

March 28, 2019

[Translation]

Exports

Mr. D. Landry: Two days ago, we asked the Premier questions in the House regarding concerns about comments made on China by the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development and their negative impact on an export market that is very important to New Brunswick businesses.

The Premier gave a reasonable answer, saying that ministers should think about the consequences of their words before speaking. He also said that he had met with the Consul General of China and with Francis Pang, who is involved in education partnerships between New Brunswick and China and who just received the Order of Canada. The Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development then went out and defied the Premier in an interview with CBC.

My question for the Premier is simple: What are you going to do with a minister who cares more about his personal ambitions than about New Brunswick businesses and orders from his own Premier?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, it comes as a shock, I am sure, to the members on the opposite side that—and I have said it before, in different meetings and at different events—there is diversity within our group. I have talked about these members' interests and having passion about what people believe in and what they want to pursue. I respect all of that because, you know, we are built on diversity in our country. We are built on each other's opinions, and we thrive on that. I am sure that the members opposite would feel the same way.

But at the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, we have a government to run, we have relationships to build, and we have relationships where we have to decide on how we will move forward and how we will not. In this situation, I did have great meetings with the individuals that the member opposite mentioned. We will continue to have these discussions, and we will continue to find a path forward. I believe that futures in any area are built on relationships, and, Mr. Speaker, we will continue this one. Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: Mr. Speaker, should a minister jeopardize international exports between New Brunswick and China? We have suggested to the Premier that the minister be recused from this



file to solve the problem. We are now asking whether it would not be preferable to remove him completely from this portfolio. I am sure some private members would like to work on it and they would do what is right for New Brunswick businesses. Who is the boss here, Mr. Premier? Is it you, or is it your delinquent minister who is defying your authority?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: You know, I know a lot of people who have security issues, but I am not one of them. We will do what is right as we go forward. We will do what is right for the people of the province. We will do what is right for the kids in our schools. We will find solutions, and we will work with people to get those solutions. It is not always going to be easy. It is not always that we are going to agree. But at the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, we will find a pathway forward, because that is what we do, and I am excited about those opportunities.

We will work together on economic opportunities because we must. We do not want to see anyone in our province impacted negatively in what they are exporting and what they are purchasing. That is our goal, and we will continue that. We will build our relationships, but things will change, ideas will change, and our paths will change as we move along. But that is life. Things change, but we have to find a way to work through changes together. We will do that within the team right here, and I am hopeful that we will even see change with the member opposite.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: We are not talking about international security here; we are talking about international exports. In his interview, the minister basically said that he did not care about what the Premier thought and that he would do as he pleased. Mr. Speaker, can the Premier tell us if he finds that embarrassing?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Cardy: Mr. Speaker, I thank the Leader of the Opposition for that question. I joined this team because of the man sitting in the Premier's chair right now. When I was looking at a new path in my political career, I had an approach from the team opposite and it was pretty clear to me. The reason I am sitting on this side of the Chamber and not on the other side is that this team respects democracy and respects internal debate and there is nothing wrong with disagreement.

Do you know what is wrong with our democracy? It is the way the previous government behaved over the last four years. It was a dark period in New Brunswick history when ministers were muzzled and backbenchers were muzzled. There was no disagreement, no dissent, and what did we see as a result of that? The result of four years of succumbing to that dictatorship on the other side of the bench is that they are sitting where they are now.



So I am proud to be here and proud to serve this Premier as Education Minister, and I am going to work hard for the children of this province every day. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry: Mr. Premier...

Mr. Speaker: Speak through the Chair.

Mr. D. Landry: I find it embarrassing that your minister answered, since he is the one who told the media he defied your authority. He likes to work in your government because he could never make it with the NDP, and that is why he changed groups. Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Premier: Does he find it embarrassing that one of his ministers is making headlines with comments like the ones he made recently, which cause us to fear that our exports to China might be jeopardized?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: You know, I am proud to be here representing a group with very strong personalities. I said after the process we went through last fall that it is great to be here with a team of 25, including me, who could not be bought. That is what democracy brings. It brings real people with real convictions to make a difference in the province, and that is what we have on this side of the House. I am excited about that.

