

May 29, 2019

[Translation]

Floods

Mr. D. Landry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning, my question is for the Premier. Earlier this week, the *Telegraph-Journal* urged the Premier not to let politics delay infrastructure projects this year, particularly with regard to flood mitigation measures and money available in Ottawa.

Perth-Andover avoided the worst this year, but has experienced several disastrous floods over the past few years. To combat flooding, we already had a shovel-ready project developed by engineers—not politicians. What reasons would the Premier have, other than playing petty politics, for not implementing this project?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, thank you for the question. In relation to mitigation efforts, we are now going through an assessment of everything that happened this past year and comparing it to last year. We actually have a... We are down. I think that we had about 500 and some applications this year versus about 1 200 last year, so that... The flood conditions in the south were similar or the same, and I appreciate that those in the Perth-Andover region escaped it this year.

I said in that same interview that we would put that on the list with all the other projects that are certainly there and that we would go after the highest risks first. We know that we have to deal with mitigation efforts and we have to do that across the province. The idea is to have a plan and not simply to go out and spend money. They may have had a shovel-ready project there, but, mind you, Mr. Speaker, there were a lot of shovel-ready projects last year at election time, so picking and choosing them is a tough act. Right now, we want to focus on looking across our province and at where we would get the biggest bang for the buck. We have been working with our federal partners because they have been partners in this issue, Mr. Speaker, and I am proud to say that. Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: Mr. Speaker, now that the flooding is over, I am reviewing the Premier's report. He states that he will be implementing projects which may be of higher priority. However, we must not wait for this to happen again. As for Perth-Andover, the project had been decided on and was shovel-ready.



One of the recommendations was to raise the road. The Premier himself has already said that, in certain parts of the province, roads would probably have to be raised. However, the Perth-Andover project is ready to be implemented. Is it necessary to wait for another flood to prove that it can happen? It has already happened. Why does the Premier not put money where it should be put in order to solve this problem once and for all?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I said, there were a lot of shovel-ready projects last year in every sector, and I know that Perth-Andover certainly was no exception. We would like to be able to do as many projects as we can before the next flood season. I know that we will not be able to do them all, so we are going to have to look at where the greatest risks lie. That one is on the books, as I said, to look at as well. We will continue to evaluate all of them as they come in and do that over the next few weeks. It is not as though we are going to wait until next spring and then think about it.

But I think the reality is that we certainly will not be doing all the projects everywhere in the province and every low road will not get raised. We saw even this last time around that roads that were recently repaired were still low. They were flooded in last year's flood, so you kind of wonder, here we were fixing the road anyway, but doing it at the same low level. Those have been identified, and they will happen over time, many of them, as we repair them. But we will still continue to focus on the priorities. We will have a work plan that we will generate over the coming months and weeks.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: We also heard from certain contractors that tendering would be delayed in the province and that they did not know exactly how to adjust their teams for this coming summer. It is possible that 1 000 construction jobs will be lost at the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure this summer. Since the Premier likes to measure things, how will he go about compensating for the lack of employment? I heard the Premier say he wanted to repatriate people from Alberta and other provinces, but, with a shortfall of 1 000 jobs at the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure this year, how does he think these families will make a living? For these people, going out West is the very opposite of what the Premier said.

So, can the Premier tell us what will happen to these families, and why there are so many cuts and delays in infrastructure programs in New Brunswick?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, here is where the rubber meets the road. There is a fundamental belief difference here. There is one belief across the aisle that says we will spend as many tax dollars as we possibly can to buy jobs. We will buy them here. We will buy them there. We will



buy them anywhere in the province, but we will buy jobs because there is good value in buying jobs.

There is another philosophy that says we want the private sector to invest in the province and create employment. We want to invest in roads and infrastructure where it will drive the best behaviour, and that means having tourism routes through our province or having tourism activities in our province that people will want to stop and see. It is not a matter of saying: How many jobs can I buy with your dollars? We are dollared out for taxes, and the only way we are going to change that is to have private sector investment and start to grow the economy in real terms—real jobs that make a difference for real people, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry: The Premier's comments make me mad; they really do. Several people from the private sector have invested in equipment purchases, as they do every year. You know there is a fixed budget, and, over the years, these people have expected to get a certain amount for road construction—and I am just talking about roads here.

