

**Notes for Darrell Dexter  
Leader of the Opposition  
The Greater Halifax Partnership  
January 30, 2003**

Thanks you all for coming here this morning.

I'd like to thank Steve Dempsey for inviting me to speak to you and the Globe and Mail for sponsoring this political leadership series.

I'd also like to thank to Kevin for the introduction.

I always hope people will be impressed with the varied experience I bring to politics and not be left thinking I can't keep a job.

Thank you all for this opportunity to speak with you about how, working together, we can create a better deal for Nova Scotia families.

Because frankly I believe that together we can do better.

**A BETTER DEAL FOR SENIORS**

I believe governments have an important role to improve the lives of ordinary families.

Because, unlike others, I do not believe that governments should just stand by and say "well, what can we do?"

I guess you could say I cut my teeth on Can Do politics.

I believe in a politics based on the belief that by working with citizens...from a seniors group in Cape Breton to healthcare workers in Yarmouth to anti-poverty groups in Metro or the Greater Halifax Partnership.

I believe that governments can improve people's lives in tangible ways.

From my early involvement in student politics in the 1970's through my days on the downtown Dartmouth Business Commission, as a Dartmouth alderman and now as an MLA and leader of my party, I can safely say I've never encountered an issue that better proves that point than the question how we treat nursing home residents.

I hope I'm safe in assuming that most of you are aware of the public campaign I began last fall to ensure that Nova Scotia nursing home residents get a better deal.

A deal that guarantees that they no longer have to pay for their own healthcare, just like the rest of us.

The response to our campaign has been nothing short of extraordinary.

Nova Scotians from one end of the province to the other have written, faxed and e-mailed their support.

They've signed our petition on the issue to the tune of over 20,000 signatures.

All with the simple message, they want the government to do the right thing and cover the health care of seniors and other nursing home residents.

Like Nova Scotians have always done, they've recognized an injustice and are demand that it be remedied.

The government has begun to listen...sort of.

They have made some moves to change this unjust situation...but have really only taken half measures.

And as we all know, Nova Scotians will not accept half measures when it comes to security of our seniors.

The government's attempts to make this problem go away has only served to increase the number of phone calls, letters, faxes and e-mails and make Nova Scotians more determined to achieve a full measure on this - they will accept nothing less.

The campaign to ensure nursing home residents receive a better deal is far from over.

I continue to travel across the province working with seniors, their families and other concerned Nova Scotians working to secure a better deal for nursing home residents. In fact, I will pick up that tour again tomorrow.

A better deal that sees them no longer have to pay for their own health care.

It's within the province's financial means to do so.

It's also simply the right thing to do for our seniors who've work so hard, sacrificed so much, paid so many taxes throughout their lifetimes so that we can enjoy the prosperity we have today.

We can not let them down at a time when they most in need of our help.

## **A BETTER DEAL FOR YOUNG NOVA SCOTIANS**

Caring for our seniors is a part of the equation of how we can secure a better deal for Nova Scotians.

But if we are to secure a stronger, more prosperous future, we must also secure the future of our young people.

Unfortunately the education young Nova Scotians need to live up to their potential increasingly slips from their grasp as tuition continues to escalate beyond their ability to pay.

Nova Scotian students pay the highest average tuition in the country.

\$5214 - \$1500 more than the Canadian average.

As university presidents I recently met with pointed out, despite ever-increasing tuition, enrolment in Nova Scotian universities continues to climb.

That's true when you look at overall numbers.

What you don't see in that global number is how tuition increases are changing the face of higher education.

According to Statistics Canada, students from upper income families are three times more likely to attend university than those from lower income families.

That rises to six times more likely if a student has to move to obtain an education.

I'm not the only one alarmed by this trend.

Let me read you a quote.

"We're creating a class-based society in which the wealthy can afford to send their children to university while others can not."

Know who said that?

No, I'm not quoting myself.

It's that's actually a quote from Mark Parent, one of the more prominent backbenchers in the Hamm government, who seems to understand the nature of the crisis in student debt.

Now if his boss would just recognize the same thing and take some action.

Of course it comes as no surprise to anybody that the higher tuition rises the more likely that students from lower income families will simply not be able to realize their potential.

Young people who could have applied their skills to help many of you to improve your products, your service and your bottom line.

Of course there are students, who despite their family resources, manage through student loans to cobble together enough to complete their education.

But what they are left with at the end of the day And more frequently left at the end of their education is an unmanageable debt.

The average debt load for a graduating student in Nova Scotia is close to \$25 thousand dollars.

