

October 30, 2018

[Original]

Government Finances

Mr. Higgs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Six days ago, the Bank of Canada raised its benchmark interest rate by a quarter of a point. New Brunswickers are worried about how this will soon impact their household budgets. When rates go up, so do payments on debt. We should be equally concerned about how this rate hike will impact our province, but, for the past four years, the Premier has spent money even faster than he raised taxes. Only in desperation has a promise now been made to balance the budget sooner. Can the Premier explain how New Brunswickers should be expected to have any confidence in his ability to deliver on this new fiscal promise? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Mr. Speaker, first I would like to join the Leader of the Opposition and all my honourable colleagues in this Legislature to express our deepest sympathies to the Jewish community and to everybody affected and impacted by the tragedy in Pittsburgh. It is another reminder that we all have to be vigilant and do everything we can to promote inclusiveness and diversity and, of course, the strength of these values has to overcome the fear that many are trying to create with these horrible acts.

Mr. Speaker, we have made it very clear that putting more money in the pockets of New Brunswickers is a priority for our government. That is why we raised the minimum wage, enhanced the CPP, and advanced pay equity. That is why we asked the richest 1% of New Brunswickers to pay a bit more in taxes so that we could invest in important things that could help put money in the pockets of New Brunswickers. And yes, Mr. Speaker, we have reduced the deficit every single year. We have reduced it by more than half since we have been the government, and the first budget surplus in a decade in this province happened under the watch of our government.

[Translation]

Mr. Higgs: This is the fifth time the Bank of Canada has raised its rate since last summer. It is the highest rate in almost a decade. For over a year, the Premier has seen this rate go up but has done nothing. Should credit rating agencies put their confidence in a desperate throne speech that only serves to balance the budget as a last resort?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: In fact, since taking office, we have been working hard to address the financial situation of this province. To that end, we have focused on growing the economy.

We have focused on economic growth because it helps us increase revenues to invest in education, health, and other measures that will help us grow the economy. Of course, it also



helps us reduce the deficit. In fact, since taking office, we have cut the deficit by more than half, so much so that we have had a budget surplus for the first time in 10 years. This happened under our government.

Once again, during our mandate, our credit rating with one of the agencies remained stable. This agency still told us to monitor certain things. However, our credit rating did remain stable, because people have seen that the economy is growing, that the deficit is decreasing, and that we have had a budget surplus for the first time in 10 years.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: Mr. Speaker, the bond rating services are not buying it. Earlier this year, Dominion Bond Rating Service changed the provincial outlook trend from stable to negative. Travis Shaw, Vice President of Public Finance at Dominion Bond Rating Service, said that after making a trend change, it hoped to see a resolution for improvement within a year or so. Otherwise, the province could be slapped with higher interest payments.

However, in his election platform, the Premier ignored that fact and pushed a balanced budget out to 2021. I would now ask the Premier how New Brunswickers can have confidence that he understands our fiscal situation and the damage that has been done by his four years of tax-and-spend government. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Mr. Speaker, the credit rating agencies have continued with the stable rating that they have given our province over the past four years, with one saying that there was a negative outlook but still keeping the same stable rating. The reason for this, we think—we certainly cannot speak on behalf of the credit rating agencies—is that we have been successful at growing the economy and making strategic investments in workforce development, education, and health care. Mr. Speaker, we have done all of this by reducing the deficit by more than half and having the first budget surplus that we have seen in 10 years.

Mr. Speaker, with that said, we understand that New Brunswickers sent us a very loud message on election night. They want us to do more to collaborate with the other parties and, clearly, many of the other parties, including the Leader of the Opposition himself, have said that we have to get to a budget that is balanced sooner. Mr. Speaker, we will listen and work with the other political parties to accomplish just that, but we will also ensure that we are investing more in education and health care. That is more important than the bottom line.

