

December 7, 2017

[Original]

## Property Tax

**Mr. Higgs:** When people try to get a sense of the principles or values of an organization or a government, they tend to observe actions because actions speak so much louder than words. The actions of the Gallant government on the property tax scandal have been, from the very beginning, just awful.

The month of March was spent denying that there was an issue and deflecting to the past. When a whistle-blower told the truth, the government blamed the civil service, attempted an internal review, and went into a new phase of damage control. Now, faced with conflicting accounts and changing stories, the Premier is hiding behind the Attorney General and will not answer questions about his own involvement.

I will give the Premier another chance today by repeating my question. Will the Premier get up and advise the House and the people of New Brunswick which story they should believe—the story of the Premier or the story of the Chief of Staff? Thank you.

[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. Rousselle:** I have already had the opportunity to say this: The truth that we must believe is the Auditor General's. Period.

You know, since 2011, thousands and thousands of property assessment errors have been made in New Brunswick. As a matter of fact, the Auditor General indicated that 2012 was the worst year. Of course, the Leader of the Opposition was then Minister of Finance, and nothing was done to resolve the situation.

Our province finally has a government that does more than talk; it actually takes action. We are determined to fix the problem. We want to end these errors, because one error is one too many. We will maintain our efforts. Excellent work has been done by the Auditor General, and, as she said, she left no stone unturned.

In this report from the Auditor General, there are 25 important recommendations that we must implement, for the future and for New Brunswickers. The Leader of the Opposition should realize this.



[Original]

**Mr. Higgs:** Once again, denial, deflection, diversion. The three pillars of the Gallant government's crisis management do nothing to help get to the truth of any issue. The property tax scandal has now become a test of principles and values. We have actually had an individual resign because of the principles and values not being followed. It is time to be accountable for actions. It is time to be the leader in this province that the Premier was elected to be.

I will ask again: Whose story should New Brunswickers believe? We have a conflicting story between the Chief of Staff and the Premier. This is not a difficult question. The two stories do not line up. Could we just get an explanation of how these stories are different, why these stories are different, and whose story is correct? That is all that we are asking. It is not difficult. Which story should we believe—the Premier's or the Chief of Staff's? Thank you.

[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. Rousselle:** I have said this and I will keep on repeating it: The Auditor General did a comprehensive and independent review. The Auditor General herself said that she reviewed every issue. When the Leader of the Opposition asks me who is telling the truth, I will continue to repeat the same answer: The Auditor General is.

What did the Auditor General say? Last week, she answered the question from the member for Gagetown-Petitcodiac, who had asked her whether she was certain that the Premier's Chief of Staff did not order the fast tracking. In her answer, she said that, based on the evidence, that was not what happened.

It is unacceptable that an Opposition Leader would keep on wanting to undermine the credibility of the Auditor General of New Brunswick. That is unacceptable. It is time for the Leader of the Opposition to stand up, stand tall, and uphold the values of truth...

[Original]

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

[Translation]

**Mr. Higgs:** According to an article published in *The Telegraph-Journal* on April 6 of this year, the Premier's Chief of Staff said that the Premier heard about fast tracking property assessments on May 6, 2016. In her report, the Auditor General indicated that the Premier heard about the fast track in March 2017. Could the Premier indicate which of the two scenarios is correct?

**Hon. Mr. Rousselle:** I cannot get over the fact that the Leader of the Opposition refuses to understand something so simple. As you know, since I have said this several times this week, when the Premier saw the presentation...



The Premier is someone who is working for New Brunswickers and cares about their well-being. He is not someone who is simply looking for political gain, like the Leader of the Opposition is. The Premier is someone who is concerned about New Brunswickers.

When he saw the presentation, the Premier fully understood that this new aerial photography system could lead to property assessments being done more regularly and, as a result, more quickly. The Premier asked questions because he wanted to be sure that what was being done was for the good of New Brunswickers.

So, it is high time for the Leader of the Opposition to stop casting doubt on the Auditor General's work and to work with us to find solutions to the problem.

