

May 15, 2019

[Translation]

Collective Bargaining

Mr. D. Landry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During events I took part in over the weekend, people asked me if the government and the union representing nursing home workers were close to an agreement. I told them the two parties were in negotiations.

I want to ask the Premier a question this morning, because people are nevertheless worried, mainly the families of nursing home residents. I want to ask the Premier this morning what is happening with the negotiations. Are we close to an agreement?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, I guess, speaking about the opportunity and the issue we have just had over the past few days in the discussion, in every discussion we are having, we are having it about the next generation and we are having it about changing the way we offer services because it has to be a different model. We know about the demands and the aging demographics and the issues with finding employees to work in different sectors across the province, so every discussion has to be about how we are going to change the game: How do we find improvements to deliver more hours of care? How do we find the ability to reduce sick time and lost time? How do we find a whole different way of delivering services in order to meet these demands?

We simply cannot keep doing this same thing that we have been doing for years and years. That is the challenge we are having. It is not just about wages. It is not just about any one thing. It is about a whole encompassing change in how we do enact the way we deliver services. I have said many times that we have to be about better service, but that we have to do it with an envelope that is not about more taxes because people cannot afford to pay more taxes in this province, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: Mr. Speaker, the Premier did not answer the question at all. We know that the solution to this problem, if the government cannot solve it, is to go to binding arbitration. At one point, we had the majority of votes in the House to request binding arbitration. Unfortunately, the leader of the People's Alliance decided to join the government and to add conditions to the motion on binding arbitration. This meant that binding arbitration did not happen.

At this time, I would like the Premier to tell us where the government is regarding this agreement. Were offers made to the nursing home workers? We would like to know when this



problem will be solved, so that nursing home workers can go to work feeling comfortable and people with loved ones in nursing homes feel relieved. Residents will then feel comfortable staying in nursing homes. When are you going to solve the problem, Mr. Premier?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, we actually did make an offer this past week. We were discussing the offer. Three years have passed. I mean, the member opposite would know well about the conditions that were offered previously—the conditions that 24 out of the 26 unions have accepted.

Saying that that is three years and that we cannot change the game in this sense going forward, we said that we will look at the next years, four and five. In four and five, Mr. Speaker, we offered 2% increases, but, based on 1%, let's find improvements in the system. Let's say that if there are 18 days per year of sick time being used, let's get that number down to 16. Let's find a way that we can work within the system because we value the employees. Now, in the discussion to go to... All the other aspects of the deal were there, the shift differential and looking at the skill matrix. We talked about that. That was an item we wanted to discuss.

But let's go to binding arbitration. The Leader of the Opposition talks about that. Mr. Speaker, with respect to unfettered binding arbitration, we have seen what that has done to municipalities. Every municipality brought that as the number one and number two items. That is breaking the bank for the municipalities. We need to have reflective salaries for working here in New Brunswick.

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry: Mr. Speaker, I want to talk about binding arbitration. When I was Minister of Human Resources, the first group I bargained with was correctional officers, and we had to go to binding arbitration. Since then, no other group has taken this path.

The Premier says he fears setting a precedent, as in the case of municipalities. It is different for the government and for municipalities. I am wondering why the Premier cannot be as generous with nursing home workers as he has been with his Conservative friends. In fact, he appointed former Conservative Party leadership candidates, former Conservative candidates, former Conservative MLAs, former Conservative Party officials, former colleagues, friends, and others to various positions.

Mr. Speaker, here is what I want to know: Can the Premier be as generous with nursing home workers as he has been with his Conservative friends?



[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, it may make for a nice sound bite, but the leader opposite knows exactly what the situation is with any of these board appointments. It may be stipends, it may be a minimal amount a year, but it is not a salary, especially with the Workers' Compensation Board. It is not a salary as it was under the Liberal regime, when they had a full salary, a full-time deputy minister, and a car and mileage—the whole nine yards for a part-time job. We did not do that, Mr. Speaker.