Health Care

Mrs. Anderson-Mason: Mr. Speaker, I want to address my questions to the Minister responsible for Women's Equality, the Premier. In the Saturday edition of the *Telegraph-Journal*, we read that sexual assault victims in Grand Manan will have to travel to the mainland if they want to provide evidence that they have been raped. This was according to a senior official at Horizon Health Network. I would like to ask the Premier whether he feels that



denying access to this service for the people of Grand Manan is somehow justified. How does this Premier justify this decision by his government?

Hon. Mr. Bourque: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One thing is for sure: We deplore that any type of victim of rape or any other type of assault... It is quite deplorable, and we, as a Department of Health, want to make sure that we have the appropriate measures in place and the appropriate levers so that everyone can have access to the appropriate treatment. I can assure you that has been looked at, and we are keeping a close watch on all of that. We are discussing it with Horizon. We are looking at ways we can better improve our system, and that includes that area. I can assure this House that we will continue to look into this matter and to ensure the best services possible. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Anderson-Mason: The last ferry of the day leaves at 7 p.m. A person who is sexually assaulted in the evening will have to wait all night to take the ferry. The victim cannot take a shower, change clothes, brush her teeth, or go to the bathroom. Then, after a ferry trip, the victim has to drive to Saint John to undergo the sexual assault forensic medical examination. Why did the Premier not make Grand Manan a top priority to have sexual assault nurse examiners on site?

Hon. Mr. Bourque: Once again, I simply want to say that, obviously, all acts of violence and assault, in particular sexual assault, are deeply deplorable. We must condemn all actions of this kind.

I also take a moment to extend my deepest sympathies to the Jewish community in Pittsburgh and around the world.

However, to get back to the question, as I explained, we want to ensure we have the best procedures in place so that women who are victims of such assaults can be treated as quickly as possible. We are continuing discussions with the health networks, Horizon and Vitalité, to ensure that all of these women can be treated as quickly as possible, since they are in fact going through trauma—we recognize this—and it is important that we treat them as quickly as possible so that things go as they should.

[*Original*]

Mrs. Anderson-Mason: Mr. Speaker, I fear that the lack of sexual assault nurse examiner services on Grand Manan will lead to sexual assaults going unreported. This is the worst possible outcome. In Monday's paper, there was a correction to the excuses given by Horizon Health for the lack of a plan for this service to be available on Grand Manan. Monday's excuses were different from Saturday's excuses, but they were excuses all the same. Instead of excuses, does the Premier not agree that we should be looking for a way to make this service available on Grand Manan—the sooner, the better?



Hon. Mr. Bourque: Once again, we are aware of the matter. We are working with Horizon. I have to say that, as we all know, the regional health authorities are responsible for operating the health care system for New Brunswickers, and that includes Horizon on Grand Manan Island. We are working with Horizon to ensure that these services are provided in the best way possible. We are looking at options. We are discussing this with them, and we want to make sure—and, obviously, with the community of Grand Manan... I can assure this House that this will be done to ensure that the best care possible is provided, not only to the people of Grand Manan, but to the people across the province, especially those who live through these traumatizing events. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Family Support Services

Mrs. Shephard: During the estimates process of 2016, in a nonpartisan way, I brought forward questions to the Minister of Families and Children regarding changes in the *Family Services Act* directed at support for families in kinship relationships. The minister of the day, the member for Moncton South, told us that further amendments were being worked on and would be coming forward very soon and indicated that it would be before the end of that year. Can the Premier tell us why we should have confidence in him when his government could not prioritize a policy that helps children and everyday New Brunswickers? They never did it, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Horsman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, the safety and the security of our children in the province are of utmost priority. I want to thank the 1 600 or so Social Development workers who continue to work for the people of our province, especially our children and our most vulnerable. Even though the legislation did not come forward in the Legislature this past year, we continue to do those items.