Starting off life with that kind of debt load means it will be a long time before those students can afford to pay for your service, pay for your product or improve your bottom line.

More likely these well-educated Nova Scotians will end up leaving the province for higher paying jobs elsewhere so they can pay down their debt.

And that's not just a minor problem.

Because if you want Nova Scotia trained doctors to practice here and not in Alberta.

If you want Nova Scotia trained nurses working in our hospitals and not in Texas.

If you want young people to help your business grow, than we have to lessen their financial burden.

If we don't, they will simply move to where the big money is so they can get out from under their student debt and we will all continue to be the poorer for that.

That's why I am committed to a package of measures to do help students and their families.

A package that includes:

- \* increases in operating grants to universities that will stop tuition from going up. That includes an immediate fully-funded tuition freeze

- \* an immediate reinstatement of a loan remission program.

- \* and a commitment to working with all concerned parties to develop a plan for predictable, sustainable funding for universities. A plan that takes the unfair and unmanageable financial burden off students and their families.

Successive Nova Scotia governments have switched the financial burden for higher education from their coffers onto family budgets.

I would make other choices.

What I propose are only first steps toward bringing us in line with other provinces.

But they are important first steps. Ones we must take.

After all, education costs money, but so ignorance.

There are still those who will say we can't afford this investment in our young people.

I say we can't afford not to make this investment.

Higher education pays a real dividend that sees university grads making between nine and 15 per cent more than those without a university education

That means they contribute more financially to our society.

It's estimated that university grads will earn nearly 15 per cent more and contribute than \$85,000 in additional taxes over their working lives than those without a university degree.

That more than offsets the roughly \$7,000 per student provided by the government of Nova Scotia to provide that education.

That sounds like a worthwhile investment to me if we are to help young people recognize their potential.

If you'll permit me one more quote from somebody in this room.

"Students and their families have paid 100 per cent of the cost of expanding our universities over the past decade. Student debt has soared. Nova Scotia now has the worst record of support for higher education in Canada. Eventually, we'll all pay a price for this neglect."

Tom Traves, President of Dalhousie University.

## **A BETTER DEAL FROM OUR OFFSHORE**

When we better the lives of our young people, we ensure prosperity for our community.

Prosperity that protects and builds on the quality of life we enjoy here and across the province.

Prosperity that, if it truly comes for all Nova Scotians, will be driven in the decades to come by the prospects just off our coast.

Our offshore resources quite simply represent the last best chance we have to truly provide opportunities and a better deal for Nova Scotia families.

The potential has always been there.

The potential remains.

And it is the provincial government's obligation, to ensure that our gas, our oil, drives our economy, and creates the maximum number of jobs for Nova Scotians.

Frankly that has not happened so far.

Poor deals have been signed that have thrown away opportunities.

Poor deals that have not been improved on by successive governments, despite promises to do so.

There are two areas where we can forge a better offshore deal for Nova Scotians.

In royalties and in benefits.

But there is only so much room for improvement on royalties...where we are essentially locked into deals that we can't get out of.

So that leaves us with benefits...where plenty of improvement can be realized.

Improving benefits means more Nova Scotia companies get more work.

It means more individual Nova Scotians get jobs.

But it's not going to happen until a Nova Scotia government summons the will and stands up for the economic rights of Nova Scotians.

Even with the will it won't happen overnight.

It requires long term planning with a specific goal of improving the deal for Nova Scotians.

A long-term strategy that includes a jobs plan to ensure Nova Scotians get a fairer share of the available work.

A plan that includes job targets for Nova Scotians and that ensures Nova Scotians get the necessary training so they can actually get the available jobs.

A plan that includes industry involvement so trainees receive the necessary work experience in the industry that allows them to finish their training and meet the qualifications.

We can achieve a better deal from our offshore resources, so that not only do we receive our fair share of the work, but so our own natural gas does not continue to pass us by on the way to New England where it's driving their economy, not ours.

Short-sighted policies have gotten us to where we are.

A vision that keeps as its goal a better deal for all Nova Scotians that leads to the prosperity we seek.

### **A BETTER DEAL FOR FAMILIES**

I want to touch on one more direct way in which we can forge a better deal for Nova Scotians

By ensuring people keep more of their hard earned money.

The Hamm government has signaled pretty clearly that they want to make this the main issue in the next election by offering up some kind of tax cut.

I say "of some kind" because frankly as they've moved ever closer to the next election, it's become increasingly unclear as to what the Tories plan on doing.

But I'm not here to talk about what the Tories are planning and whether the NDP supports it.