In this situation, the binding arbitration situation that we have, we know what it is doing to municipalities. They have all told us, and I assume you have talked to the municipalities association and to leaders as well. In our binding arbitration proposal, we have said: Yes, we are willing to go to binding arbitration, but we want the consideration of it to be reflective of living and working in New Brunswick and of public and private sector wages and salaries. Is it too much to ask that we want living conditions here in New Brunswick and Atlantic Canada to be reflected in the wage settlement? I do not think that it is unreasonable, and I do not think anyone paying taxes in this province would think it is unreasonable.

[Translation]

Mr. LePage: I am a little puzzled this morning about what we are hearing here in the House. We have a Premier who was Minister of Human Resources for four years, during which he did not sign a single agreement, and he would like us to have settled every file. We settled 25 out of 26. We are also talking about arbitration.

[Original]

If this government will not accept the arbitration without conditions, what are the conditions that the Conservative-Alliance government would impose or put forward?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, this is interesting, because the deal that is on the table is the very same deal that was accepted by the other unions that the member opposite talks about. It is the very same deal. What has changed? You would think that if it were not for a mind shift as you walked across the floor and looked the other way, you would actually say: Well, everyone else accepted that. Let's get on board here. Let's finish it.

If it were not for this reversal in position because of a change in government, this would have been over long ago, but, as long as people want to keep fuel in it and to, all of a sudden, have a new view because they are on the opposite side of the House... That is what is wrong with our system today. The thing is, attitudes should not change and positions should not change just because you cross the floor. Here is a clear situation, and the member opposite has made it very, very focused. All these agreements were signed under the same deal that this union refuses to sign. What is the problem? I would say they should ask the union leaders that question, Mr. Speaker.



[Translation]

Mr. LePage: Once again, I had asked what conditions the Premier would put on the table, but I got no answer to my question. Is the Premier really serious when he says he will impose conditions, and what will they be? We do not know yet, and we will never know.

However, what we did, back then, in negotiations with nursing home workers, is that we had specifically set the condition of increasing hours of care for the most vulnerable people, the seniors of our province. That was part of the negotiations. However, here again...

[Original]

We will ask again: If the minister's offer is fair and right for all, as she claims it is, are the minister and the Conservative-Alliance members afraid to just take this binding arbitration without conditions? Will she do it? Will she defend the most vulnerable?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, we are absolutely working to ensure that the most vulnerable are indeed protected and that the cost of keeping a loved one in a nursing home does not go to a point where individuals cannot afford to do that. We need to have that service going forward, and we need to ensure that it is protected. That is the whole goal here.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to going to binding arbitration, the point here is that we are saying that binding arbitration should be reflective of New Brunswick conditions, such as salaries in both the private and public sectors. Mr. Speaker, what is wrong with that? I mean, think about what we are saying here. We are trying to build an economy in New Brunswick, for New Brunswickers, that New Brunswickers can pay for. We are taxed out. Thanks to the previous Liberal government, the province is taxed out. If you look at the situation here, you see that money was spent. We are trying to find where it was spent so that we can get better results. We want more hours of care, Mr. Speaker, and we want to have all those discussions. However, it is not a case of just throwing the book at it. It is a case of having to reflect the situations that reflect New Brunswick.

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

[Translation]

Mr. LePage: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

This Premier talked about making sure that we do the right thing for the next generation, but what is he doing for this generation? Actually, this is what we want. Is he talking about Irving salaries when he talks about improving salaries? I do not think so. If that is the way he wants to do it, well, I think that he has a lot to do and a lot to work with. Mr. Speaker, if the



Conservative-Alliance government will not ask for a neutral third party to look at this mess that it is in right now, has the leader of the Conservative and Alliance parties made a contingency plan if the union does win the right to strike on May 24?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, it is to no one's value or benefit to have a strike situation. It is to everyone's benefit to come up with a long-term solution, one where we look at opportunities in the system in order to get better at what we do. We improve working conditions. We improve hours of care. We do not have a sick time rate that is so high, because people enjoy coming to work. We do not have accident rates that are so high, because people are working safely at work. It is all about that.

