

November 29, 2018

[Translation]

Appointments

Mr. Gallant: Following the retirement of the former Commissioner of Official Languages, an interim commissioner was appointed. This was in June 2018. Since the Premier is governing with the support of the People's Alliance of New Brunswick, a party that made the campaign commitment to abolish the position of Commissioner of Official Languages, it is important to permanently appoint a commissioner soon. Could the Premier tell the House on what date he will appoint a new Commissioner of Official Languages?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, I had an excellent meeting with Michel Carrier just in the past few days, and we discussed a number of issues about the opportunities in New Brunswick and many of the issues that we have not talked about in the past. The former Premier of the province, now the Leader of the Opposition, actually said in a recent interview that he wished that he had done more to promote unity and bilingualism within the province. What we have, Mr. Speaker, is an opportunity before us. The current Commissioner of Official Languages recognizes that. He recognizes that never before have we had this opportunity.

Mr. Speaker, I am seeing people of very diverse opinions come together on issues that we agree on and paths forward that we can build on. I am excited about that. I am looking forward to continuing not only working with that office but also working with the current Commissioner of Official Languages for an interim period because he brings a lot to the table from his history. His views are about rebuilding New Brunswick and representing both official languages in a way that we likely have never seen before. The commissioner sees it and has the experience to...

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

[Translation]

Mr. Gallant: I appreciate the Premier's remarks, but I suggest that he publicly disclose, even if it is not today, a permanent appointment deadline for the very important position of Commissioner of Official Languages.

[Original]

At the federal level, the appointment of the Commissioner of Official Languages seems to adhere to the principle of alternance between Anglophone and Francophone commissioners. I



humbly suggest that we do the same thing here in New Brunswick. It is my opinion, therefore, that the next Commissioner of Official Languages here in our province should be a bilingual Anglophone. Will the Premier join me in calling for the appointment of a bilingual Anglophone as the next language commissioner?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his comments and his recommendation. I will certainly take that into consideration. We will be dealing with that appointment in due course, but I will not be setting any target timeline at this stage.

As I mentioned in the previous response, I certainly want to understand the issues. I want to take advantage of the history and what we have learned, and I want to share that with my colleagues here in the House so that we build, we build the relationship that is needed. The relationship, unfortunately, has come apart a bit, and we are going to put it back together by doing what makes sense and doing it based on the reality of New Brunswick. We respect the cultures that we have in our province. We need to build that strength in our province because we know that we have something unique here that can outshine any other province in this country. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hydraulic Fracturing

Mr. Gallant: Mr. Speaker, with a majority government, we, the Liberals, introduced a moratorium on hydraulic fracturing. As we all know, hydraulic fracturing is a contentious issue. It is something that has been hotly debated for over five years here in our province. Therefore, only a majority of this Legislature should be able to lift the moratorium that is in place. I have to point out that the Premier was wrong when he said that legislation was needed to lift the moratorium. It can be lifted by Cabinet through regulation. We proposed, therefore, an amendment to the speech from the throne so that we can have a transparent vote right here in the Legislature on the matter of hydraulic fracturing. I would like to announce that the Liberal caucus will have a free vote on this amendment. Will the Conservative alliance join us in having a free vote on the fracking amendment to the speech from the throne?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, I guess that the Leader of the Opposition is correct that the current position, which the members opposite put in place in relation to the moratorium, would allow for a Cabinet decision to move forward in the way that we are proposing. That is true. However, we have brought it forward. We amended what the Leader of the Opposition and his party put forward in the throne speech. We amended it to reflect exactly what we have been talking about now for the past two or three years: a sustainable, focused-area, regional approach to development in a very calculated way, in a way that ensures that people in New Brunswick are safe, the water is safe, the whole operation is safe, and they get to learn that.