We want to ensure that children stay in their communities. We want to ensure that the children who cannot live with their parents for unsecure reasons remain within the family, and we will continue to work on that. We are ready to go with it. Once we get this Legislature going, we want to ensure that the legislation comes forward with kinship. We can rest assured that this is happening right now, Mr. Speaker. We want to make sure that the children in the communities stay in the communities and with family members.

Mrs. Shephard: During the estimates process a year later, in 2017, I asked questions of the minister of the day for Families and Children, the current minister and member for Fredericton North. They were almost exactly the same questions I had in 2016. He responded word for word with the same response as the former minister. He even went a step further by saying to the media that the amendment would be in place in very short order, not months but in very short weeks. Unfortunately, that did not happen either.

Can the Premier tell us why we should have confidence in him when he could not prioritize our most vulnerable families?



Hon. Mr. Horsman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can reassure the people of this province that the kinship model is taking effect right now as we speak. Even though it is not legislated, we are doing it. I want to thank, again, the people at Social Development for making sure that this happens.

For those who do not know what the kinship program is, it is about children who cannot live with their families due to unsecure issues. They can remain within their communities and, more importantly, remain within their families. It is taking place right now, and we will continue to work with those vulnerable people to make sure that the children are safe and secure. Thank you.

Mrs. Shephard: This government has had an opportunity to be collaborative. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the election of 2014 gave the minister an opportunity to understand that the electorate was fragile. The members opposite formed government by fewer than 300 votes over four ridings.

However, they chose to ignore legislation that meant something to many people, legislation that I drew their attention to in a nonpartisan way. I went out of my way for it to be nonpartisan so that they would take it seriously. They all but ignored it. How can we have confidence that this future government will be collaborative and nonpartisan going forward, because the government members have surely shown in the past that they are not interested in input from other parties?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is unfortunate what we are hearing from the members of the opposition. We have taken those into consideration. As a matter of fact, they are taking place right now, and I do not know how many times we have to say that. The kinship program is happening as we speak today, and it always has been.

When this Legislature gets under way, we will make sure that it becomes legislation. It is talking about collaboration. That is what we want to do. As a matter of fact, we are taking action. That is why we hired Mr. Savoury from Nova Scotia to look at all our policies with regard to the safety of the children of this province. The throne speech mentioned it. We want to make sure that our most vulnerable are looked after, and that includes the children of this province.

Mr. Coon: Five children were removed from their Saint John home in May 2016 when sheriffs happened upon them living in a squalid apartment, covered in garbage and feces, with little to eat. The family had been known to the Department of Social Development for four years. This led the Minister of Families and Children to contract George Savoury to examine our entire child protection system. A report has been in the government's hands for a couple of months now. In my own riding, I recently have had parents and grandparents reach out to me about worrisome child protection cases where they have encountered a wall of resistance to ensuring that children are protected. My question is this: Will the Minister of Families and Children table the Savoury report in the Legislature by no later than tomorrow?



Hon. Mr. Horsman: As I said with regard to the member opposite, this is taking place, and we took action immediately when we heard of this. I cannot speak of specific cases, but we hired Mr. Savoury in the Department of Social Development to ensure that the safety of children in this province is the utmost priority. The report itself took longer than was planned only because we wanted to ensure that we looked at everything, not just one issue. We looked at everything, and the report should be coming out soon. We have not seen it yet. Again, once it becomes available to us, we will certainly share. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Coon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, the Department of Social Development has had the Savoury report in its hands for a couple of months now. When the minister became aware of the plight of the five children who were living in horrific conditions in their Saint John home, he said that he was “probably the most upset of anybody in this province”. During question period last February, he promised to get to the bottom of this and make the report public. Eight months have now passed. His department has had the report for two months, Mr. Speaker. I again ask him this: Will the Minister of Families and Children give his word that he will table the Savoury report in this House no later than tomorrow?