Do you know why we have diverse opinions? It is because we do not operate on speaking points every day. We actually have individual thought processes in our own brains, and I am excited about that. How many times in the past four years did we ask questions where every answer came back with a new speaking point? But there were only five speaking points, so they were only up to five. It did not matter what the question was. Well, Mr. Speaker, we will answer from the heart. We will work with conviction, and we will get the job done. Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry: Mr. Speaker, I will ask the Premier a question directly: Who is the Premier, you or the other 21 members of your party?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure that I understood the question, but yes, I believe that we are together. I think that we are certainly together here and we are moving forward in a direction that is right for this province. We have already demonstrated that in many areas.



We have demonstrated a policy where we are going to be a rapid-response government, one that listens to people and then reacts accordingly. We have certainly done that within our budget process. We have done that within the WorkSafeNB process. We have done that with what we are doing in working with First Nations in a real way—in a real way—by creating a secretariat that actually drives the attention, drives the focus. I am excited about that potential.

So, yes, we will have differences of opinion, and yes, there will be differences of opinion in the media. But that is not going to drive our conviction. Our conviction is going to be moving forward and pulling our ideas together to get the right solution, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry: Do I understand correctly? Is the Premier telling us that he agrees with creating international export crises? That was my understanding.

[*Original*]

With the question that I asked him a few minutes ago, where he was not sure about the question, I was asking him whether it is he who is the Premier or the 20 others who are with him. I need to know that answer. Are there 22 Premiers on that side? That is what I need to know.

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Another issue, I think, may come as a surprise. You can go right back to the election. Do you know what we had on the side of our bus? We had “Team Higgs”, because you cannot do it alone. You do not have all the solutions. You work with people to get results. That is what this is about. This is about working with people to get results.

I said that I do not have a security problem, and I do not. Maybe it is just a factor from being around for a while. But I do have a conviction for this province, and I know that I cannot do it alone. We had a budget, a budget that said we have a sense of urgency in our province. And what did it say? “We can’t do it alone.” We do not admit things that are not real. We need help in every sector to bring our province back.

We can play the games about diversity, we can play the games about dissension in the ranks, or we can get the job done. And Mr. Speaker, I do not get sidetracked by headlines. If you want to create an issue out of this, then you are creating your own problem for New Brunswick by bringing this up on and on and on and trying to make a meal where no meal exists. We will continue to stay focused. We will not lose traction, and we will not lose focus on the future.



[Translation]

Collective Bargaining

Mr. LePage: It is strange that Alliance members have not risen to ask questions, make comments or statements, or offer congratulations, since it is opposition day today.

My question is for... Unfortunately, we have heard that negotiations with nursing home workers have stalled, which means families throughout the province are worried about what could happen to their relatives or loved ones who live in these homes.

Can the Premier tell the House what he is doing to resolve the impasse and when families and nursing home employees can expect this conflict to be resolved?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question. Yes, we are. We are trying to get the job done so that we can have a future for our seniors in nursing homes, a future for the many seniors who will end up in nursing homes, and a future for our seniors who are able to stay in their own homes. The idea, Mr. Speaker, is that we cannot keep doing the same old process, the same old thing of just saying: Oh, well, just give us more money and life will be good.

We have got issues in our nursing homes. We have got issues with skill sets. We have got issues with hours of care. We have got issues with absenteeism. We have an opportunity to fix this for the future, Mr. Speaker. That is what this is about. That is what we are putting on the table. We want the help of the CUPE members. We need their help to make this happen.

It is not business as usual. This is a crisis in our province. We cannot keep kicking the can down the road and hoping for the best. What is most concerning for me is that it seems to be okay. Mr. Speaker, it is not okay on this side of the House, and it should not be okay on the other side of the House because our province deserves better. We are not here for the goodness of our health. We are here for the goodness of our province. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mrs. Harris: Mr. Speaker, I can tell you one thing. Nursing home residents, their families, and the great employees in these nursing homes certainly have security issues because of Premier Higgs.

