35 000 errors, to be exact. Today, the Leader of the Opposition is asking us...

As soon as we discovered the mathematical errors, we made a public announcement, we were transparent, and we advised the 2 400 or so people affected. We are very clearly telling people that, since we acknowledge that over 35 000 errors were made in the past, if they believe they have an assessment that contains mathematical errors, they can contact one of the Service New Brunswick regional offices. We are transparent people, we take responsibility for our actions, and we are accountable. The opposition cannot say as much.



[Original]

Water Quality

Mr. Higgs: Transparency and accountability are hardly the hallmarks of this government. In 2014, we learned that the Health Minister had started a campground business in Shediac along with some partners. In late 2014 or early 2015, the Health Minister was made aware of the poor water quality results at Parlee Beach. The minister should have acted in 2015 and again in 2016, but he did not. In fact, in the summer of 2016, despite poor water quality levels, he was saying that the water quality was good and the signs were adequate. Now, the minister has recused himself from the file, with the Premier's support. Will the Premier tell us today whether he was also aware of the water quality issues at Parlee Beach or was he, too, kept out of the loop?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: To answer the question of the opposition directly, unfortunately this has only been brought to light because of some investigative reporting. Frankly, we thank the reporters who looked into this issue, and we are now aware of it.

We do not want to place blame, but if the Leader of the Opposition wants to talk about 2014, in 2014, there were water quality issues that were not properly addressed. Under the previous government, in which the Leader of the Opposition was the Minister of Finance, there was this issue. When we came to government, because the former Conservative government, in which the Leader of the Opposition was the Minister of Finance, had not flagged this or discovered this, of course, we went on as usual. The minute that we found this out, we looked into this. We have sent it to the appropriate places.

During this whole file, the Minister of Health has been in contact with the Conflict of Interest Commissioner. The minute that there was the potential for a recommendation to cease development for a period of time, the minister did the right thing. He followed the advice of the Commissioner, and he recused himself from the file.

Mr. Higgs: When did the Premier actually learn about the water quality issues at Parlee Beach?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The exact date would be tough to remember. There was correspondence that was referenced this week, of which I was made aware. As was said already, the Minister of Health at the time sent the letter to the appropriate places to make sure that there could be a response and to make sure that it could be looked at. There have been discussions about this for quite some time. We recognize that.

I want to remind the Leader of the Opposition, however, that, in 2014, there were reporting issues when it came to the water quality at Parlee Beach and the government did nothing. I do not want to place blame. I do not think it was the Leader of the Opposition going to Parlee Beach and causing problems. However, I think it is a bit rich that he sits here today and says that we should have known earlier. Unfortunately, his government... Unfortunately, at the start



of our mandate, we were not aware of this issue. We are aware of it now, and we are taking action to make sure we rectify all of this situation so that Parlee Beach can remain a gem for our economy, for tourism, and for the quality of life of the people of our province.

Mr. Higgs: In December 2016, the Premier gave a year-end interview in which he was quoted as saying: “If there are issues, we can always look at that.” In December 2016, the Premier said “if there are issues”. That would suggest to me that the Premier was not aware that there were indeed issues. Or was he experiencing some sort of convenient memory loss? Can the Premier tell us which it would be?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Frankly, I do not think that the sarcasm and the condescending tone of the Leader of the Opposition are helpful. This is a very serious matter. This is something that I think New Brunswickers care deeply about. It is important to our economy, it is important to the tourism sector, and it is important to the quality of life of the people of the region. I grew up going to visit mémère and pèpère in Shediac Bridge, and some of my fondest memories are from days that I spent on the beach at Shediac Bay. This is an important issue.

When we said “if there are any issues”, of course, we were aware that there were allegations. We were aware that there were people saying that there could be a problem. The government got together quickly. We got a steering committee. We got people looking into this issue to find out if there was an issue. We have now confirmed that there is one. We have confirmed that, actually, in terms of the reporting issue, it dates back to 2014 and beyond. We are rectifying the situation. Meanwhile, the Minister of Health has recused himself. Throughout this whole process, he has based all his actions on the advice of the Conflict of Interest Commissioner.