Mr. Premier, you say you do not want to buy jobs, but this is not about buying jobs. In fact, every time a Conservative government takes office and is then replaced by a Liberal government, the roads are so neglected that we have to work twice as hard. If we do not invest in our infrastructure today, the cost will be doubled in years to come. Does the Premier have anything to say about this?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: We have seen investment, Mr. Speaker. We have seen investments from local companies such as MRDC and Dexter—companies that are growing outside the province but building roads inside the province. Our goal is to have projects that are right for companies in this province so that they can own them and run them. That is our goal, Mr. Speaker.

At the end of the day, we have people working. Do you know what? I agree that we cannot have this cyclical nature of high spending for election purposes and then average spending for maintenance purposes. That is what we see. We see one party that is dedicated to throwing money at literally everything, everything that is on the books, to try to invent jobs and invent projects through taxpayer spending. We see a federal government that is doing the same thing.

Yes, we can get lots of money to spend, Mr. Speaker, and 50-cent dollars. I am willing to do that for our mitigation efforts as we make changes to deal with the next issue concerning floods. But I am not willing to do that to create a job that is there for only one purpose—to buy it. The cost of jobs is much greater than the cost of the actual project. It has to be done for the long haul, with investment that works for the long haul.



[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: Mr. Speaker, I would like the Premier to go and say that to people in Perth-Andover and the Kent and Shippagan areas about building the bridge. Yes, I would like the Premier to go around the province and tell these people: This year, your projects will not be carried out. As I said earlier, about 1 000 people will lose their jobs this year. Where will these 1 000 people go? Out West.

I am not fearmongering; I am simply telling people the truth. Fearmongering and telling people the truth are not the same thing. I can tell you this: There are people who are afraid they will not be able to keep their homes and their vehicles, buy food, and send their children to school. This is an imminent reality: More than 1 000 people will lose their jobs as a result of this government's inactivity. This is nothing new.

I will tell you, Mr. Premier, that this is not about buying jobs; it is about making sure families can make a living here in New Brunswick.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, there are no other words for it than buying jobs. Why do you think we wanted to balance the budget, Mr. Speaker?

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Higgs: We wanted to balance the budget because we wanted the credit agencies to save us \$25 million or \$50 million in interest payments, Mr. Speaker. And who does that help? It does not help us. Why do you think they looked at us and said that we were finally on a stable footing, a stable path forward? It is because they saw, Mr. Speaker, that we were not inventing an economy. We were not taxing people, because we had no more tax room. The Liberals saw to that in the last government.

We are in a situation where we can pay more interest or where we can try to get stabilized so that we can create long-term employment that results in fixing roads and infrastructure in a meaningful way. Yes, we are analyzing that bridge in Shippagan right now to understand when it needs to be replaced, Mr. Speaker, because we will fix things based on the requirement to fix them, not based on a political statement.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to hear that. It is simply that the philosophy of the government members is completely different from ours. In terms of asset management, we had



a system that told us where to invest money. This government, from what I have seen, has not looked at this system that was working very well. Here, we do not just play with numbers.

What matters to this government are the numbers. With us, when we talk about balancing the budget, we understand that. What matters to this government is the rating given by Moody's and other similar companies. For us, on this side of the House, it is the people of the province that we care about. These are the people we want to keep here. These are the people we want to focus on.

This is not about creating the make-work jobs the Premier is referring to; these are not make-work jobs. If I look at St. Isidore Asphalte, 50 to 75 people might not have jobs this year. This is happening right in my community. What does one say to these people?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, asset management? The new bridge to Riverview, the causeway—asset management? The twinning of the four-lane highway—asset management? The courthouse—asset management? The twinning of Route 1 a few years ago—asset management? That is not asset management. That is buying jobs, Mr. Speaker. That is saying that the members opposite cannot resist the federal government's 50-cent dollars. They just have this obsession.

With regard to the interest in Moody's, yes, you want Moody's or Standard & Poor's or DBRS, Mr. Speaker. Do you know why that is important? It saved us \$25 million or \$50 million in interest. We are paying \$700 million now, \$660 million, or \$670 million, but it does not matter, does it? That \$50 million in interest payments that we are not making matters to me, Mr. Speaker, because it is less tax that we have to charge. It is more services we can provide rather than spending on interest. That is the difference. Build what we need. Tax in appropriate ways so that people want to live and work here in New Brunswick.

[Translation]

Appointments

Mr. LePage: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we see, the Premier understands what Moody's means. However, does the Premier, who is responsible for the administration of the *Official Languages Act*, understand that, while this act prevails, it does not apply to the *Education Act*? The Premier must acknowledge and respect the independence of the selection committee and the commissioner.

