

Working Together For Fairness





CCPA

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Preamble

IN THE SPRING of 2013, the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour (NSFL) held a series of eight town hall meetings around the province, and conducted a round of public opinion polling with its members. Based on these town halls and on the polling, the NSFL identified five priority issues for labour leaders, workers and their families. To assist their members to understand the issues, the NSFL contracted with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Nova Scotia to produce this report.

The five priority areas identified were:

- Jobs and the Economy
- Poverty
- Occupational Health and Safety
- Health Care
- NS Power

Each section provides a succinct understanding of the issue, summarizes what the current government has done in that area, and proposes next steps and policy recommendations.

The premise of this work is that we can move forward together to achieve fairness, help those currently in need, and ensure that the province is becoming socially and economically just, as well as environmentally sustainable. As per the mission of CCPA-NS, the recommendations are designed to:

- show that there are choices and alternatives in public policy that can advance a local, social and economic justice agenda for Nova Scotia, even in the context of an increasingly globalized world, and,
- promote a participatory and accountable approach to the development of public policy in Nova Scotia.

This report seeks to stimulate debate in our province on key public issues of critical importance to our future. It is released to ensure that these policy issues figure into campaigns of all political parties and candidates, and inform voters' decisions.

For a more comprehensive treatment of issues, we direct readers to our other publications and in particular to our Alternative Provincial Budgets, www.policyalternatives.ca/nsab

Introduction

THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT has been in office since the summer of 2009. Anticipating a likely Fall election call, this report takes stock of issues of concern to Nova Scotians. It outlines what the current government has done on these issues and what more the next government could do to ensure that our province moves forward to achieve fairness for all Nova Scotians.

This is not a report card per se. Improvements or worsening of indicators in this four years is not enough to draw conclusions about a definite trend or to attribute the trend to the current government's actions or inactions. Previous governments influence these trends, positively or negatively. It is also difficult to untangle the impact of provincial funding and initiatives from federal government, equalization payments, and the increasing number of matching federal-provincial grant programs for example. Moreover, the overall social, economic, and political environment influences a government's ability to implement public policy, and to ensure they have the intended outcomes.

In the case of the current NDP government, it did have a clear majority in the legislature allowing it to dominate the legislative agenda and ensure (via party discipline) that its bills became law.

The current government did, however, face significant economic challenges throughout its mandate. It came into office during one of the most serious economic financial crises in the post-War period. As a result of the recession as well as longer-term trends, the government was operating in a social and economic environment of increased income inequality. It also

faced a broad perception that public resources were constrained. Indeed, the government faced the neoliberal¹ call to address the deficit and the debt at any cost, and at the same time to cut business and personal taxes. This agenda is part of the claim that the government, indeed, the public sector and unions are constraining the business community's ability to make profit and expand the economy.

After decades of neoliberalism, the government also faced a workforce that had seen stagnating wages for decades, despite rising productivity. Between 1981 and 2006 the province's economy expanded by 62.44% with most of that growth – 36% – occurring since 1997. During this 25 year period, as the general provincial economy expanded, “labour productivity” (GDP per hour worker) also rose (by 37%), but the average “real” (inflation-adjusted) weekly earnings of Nova Scotia workers *actually declined* by 5%.²

Clearly, growth was not enjoyed equally by all Nova Scotians.

Since 1982, the increase in real incomes in Nova Scotia were \$3,500 for the bottom 90% of tax filers and \$99,500 for the top 1%. In 1982, the average top tax filer had incomes 8.3 times as much as the bottom. Now, the 1% tax filer makes about 10.5 times as much.³ To be in the 1% in Atlantic Canada you need to have an income of at least \$151,900. The average income of the top 1% of tax filers is \$259,300. The average income of the bottom 90% of tax filers in contrast is \$26,700.⁴

Income inequality is only one indicator of the social and economic challenges facing the current government. Gender inequality, racism, and the continued marginalization of people with disabilities, are just a few of the entrenched inequalities not redressed or indeed worsened over the last few decades.⁵

A government's ability to tackle issues is largely dependent on the resources at its disposal. Adequate resources are essential to deliver quality public services and to meet the needs of Nova Scotians in the most fair, transparent and accountable way. Foremost in this equation is a progressive tax system, where the wealthiest pay their fair share. With these funds, we can build strong social programs, so everyone is afforded a good quality of life and the opportunity to thrive.