Mr. Speaker, up to this point, the discussions were only about wages. We were not talking about anything else, only about wages. I must say that it is very limited, even at this point, to talk about anything else. And we proposed other things. We proposed a committee that would be working together to find improvements, and as those improvements were found, we would share them, Mr. Speaker. That was the idea. We would continually improve our delivery of service. That is the goal, and we need everyone's help to do that. We are not questioning that, but to suggest that we should throw the door open without any conditions on the binding arbitration model, that it does not matter what it reflects of New Brunswick, is irresponsible, Mr. Speaker.

Social Programs

Mrs. Harris: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to be extremely clear this morning. In order for people to qualify for the Primary Informal Caregiver Benefit, the clients needed to be receiving Social Development benefits. The clients needed to provide information to prove that they needed the help.

Also, to be very clear again, the client needed to be living independently, not in a special care home or in a nursing home. For this benefit, the client was able to pick who the primary caregiver would be and give that person the money in order to be able to have the person's help. It could be to drive the client to an appointment. It could be to shovel the steps. It could be to run to get the client's medication. That is how this was. Can the minister agree that this benefit was helping people?

Hon. Mr. Flemming: Well, it sounded as though you were referring to the item that I raised in the Legislature yesterday. I wish to clarify. My wife's parents were at Chateau de Champlain. It was independent living. They had the benefit of the Home First program. My wife was approached and told she was eligible for this. This was back under the previous government. She filled out the forms, applied, and got it.

The point to be made is that there was no underlying management behind the execution of the plan. It was just willy-nilly and across the board. Anybody and everybody could show up and get it. The point is the lack of management. There should be a needs test. It should be helping



people who need to be helped, and it should be executed properly. It is a typical example of the previous government. Spend the money. Throw it at the wall with no accountability and no structure, so long as we spend the money.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mrs. Harris: Mr. Speaker, this is absolute proof that we see “willy-nilly” and all these types of words being used. The clients needed to be recipients of Social Development benefits, which meant that it was means-tested for them. For the primary informal caregivers, it was not means-tested because it was up to the clients to pick the persons that were helping them so they could remain in their homes, living independently.

If those people did not need the money, why would they apply for it? It was about those clients being able to have the help to remain independent so that the government would not be wasting more money with those people going into a special care home or into a nursing home. That is what this was all about. It was for those clients so that we could help them. Those members can spin this all they like, but this is what is helping the most vulnerable. Will the minister agree to that?

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, a recipient of the informal caregiver benefit had to be assisting someone who was a client of Social Development—not in receipt specifically of social assistance benefits—so seniors and families of seniors and families of those receiving social assistance benefits could certainly apply for this program.

Here is the problem, Mr. Speaker. The Department of Social Development was in a \$20-million-plus deficit position at the time when this government implemented the program only two months before the writ fell for an election. In typical Liberal fashion, the members figured nobody would dare cut it. It is not about cutting it, Mr. Speaker. It is about affording it. They did not provide for the affordability of this program. They left this department in a mess.

Mrs. Harris: Mr. Speaker, actually, we were in a surplus, and that is where we found the money to do this. The department was not in a mess, but what is happening is that the most vulnerable people, who absolutely needed this benefit, are now in a mess because they do not have the help that they need.

The letter that the department sent out on behalf of the minister was so cold. To quote one of the parents, “It’s easy to put a letter like this in an envelope with a stamp and send it... It’s not personal, there’s no caring in it, it’s just a coward’s way out of it.”

There was no explanation, no warning. People were just told that the money they received last month was done. The government did not take the time to talk to those who were using this



money so that they could help their loved ones remain in their homes. Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the minister: Why would you send out such a cold, uncaring letter? We care. You do not.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, if the former minister cared, she would have ensured that the money was there. She is talking about surpluses, talking about information that, quite frankly, cannot be proven.

I regret that people have been disappointed. I sincerely regret that. But we are a government that has to do the right thing for all New Brunswickers. Mr. Speaker, we took those monies, we added a little bit, and we increased the wages of over 10 000 individuals who were making \$13.80 per hour, bringing them up to \$14.80. Also, those 10 000 individuals were delivering services to thousands and thousands and thousands more.