Hon. Mr. Horsman: When we did hear about this unfortunate incident, I was the most upset person in this province. Mr. Speaker, again, we immediately took action. We hired Mr. Savoury, as he has done in other provinces, to ensure the safety and security of all children in this province. I have not yet seen the final results of the report, and, when that occurs, I will be more than willing to share. I can tell you we want to ensure—it is the priority of this government—that the safety of children is the utmost priority. Thank you.

Ambulance New Brunswick

Mr. Austin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am sure most of us are aware of the tragic news that took place over the weekend with the loss of the young boy in Lamèque. My heartfelt condolences go out to the family. I think that I can speak on behalf of everybody.

In the story, we hear yet again of an ambulance response time of 38 minutes. Mr. Speaker, this is becoming a common theme in New Brunswick today, of 35-, 40-, or 50-plus minutes of waiting for emergency services. The question that I would ask the Premier is this: Does he think that it is acceptable to wait 35-plus minutes when you dial 911 to have a paramedic at the scene?

Hon. Mr. Bourque: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I give our heartfelt condolences to the family and the friends regarding the tragic incident that has happened. Obviously, I cannot comment on specific cases, but cases such as these are tragic, and I offer our heartfelt sympathy.

To directly answer the question: No, it is not acceptable. It is not acceptable because we have given clear directions to Ambulance New Brunswick that the response time in rural areas is 22 minutes. We hold it accountable to those standards, and we will continue to hold it



accountable to those standards because those are what the standards are. Also, we want to make sure that we have the best rates possible. We have been doing a fair job. I believe that we are doing a good job.

Having said that, we know that there are times when these things, unfortunately, happen. We are working tirelessly to ensure that these things do not happen again. We will continue to do so because we feel that New Brunswickers deserve the best paramedic system possible. Thank you.

Mr. Austin: Yet, Mr. Speaker, as we heard during the throne speech, when it talks about ambulance wait times, we hear words like “review”, “consult”, and “study”. Mr. Speaker, New Brunswickers do not need more studies and more reviews. What New Brunswickers need is action. I am calling on and asking the government this: Would you indeed institute and implement the arbitrator’s ruling and get our current paramedics on full-time permanent status so that we can stop these ridiculous wait times?

Hon. Mr. Bourque: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, one thing is for sure. We want to act as quickly as possible when it comes to ensuring that the paramedic system is at its best. One thing when it comes to this situation regarding the ruling is that we have two different rulings. We have a court order ruling, and we have an adjudicator’s ruling. Now, we are asking for a review to see which is the one we need to abide by. We will continue to do that.

In the meantime, we are asking for the collaboration of all parties to look together at ways to find solutions that will, through this review, allow us to quickly... We are talking about a six-week time period regarding this review. That is quick, if we know how our system works. Once we have that, we will proceed with some concrete, rapid action to ensure that our system does improve. Thank you.

Cannabis

Mr. Wetmore: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to express my disappointment to the Premier that during the rollout week of recreational cannabis in New Brunswick, there was no campaign in our public schools about the health dangers of cannabis. Our children and youth were bombarded from all sides with cannabis talk. In the papers, the mainstream media, and the Web—literally everywhere—there was cannabis. Our children were as engaged as they will ever be, yet no effort was made. To me, this is, at best, a missed opportunity and, at worst, negligence. Would the Premier explain how the people of New Brunswick can have confidence in a government that missed the mark so completely on this public safety, health, and education issue?

Hon. Mr. Kenny: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we know, this has been unrolled here, but the Department of Education has been very proactive in informing students, starting in kindergarten, for that matter, with regard to health-related issues such as drugs and cannabis. The department is well aware. We have had chances at the district level, the principal level, and



the teacher level in our schools to meet with Public Health, the Department of Public Safety, and many officials to deal with how we are going to unroll this in our school system. The school system and the Department of Education have been very proactive in making sure that the teachers have the information. I also want to make you aware that throughout the province, there are a number of ad campaigns going on to show what the issues are related to cannabis. We are being very proactive.