Nova Scotia is second only to Quebec for having the most progressive income tax system in the country. With the introduction of the fifth tax bracket for those with incomes over \$150,000, the current government made the system more progressive.

Shortly after taking office the Nova Scotia government commissioned independent studies to assess and propose how to deal with the perceived fis-

cal challenges it faced. The first study, by Deloitte, concluded that the financial situation is worse than was presented by the previous government and warned of projected significant annual deficits and rising debt.⁶ The government appointed an independent Economic Advisory Panel and based on its report,⁷ the government was set to make “tough choices” to return the province to solid ground.⁸ The government was poised to ‘live within its means’ and return the province to fiscal balance; it proceeded to raise the consumption tax by 2 percentage points even though the panel offered the income tax as an alternative area for increases, and to institute expenditure cuts, among other initiatives,⁹ to achieve a balanced budget in four years.¹⁰

The CCPA-NS has argued, however, that the government should have a longer term target for balancing the budget especially when one considers key indicators over the previous decade.

Nova Scotia’s debt-to-GDP ratio fell from 49% in 2000 to approximately 37% in 2013. In 2002 almost 20% of the provincial government’s expenditures went to finance the debt. The debt servicing/expenditure ratio fell below 10% in 2011. The sizes of Nova Scotia’s deficit and debt are manageable. Relative to the current low interest rates, many public investments have high rates of return, which makes them better candidates for government spending than paying off the debt. Productive public investments enhance economic growth. Moreover, such investments are necessary. One of the most significant hindrances to economic growth is economic inequality and insecurity.

Given our assessment of the fiscal situation, we maintain that the government should not engage in across-the-board cuts.¹¹ We continue to argue that priority should be placed on investment to re-balance the social deficit including to address high tuition (instead of allowing it to increase by cutting postsecondary education funding),¹² to address a lack of a system of accessible, affordable early learning and child care (instead of the current market-based system),¹³ and to ensure that all Nova Scotians have access to safe, affordable housing, to name a few.

Smart public investments that address inequality and insecurity not only achieve greater fairness; they also provide more opportunities for economic growth than a single-minded focus on debt reduction. Public services help level the playing field. However, from 1990 to 2009, Nova Scotia consistently invested less than most provinces. Further, the province always spent less on a per-capita basis than the Canadian provincial or the Atlantic average.¹⁴

A more progressive tax system allowing for adequate revenue to deliver quality public services is only part of the way forward however. Fundamen-

tally, we need to address the root causes of inequality, which includes the “concentration of power at the heart of the economic life.”¹⁵ Societies that are more equal have some things in common including employee-owned and controlled industry (with local community and consumer representatives on their governing boards), as well as strong unionization rates.¹⁶

Evidence shows that the higher the unionization rate in a society, the lower the poverty rate and that declining union membership is closely related to growing income inequality.¹⁷ We also know that women benefit from the union advantage even more than men, helping to address gender inequality.¹⁸ The hourly union advantage for women in Nova Scotia is \$7.31 and for men it is \$5.44. The union advantage is also important for youth. On average, young workers with unions earned \$5.53/hour more than non-union young workers in Canada

These challenges are presented as the backdrop that highlights the interconnections between the issues presented here. They underpin our assessment of the government’s shortcomings and inform our recommendations for a more just and fair society.

Jobs and the Economy

THIS GOVERNMENT TOOK office at the height of one of the most significant recessions in the post war period, with unemployment soaring and manufacturing in crisis. It faced significant geographic disparities; decades of decline in natural resource industries and manufacturing and the shift to the new economy, with higher waged and secure jobs, favoured Halifax region over the rest of the province. At the same time, rural communities are known for a rich history of unconventional models of economic development that were genuinely community-based and democratic, beginning with the Antigonish movement⁹ in the 1930s. Regional differences do not just fall along a simple rural-urban divide, there are pronounced differences between some rural and small towns.