Yesterday, we learned that, according to the Premier, the task of figuring out why every child coming out of our schools is not speaking both official languages would be part of the commissioner's new responsibilities. I thought it was the role of the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development to do so.



Mr. Speaker, given that the Premier does not seem to understand the scope of the *Official Languages Act* and is giving himself the authority to restart the selection process, will he appoint the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development as Commissioner of Official Languages, or is the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development one of the candidates he wants to consider?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, do you know what I understand? I understand that our school system is failing our kids. I understand that here, after 50 years, we are still debating the merits of a bilingual province. I think that is sad. I think it is unconscionable that it is even a discussion at this point. Do you know what the difference is, Mr. Speaker? I am not prepared to stay here and avoid the real issues. I want to get to the bottom of why our kids—anywhere in this province—cannot graduate and be able to speak conversationally in both languages. I do not understand that.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Higgs: When people in European countries can learn three, four, and five languages, what is the problem in New Brunswick? I think that it is the responsibility of everybody. I think that it is the responsibility of the educators. I think that it is the responsibility of the Commissioner of Official Languages. I think that it is our responsibility right here in this House, and I will not walk away from it.

[Translation]

Mr. LePage: Once again, I think the Premier really did not understand the question: We are talking about official languages. I am asking him to refer to page 6 of the *Official Languages Act*, and I am asking him to read sections 2, 3, and 4, so he understands that education is not part of official languages. No, this Conservative-Alliance government says it wants to save money and eliminate duplication. I assume this does not apply when their friends or defeated candidates are not qualified for government jobs.

Subsection 43(5.5) of the *Official Languages Act* states that the Lieutenant-Governor in Council may appoint an acting commissioner for a term of up to one year. This term ends on July 28, 2019, in about a month and a half, Mr. Speaker.

The Premier informed the House yesterday that the process would not be completed in July 2019. Is he aware, yes or no, that he is breaking the law? What authority does he have to act?



[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, what the member opposite does not understand is the problem. The problem is that we have not been successful with our future generations. We have not been successful in educating them so that they are first in the country rather than eighth. We have not been successful in teaching both languages in a province that has been bilingual for 50 years. We have not been successful in managing our finances so that we can provide the best services in the country. We have not been successful in improving our health care services so that they rank number one in the country, not last place. We have not been successful in having a long-term strategy for nursing homes and nursing care. We have challenges in employment, on which we are focused head-on.

Mr. Speaker, the one thing that we are going to be successful on in every category, over and over again, is that we are going to talk, we are going to deal, and we are going to act on the real problems that exist in this province. We are not walking away, Mr. Speaker.

Tourism

Mr. J. LeBlanc: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess there is a lot of talk and heavy smoke in here this morning.

Many people, thousands of people, are concerned with the tourism cuts. Can the minister confirm to this House with a yes or no that the *Explore NB* tourism guide has been cancelled, and, if so, which stakeholders in the tourism industry were consulted before making this decision?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gauvin: Thank you for the question. Out of respect for my colleague, who asked me the question in English, I will try for the first time to reply in English. I apologize if I make any mistakes.

[Original]

First of all, let me stand here and tell you that I was against this cut. It is because for many years my picture was in that book.

But now, I myself called a tourist place, which is right in the average. It received 1 000 books last year, and, at the end of the year, it had 876 books left. So, if I pass a bucket and collect \$600 000, I will revisit this. Until then, let's be serious.



[Translation]

Mr. J. LeBlanc: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, the minister did not answer my question. I asked if the various stakeholders were consulted, and the answer was a smoke screen. We are at the beginning of the tourist season; cancelling this guide sends a very bad message to the tourism industry, both within New Brunswick and outside the province. The Tourism Industry Association of New Brunswick clearly said that small operators from rural areas need this guide to promote their tourist destinations. The minister is taking an axe to the tourism industry—an industry which, I remind you, generates \$3 for every \$1 invested.

Since the minister would not answer journalists, his spokesperson explained that the minister is working on developing alternative methods. Can the minister tell us what these alternative methods are and what measures he can guarantee will work?

Hon. Mr. Gauvin: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Yes, we are working on developing alternative methods. It cost \$650 000 to produce this guide. All the guides that were left on the shelves meant that \$450 000 remained at the bottom of the boxes. We are working on developing an alternative method. It is called 2019. People are visiting more and more by using their phones. People in the industry are ordering fewer and fewer of these tourism guides. Over the last five years, demand has gone down significantly, Mr. Speaker. So, everyone in the tourism industry was aware. Even the person who talked to journalists said: We knew this was coming. Starting in 2020, this is coming up. Also, an issue nobody wants to mention is the environment. Again, let us be serious and take responsibility for the province of New Brunswick. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. J. LeBlanc: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, wealthy people, big business operators, and urban areas will have the wherewithal and will not lose their promotion. What are small operators in rural areas who rely on this tool going to do?