Mr. Speaker, there are things that we know from all over this country, all over North America, about the business that has been in operation for 40 or 50 years. Well, surely, we can build on that. We know that we had great regulations that were already in place, but we also know that



many things got stopped by the previous government. It is time for New Brunswick to move forward, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. McKee: Mr. Speaker, fracking not only runs the risk of contamination through ruptured pathways deep underground but also requires massive amounts of water. The water that is recovered is toxic waste, and there is no facility to dispose of it in New Brunswick. In fact, our previous Liberal government introduced legislation banning fracked wastewater from its public wastewater treatment facilities. Until the contaminated water is trucked out of province, it will sit in holding ponds where it can poison passing birds and wildlife and potentially leak into the surrounding environment. Now that it is clear that, with the support of the People's Alliance, the government intends to lift the moratorium on fracking, can the Premier tell us his plan to manage contaminated, fracked wastewater?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, the fearmongering continues. The water used in the fracturing process is treatable, like any other water that is used in an industrial process. If we look at industry all over this province, there is water that is being treated to be safely discharged. The idea here is to make people well aware of how that process works because it is not new technology. It can be treated, Mr. Speaker, and it will be treated. We will bring all of that forward so that people understand it.

The interesting thing here is that this is not political. We have nothing to hide. This is an industry that exists all around us, and yet we bury our heads in the sand. We have industries that are being threatened because of high gas prices, the highest in the country by far. We have industries that cannot move forward or people that will not look to come here because they see that our costs of doing business are too high. Mr. Speaker, I just want the facts to speak for themselves because when you stand on the side of the facts, you move our province forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. McKee: Where will the wastewater be treated? People have real concerns about fracking, Mr. Speaker, especially near the Turtle Creek watershed. The way the government describes lifting the moratorium in the subamendment is vague enough to allow fracking in Albert County. As mentioned, our previous Liberal government introduced legislation to ban the disposal of fracked wastewater in our public wastewater treatment facilities. How can the Premier today tell us that he wants to proceed with fracking without a proper plan in place to treat the fracked wastewater, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Here we have statements being made that are totally incorrect. Yesterday we saw that same thing about expanding it across the province, and that is not our plan, Mr. Speaker. It was very clear, but the statement was made here in the House for public consumption. Here we have another one: How would we proceed without knowing how this is going to be done? We are not proceeding without knowing how it is going to be done, and we are not proceeding in areas outside of what we have very clearly outlined. We will share and make public how this process works and how we treat the wastewater.



I would like to know whether any of the members opposite actually know how successful this industry has been across North America and what a successful impact it has had for the community—positively. Do they actually know where we have had any issues related to water contamination? I will reiterate one more time: Let's base our decision on facts, not emotion, and not just hype to generate a public issue. Let's move our province forward on a factual, sustainable basis. Thank you.

Paramedics

Mr. D'Amours: Mr. Speaker, we all know that the requirements of the paramedic profession are many. They have important responsibilities and face emergencies that are rarely easy. Paramedic workers are paid up to \$20 000 less than police and firefighters in New Brunswick. While the Premier tries to convince himself that there is no problem, retention is a challenge and attracting new candidates is not easy. When will the Premier redo his homework and introduce new salaries for paramedics so that their salaries will be representative of their work and their risks?

Hon. Mr. Flemming: It is interesting to note that the previous government did nothing to alleviate the paramedic problem. Almost immediately upon coming to office, we have made strides to improve the situation with the paramedics that absolutely dwarf the actions of the previous government. I do find it a little rich when someone criticizes the government for taking action when the previous government took no action.

Having said that, remuneration is a significant aspect when it comes to labour supply shortages, so that is a legitimate aspect of the question. They are members of a union. They have an association. I agree with the member opposite that remuneration is a significant part of the overall picture of solving the paramedic problem, but it is not the only one. We are working to solve this and to give New Brunswickers a top-notch paramedic system.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours: I would like to remind the Minister of Health that he himself voted against our sub-amendment to our throne speech, which called for an increase in New Brunswick paramedics' wages. Recognizing that paramedics face challenges every day is one thing, but working to improve their situation is another. Employee retention, wage enhancements, and occupational reclassification are different pieces of the same puzzle. Is the Premier prepared to commit today to reclassifying the occupation of paramedic and to ensuring better wage conditions that reflect the risks and requirements associated with this profession in New Brunswick?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Flemming: Thank you for the question, member. Mr. Speaker, you have to remember that whenever you are talking about reclassifying any bargaining unit or labour group, it is not



necessarily for the government to do that. There is the *Industrial Relations Act*. There is a bargaining unit. The bargaining unit right now is CUPE, and it is not the position of this government or any government to enter into the internal workings of a union or a bargaining unit. That is for the paramedics to decide between themselves and their unit. We are going to let the situation unfold. These are responsible, capable, and able people, and they will undertake that process in due course. I suspect that I will be meeting with them and will be kept apprised of that, but the fact of the matter is that it is not the job of any government to delve into a bargaining unit, contrary to the provisions of the *Industrial Relations Act*.