The current government has demonstrated a flexible and hands-on approach to the economy and job creation. The government has used more of an interventionist approach, including buying stakes in local businesses. The government has also moved to stabilize manufacturing and forestry with major capital loans and public ownership of the forests. However, this government has also engaged in a significant amount of old-fashioned corporate giveaways. While these giveaways are problematic, the past four years of government policy also show a desire to do things differently than previous governments.

What Has the Government Done?

Ships contract: The biggest economic news in recent times for Nova Scotia is the "Ships Start Here" contract at the Halifax Shipyards. With construction of a new drydock to start this Summer, and production of the ships beginning in 2015, there will be a major increase in hiring across the supply chain. The provincial government claims a major role in helping secure the contract, both through its public support campaign and the financial backing it has given to the project.²⁰ The provincial government contributed a \$260 million capital loan.^{21,22} The estimated new revenue for the province over the next 20 years is around \$2.8 billion. The provincial government projects that the contract will create about 11,500 direct and indirect jobs.

Skills Training and Workplace Education: The province has opened new training seats at the Nova Scotia Community College and is creating new programs in high schools to meet the need for skilled trades workers. The province is also in the process of turning Cole Harbour District High School into a new model school where trades will be taught in the classroom. Additionally there are efforts to reform and improve the apprenticeship program²³ and to engage more women in the trades.²⁴ The province is also working with First Nations communities to develop skills training programmes.²⁵ The province has also increased the budget for adult literacy.²⁶

Saving the forestry industry: Three of Nova Scotia's four major forestry mills faced closure in the last few years as the entire global forestry industries laid off thousands and idled mills around the world. The government intervened in Port Hawkesbury to save the mill from being sold off piece by piece.²⁷ This mill is very advanced and should be able to thrive under new ownership. In Liverpool the mill couldn't be saved, despite a restructuring package offered by the government. Instead the government moved to secure the Bowater forest lands, 500,000 acres of forest land that could have been sold, or worse, clear cut.²⁸ The government articulated a new direction for forestry in that region by creating a community forestry to run a centre and a new research facility²⁹ at the old mill site. Forestry does have a sustainable future if it is based on good forest stewardship and community ownership, not raw log export.

Daewoo: The TrentonWorks railcar manufacturing facility closed in 2007, throwing hundreds out of work, though thousands had worked there during peak production. Upon coming into office this government started looking for a buyer. What the government found was an impressive opportu-

ity. Today, we produce windmills in our province. That production facility is also half publicly owned. This was done in 2010 and helps demonstrate the difference in approach this government has taken.³⁰ A major international industrial company was enticed to come to Nova Scotia, and the province ensured our investment was secure by taking co-ownership of the project.

LED Roadway Lighting: In 2009 (and again in 2013) the province purchased a stake in a small, local business that produces modern LED lights at a facility near Amherst.³¹ Today it is a leader in the industry. The government took a financial stake in the company and provided other assistance and support.

Making it easier for workers to join unions: Through a variety of regulatory and legislative changes, the government has made it easier for workers to join unions. Unionization is one of the best options for workers to improve their economic situation. On average in Nova Scotia, unionized workers make \$6.70 more an hour than non-unionized workers.³² This results in an additional \$31.1 million a week for Nova Scotia workers and their families thanks to union members' wage settlements. That's \$1.6 billion a year! Increasing unionization from the current level of 31.5% to 40% of the workforce could result in about \$10 million a week in workers' pockets. Whereas the profits foreign businesses leave the province, most of these increased wages would be spent here in Nova Scotia. Thus, as Nova Scotia has a relatively high rate of out-of-province business ownership, increased unionization would create a significant economic stimulus at no cost to the provincial government — up to as much as \$520 million.