Hon. Mr. Gauvin: I did not know the applause would be delayed.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for the question. There are already people in the private sector who deal with talking about each region in various tourism guides. We will work with them, and we are open to finding new ideas. We already have excellent ideas for promoting each region in New Brunswick. I met with the deputy minister yesterday, and he talked instead about targeting certain objectives. Again, for every dollar that goes to the tourism industry, we have to know where that money is going to ensure that it is profitable for us. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.



[Original]

Privatization

Mr. Austin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Cannabis NB is a money loser that has gone nearly \$12 million in the hole since it opened its doors last fall. There are supply problems, store shelves are empty, and employees face layoffs, and the price of cannabis available at Cannabis NB is much higher than what is available in the black market. NB Liquor has also proven to have serious accounting issues where senior executives and board members lost track of their fiscal year, which resulted, coincidentally, in over \$400 000 in bonuses to their employees. With all of this in mind, will the Premier admit that these Crown corporations have serious management issues that are not in the best interests of the province? What does he plan to do about it?

Hon. Mr. Steeves: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, to the member and leader of his party. Yes, there are concerns. There are concerns with all Crown corporations. When we see irregularities, we act on them. The irregularities that we have seen have resulted in my asking for an internal audit from the Office of the Comptroller. It is not a financial audit. It is an internal audit, which means that it is going through the checks and balances to find out exactly what is going on in the situation and how this mistake was made. It is also making sure that it does not happen again—absolutely. The Office of the Comptroller will answer a number of questions for us through this investigation, which will be done, certainly, by the end of August, and I will be reporting back to the House at that time.

Mr. Austin: Mr. Speaker, I think we are missing the fact that many jurisdictions across North America have left the sale of cannabis and liquor to the free market, letting business do what business does best rather than government screwing it up through the retail sector. A privatization model in other areas has evidence of increased employment, increased revenue, better variety and distribution, and, just all the way around, a better system. This province has better things to worry about than selling weed and booze, and I am asking this government: Will it commit to getting out of the business of being in business?

Hon. Mr. Steeves: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, to the member. Yes, I agree, and I have said those exact words: Government should not be in the business of business. On the other hand, we have got a business that we have got to try to manage and improve. We have a business that was scheduled to have 15 stores, and the former government raised that to 20 stores for no reason other than political gain, apparently trying to buy some votes.

We have got situations where leases are \$60 per square foot. I have a brother in Vancouver who has office space downtown for a large engineering firm. He pays less than \$30 per square foot—in downtown Vancouver, but, in Miramichi and Sussex and Sackville, we are paying \$60 per square foot on a 15-year lease.



It is an unbelievably strange, to say the least, business model. We have had supply issues, and we have had any number of hurdles from Health Canada that we have had to overcome. It is a bad business model. We are working to improve it. That is what we will do, Mr. Speaker.

Health Care

Mr. Coon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do not know what was brewed in the coffee this morning, but I am not going near it. I will tell you that.

The Finance Minister has said that the only reasonable solution to our health care crisis is to seek a onetime demographically weighted health care agreement from the government of Canada. I agree. The Premier has said that having the federal government fund health care for our aging population is a priority of his. I am glad it is. It is an important priority.

Our history tells us, however, that the only way we get a fair shake in Confederation is when New Brunswick Premiers corral the other Atlantic Premiers to present a common front to Ottawa. Mr. Speaker, has the Premier travelled to Charlottetown to meet with Premier Dennis King to begin to build the Atlantic coalition we desperately need to get access to our fair share of the Canadian health care transfers from Ottawa?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have not travelled to Charlottetown. I have spoken to Dennis King. We also had a conference call yesterday with all the Premiers across the country to get ready for a meeting of all the Premiers in Saskatchewan in July. One of the general items, obviously, is health care. It is one of the main areas of focus for all of us across the country.

I realize that, as Minister Morneau said, we are the canary in the coal mine in many areas. I know that health care is certainly one of them. It is a main topic, it is getting national interest, and it is getting provincial interest. It will be a topic on the national scene with all Premiers in July. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Coon: Mr. Speaker, the interests of other Premiers in other parts of this country are not the same as those in this region. In fact, some of the Premiers will fight this priority that the Premier has said he has set out, to get an improvement in our Canada Health Transfer because of our demographics. They will fight it, Mr. Speaker.

