

From Province House to Home

In responding to the Throne Speech delivered by Her Honour Mayann Francis, Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia, the Liberal Party first committed to working with the Progressive Conservatives and the NP to provide good government, fair government and balanced government. In that context there are a number of issues that as MLAs we all need to address and government needs to take action to resolve.

There is no area more urgent than keeping our emergency rooms open. This year alone, the province's emergency rooms have been closed for 5,700 hours. Imagine for a moment that your sick child requires immediate medical assistance. Everyone does not hear the closure notices and you drive to the hospital and there is a "CLOSED" sign on the door. This is the reality for too many Nova Scotians in too many communities across this province, and this is unacceptable. Our Caucus has called on government to create a centralized service for health authorities within the Department of Health to that matches ER Doctors with hospitals in need. We also suggested that the province hire a force of local physicians to fill the need on a temporary basis, but the MacDonald government has refused despite the community support for this initiative and the willingness of doctors to try this option. The issues plaguing our healthcare system are some of the same issues that Nova Scotians were talking about five year ago.

Furthermore, Nova Scotians are still waiting for this government's plan to address spiraling tuition rates and declining enrollment in Nova Scotia's universities. Federal funding provided Nova Scotia students with a \$435.00 reduction in January of 2007, and it was replaced with \$500.00 in tuition relief for our students in September of 2007. This measure only goes so far when the average undergraduate tuition fee in this province is \$5878.00. This federal funding has ended and with the highest tuition in the country, a university education remains out of reach for many. Right now, Students are funding the operational cost at most of the province's universities at a higher rate than government. High tuitions and low government funding are resulting in Nova Scotia students leaving our province for post-secondary education. We should be doing everything we can to enable our young people to learn and work in Nova Scotia.

A quality education system is the foundation for a more competitive and prosperous province. We need to get back to the basics and address our province's failing grades in Math, and the high drop-out rate at the junior high level. We need to look at reducing class sizes to acceptable levels beyond third grade. Many of our classes, especially at the senior high are thirty plus and their make up often has six to eight students with some form of learning disability.

Nova Scotia students should be provided with a full range of assessments in the primary year of schooling, so that learning disabilities can be determined early on and appropriate measures can be implemented. Even better would be an expansion of the four year old Pre-primary pilot that research supports in the strongest manner. Nova Scotia doesn't have a strong early childhood education program. If the government is not going to expand the 2005 pilot program, it should be looking into options to strengthen pre-primary education in our province.

In responding to the Throne Speech, my party also acknowledges the need for government to create a poverty reduction strategy. This needs to address the fact that over 11, 500 children of working parents live in poverty in our province. Action needs to be taken to strengthen the Career Seek and the Harvest Connection programs. Government should expand the mandated programs provided by Nova Scotia Legal Aid. Removing the moratorium on the creation of small option homes, along with increasing affordable housing. The Annapolis Valley has the highest demand of any region in the province.

It was only natural for government not to address major issues like the Atlantic Accord, the failed Business Mentorship Program for Immigration and Gas regulation. However I thought they would be leaders on renewal in the primary industries, advancing renewable energy and attacking the root causes of crime. In the coming weeks my caucus will introduce legislation to create a fairer, greener, safer, more competitive and more compassionate Nova Scotia.