[Original]

**Mr. Higgs:** Exactly. When the Premier saw the presentation on the fast track, he asked questions about it and he asked questions of his Chief of Staff. That says it. The minister has just said it. He learned about it on May 6, so why did he tell the Auditor General that he learned about it in March 2017? There, we have a situation right here, right now, that is conflicting with what the Premier said and what he did versus what he told the Auditor General. Let's get the facts clean.

[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. Rousselle:** I would hope—I am not sure—that this has to do with interpretation or that it is me who is not being clear. I want to be clear: At no time did the Premier speak about a fast track on May 6.

As the Auditor General did indeed say, and she was very, very clear on this matter: The staff who gave the presentation very clearly said that a fast track was never mentioned during the May 6 meeting. There is therefore a very big difference between the system working more quickly and regularly and the fast track the Leader of the Opposition is referring to.

I want to repeat this: On May 6, the Premier did not get a presentation on a fast track. I want this to be absolutely clear. I am asking the Leader of the Opposition again to start taking this seriously and to work with us to implement the Auditor General's 25 recommendations.

[Original]

**Mr. Higgs:** Remember the old soap opera *As the World Turns*? Well, this is "As the Story Changes". It changes, and it changes. Here, it happened again, right here today in the House. They had to kind of modify that last answer because it clearly said that the Premier had witnessed the model, had witnessed the aerial views, and had witnessed the program as it



would exist with the fast track, and then talked about it, saying: Well, I may have concerns about that.

Good enough. Let's take those concerns to the next step. Let's do the right thing and say: Well, then, what changed? What changed on that date and very quickly after that date when the actual Premier... The decision was made, saying that we were going to move from three years to one year? Now that we have confirmed and the minister has confirmed that the Premier actually knew about it, questioned about it, and actually said that we ought to think about this, what caused the change and what message was sent to the Chief of Staff? What message was sent to the CEO of Service New Brunswick?

**Mr. Speaker:** Time.

**Hon. Mr. Rousselle:** I will be clear. The Auditor General was clear. The Premier was not presented with a fast-track program whatsoever.

I invite the Leader of the Opposition to read the report. The Auditor General said it, and she wrote it very clearly, after an exhaustive and independent review. She looked at all the evidence and all the documents, and she interviewed everyone that she needed to interview. She was crystal clear. The Premier was not presented with this fast-track affair on May 6, period. Thank you.

**Mr. Higgs:** There were lots of conflicting reports. The Auditor General acknowledged the conflicting reports. I am not sure where the "crystal clear" applies in this case, but it certainly does not apply to the communication that went between the Premier and the Chief of Staff or the e-mails that went from the Chief of Staff to the CEO. We have e-mails. We have e-mails right here, and I mentioned yesterday that the Chief of Staff said to the CEO: Let's do this, and let's do it offline. It would make one think that they did not want to have a long paper trail.

It is easy to deal with this. All that it requires is to do the right thing. It requires carrying forward the motion that we put forward. Let's bring the three key individuals into the Legislature. Let's have that question and answer session under oath, and let's get to the bottom of this. The Premier does the right thing. Actions speak louder than words. It puts an end to the conflicting documents between the Chief of Staff and the Premier's Office. It is not difficult. It is easy. It resolves it, and most important, it is the right thing to do.

**Hon. Mr. Rousselle:** I will also be quoting the report of the Auditor General. She said clearly that the staff who demonstrated aerial photography to the Premier indicated that accelerating the implementation of aerial photography was not mentioned during the demonstration to the Premier on May 6, 2016. Is the Leader of the Opposition saying that she was lying?

**Mr. Higgs:** It is interesting. Again, deflect, deny, and divert—whatever it takes to get the story changing, to get the message out there that all is well. Well, all is not well.



Yesterday, I mentioned former Premier Bernard Lord, who did the right thing, the principled thing, in 2004. Premier Lord asked the Crown corporations committee to hold public hearings where all the key players involved in NB Power's decision to convert Coleson Cove to burn Orimulsion fuel testified under oath right here in the Legislature. The precedent was set by a former Premier to do the right thing. The opportunity exists for the existing Premier to do the right thing. Back then, there were many outstanding questions that were unanswered at the time, but thanks to the public hearing, they got answered.

Will the Premier do the right thing too and allow all the key players in the property tax scandal to testify under oath in this House, or once again, will the Premier hide away behind the Attorney General? Let's do the right thing. Mr. Premier, do the right thing.