It was a tough decision. We had to do it. We made the decision, and we hope that going forward we can look at as many ways as possible to assist those who need it.

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Municipalities

Mr. Austin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know that the government has been in several meetings relating to municipal reform. We can go way back to the Finn report, which was issued many years ago, talking about helping municipalities to expand, with areas, LSDs, around municipalities being part of the municipalities themselves. As time has gone on, we have seen that urban and rural municipalities alike across New Brunswick are struggling greatly to keep up with maintaining assets and offering services to their residents. With the discussions that I believe the Premier has been having regarding the Finn report and other types of municipal reform, can the Premier advise us as to how those meetings are going and what progress is being made?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you for the question. Yes, Mr. Speaker, we have dusted off the Finn report to see what makes sense in that regard, but there have not been any concrete plans as yet because those plans are going to require all of us to play a role. There are a lot of reasons to look at a modified program in municipalities, most notably to provide a better taxation model that works for municipalities.

In addition, we want to enhance the regions in order to ensure that each region across the province has fair and equitable treatment as well as the right level of amenities. We want to ensure that we have a system where municipalities have to work together in order to ensure that they can be as good as they can be. That applies to anything from hospital services and educational services to social services and economic development services, so that we have a real model across the province that works.



Yes, I am looking forward to working with colleagues in the House and certainly following through with what is the best thing that works for communities. We will be working on that.

Mr. Austin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, when we talk about municipal reform, we cannot help but talk about tax reform. I have been saying for years that New Brunswick has a completely antiquated, outdated, and, in my opinion, unethical tax system where residents are carrying too much of the heavy load. Large industry is not paying its fair and reasonable share. Tax reform has to be part of municipal reform.

With that said, I would ask the Premier this: Not just on municipal reform but knowing that tax reform has to be part of it, do we have a time frame? Is there a plan in terms of a schedule for when we can expect some movement on tax reform and municipal reform?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Again, thank you for the question. I guess that the timeline, as with any of these, is trying to tie it in with maintaining a balanced budget and a balanced approach to actual expenditures and tax reductions.

In looking at the actual tax reform in the municipalities, there is an opportunity to say that, today, we look at all services. We look at the double tax model that has been on the radar for some time. I think there is a joint commitment here—I know that there is on this side of the House—to look at double tax and to reduce that double tax and eventually to get rid of it, Mr. Speaker. I would like to say that the target would be that by the next year's budget, we would actually have an implementation plan that we could start to put in place. Does that mean that the tax changes overnight? Not necessarily. Does it mean that there is a clear path to reduce that particular one and to have a tax model that improves the lives of New Brunswickers? That would be the goal—that we could put a longer-term vision into a plan that, in three or five years, would see the plan and the tax reductions go forward. Thank you.

Health Care

Mr. Coon: Mr. Speaker, as if there is not enough anxiety already around the province, there has been a recent uptick in communicable diseases in New Brunswick, as we have seen recently with the cases of measles reported in Saint John. Mr. Speaker, the best protection the government can provide citizens against contracting communicable diseases is a strong public health system that is well trusted and held in regard by all. The former government weakened our public health system by breaking it up into pieces and dividing those components among multiple departments.

In his platform, the Premier committed to making public health a priority by restoring the integrity of the office of Public Health, as recommended by public health experts from across this country. My question for the Premier is this. Why has he not yet acted to restore the integrity of the office of Public Health, given what we are facing in this province?

Hon. Mr. Flemming: Thank you for the question. It is a good question, and it is a matter that does, in fact, warrant investigation. The issue concerning the outbreak of measles is a serious



one, but it is interesting to note that this is going on in New York, California, Washington, D.C., and Europe. It is in places like those where the outbreak of these types of things is indeed on the rise.

We have to be vigilant. We have to consolidate these types of things in the department of Public Health. We need electronic medical records so that we can actually have access to medical information and we know every single person in New Brunswick who has or who has not been vaccinated. I think that centralizing that is a legitimate thing to look at. I do not think it involves spending a bunch of money. I think it involves focusing on who is best able to deal with this issue, and I thank the member opposite for his question.

