

From Province House to Home  
April 24, 2009

April 24, 2008 marks the start of the Spring Session of the Nova Scotia Legislature and the 2008-2009 Budget debates. This event immediately evokes two thoughts, how long will the session last and will the budget trigger an election. As the Legislature with the dubious record of sitting the fewest days in the country I am expecting the Government will once again want a short session, limiting the number of days we as MLAs have to debate the issues that affect Nova Scotians. With Orders in Council (decisions made by Cabinet) this government moves their own agenda forward, issues that affect all Nova Scotians, for example, the 1.9% increase in fees paid by individuals on Birth Certificates etc. This should have been debated in the Legislature. A quicker answer to the possibility of the Budget's defeat, it won't happen this spring.

However, this budget will signal the future of how long this minority government will remain in office. Inside this twelve month fiscal plan will be several election type spending initiatives that will be designed for political benefit rather than mark a change in direction. That brings me to several budget supported ideas that I think should be measures to improve the lives of Nova Scotians in the short and long term.

Recent developments in all parts of the province regarding the shortage of medical personnel have become more acute. When hospitals operating at 100% capacity close beds, you know we are in serious trouble. There are simply not enough nurses to care for patients safely and that's what just happened at Soldier's Memorial Hospital in Middleton with the closure of four beds. My Party has been asking this government to pay for the education of Doctor training at Dalhousie Medical School in return for locating in under served areas of Nova Scotia; this should be in this year's budget. The number of seats will be small, but it's a directional shift that marks a needed beginning and can be built on for the future. Since we won't be returning to the hospital training schools for nurses a similar nursing initiative for retention is just as critical.

Since this government cancelled the Keep the Heat Program our caucus has been calling on the government to reinstate this much needed program. In my five years in office this has been the most difficult winter for low and fixed income Nova Scotians to heat their homes and apartments. This was a good program that targeted 35,000 homes with the greatest need. I think the human cry has been so pronounced that it will be reintroduced. In my view it should be administered by the Salvation Army, who base their help through the Good Neighbour Energy Fund on Revenue Canada information and pay the oil company or Nova Scotia Power directly.

Small business is at the heart of the economy in our province and I believe even more so in rural parts of our province. The establishment of an office for small business advocacy is a development whose time has come. This will be extremely valuable for the long term in establishing a tax credit system for job creation and retention, energy saving green concepts and infrastructure renewal. Revamping the regressive tax structure is long overdue and would be a priority of the Small Business Advocacy Office.

A short and long term plan for healthier Nova Scotians will be supported in this budget. While a daily physical education plan may not reflect a Bill I introduced in the fall sitting it will be a directional shift that is long overdue. Along the same lines I think government will adopt another opposition Bill to improve health outcomes for seniors – the fastest growing sector in our population. Introduction of a tax credit or elimination for participation in physical activity will be a timely plan.

Both opposition parties have been calling for an in-home support program delivered by family members. While new long term care beds are coming, the net gain will be minimal as older nursing homes will be closed. Keeping seniors with chronic illnesses in their homes cared for by family with government assistance must happen now. This could be the budget year.

In standing committee meetings, discussion with Ministers, and through public forums I continue to advance my favourite five. If there is one supported by the budget in addition to those elaborated I will consider it a good budget, remember that it is only balanced on paper.

1. Needs based grants for the 40% of students and families who do not attend university or college do to financial inability.
2. An agriculture strategy that makes targeted investment in the industry.
3. Special education restored to public schools similar to the programs at our three private schools
4. Retrain re-skill and improve the literacy of our current work force. They are the most likely to remain in our province.
5. Renewable energy investment through private partnership and firm timelines.

There will be no budget defeat but it will signal the timing of the next provincial election.