And frankly, saying whether you support or oppose something you've never seen would be like saying whether you're going to vote for a budget before you see it.

But their plans do raise an important question.

What exactly is a tax cut?

Is it simply a ploy to get re-elected, or is it to truly give Nova Scotia families a badly needed break by increasing the amount of money in their pockets.

Because boy do Nova Scotians need a break. In the past four years, fees and taxes have increased in Nova Scotia to the tune of over 200 million dollars.

That doesn't even account for the increases families have experienced in privately delivered services...from their power bill, to cable to their telephone bill.

And I don't have to tell anybody how it all adds up.

If your goal is to put money back into the pockets of Nova Scotians, there are many ways to do it.

I have already outlined three specific measures that can be taken to improve the financial bottom line of families.

Providing seniors and their families with the publicly-funded health care they are entitled to in nursing homes, by taking the unfair financial burden off of the backs of students and their families, and ensuring individual Nova Scotians receive more of the benefits from their own offshore resources.

There are other, equally direct ways of leaving Nova Scotia families with more of their hard earned money.

Like the reducing the HST on some of the necessities of life...like home heating fuel, and children's clothing.

Items, that by their very nature, most families have no choice but to purchase.

There is also a way of putting money back into the pockets of seniors who must rely on prescription drugs to maintain their health.

Prescription drugs that are increasingly expensive, not just due to increased prices from pharmaceutical companies, but thanks to ever increasing pharmacare fees and co-pays.

Thanks to the most recent premium increases alone seniors are now paying five and half million dollars more each year from their fixed budgets.

Studies show that each increase in fees and co-pays results in more illness and hospitalization because seniors can no longer afford their drugs.

There are many ways of putting money into the pockets of Nova Scotians, including the pockets of the working poor.

Like setting the minimum wage at a level that provides something more like a living wage.

That's why the NDP is committed to increasing the minimum wage annually equal to the annual increase in the Consumer Price Index, plus 2 per cent.

Nova Scotia's minimum wage currently lags behind every province but Newfoundland. It also lags behind American states with which we compete.

This annual increase would mean the working poor would no longer become poorer every time the cost of consumer goods and services increases, but the minimum wage fails to keep pace.

It puts more money in pockets. Money that will go to make ends meet.

That's money that will go right back into the provincial economy.  
Because it certainly won't be going into the family trust fund.

I don't have to tell anybody who owns a vehicle just how much more you are paying for insurance.

Nova Scotia drivers have experienced insurance rate increases in the order of 50 per cent over the past two years.

Now that's a growing burden on family budgets.

And has even resulted in some people on fixed incomes having to give up their cars, because they can't afford the insurance anymore.

That's simply unacceptable.

It calls for a solution that does not just freeze insurance rates but lowers them.

A solution I and my caucus are currently working on.

A solution that will result in Nova Scotian drivers keeping more of their money in their pockets.

According to Statistics Canada, consumer spending accounts for ## % of Nova Scotia's Gross Domestic Product. (Paul working on this #)

Now that's power.

Imagine how much more powerful that could be.

What a much more powerful engine the average Nova Scotian could be to our economy if we worked to take the real burden off of them.

## **THE ROAD AHEAD**

Standing here in Halifax this morning in the very heart of the economic engine of the province, it would be easy to forget that not everybody is sharing in the prosperity that HRM enjoys.

That not everybody is getting a better deal.

That not every region of this province is receiving its fair share.

Parts of Nova Scotia are falling behind...are suffering from high unemployment, are losing health and education services, are losing their best and brightest.

And we can't forget that.

We can't build a stronger province by creating some sort of metropol that drains off more and more of the resources.

We will not be truly prosperous until Nova Scotia families share in that prosperity...until they get a better deal, no matter where in the province they live.

My challenge to you as a group of decision makers is to work with each other, to work with politicians, and citizens to ensure all Nova Scotians receive a better deal in health care, education and the off-shore. To ensure that the average Nova Scotian family receive a better deal by keeping more of what they earn.

I know that the challenges you face in your own businesses are enormous.

But I also know that as a group you look beyond your own personal interests.

If you didn't, you wouldn't be here this morning.

You wouldn't be involved in this organization.

You wouldn't, despite the load you carry at work, despite your family responsibilities, take the time to play an active role in other community organizations that make this city, and this province a great place to live, work and raise a family.

I challenge you to work with Nova Scotians all over this province who find themselves on the outside looking in.

Nova Scotians looking to share in the prosperity.

Demanding a better deal.