Mr. Coon: Mr. Speaker, we need to make our public health system whole again. It is the institution that is best positioned to develop and implement a science-based strategy to rebuild the level of vaccination that is needed in our province to protect New Brunswickers, particularly children and youth, against infectious diseases.

Mr. Speaker, I am old enough to remember when children who had contracted polio had to live in iron lung machines—a terrifying reality of that day. Those days, hopefully, are gone for good, Mr. Speaker, but we have to ensure that the level of vaccination comes back up in this province, across the board. We have seen measles. We have seen mumps. We have seen other infectious diseases rearing their ugly heads again.

Mr. Speaker, I want a commitment from the Premier that he will act with urgency to restore the integrity of our public health system, to make it whole once again, and to ensure that it actually has the additional funds that it needs to bring vaccination rates back to the level that is needed to protect New Brunswickers from infectious diseases. Will the Premier make that commitment today?

Hon. Mr. Flemming: Again, thank you for the question. I certainly will make that commitment to the member opposite—that we will be working diligently in the area of vaccination. We have to improve it, and we have to do better. Sometimes things are so successful, as vaccinations were a long time ago, that we can get a little bit complacent, a little bit lazy, and we are not as diligent as we should be because these types of diseases are not around.

I, too, am old enough to remember how, when I was in elementary school, the entire school would go down and everybody got a sugar cube with the pink thing in it for polio. We all lined up, we took it, and things like that. I can remember the measles and things like that. When we think things are cured and they are not, we have to realize that we can get complacent. We can get lazy. The member opposite is absolutely correct. We need to be more diligent and more vigilant, and we need to improve the vaccinations, starting with our children. Thank you for the question.



[Translation]

Social Programs

Mr. D'Amours: Mr. Speaker, the most vulnerable people in our society are under attack on all sides. Let's think about all the informal caregivers who take care of people with disabilities. The Disability Support Program of the Department of Social Development was certainly not a program that made people wealthy, but the \$100 provided once a month could be the difference between putting food on the table or enabling a person with a disability to take part in community activities.

Some ministers may laugh at the amount provided to people with a disability, but there is nothing funny about this. Will the minister finally acknowledge her mistake, or, in the end, was the decision to cut \$100 taken by the Premier, who has directly attacked the most vulnerable people?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, the former Liberal government implemented a program two months before the election writ fell—a program that it did not have the money for—thinking that no one on earth would pull something back that was given. It is not easy to do that, Mr. Speaker. I do not take any pleasure in having made the decision, but I will own that decision, Mr. Speaker. Unfortunately, the previous government had a department that was over \$20 million in the hole when it implemented this. It did not provide for the future. Collecting \$1 billion more per year in taxes, it still could not provide funding for this program.

Nobody relishes this, Mr. Speaker—nobody—because we know that some of the people receiving it needed it. But, Mr. Speaker, we have to provide the basics first.

[Translation]

Mr. D'Amours: The Minister of Social Development had her civil servants in the field send an odious letter indicating that the informal caregiver benefit for people with disabilities was being eliminated. Worse yet, the minister had this letter sent on April 16, indicating that benefits had ended in March, the previous month. Not only did she lack the courage to sign the letters herself, the minister did not even give these families a chance to adapt.

In the end, will the minister do the only honourable thing, which is to fix her mistake? Or does she not have enough power to convince her colleagues and her Premier to do the right thing, which is to reestablish this program for the most vulnerable people in our society?



[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard: Mr. Speaker, our Premier and our government have committed to be responsible to New Brunswickers for the monies that we have. We cannot go into a bottomless pit of taxes, as some philosophies would deem we should do. Nobody wants to take money away from those who could use it. The fact of the matter is that we had to provide for over 10 000 employees in special care homes, home support workers, family support workers, and attendant caseworkers, who were making a paltry \$13.80 per hour, and we had to make decisions on where that money could come from. Not only did the previous government not provide funding for this, but also it did not provide for these other employees taking care of thousands and thousands of New Brunswickers. Mr. Speaker, it was not an easy decision, but we had to make the decision.