[Translation]

Social Programs

Mr. J. LeBlanc: I am honoured to rise for the first time during question period.

My question is for the Premier. Seniors in our province deserve to enjoy the best quality of life possible while maintaining their independence. This is why our government developed the Home First Strategy, which includes the creation of new tax credits to enable seniors to renovate their homes, a tax credit for informal caregivers, and investments in more affordable housing. Does the government commit to maintaining this strategy?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: I want to thank the member opposite for the question, Mr. Speaker. You know, our seniors are probably our province's biggest asset, and we want them to live their lives with as high a quality as they can. The Home First Strategy was indeed a very important aspect of the previous government. It was started by the former government before it, with the David Alward government, that I was proud to be a part of. The Home First Strategy, I think, is well in hand, and we are certainly, as we said before, reviewing everything as we go along. Seniors are very important. I do not see any changes coming. We will report back if there are. I want to thank the member opposite for the question. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Nursing Homes

Mr. J. LeBlanc: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The question is again for either the minister or the Premier. Indeed, keeping seniors in their homes is a top priority, Mr. Speaker, but should our seniors eventually need a place in a nursing home, they must, first of all, have access to a bed. During our mandate, we created a five-year nursing home plan, a plan to build 10 new 60-bed nursing homes, totaling 600 new nursing home beds, to add an additional 407 memory care beds, and to invest in renovations to existing homes. Mr. Speaker, does this government commit to completing the last phase of the nursing home plan?



Hon. Mrs. Shephard: I again thank the member opposite for the question. The nursing home strategy is being reviewed at this time. We certainly understand that it is important, and we understand the fact that we do need more beds. We also need to ensure that all empty beds are being utilized, so we are going to be taking an all-encompassing look at what the strategy is and how we move forward with it.

It is interesting that the government had an enormous budget and approved only a very small amount of that budget for even the 2018-19 period. Along with knowing that we need these beds, we also have to figure out how we are going to pay for them, Mr. Speaker, because the government did not leave us very much to work with in that regard. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Taxation

Mr. Melanson: Mr. Speaker, the throne speech stated that the government wants to see a balanced budget by 2020. We on this side of the House agree that seeing a balanced budget in New Brunswick is a good thing, as we had been working toward that over the past four years. In the same throne speech, the government said that it will see the small business tax and the so-called double property tax be eliminated. Let's remind ourselves that this language was found in the People's Alliance platform.

In a media scrum, it was said by the Premier that there would not be any tax cuts before a balanced budget. Therefore, tax cuts, if they come, only would be in 2021. Why include tax cuts in this throne speech when it will not happen until 2021? Could the Premier explain whether this was part of the secret deal to get the support of the People's Alliance in this Legislature?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: You know, it is really ironic. Here we go again. This will be the third time of throwing statements out there hoping to get a news clip of some sort that there is something when there is not. People on the opposite side cannot seem to believe that there is an actual agreement here to work together in good faith on issues as they come forward. One on chocolate milk came forward today. We are working on chocolate milk. We are going to deal with chocolate milk, right? It is an issue throughout all the schools.

Let's talk about this situation. I remember that during the election, a number was thrown out there—\$500 million in double tax. Do you know what we have learned? It is a \$90-million item. That is what we thought it was but were not sure, so we were careful not to overcommit on this. There is a number that they would have known about, but they purposely put out a wrong number during the election. It is time to speak the truth. It is time to say what is real. We will be bringing forward a very responsible budget because we do not want a downgrade in this province.

Mr. Melanson: Mr. Speaker, I guess that secret deal will always stay secret.



[Translation]

It is interesting to read in the speech from the throne that the current government seems to be playing politics with a document that is supposed to establish its agenda for the next 12 months.

The government is promising to eliminate the small business tax and the so-called double taxation of secondary properties in three years. If the current government is sending a serious message when it says that our businesses must be more competitive and that, therefore, the tax structure must be changed, why wait three years?