Mr. Speaker, the majority of this House agrees that this matter should go to binding arbitration if an agreement cannot be reached. We think that looking after our elderly loved ones, keeping them comfortable and alive, is more important than the Premier's concern that government gets its way at the bargaining table. If there was ever a cause for compromise, this is it, Mr. Premier. Why will you not just say yes to binding arbitration? Is your image as a tough negotiator more important than our nursing home residents and their families?



Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, I would ask the member opposite why the former government did not say yes 28 months ago. Why did it not say yes 20 months ago or 12 months ago? This is really rich, Mr. Speaker. If I have ever seen anyone cross the floor more quickly, it has been related to the position that the opposition now takes on a situation that it spent 24 months fighting against.

It is time we put the guns down. It is time we decide what our challenges are and figure out together, with all our diverse opinions, what the solutions are. But business as usual, throwing in the towel, trying to get over this little hurdle, and saying, Oh well, we will worry about it tomorrow... No, tomorrow is here now, Mr. Speaker, and we are worrying about it today to fix tomorrow. I am excited about the potential. We need help to do that, and we need the members opposite to be part of that. It is a solution that is in front of us. We cannot even get people now to fill many jobs. It is not about employment, the number of people. It is about finding different ways to do our business, Mr. Speaker.

Mrs. Harris: Mr. Speaker, we may have crossed the floor very quickly, but I will tell you one thing: We are coming back even quicker. Mr. Speaker, at least on this side of the House, we kept the negotiation lines open. We did not cut them off.

Nursing homes are sending letters to family members telling them that they will have to come and look after family members themselves, to work in nursing home kitchens, or to take their family members home. People are very upset about this. I saw one media report of a man who said that he was literally in tears. Let me be very clear. Without a doubt, there will be nursing home residents who will die prematurely if this strike happens, seniors who have made this mighty province what it is today. Mr. Minister and Mr. Premier, are you okay with this approach?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, what I am not okay with is a mind-set that says: Do anything. Give anything. We will pay for it in the future.

I am very concerned for the well-being of all our residents in our nursing homes. They deserve to have the comfort of not being uprooted. But we have a situation, Mr. Speaker, and it is sad that the former government allowed this to go on to the extent that it did. It left us with a mess to clean up. I am not surprised. It was 21 months that it worked on this and did not get the job done.

We are still willing to negotiate, Mr. Speaker. The mediator has not called off talks. We are at the bargaining table. We have options, we have resolutions, and we want CUPE to work with us to resolve this. We need it. We value it. We want to protect our residents in our nursing homes, and we want to continue to negotiate. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order. Order.



Capital Budget

Mrs. F. Landry: “Properly maintained bridges are essential to the integrity of the transportation system and the safety of New Brunswickers.” This is a quote from the Auditor General in 2013, and in 2019, this quote is more accurate than ever. Our government continuously invested in bridge repairs and maintenance, and between 2015 and 2018, it allocated substantial increases over the Alward government’s budget. With this government’s 29% cut to the bridge program, will the safety of our roads be compromised? Is there any possibility that overpasses and bridges may collapse, as happened in Quebec a few years ago?

Hon. Mr. Oliver: Mr. Speaker, I certainly thank the member opposite for the question, and I can assure the Assembly here today that we are very concerned about the safety of not only our bridges but also our underpasses and the road structure itself. We do comprehensive surveys of all our bridge structures. We will make sure that they are safe, and we will make repairs where needed and when needed. Thank you very much.

Mrs. F. Landry: Mr. Speaker, I believe that there are about 200 road building companies that are members of the provincial Road Builders Association. These private sector businesses employ 7 000 or more New Brunswickers. We have asked repeatedly how many jobs are going to be lost in the private sector because of the cuts by this government to the capital budget for roads. Has this government evaluated the impact on the economy in every corner of the province with these cuts?