I do not understand why the Premier spent time travelling to Saskatchewan and Ontario to meet with the Premiers in those provinces when they do not face the challenges that we have. It seems as though the Premier has been distracted by a political crusade while our ER physicians are ringing the alarm that wait times are dangerously slow and threatening patient safety right here in New Brunswick. He knows that our health system is not adequately funded to contend with the demands of an aging population.

In the fifties, it was a sustained and cooperative campaign by Atlantic politicians, led by Hugh John Fleming, that successfully ended the chronic underfunding of our region. We find



ourselves in that position once more. Will the Premier show leadership and bring the Atlantic colleagues together for a health care summit to address this problem?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Well, Mr. Speaker, it is not the 1950s. It is 2019.

In regard to that, the reason I am spending time talking with the Premiers across this country is in relation to getting bigger issues on the table that will help to finance the future of our health care, our education systems, and our social systems.

We can work here in isolation, Mr. Speaker, and we can talk about being all connected jointly in the Atlantic Provinces. That is right. We want to be. But that has happened in unprecedented terms in the last four years with the federal government, and what has it done for this province? What has it done for Atlantic Canada? It has not done much.

Do you know what? I have decided that I want to align myself with every other province. We have a province in the middle that provides a blockade to us on many issues, and that is Quebec. That is why a discussion about a utility corridor is important. We want to connect with the rest of the country. We have trade issues between provinces that are worth about \$60 billion, which we do not take advantage of. One of the barriers to those trade issues is the border in Quebec. That same issue exists in Ontario, and it exists in New Brunswick. We get allegiances to get the job done. That is the reason.

Electoral Reform

Mr. McKee: Mr. Speaker, in 2017, the New Brunswick Commission on Electoral Reform recommended lowering the voter age to 16 in New Brunswick. The previous government committed to putting this question to New Brunswickers by way of a referendum in the 2020 municipal elections. Will the current government keep this commitment to put the question on lowering the voter age for New Brunswickers in a referendum next year?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, at this point in time, we have a lot of priorities in this province, and this would not be one of them.

Mr. McKee: Mr. Speaker, the commission also recommended that we move to a preferential ballot. Again, the government of the day—our former government—committed to putting this question to New Brunswickers in 2020 in the form of a referendum. We are asking this again: Will the current government keep this commitment to put preferential balloting as well as the voting age of 16 to a referendum next year? If not, what is the government scared of, Mr. Speaker?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, if I recall correctly, the federal government had something similar that it was talking about too. I know that it seems to be a tradition in the Liberal Party to throw out a lot of stuff, see what sticks, and forget about it as time goes on. People seem to forget or not to care, or they expect that it will not be followed through on.



Mr. Speaker, the difference with us right now is that we are going to deal with what we need to deal with. And we are not going to say things that we think we might deal with or that we might deal with or that we are not going to talk about or that are coming soon. We are going to say that this is not a priority for us at this point. We are going to be focusing on other issues, of which we have a long list. I am willing to work with people on both sides of the House to get those done, but these things that are being mentioned as priorities by the member opposite are not ones that we in this government are going to pursue at this time.

Ambulances

Mr. D'Amours: Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the leader of the fourth party said in this House that paramedics are being denied jobs because they are unilingual and that, as a result, ambulances are going unstaffed. Have the Premier or the minister, who had two different answers yesterday, had a chance to find out if this is in fact the case? Which one should we believe: the Premier, the acting Health Minister, or the leader of the fourth party?

Hon. Mr. Higgs: I will answer the question. I am not sure what the differences were. I think what I said yesterday was in relation to going back to Medavie and saying that if we are getting criticism that things are not working and that we are not keeping ambulances on the roads... That was a commitment that Medavie made to us, and that is a commitment that we expect it to uphold. We expect to look at more than just its facts. We listen to people and paramedics around the province. If Medavie is telling us one thing and we are hearing another, we have to get to the bottom of it.

My goal—and my goal is to work with anyone in this House—is to take that position with Medavie. We expect results. We expect ambulances on the roads. We expect services to be provided to the utmost of the contract. No excuses. That is what we are going to hold it to. Whether it is me saying it, whether it is the representative for the Health Department saying it, whether it is the Leader of the People's Alliance saying it, or whether it is anyone else saying it, the point is that Medavie has a job to do and we are going to hold it accountable to get it done.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker: Question period is now over.