**Hon. Mr. Rousselle:** The Auditor General is saying that the fast track was not presented to the Premier on May 6. The Leader of the Opposition is saying that it was presented. It cannot be both. Who is lying? I want an answer.

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Speaker:** I do not need chatter right now.

**Mr. Higgs:** This is great. I have been asking for how many weeks now for an answer on conflicting e-mails? These are conflicting e-mails about the Premier knowing about the fast-track model well beyond March 2017, the time frame that he told the Auditor General. I do not think that there is any dispute because it is right in the Auditor General's report. It is also right in quoted statements from the Chief of Staff that the Premier knew about it in the spring of 2016. Which one is right? That is the question. Who is right? Somebody is not right. That is the question we are asking. Let's do the right thing. Let's understand the series of events. We do not need anybody else quitting in the civil service because of poor behaviour in the Premier's Office.

**Hon. Mr. Rousselle:** It cannot be both. I accept what the Leader of the Opposition is saying. The Auditor General is saying that this fast-track thing was not presented to the Premier on May 6, 2016. The Leader of the Opposition is saying that it was. As he always says, it cannot be both, so I want an answer. Who is speaking the truth?

**Mr. Speaker:** Time. Can you suspend the clock for a few moments?

This is directed to the Minister of Service New Brunswick. You have used "lying" twice, and you have referenced "the truth" once. That is never acceptable in this House. I know that it is not pointed toward one of the members, but it is never acceptable language in this House. We will resume.

**Mr. Higgs:** I have a suggestion. Why do we not all come in here under oath? Why do we not have a session under oath to get to the bottom of all these facts? We want to bring the truth to



the Legislature today, we want to bring it in the future, and we want this issue evaluated and understood. Why do we not do that? I am open to that. I will take that on. Would the minister like to take that on? We will come in here and talk about every living fact that we want to discuss, and we will do it all under oath. Will the minister agree to that? Will the Premier agree to that?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Rousselle:** I have said this before and I will repeat it as often as necessary: Since 2011, thousands and thousands of errors related to the property assessment system have been made.

During the years when he was Minister of Finance, the current Leader of the Opposition said that it was a fair and just system, despite the 35 000 errors that were made during his mandate. He suggested no improvements or changes.

For the last seven months—I am indeed saying seven months—the Leader of the Opposition has done nothing but criticize and try to score political points, but he has never made a positive suggestion to improve the situation. So, I am asking the Leader of the Opposition to accept the report from the Auditor General, who says that she looked at all the issues and found all the necessary answers. The answer is clear: The Office of the Premier was never involved with this fast track.

[*Original*]

**Mr. Flemming:** With respect to property tax—and it is unfortunate that it is being referred to as a fiasco or a scandal in the media and everywhere else—I have observed the government’s strategy here in the House and I have noted that the Premier is clinging to his deafening silence on the matter of conflicting accounts on this fast-tracking business. I have listened to the Attorney General faithfully recite his talking points, and I have also noticed that, every time the Attorney General says that the Premier was never presented with this, someone over there chirps “On May 8, on May 8.” I have heard them.

I was also surprised to hear that the government wants to block oral testimony from Service New Brunswick executives. There are two types of testimony, and I would like the Attorney General to explain to the House the difference between written evidence and oral evidence.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Rousselle:** I thank the member opposite for his question, as it will give me the opportunity to note that the Auditor General did indeed have the opportunity to call witnesses and have them testify under oath. However, she got so much cooperation from everyone involved that she deemed it unnecessary to have them testify under oath.



That being said, the Auditor General's review was obviously comprehensive and independent. She drew all the necessary conclusions, that is, that the Office of the Premier and the Premier himself were not involved. She also clearly said that she had figured out everything that needed to be figured out, and she even corroborated the fact that, yes, if she had wanted to, she could have called witnesses and had them testify under oath.

So, everything is clear. I understand that the opposition is desperate and wants to score political points, but it is time to solve these problems rather than to create new ones.

[*Original*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Time.