Mr. Wetmore: At our last meeting with the Chief Medical Officer of Health, she informed us that there was no formal education program in the public school system.

Our province gained national attention for breaking the rules on cannabis advertising. Once again, the Gallant government has put us in the national spotlight in a bad way. Could the Premier explain how this could happen? The Health Canada rules about cannabis advertising are very clear. His government had plenty of time to get ready for cannabis sales, including its website and advertising. How can the people of New Brunswick have any confidence in a Premier and a government that, once again, failed to deliver a positive result for New Brunswickers?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Mr. Speaker, I am sure that Brian Harriman will be pleased to answer those questions as he, as CEO, is the one who runs Cannabis NB.

I can tell you that I, as Premier, denounce the fact that this could have been happening. I certainly was made aware by media that there may be an issue with the website, which I think is what the member opposite is referring to, and I would denounce it if ever Cannabis NB, a Crown corporation, were to break the law. Of course, I denounced that right away. I am happy to hear that it is, if not already, making the necessary changes to make sure that it complies with the law.

I said on that day, though, that we have to recognize that cannabis, now that it has been legalized for recreational use by the federal government, creates a major policy shift. There are going to be some challenges and hiccups. The best thing that we, as the people who represent the people of New Brunswick, can do is work together to make sure that we are able to overcome those hiccups and ensure a smooth transition, keeping New Brunswickers safe and getting some of the jobs that will come from the production of cannabis.

Mr. Wetmore: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When the member for Quispamsis is Premier, I guarantee you that Mr. Harriman will be in his office explaining what happened.

At the end of last month, the Union of Municipalities of New Brunswick had its AGM, and cannabis was on the agenda. More specifically, it was how to pay for the cost impact of cannabis on protective services like policing. The municipalities have asked for 44% of the provincial pot revenues. How should the people of New Brunswick have confidence in a Premier who, for a year and a half, knew that legalization was coming and had nothing in place for the municipalities?



Hon. Mr. Gallant: I have had the chance, along with the member for Shippagan-Lamèque-Miscou, to meet with many representatives and leaders from municipalities and communities across the province. We have other members of our government who have been able to do the same. I can tell you that I made it very clear to them that our government is prepared to share with the municipalities revenues that come from the sale of cannabis.

I also made it very clear that when it comes to sharing the proceeds from the sale of cannabis with all levels of government, including the municipalities and the federal government, it is important that it be fact-based. It is important that it be based on the costs that each level of government is bearing because of the legalization of cannabis by the federal government. We want to undertake a very exhaustive process to ensure that we calculate what the fixed costs are and what the continued costs are for all levels of government so that we can then divide the proceeds appropriately to ensure that we are offsetting any costs to these levels of government. We will do all of this while keeping New Brunswickers safe now that cannabis is legalized.

Government Contracts

Mr. Higgs: There has been a lot of concern regarding the secrecy around the Medavie contract for home care. We do not know exactly what indicators will protect New Brunswickers and will give us a basis to evaluate the contract. I know that many members felt shut out by the secrecy and closed doors around this process. Before we give someone the confidence of the House to manage this new era of collaboration, it would be good to know whether they would share facts and information to allow real collaboration. Would the Premier like to give us confidence in his commitment to collaborate by rethinking his decision to keep the full contract from the House? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I think that for the new members of the Legislature, it is important to go through the facts of what has happened over the timeline. They should be reminded that Medavie does important work for the province, including the drug plan which was sole-sourced by the then Minister of Health, who is now the member for Rothesay. It was sole-sourced to Medavie for it to effectively take over the drug plan that it instituted.

We have a contract with Medavie, with very clear conditions that have to be met for it to continue the work that we have asked it to do. We have made this contract public. It is redacted in some cases because, of course, we have to respect the rules and laws around confidentiality and privacy. That goes for corporations, but more importantly for individuals, of course. Mr. Speaker, there are conditions where it has to reduce the wait times for extramural patients by 15%—that is for wait times for health care in ERs—and increase...