Hon. Mr. Oliver: Mr. Speaker, again, thank you. Certainly, with the issue of the amount of work that will be done, we have been meeting with the Road Builders Association and keeping its members apprised of the amount of work that we will be doing. They understand the situation that we are in. We did make cuts in the fall, or we did reduce the amount of money that was being spent on capital budgets. But we have addressed the situations that are necessary. We will make sure that the infrastructure that we have is in safe condition and that it will be working properly. That is our main concern.

Going forward, we will be spending money where it is needed. We want to take care of our needs and not our wants. We will always focus on safety first. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Agriculture

Mr. K. Arseneau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since the Legislature will be adjourned over the next five weeks as farmers hit the fields across the province, I want to take this last opportunity before we eventually sit again on May 7 to ask a question of the Minister of Agriculture.

A report last year by the Centre for Local Prosperity found that a 10% shift toward local food products would create over 4 772 jobs in that industry across Atlantic Canada. This government



could kick-start that process by increasing the ratio of local food procurement in our governmental institutions, such as hospitals, nursing homes, and schools. This would create new opportunity for the province's family farmers while keeping more money in the province. The last thing we need is a strategy. We need concrete action. Will the Minister of Agriculture commit to creating ambitious local food procurement targets for our public institutions?

Hon. Mr. Wetmore: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for the question. I have had the opportunity to be the minister since November, and this is the first question that I have gotten from the Green Party. I have received only one other question from the official opposition, so certainly, it is an honour for me to have the opportunity to rise and answer the question.

I would like to say that the Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries is the second-largest generator of economic activity, or GDP, in the province, second only to energy. We are ahead of forestry, and we are ahead of mining. Certainly, we understand how important the sector is, and we will be working diligently with our stakeholders. I have tasked our department with being very aggressive in growing the economy. Thank you.

Mr. K. Arseneau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If the minister does not answer questions, we will have to not ask them too much.

(Interjections.)

Mr. K. Arseneau: Well, you could start by answering the first question that I asked about local food procurement targets for our public institutions. Then, after that...

[*Translation*]

In 1972, the Canadian government introduced supply management so that farmers could make a decent living from agriculture. I want to be clear: I stand for and will always stand for the intent of supply management. However, agriculture has evolved, and so supply management must also evolve.

In this province, we control quota-exempt production. Currently, in New Brunswick, without quotas, a farmer can only have 199 hens, 199 layers, and 25 turkeys. These numbers must be increased to better meet the demand for human-scale and pasture production and to enable the next generation to have viable business plans. Will the Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries commit to increasing quota-exempt production so that the next generation of farmers can make a decent living and by...

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Wetmore: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Since taking office as the Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, I have had the opportunity to meet with a number of



local growers. I have had the opportunity of meeting with the member's spouse and discussing issues with regard to agriculture. I would also like to take the opportunity to congratulate the member on his newest addition.

What I can tell you about supply management is that we on this side of the House take supply management very seriously. Unfortunately, we have seen the federal Liberal government start to give away some of the supply management with regard to dairy. This is certainly an issue that we will be dealing with with our sector, the pork sector, the... Excuse me, the...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Motor Vehicles

Mr. Austin: I know that the members opposite are very anxious to make sure that I get up and speak.

My question relates to... The research firm Collision Sciences says that two of the most common factors in vehicles accidents are speed and alcohol. Weather also plays a role. However, Mr. Speaker, 97% of accidents are the result of driver error, and only 2.7% of all collisions are due to vehicle failure.

An Alberta traffic collision statistics study shows that vehicle inspections have little to no bearing on vehicle collisions. In fact, in Alberta, where annual inspections are not required, less than 1% of accidents are attributed to vehicle failure. Mr. Speaker, based on hard data, it is an absolute myth that inspection stickers keep roads and people safe. With that myth busted, will the Premier commit to reducing or eliminating vehicle safety inspections, which will save New Brunswickers both time and money?

Hon. Mr. Urquhart: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, highway safety is one of the hot topics in my department right now. What I will commit to is a complete review of the policy we have around our inspections on all vehicles, whether they be trailers, vehicles, or otherwise. I have been in Alberta, as you know, meeting with its highway safety people, and I am meeting with other jurisdictions about the best practices in their provinces.