Can the Minister of Economic Development and Small Business explain to these business owners why the government is playing politics by putting off improving the competitiveness of our businesses for three years, just to win the support of the People's Alliance of New Brunswick?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, we have inherited a spending nightmare where we saw the previous government just trying to buy everybody with everything at any time. We saw it in unprecedented terms during the last two months. I have said it over and over again: We will bring forward a balanced approach that does not require more taxes on the people of this province. That is why you do things over time. That is why you set priorities. I am not trying to buy anyone. I am trying to build a better New Brunswick. Thank you very much.

Property Tax

Ms. Rogers: Prior to the change of government, we were advised by officials of the need to introduce, this fall, legislation to continue the implementation of the Auditor General's report on property assessment. This is necessary to allow departments time to prepare, to separate property assessment notices and tax bills for the 2019-20 tax season. Will the Minister of Finance or the Minister of Service New Brunswick be introducing legislation this fall to continue the work on these Auditor General recommendations, as per the plan to complete the tax bill separation?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question. We have had meetings on that. We understand that we are unique here in the province in terms of what other provinces do in relation to the tax bill and how you separate it, like a three-month period between the assessment. We are looking at that, and we are taking that as... I do a comparison in all cases. Are we unique? Are we unique for the right reasons, or are we unique for the wrong reasons? That is in comparison with other jurisdictions.



We have had the first and second meetings on that. It would be our intent to proceed in a manner that is like other jurisdictions. At this point, it looks as though this will happen over time. We are working on that. I thank the member opposite for the question. Thank you.

Telecommunications

Mrs. Conroy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I said, in terms of the Internet, many people still have spotty or no Internet service in a lot of rural areas. It is hard to believe that in this day and age, there are still so many who do without. Can the government provide insight as to what is happening with our efforts to make high-speed Internet and cell phone services available to all rural communities in the province?

Hon. Mr. Oliver: I thank the member for the question, and certainly, it is one that is dear to my heart, living in a rural area, traveling around, and losing Internet coverage and cell coverage. It is one of the commitments that I made or a promise that I made, not only to my constituents but also to my grandson, because he brings that up with me all the time. I said that we would work with the suppliers of Internet coverage and cell coverage to make sure that we try to improve as much as possible the cell coverage in the province. It is not acceptable to be driving on our four-lane highways between Quebec and Nova Scotia and dropping coverage. It is something on which I will be working with them, and I will be asking the suppliers to meet with me to discuss that further. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Pay Equity

Ms. Mitton: A letter was sent to all MLAs last Friday. It was signed by the executive directors of a number of organizations, such as the New Brunswick Coalition for Pay Equity and the Regroupement féministe du Nouveau-Brunswick. All of these people are calling on MLAs to support pay equity in the private sector.

It is worth noting that 66% of New Brunswick women work in the private sector and that those working in traditionally female-dominated professions are not paid what they should be for their work. That is a form of discrimination. Will the Premier undertake a legislative process to ensure pay equity in the private sector?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. S. Wilson: Thank you, and I thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, we are focused on home care workers and day care workers. We know that there has been a lot of work going on with pay equity in the province. It certainly is going to be an approach that we look at. There are meetings planned to discuss this with a number of people. It is something that we are looking at, but our focus right now is on our home care workers.



Ms. Mitton: Mr. Speaker, the Premier said that he wants to ensure that everyone is treated equally for the jobs they do. This is exactly what pay equity is. It is equal pay for work of equal or comparable value. Do those who work in traditionally female-dominated sectors other than child care and home care not deserve pay that recognizes the full value of the work that they do? By refusing to pursue private sector pay equity, this government is just reinforcing stereotypes and keeping the pay gap in place. How can the Premier justify this unfair wage disparity between female- and male-dominated jobs?

Hon. Ms. S. Wilson: Just to let the House know, pay equity is important. It has to be something that we move forward in a collaborative way with all stakeholders. Our businesses have been hit hard enough. It is to manage this, to figure out a way that we can move this forward in a collaborative way that is going to be effective and that will really address the needs of all stakeholders. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gallant: I want to join my colleague from Memramcook-Tantramar in discussing pay equity. Unfortunately, the minister does not seem to understand that, in fact, pay equity will mean that our businesses will even see some gains in terms of competitiveness and productivity. It does not, in fact, mean that our businesses will incur additional costs, since such a measure will assist our families and businesses. Moreover, it will create a more equitable economy.