Mr. Higgs: Later in that same interview, the Premier is quoted as saying: We need different departments to play their role to analyze the situation to see if there are issues. There it is again: “if there are issues”. This would lead a reasonable-minded person to assume that the Premier had no knowledge in December 2016 that there were serious issues with water quality testing and reporting at Parlee Beach. The Premier is one of the local MLAs. As a local MLA and as Premier, it is deeply concerning to think that the Premier was not aware or was not made aware of this situation as recently as December 2016. Did the Premier misspeak in this case, in this interview, or was he really not aware of this developing crisis? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We, as a government, have to be responsible. We, as elected officials, have to be responsible. People brought some issues to our attention, and the appropriate actions were taken every step of the way. Of course, until we find that there is an issue, we are going to speak the truth and say that we are not sure yet and we are looking into it, if there are issues. That is how I spoke in the interviews that the Leader of the Opposition is referencing.

We—every single one of us and, I would argue, every single member of the opposition, including the leader of the third party—understand the importance of Parlee Beach, the importance that it has for our economy, for tourism, and for the quality of life of New Brunswickers. I certainly can tell you that it means a lot to me personally. The house in Shediac



Bridge where my family, the Gallant family, has lived for 100 years is right on the bay, so we understand the importance of this. We are acting swiftly. We have a steering committee that was put in place to look into the issue. It has found issues, and we are going to rectify the issues.

Mr. Higgs: This government's handling of the Parlee Beach water issue has hurt New Brunswick's reputation as a tourist destination. Already, we are hearing that bookings are down for some Shediac area businesses. With annual visitation rates of nearly half a million people, fumbling the Parlee Beach file will have serious repercussions well into the future. I am concerned about this, and I would like to ask the Premier how he plans to recover our great reputation for Parlee Beach in an expedient way so we can ensure that we can move forward with our tourist destination.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We are concerned as well, as I think all New Brunswickers are. Again, we recognize the importance of Parlee Beach to our economy, our tourism, and the quality of life of the people of our province. What we are doing is that we are acting. We are rectifying the situation. We understand the importance of tourism to our economy. That is why we have invested record amounts in things that will help with the infrastructure in the tourism sector, and that is why we are investing 17% more in tourism in this last budget. We recognize that we have to act swiftly and boldly to ensure that we rectify this issue.

However, I have to go here. I really do not want to make this a sort of a blaming game, but, if the Leader of the Opposition wants to get up and try to say that all of this happened under our watch, I ask him: What did he do in 2014 when he was the Minister of Finance, when he was in government, to rectify the issues that existed when he was the Minister of Finance?

Mr. B. Macdonald: We want to talk about what this government has done on its watch, and it has been on watch now for three years. The problem is that, in fact, it really has not been watching much at all.

What do we know about the facts about the Parlee Beach scandal? Well, first of all, we know that water quality at Parlee Beach is directly related to development. We also know that the Minister of Health wants to develop the largest campground in the history of Shediac. Furthermore, we therefore know that it is in the best interest of the Minister of Health that water quality not be an issue in Shediac. Knowing all these facts three years ago, why did the Premier put this MLA in charge of overseeing water quality at Parlee Beach?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: First, three years ago, the members opposite were in government. Second, when we formed our Cabinet and became the government of the people of New Brunswick, this was not being talked about because the previous government did not shed any light on this issue. The previous government did nothing to rectify this issue.

However, this has been brought to our attention as a government. We have a steering committee that was put in place to ensure that we are going to rectify the situation to the best



of our abilities. In the Premier's Office, the chief of staff was directly involved in daily and weekly calls to make sure that we are doing everything that we, as a government, can do to rectify this situation. We are going to get it done.

However, I again have to remind the member opposite that the Minister of Health, throughout this process, was in talks with the Conflict of Interest Commissioner, so, if he has differing opinions, he should go tell the Conflict of Interest Commissioner that he does not agree with the advice that he was giving to the Minister of Health.

Mr. B. Macdonald: Well, the Premier has come up with a very convenient chronology that suits his ends, but it is not the reality. He did not learn about these issues just last week or last month. He has known about them for a long time. In fact, in 2014, this minister, whom this Premier appointed, said that he would recuse himself from issues concerning development at his campground, yet this Premier has allowed this minister to remain in charge of ensuring water quality standards at Parlee Beach. Why did the Premier wait until last week to ensure that this minister did what he promised that he would do in 2014?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: This is a good question, and it is one that I have answered several times, but I will be glad to do it again. The Minister of Health was in contact with the Conflict of Interest Commissioner. In fact, there were three of them—Commissioner Landry, Commissioner Bertrand, and Commissioner Deschênes. Throughout the file, the Minister of Health divulged all the relevant facts, everything that they should know, of course, and was given the advice that he was not in conflict.