**Mr. Flemming:** Well, I did not get my question answered. The difference between the two forms of evidence is that oral is verbal, given to someone, and written is obviously in writing. The Auditor General could have found only what she found if she did not have access to all the people. We are taught in law to get all the facts—not some of the facts, not just the facts you like, not just the facts you want to use, but all the facts.

In the Auditor General's report, her own words state that she "could not determine the Premier requested 'Fast Track'". That is the difference between oral and written evidence. Just because you did not give somebody something in writing, how do you know that they did not tell them? What were these people told, and who told them? Why is the government depriving the people of New Brunswick of sworn testimony to get to the bottom of this blemish on the government of our province? Why is this government blocking a quest for the truth?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Rousselle:** I thank the member opposite for his question. I would like to note that the Auditor General had access to all documents and testimony from everyone involved and that she listened. She very clearly said that she was able to get everything she needed to produce her report. She also very clearly said that the Office of the Premier and the Premier himself were not involved and did not order the fast tracking.

So, once again, I am asking the opposition to look for solutions. We now have 25 excellent recommendations that stem from a comprehensive review by the Auditor General. As a matter of fact, the opposition was asking that the Auditor General be the one to prepare this report. Now opposition members find the Auditor General's excellent conclusions unsatisfactory, so, as I said yesterday, they would like to rewrite the report. We do not want that.

[*Original*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Time.



**Mr. Flemming:** I want to reiterate that the Auditor General did not clear anyone. No one was exonerated here. She simply said that she could not determine that the Premier did or did not give a fast-track order. Did he do it verbally? Did someone in his office do it verbally? Just because there is no written evidence, it does not mean that a direction was not given. That is the point. Employees are alleging that the Premier used words such as these: I want to see it in half the time. Did he or did he not say that?

I will ask again: Why is the government depriving the people of New Brunswick of sworn testimony that would get to the whole story of this festering boil that overwhelms our ability to function. As Paul Harvey used to say, we want the rest of the story.

*[Translation]*

**Hon. Mr. Rousselle:** I cannot get over how the opposition is casting doubt on the Auditor General's credibility and integrity. She said that she looked at everything that needed to be reviewed. Here is what she said:

*[Original]*

No outstanding issues or mysteries.

*[Translation]*

How could she have been any more accurate or clear?

Speaking, again, of the Auditor General, she used the following term:

*[Original]*

“a fictional conversation”.

*[Translation]*

It is on these fictional conversations that opposition members seem to want to base their judgment. Again, I repeat what the Auditor General said.

*[Original]*

The Auditor General confirmed “both of these communications”.

*[Translation]*

These communications incorrectly attributed to the Premier





[Original]

“are not direct quotes and incorrectly imply the Premier requested ‘Fast Track’”.

[Translation]

How could the Auditor General be any clearer?

I repeat: We received an independent and comprehensive report. This is a report that opposition members wanted. Now, they find the conclusions unsatisfactory, so they would like to rewrite the report. This is not how things work in a democracy.

[Original]

### Health Care Services

**Ms. Wilson:** The people have been very clear with this government: Do not change the Extra-Mural Program. The Extra-Mural Program is working well. If the government truly wants to improve service, then put more nurses into the system, not more managers. If the government cannot understand something as simple as that, we are in bigger trouble than everyone thinks. I would like to ask the minister why he believes that the \$4.4 million to hire 21 management staff would not be better spent on hiring at least 50 more nurses.

[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. Bourque:** I am wondering whether the member opposite listened to the answer I gave yesterday. At that time, I clearly explained that there is a nurse shortage. I am using this term because it is the one she used in her question. We know that nurses account for 60% of Extra-Mural Program employees. A whole range of other professionals work for this program, and they do wonderful work.

It is well known that there is a nurse shortage not only in New Brunswick hospitals, but right across the country as well.

So, adding more nursing positions will not resolve the situation because it will be difficult to hire these professionals. Therefore, the best thing to do is to strengthen the capacity of the system to make it more efficient. This means, for example, increasing the number of home visits to New Brunswickers by 15%.

[Original]

**Mr. Speaker:** Time.



**Ms. Wilson:** Where are these managers coming from? What is their qualification level? What about the people who are already managing this? How is the Gallant government hiring, and what does the hiring process look like?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Bourque:** That is a good question, to which I replied during the 24 hours that the Standing Committee on Economic Policy spent on Bill 5. This concerns 21 employees who will be hired to take care of management. They will be employees in Part III of the public service, and they will handle the services provided by the Extra-Mural Program and Ambulance New Brunswick. They will be managers for this whole corporation and will help to provide better services to the people of this province.