So the Liberal caucus would like to join our colleague in calling upon the government, once again, to do everything it can to promote pay equity in the private sector and, of course, finish the work we began on pay equity in the public sector. Therefore, we are asking this: Will the government join us in introducing and supporting a bill to mandate pay equity in the private sector?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, I do not think there is anyone, at any point in time, at this stage, that would suggest that equal pay for equal work is a mandatory requirement. It should be absolutely held true in our province and in our country, and it is. It is here in the government offices.

I have been clear: We are focused on home care, and we are focused on day care. We will not be implementing a mandatory pay equity program in the private sector. I have said that before in this House, and I repeat it once again right now. We will ensure that equal work that is done is gender neutral, so it does not matter. If you are doing the same job, you get the same pay. It does not matter what your gender is. We need to go a little farther. I know what pay equity stands for, but I am saying that we want gender equality across our province and across our country, and we will ensure that. On the pay equity side, we are focused on home care and day care, Mr. Speaker.



Mr. Gallant: Mr. Speaker, I would humbly suggest that, indeed, the Premier does not understand what pay equity is. What he is describing is pay parity, Mr. Speaker. What we need to do is to help families with the affordability of everyday life. We need to ensure that we are growing our economy and that we are growing a fairer economy for all New Brunswickers. That is why we want to see the minimum wage raised. That is why we want to see pay equity in the private sector. That is why we want to provide free child care and free tuition to the families that need it the most, and we want to help the middle class with the cost of tuition and the cost of child care.

All these measures, Mr. Speaker, will not only create a fairer economy but will also create more opportunities and help grow the economy for all in our province. Therefore, we ask yet again that the Premier be briefed on the difference between pay parity and pay equity. Once he understands the difference between the two, he can come back to the Legislature. Hopefully, he will commit to ensuring that pay equity will be introduced into the private sector.

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, I would appreciate it if the Leader of the Opposition would be briefed on the state of the economy in our province. We have a situation. The last report, I think, was 6 000 jobs lost in the private sector. We have the lowest economic growth in the country, Mr. Speaker, and we are saying that we want to put more into that workforce or into those investors that want to create the employment. The best opportunities for good wages are good jobs and people investing in our province.

I am well aware of what the pay equity system is all about. I am well aware of the definition and how it works. I am focused on home care and health care. We cannot be all things to all people all at the same time, and that is why we have a different approach from this government that just left us, Mr. Speaker. We have a different approach because we believe, at the end of the day, that we all have to have a successful province. That is our goal. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gallant: As a government, we had worked extremely hard to grow the economy, but it is worth emphasizing that we worked with New Brunswickers, business people, businesses, and workers.

[*Original*]

Because of that cooperative approach, working with all New Brunswickers during our time in government, we were able to grow the economy every single year. Contrast that with when the Premier was the Minister of Finance, slashing into education and health care, when the economy actually shrank, Mr. Speaker. We grew the economy every single year. We ensured that the population grew to its highest level ever in our province. We were able to increase wages significantly, at times being the fastest province in the country when it came to wage growth. Mr. Speaker, we reduced the unemployment rate by almost two full percentage points.



With that said, we not only grew the economy but created a fairer economy by raising the minimum wage, providing free child care and free tuition for those who need it the most, and helping the middle class with the cost of both. Will the Premier continue that work and introduce pay equity in the private sector?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, despite the change of tone that we saw during the past few weeks, it seems that the Leader of the Opposition has now resorted back to the original speaking points.

Mr. Speaker, I have seen presentations now which show that, for practically the first time in history, the private sector investment and public sector investment are matched. Mr. Speaker, that has not happened, so what that tells you...That means that any economic growth in this province has been directly related to taxpayer spending. That is not a sustainable economy. You cannot continue to invest taxpayer dollars to create employment and expect a long-term, sustainable future for the people of this province.

There is a fundamental difference because taxing and spending is not our philosophy. Having the right amount of taxes and getting results for the money being spent is our philosophy. Being open for business and incurring private sector investment is our philosophy. We want the economy to survive and thrive, and we want people to look at New Brunswick once again for success for their businesses.

Mr. Speaker: Time. Question period is over.