I definitely feel that there is some merit to the member's concern. Just because this is the way we have always done it, I am not convinced that it is the way we should continue to do it. Until the assessments have been made... After tomorrow, when we get out and I get back to my office to do the work, it certainly will be reviewed.

Mr. Austin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the response from the minister. However, when we talk about reviews and studies from those in government, I often have a red flag raised because they often go into a great warehouse of government studies to collect dust. What I would like to see is the bill that we put forward, which would put more money into New



Brunswickers' pockets, stop a lot of the red tape and the unnecessary movements of vehicle registrations and stickers on the front windshields, which do nothing in terms of what the data shows for vehicle safety...

Again, I will ask this: Will the Premier and the caucus support the bill that I presented and allow New Brunswickers to keep more money in their pockets instead of spending it on needless government red tape?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, I do not disagree. I think that if we look at the statistics and we find that there are opportunities to make changes to save taxpayers' dollars, I am all for that. I would be very keen to look at that information, look at any information that is available, and talk to the authorities, but put a timeline on it. I sympathize with the fact that we have studies and committees and task forces. We do a lot of that, and we find one reason or another not to get the job done. Mr. Speaker, I want to assure my colleague, the Leader of the People's Alliance Party, that we do indeed want to get the job done. This is one more issue to look at, and we can put a timeline on it to analyze it—a very short timeline—and then make a decision together to move forward.

Housing

Ms. Rogers: Mr. Speaker, New Brunswick's not-for-profit agencies and volunteers have been working so hard to house people, and we have been waiting for the housing minister, the Minister of Social Development, to respond. The federal government tells us today that there is nothing on its end that is holding this up and that there is no reason for this government to be cutting housing. So my question for the minister is, When will she be helping these people from shelters who are going to find themselves out on the street this weekend? Thank you.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question. You know, we have not stopped working. We have been working on this ever since November, when it became very apparent to us that the homelessness file needed to have attention. We responded immediately, and we invested \$440 000 not only in the out-of-the-cold shelters but also in the wraparound services with those.

There is a plan going forward with our partners in the community organizations. They are partners with us. They are helping us to make sure that we have these services continuing on. Our budget is going to reflect that we have another \$659 000 not only for the shelters but also for the wraparound services that will help to move individuals into permanent housing.

Mr. Speaker, I also had it confirmed this afternoon—the Fredericton Planning Advisory Committee (PAC) has confirmed—that our ongoing shelter at the bishop's house will be able to continue for another 30 days. That is going to complete the out-of-the-cold shelters for this year. Thank you.



Carbon Tax

Mr. Harvey: Mr. Speaker, yesterday, we reminded the Conservative Leader of one of his campaign platform promises: “If the Trudeau government imposes a carbon tax on New Brunswick, we will refund the money to taxpayers in the form of tax relief.” When reminded of this promise, he answered yesterday: “We said we would refund any extra money we got from a carbon tax, and we will do that.” Later in the afternoon, the Premier voted against our amendment to Bill 11—an amendment that proposed a refund to New Brunswickers. Mr. Speaker, the Premier is contradicting the Premier.

The Premier had a choice, and he chose to gouge New Brunswickers with a tax on a tax. Will the Premier stand in this House, honour his campaign promises, do the right thing, and provide tax relief to hardworking New Brunswick taxpayers?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: We know all too well that the member opposite and his team know very well how to gouge taxpayers. They did it for four years in record amounts. They do not recognize the situation that they brought forward in their motion yesterday. What they basically did was to say all taxes—that we were going to refund all taxes. If the member wants to read the platform, he will see that any new money generated from the carbon tax will be refunded to the taxpayers. That is an absolute fact, and that is what we will do. Their motion did not say that yesterday.

The point is that what they put forward was not related specifically to the carbon tax. It was related to any tax. I know they had trouble adding up the numbers for four years, but we can point it out to them. In fact, they met with officials from the Department of Finance who explained it, but even then, they did not get it.

The platform holds true. When we add up the numbers and we get extra money based on carbon tax income, we will give it back.