Increasing the minimum wage: Despite protests from opposition parties and various business sectors, the provincial government has increased the minimum wage each year in office. Each increase has been above the CPI rate of inflation, resulting in a real increase in the incomes of minimum wage earners. Today, Nova Scotia has one of the highest minimum wages in the country.³³

Capital investments: The provincial government made capital loans and grants to companies.³⁴ Investments in capital goods like machinery, production facilities, and new construction result in increased economic activity and are often tied to the creation of new jobs. Such investments in capital are key to increasing productivity in the province. This is a much more responsible way for government to invest in companies than providing grants or payroll subsidies. Capital goods are tangible, and cannot be easily transported out of the province should the company decide to leave (as many do

when their subsidy runs out). Also, because these capital investments have been publicly funded, the public has a claim on this capital equipment. This provides us with more options and greater leverage if or when the companies decide to leave.³⁵ In contrast, payroll subsidies attract short-term, service sector jobs that disappear when the subsidy runs out. Consider our provinces history, and failure with call centres.³⁶ Moving away from payroll subsidies to capital investments is an important step.

What Are the Shortcomings?

The government's jobsHere strategy³⁷ has produced results, but much more action is required to create jobs.

Unemployment in the province remains stubbornly high. The Nova Scotia economy remains relatively underdeveloped and low-waged, with the second lowest average weekly earnings in the country.

Concerns are raised about the amount of corporate giveaways by the current government especially to large profitable companies including the Irving Shipyard. That contract in particular, but these kinds of subsidies more generally, do raise concerns because of the lack of transparency around the financials of the deals and about the role and control of corporate investors and shareholders. The shipyard contract raised further questions about whether we should be building warships. The question of the ethics of military procurement in an environment where people are living in the streets, families are struggling to make ends meet, speaks to the broader question of government priorities. It also speaks to the environment that our provincial government is working within, when one considers the priorities of the federal government and its significant influence on our provincial government's ability to address the economic and social challenges it faces. The federal government provides increasingly insufficient funding for social programs and health care. Would the provincial government be at the receiving end of this federal money for these other purposes? Likely not. The other way to ensure adequate revenue is to create jobs and economic growth. However, corporate handouts are not the way forward either; they usually have very few strings attached to the money, including the number of jobs. There is limited checking on whether firms meet the conditions for the government support. Very few of these handouts result in the jobs promised.

What Are the Next steps?

As recommended in the CCPA Alternative Provincial Budget 2013, the provincial government's next steps should be guided by these principles:

Transparency and accountability: All financial details related to corporate subsidies must be publicly disclosed. Corporate secrecy and competitiveness rules are outweighed by the people's need to understand the provisions of any such agreements. They should be given directly by the government through a transparent process and not by arms-length organizations like Nova Scotia Business Inc (NSBI). Politicians are accountable to the voters while the majority of businesspeople on the board of NSBI have both general and specific conflicts of interest.

Ownership stake: Rather than providing giveaways, a better way to invest in a corporation is for the province to take an equity stake in the enterprise. The government did this with the Daewoo plant in Trenton and the LED Roadway lighting in Amherst.³⁸

Sharing the wealth: The wealth and economic output of this province is created by Nova Scotians. Public investments should benefit all Nova Scotians, not contribute to greater inequality. Corporations which receive public dollars must create good jobs across their production or supply chain. They must be responsible environmental stewards and address issues like employment equity and pay equity. In short, corporations seeking public dollars need to give back to the community, and in more than low-wage jobs.

Long-term commitment: Support for capital investment is different from job subsidies. Heavy industry still matters. For example, an investment in a manufacturing plant means long-term stable employment, an investment in a call centre means short-term, low-wage employment. In part, this is because of the capital costs of setting up new enterprises. Manufacturing is about long-term gains to pay off initial capital investments, while the service sector often makes limited investments. Indeed many call centres rent or lease the vast majority of their office space and equipment, meaning there is little long-term stake in the local economy. When corporations invest their own fund in the province, they are more likely to stay and to do business here.

