

FROM PROVINCE HOUSE TO HOME

I was pleased the 2008 Provincial Budget passed as 5 objectives that my party has worked towards will now become a reality. Recent daily newspaper and radio polls, although not scientific, gave further indication that an election was not desirable for most Nova Scotians this spring. While there are new cracks in how the MacDonald government is leading the province, solid legislation from a challenging opposition is making minority government work. When MLA's are elected their first responsibility is to be accountable for making government work, being responsive to constituents, and be a leader on the issues. That's a mandate I took very seriously in caucus deliberation on supporting or defeating the 2008 budget. I was also reminded through a number of emails and conversations that elections are costly and minority governments should work together for an entire term.

The most compelling reason for supporting the budget actually developed during the debate on estimates. To guarantee our vote for the budget we wanted a designation of 10 medical seats at Dalhousie Medical School for the training of family physicians for rural Nova Scotians. When government decided to fund 5 seats this year and five more next year in return for services in rural Nova Scotia this was a significant development. This will not place a family doctor in Digby, Tatamagouche, Sydney River or Canso tomorrow but it is sound public policy that will start the process of a future guarantee. While there are daily advances in the delivery of medicine, a family doctor remains the best investment.

All 52 MLA's were pleased that government will fund the costly colorectal cancer drug, Avastin. This drug can be effective in some cases, but it is not necessarily a cure. The real win in this budget is the funding for colorectal cancer screening. Nova Scotia has the highest incidence of this form of cancer and regular screening for families with a history is essential. This investment is a guarantee to save lives and in the process save millions of dollars that will not be spent on advanced cancers.

As the education critic for my party, I have had countless meetings with university students and administrators, numerous questions to the Minister of Education during question period about reducing tuition at our universities. Freezing tuition for the next three years will allow our fees to meet the national average by 2010-2011 school year. In addition Nova Scotian students who access a student loan will receive 20% in a non-refundable grant. This is a significant development and a good first step to a true needs-based grant system.

"Keep the Heat" rebate program was returned in the 2008 budget and with home heating fuel at 1.15 a litre, this will help up to 35,000 low income Nova Scotians. Having advocated for this since it was dropped, it would have been hypocritical to vote against the budget that restored it, plus added \$400,000 to the Salvation Army's Good Neighbour Energy Fund.

A fifth area that elicited a positive response to the budget was a collection of tax credits that will assist seniors, transit users and firefighters. The firefighters tax credit, which was introduced by my colleague, the member from Clare, will now include the important provincial service - of Ground Search and Rescue. It started at \$250.00 this year and will increase to \$500.00 in year three.

On the other side of the ledger, I can quickly identify some areas that will need focus for initiating or improving for the next budget, if not sooner. With the challenge to provide long term care nursing home beds, an in-home support program is begging to be implemented. At \$400.00 or \$500.00 a month to care for a loved one it is simply an assist. They are not going to make enough money to pay income tax and it certainly is not an incentive to leave the work force.

Nova Scotia was a lead province in addressing autism in the early years through the EIBI therapy and support program. The budget has remained at \$4 million dollars, for three years, consequently a lottery exists for entry into this very successful method. This need and all those that exist throughout the life cycle of an autistic person must be identified and addressed through a provincial working group. This is an immediate goal.

Tuition support for learning disabled children must be expanded beyond the current three year plan. Parents of learning disabled children remain frustrated with the current situation regarding a lack of programming support in the public school system, and very limited financial support for specialized education in the private system. As the 07-08 school year draws to a close, parents are now making very tough decisions, including selling or re-mortgaging their homes.

At a time when gas and diesel prices continue to soar, transitional support in the form of a gas tax cut , plus the ending of regulation is supported by 83% of Nova Scotians. It is time for government to act and bring our province's gas price in line with New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. That issue along with medical and personal recruitment and retention of medical personnel, small business expansion through tax credits and business advocacy, and heating costs will impact on the P-12 public school budget and will need vigilance and potentially quick action.

It is my contention that longer sessions in the Legislature would be a good first step to timely and responsive decision making in dealing with issues that affect the well being of Nova Scotians.