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.



Property Tax

Mr. Higgs: My next question concerns property taxes. The Premier will remember that in the last session, we had a broken property tax system. I do not want to rehash the history of the phony property tax assessment scandal, but I do want to ask about relief for working families. The system is too expensive and seems random to too many families. I did not see a lot of firm commitments in the throne speech to do things differently. What can the Premier offer us as specifics to give us confidence in his ability to manage this file? Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: When it comes to our property assessment system, it is very important to emphasize that there are problems. These problems have caused errors for years and years and years. New Brunswickers deserve better. That is why we have in fact asked the Auditor General to analyze the situation and make recommendations so we can ensure we provide New Brunswickers with the best system possible.

I can tell you that our government fully supports the Auditor General's recommendations and that we will do everything in our power to implement them very quickly, because we understand how important the property assessment system is to New Brunswickers. We also understand that the errors that were made in this system for years, even decades, have caused at the very least difficulty and hardship for a number of New Brunswickers. That is why we will implement and put into effect the Auditor General's recommendations as quickly as possible.

[*Original*]

Mr. Higgs: One other aspect of the property tax system is the regressive double tax system, which hits renters hardest with an extra level of property taxes. The throne speech finally acknowledges this problem, and the Premier asks for our confidence to let him execute this policy. However, in 2016, his government rolled back the reduction of the provincial tax on rental properties, which is the opposite of what he is saying now. Does the Premier believe that he made a mistake in 2016, and, if not, what can he offer us to give us confidence that he can handle this file now? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Mr. Speaker, I think I have made it very clear, and I will make it clear again: New Brunswickers sent us a very loud message on election night. I would argue that they sent it to our party and to the Conservatives, given that neither one of us had a majority government. One of the implicit messages there is that we have to collaborate a lot more than we have ever done before. Therefore, we have listened to New Brunswickers, and, humbly, we accept that they are always right.

Mr. Speaker, we are going to do everything we can to listen to what New Brunswickers have asked us to do, and we are going to work with other political parties. That includes listening to their ideas. That includes listening to the things that they are pushing for, and it includes



looking at their respective platforms. Mr. Speaker, the speech from the throne lays out the government's progressive and collaborative agenda, and the vast majority of its elements include things that come from the platforms of two or more political parties. Mr. Speaker, looking at the so-called double tax is one of the things that was raised in many political platforms, and that is why the speech from the throne laid out that we will look at it.

Mr. Speaker: During the last question period, the Minister of Transportation took a question from the member for Miramichi under advisement. I am told that he has an answer, so I recognize the Minister of Transportation.

Highways

Hon. Mr. Landry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To that question, here is the answer. Our government is well aware that people in the Miramichi region are anxious to see the long-planned northern bypass project completed. It is important to note that a project of that magnitude cannot happen overnight. The department has hired an engineering firm to undertake a technical analysis of the project and to compile and update the business case that will be required to source the necessary funding.

As a result of the upcoming full closure of the Centennial Bridge, DTI has been working with the city of Miramichi's engineering department to determine potential upgrades along the King George Highway, such as widening intersections, adding turning lanes, and improving traffic signal timing in order to manage traffic issues. In addition to the King George Highway, DTI staff have been looking at the road network around the entire Miramichi region for options to alleviate traffic concerns. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Member for Miramichi, you may not be aware, but you are allowed a question on his answer.

Mrs. Conroy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to say that I appreciate his prompt response in looking into the matter for me, and we look forward to fixing it as soon as possible. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Landry: I was pleased this morning to see the member for Miramichi in my office and give her all the answers she needed. It is a fairly complex problem, and there is a lot to do.

As you know, our department and our government have always been extremely proactive regarding concerns expressed by the public. So, if other people ever have technical questions to ask me, I urge them to talk to me. I will bring them to the department so that officials can answer their questions directly. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