In fact, just a couple of weeks ago, he was given the same advice, that he is still not in a conflict. However, the commissioner gave the advice that there could be the perception of a conflict and that he should potentially recuse himself, and that is exactly what he did. Why this has changed recently is because it has come to our attention that the steering committee and those involved in rectifying the Parlee Beach water quality and reporting issues said that there may be a recommendation to cease development for a period of time in the Parlee Beach area. Therefore, he recused himself based on that.

Mr. B. Macdonald: This Premier continues to hide behind the direction of the Conflict of Interest Commissioner.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. B. Macdonald: I do not think that the minister sat down with the Conflict of Interest Commissioner and said: I am trying to develop the largest campground that Shediac has ever seen. By the way, that is dependent on the water quality at Parlee Beach, and, by the way, the Premier has put me in charge of water quality at the Shediac beach. Is that okay?



The commissioner can only go by the information that he is given, that is disclosed by the member and that is known to the Premier. How can the Premier take the one person in the province who stands to benefit the most from this issue and give him all the power to control it? How is that okay?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I am pretty sure that the commissioner was aware of the Parlee Beach development project. I am pretty sure because, when we were in opposition and since we have been in government, it has been raised on a daily, weekly, monthly basis from the opposition. I am pretty sure that he was aware of that development. The Minister of Health has gone to the commissioner, has given the information, and has given what is happening with his personal life. The advice that was given by three different commissioners is that he is not in conflict—period.

The member opposite, every single time he gets up to question that, is questioning the advice of the commissioners—three of them, I might add. The Minister of Health has gotten advice, yet again, despite the fact that there is a new development in the sense that there may be a recommendation to cease development in the Parlee Beach area because of the water quality and water quality reporting issues... The commissioner has still said to the Minister of Health that he is not in conflict but should recuse himself because of the potential perception of a conflict. That is what he did.

Mr. Fitch: I see that the minister in charge of the Department of Tourism, Heritage and Culture is advertising for a park manager for Parlee Beach and Murray Beach. It was reported in the media that the former park manager moved on. Can the minister tell us how many other park managers were moved on and whether other manager positions will be advertised?

Hon. Mr. Ames: It is a pleasure to rise in the House and answer the questions today. I listen day in and day out about Parlee Beach and what is going on, and it is extremely frustrating for me, as Minister of Tourism, to try to promote one of the best places in the world, one of the best beaches in the world, when we have...

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. The member for Riverview will come to order.

Hon. Mr. Ames: We have the opposition members continuously making slanderous accusations, not even concerned about what is going on with... We have Jacques Paynter, and we have people working on this file. They are going to do what they can to make sure that action is put on the ground and that we can find results. That is what we on our side of the floor are doing. Our government is working hard to find results to make sure that Parlee Beach is going to be cleaned up and is going to be the best place. It is known as one of the warmest saltwater beaches north of Virginia.



On the other side of the floor, they do not care. All they care about is making all kinds of tag headlines and making us look bad.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Ames: They do not care about the province. They do not care about tourism. They just care about themselves, obviously. Thank you.

Mr. Fitch: Those comments by the Minister of Tourism are inaccurate.

I found the list of responsibilities, qualifications, and competencies on the job ad to be quite lengthy. However, whoever gets this job will be a well-qualified card-carrying Liberal, I am sure. When I studied the list of responsibilities, it made me wonder why this position was termed as only seasonal. It looks like a full-time job.

- *Supervision of capital construction projects;*
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- *Human Resource Management including all aspects of staffing, staff training and development, scheduling, and collective agreement administration;*
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- *Developing community partnerships;*

Those are just a few of the responsibilities. However, I could not help but notice that there was no mention of water testing as a responsibility or qualification. Could the minister advise the House as to why this will not be a responsibility of the park manager anymore?

Hon. Mr. Ames: It is too bad that my critic, the former Minister of Tourism, was not here to correct his colleague.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Ames: The position that he is speaking about today as being seasonal... When you guys in opposition were in power, you were the ones who made it a seasonal position. It was not our side.