Incidentally, speaking of key performance indicators, home visits to New Brunswickers will increase by 15%. In real terms, this means 90 000 more visits and 15% fewer emergency room visits—15% fewer. Can you imagine just how much this will give medical staff a chance to deal with real emergencies? This will make a huge difference in our system.

[*Original*]

**Ms. Wilson:** It just does not make sense. How are 21 new managers going to address and create 15% fewer visits to the ER?

I hope that the minister can find his way beyond the talking points to answer this question: Why does the government not trust its own staff to address the aging demographic instead of privatizing?

**Hon. Mr. Bourque:** Once again, the members opposite use the “p” word. We all agree that this will remain a fully public system and all the employees will remain public employees within the Extra-Mural Program. Also, through the contract, we will clearly show... It will demonstrate that we will be able to achieve these key performance objectives, which will allow 15% more visits in the homes of New Brunswickers—90 000 more visits—and 15% fewer visits to the emergency rooms. That is why we are partnering with Medavie, because it knows how to do this.

The member is asking how. Let’s watch and see. We will see it, and I am confident that, in the end, New Brunswickers will see that this system will show greater results. It is a quality system that will remain, and it will make a better health care system for New Brunswick.

**Mr. Northrup:** Do not worry, Mr. Minister. We will be watching you, and the whole province will be watching you also.

**Mr. Speaker:** Member, I am going to remind you that you are to address things through the Chair. That was kind of offside. Please continue.



**Mr. Northrup:** The existing Extra-Mural Program has a special place in many people's hearts, including my own. My mother used the Extra-Mural Program to stay home, in her own house, for the last couple years of her life. The professionalism of extra-mural nurses was second to none. These nurses had bonds with their patients, and they became part of each other's lives. Can the Premier guarantee this same service heading into the future? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Bourque:** I find it unfortunate that fearmongering is alive and well on the other side of this House.

Yes, we can say that we can guarantee that the quality of service will remain. It will be the same people providing the same services. First, it is the same Extra-Mural Program. It is the same people. They are moving from within the RHAs to the new Part III public entity. There will not be one single job lost. It will be the same people doing the exact same things. Second, within our partnership with Medavie, it is clearly stated in the contractual obligations that Medavie must maintain the levels of satisfaction and quality of care that are currently given.

Yes, the Extra-Mural Program is a fantastic program, and that is exactly why we are doing what we are doing. We want to keep it that way because we know that, in 15 or 20 years, there is going to be more strain.

**Mr. Speaker:** Time.

**Mr. Northrup:** I know that I am not going to get an answer to this question because the Premier will get up on his feet and take the last question of the day, but I am going to ask it anyway. Why try to fix something that is not broken in the Extra-Mural Program? Can the Premier or the Minister of Health explain how this agreement will be better for the patients, who have been treated with a service, in the past, that has been exceptional. There is a closeness that the extra-mural nurses have with their patients. To the Premier or the minister: Will any extra-mural offices in New Brunswick be closing in this agreement? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** I thank the opposition for the warm welcome.

I want to make it very clear to all New Brunswickers watching that we are going to continue to focus on their priorities. We are going to ensure that we spur economic growth. We will ensure that there are opportunities for New Brunswickers and that we grow the economy in a way that works for all New Brunswickers—raising the minimum wage and asking the 1% richest to pay a bit more so that we can invest more in education and health care.

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Speaker:** Order. The member from New Maryland and the member for Fredericton West-Hanwell will come to order.



**Hon. Mr. Gallant:** When it comes to the Extra-Mural Program, I appreciate the member opposite's question. I have to say, though, that I do not understand why he talked in the preamble about how important the program is as if the program were going somewhere. That is fearmongering, and that is not going to help advance health care in our province. We are taking a program that is good, and we are going to ensure that we increase visitations so that it can continue to be even better. We are ensuring that we are helping people stay in their homes as long as possible and ensuring that their families can be as healthy as possible.

