



From Province House to Home

A few weeks ago, the Auditor General reported on the final phase of the business mentorship stream of the nominee program. Never before in my years of office in the Nova Scotia Legislature have I seen such a damning report of government failure. This government set up a program that allowed everyone to fleece money away from nominees and allowed inappropriate activity to go unchecked. This government should have had the foresight, proper planning and a greater concern for the interests of the nominees.

The Auditor General made significant findings relating to the matches made for nominees and the companies that were supposed to provide appropriate mentorships. The Auditor General found that the mentor selection process was ineffective. 24 out of 41 mentor applications he tested did not meet the program's approved criteria, and on this basis, were not qualified to provide mentorships, and should not have been approved as mentors or received program funds. An unanswered question at this time is who made the final decision of having a mentor matched with a company? Also, at what point were elected officials aware that mentorship matches were being made inappropriately?

In 2005 there were several pieces of correspondence that showed that the Federal government was trying to shut down the economic stream of the program because they thought it was a passive investment scheme. Meaning it was a way for foreign capital to flow through to Nova Scotia companies with little or no value for the nominee who has paid the money. Premier MacDonald even sent a letter to Minister Volpe on October 12, 2005 asking for the program to remain in place. His strongest argument was directed at the value of keeping the nominee paying \$130,000 to come to Nova Scotia; which was completely out of line compared to other provinces in Canada.

The missing piece, for a lot of people in this discussion, is where was the accountability to ensure that the nominees had a good experience and that the placement was appropriate and the experience likewise. An unanswered question is what procedures existed to ensure that the company was providing appropriate mid to senior level management experience during their 6 month placement.

When it came to nominee selection, 50 out of 51 nominees had the appropriate management experience to be approved under the business mentorship stream. The nominees came here in good faith and kept their end of the bargain. However, when they arrived they were treated unfairly and many believe they were used and abused by this program. The Auditor General looked at 51 acceptance files for nominees and found that 17 of the nominees did not meet all the criteria necessary for entrance into the program.

The Auditor General faced significant barriers to access information throughout the entire process. When the Public Accounts committee was made aware of the government refusal to disclose documents, subpoenas were issued for their release. Only then did the government decide to move on the issue. However, they only went halfway; they did not allow the Auditor General to have full access to the documents; only the ability to view them within the office of Immigration. Restricting the Auditor General's access to information constitutes poor public accountability. There are a number of questions around this development that may require a public inquiry. At the very least, all seven ministers who were responsible for the Office of Immigration and the six deputies should appear before Public Accounts. Some of the unanswered questions are: who decided to refuse disclosure of the documents prior to the Auditor General's first report in June 2008? What involvement did the Minister or Executive Council have in this decision? Who decided to allow some access after the Auditor General's report made damning comments about government's refusal?

On October 24th or thereabouts, the Minister of Immigration will announce a refund to nominees who have remained in Nova Scotia. This will only be the rightful return of their own money. It will not absolve government of the nominee's lives being impacted negatively in ways well beyond financial. It has placed a negative appearance on Nova Scotia that only time and a reference to pre-nominee program days will heal. Back to a time when the immigrant's desire to make Nova Scotia home and their worth as a human being surpassed the \$130,000 entry fee.

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