As far as we go, as I said earlier, again, we are concerned about moving forward, trying to find results and action on the ground and making sure that Parlee Beach and all tourism attributes in our beautiful province are held high. That is why our government invested over 70% more money in the Department of Tourism. It is because we value tourism. Tourism brings in a significant amount of growth for our province, and we need to ensure that we invest in anything that does good for our province. That is what we do with a lot of things over here. We invest in things that are paying dividends to the people of this great province of New Brunswick.

Pay attention, and maybe you guys can learn from our...

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Fitch: Mr. Speaker, I am sure you will call the minister on making reference to whether or not a member is present.

I also noted that, among the responsibilities for the new park manager, it says:

- *Budget preparation and expenditure control*

and

- *Overseeing all day-to-day operations and maintenance*

However, there was no mention of taking the fall for the Minister of Health, no mention at all of being a scapegoat for the Minister of Environment, and no mention at all of being a sitting duck for an incompetent Premier and Cabinet. I wonder whether there was an accidental omission, or is it the responsibility of the park manager of operations? Can the Minister of Tourism tell us this: Where do those responsibilities lie now?

Hon. Mr. Ames: Again, Parlee Beach is world-renowned as a major tourist destination. As far as beaches go, New Brunswick is in a place of its own. We have some of the warmest saltwater beaches north of Virginia. These are the things we need to focus on when promoting New Brunswick as a tourist destination. Increasing our budget by 17% is a step in the right direction. Return on investment is important when you are trying to ensure that a sector that employs over 40 000 people can grow.

I am proud of my Premier. I am proud of my colleagues.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order.



Hon. Mr. Ames: We are going in the right direction here, and we are working with all the people who are civil servants and all the people who are stakeholders. I talk with people at TIANB. I talk with people whether they sell hot dogs or they are marketing groups that do huge deals to make sure that New Brunswick is in the right position. We are on the right track, and we are making New Brunswick...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Children at Risk

Mr. Coon: On Wednesday, I asked the Minister of Families and Children some questions about the work of the Child Death Review Committee, but some of his comments left me with more questions than answers. He said that all the recommendations of Bernard Richard's report, *Broken Promises: Juli-Anna's Story*, have been acted upon. "Acted upon" is not the same as "implemented", so I want to ask the minister this specifically. Can he tell this House how the recommendation regarding putting measures in place to increase the independence of the Child Death Review Committee—*independence from government*—has been acted upon?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the protection of children and to respond to comments made by the Child and Youth Advocate.

First, I would like to say that our government's first priority is the protection of children and their families. That is our number one priority. The current Child and Youth Advocate made several important points. He pointed out that protecting children is the responsibility not only of the government but also of everybody in New Brunswick. If you see a child that you suspect is being abused, we encourage you to call Social Development. Call somebody.

At the same time, however, there were some comments made by the Child and Youth Advocate that do require corrections. He stated this morning that even Bernard Richard, in his Juli-Anna's report that was mentioned, recommended that additional measures should be put in place to increase the committee's independence from government. This is true. However, Mr. Bossé incorrectly stated that no action has been taken on this. In fact, the provincial government of this day agreed with the recommendation, moved the Child Death Review Committee to the office of the Chief Coroner, and committed to enhancing resources available to the coroner when reviewing the circumstances of sudden and unexpected deaths.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Coon: As the minister knows, the office of the coroner is not independent from government, so simply moving the Child Death Review Committee over to the coroner's office does not change the situation. The recommendation from Bernard Richard, the original Child and Youth Advocate, about increasing the independence from government of the Child Death Review Committee stands. I want to understand how the minister thinks that simply moving



the Child Death Review Committee over to the coroner's office increases its independence from government.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Given that it is the last question, I would like to get up. I think that it is very important to reiterate that I know that every single one of the members of the Legislature cares deeply about protecting children, the most vulnerable of our society, and families.

We are talking about things that happened a decade ago that are absolutely terrible and, in some cases, horrendous. That is why previous governments, and our government included... We will continue to do whatever we can to ensure that we improve the system and improve the way that we act and react to ensure that we can keep children and families safe.

When it comes to the Child Death Review Committee, I think that we have to point out that the Canadian Paediatric Society has given New Brunswick an excellent rating when it comes to our way of dealing with the review of these types of tragic deaths. Does that mean that we are perfect? Absolutely not, and we should still work with the Child and Youth Advocate to make it even better. We at least have had a good starting point over the past few years. Thankfully, we got that report and we acted upon it.

Mr. Speaker: Time, Mr. Premier. The time for question period has expired.