Good job creation: Public funding for private economic development must come with strict job targets. If those targets are not met, there must be consequences. For too long provincial governments have given away money with few strings attached. The current government has started to change

this, but much more is needed to ensure Nova Scotians are the main beneficiaries of public investment.

Guided by these principles next steps would include:

1. Support for the democratic economy: Given the social and economic context outlined and the shortcomings in the government's current approach, the government needs to prioritize forms of economic democracy whether local, employee-owned enterprises, co-operatives or unions in Nova Scotia to ensure they grow and thrive. Helping communities undertake community economic planning on an ongoing basis, instead of crisis-driven, would also help develop these ideas. It should also set up institutions to support these forms of enterprise by, for example, setting up a Cooperative Investment Board. The government should also make it easier still for workers to join unions, including making it easier to organize and develop sectoral bargaining.

2. Shift its approach away from corporate-driven economic development: At the same time as it supports local, community-based initiatives, it needs to ensure that it changes its approach away from corporate-driven economic development, for example by eliminating NSBI.

3. Set up additional public enterprises: Public enterprises can enable a government to ensure that its policy directives in a sector are implemented, and are more accountable to the people in the province. The province should explore opportunities for crown corporations in areas like utilities and natural resources. Saskatchewan and Quebec are good models to consider when looking at public enterprise.

4. Improve minimum labour standards: Nova Scotia's minimum labour standards lag behind almost every other province in the country. The province should overhaul Nova Scotia's Labour Standards Code as recommended in the CCPA "Reversing the War on Workers – Labour Standards Reform in Nova Scotia."³⁹ This is an essential part of ensuring that the jobs that are created are 'good' jobs.

5. Strengthen local procurement and sustainable development policies: The Nova Scotia government needs to strengthen its procurement policy with specific targets for local sourcing, and estimate how much additional funding would be required to enable our public sector institutions (e.g. schools, hospitals) to meet the targets.

6. Investments in Social Infrastructure: One of the best returns on investment for the government is to invest in programs that will benefit Nova Scotians today and will have a significant impact on their future. The investment return including economic growth and jobs created by investing in post-secondary education,⁴⁰ and in early learning and child care, as well as in health and other social services is very significant.⁴¹ **Early Learning and Child Care** is an excellent strategy for economic stimulus. Research overwhelmingly shows that it creates jobs, increases GDP, increases tax revenue, and addresses population decline.⁴² A 2011 report by Robert Fairholm, confirms that expansion in the early learning and care sector in Nova Scotia provides more short-term economic stimulus than other major sectors of the economy. The GDP multiplier (the increase in GDP generated from a dollar increase in output in the early learning and care sector) is \$2.23. This is larger than other sectors, including 67% higher than construction and 112% higher than manufacturing. Furthermore, the employment multiplier (the number of jobs created per million dollars of initial increase in expenditure), is 46.8 jobs per million dollars.⁴³ In Manitoba the economic returns were even higher in rural communities, affirming the essential role that child care can play in regional development.⁴⁴ One estimate of the impact of the Quebec model is that for every \$100 invested in the system, the provincial government received \$104 in return.⁴⁵ Overall, ELCC advances multiple policy priorities and goals: “preparing our future workforce, supporting parents to work or upgrade their skills and strengthening democratic communities.”⁴⁶ It is also an essential part of poverty reduction as discussed in the following section.

Poverty

THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT'S approach to poverty is beginning to scratch the surface on some of the issues facing those living in low income. However, the approach leaves many entrenched in poverty.

The number of people with low incomes in Nova Scotia was 64,000 in 2011, about 7% of the population of the province (using the Low Income Cut-Off after tax measure).⁴⁷ This is a historical low for the province. The historical high (since 1976) was in 1997 when 18.9% of Nova Scotians lived on low income. Between 2010 and 2011 there was a decrease of 7,000 people living in poverty (7.7% were living in low income in 2010). When this government came to office there were 73,000 people living in low income, 8% of the population at the time. It is remarkable that these rates did not increase during the recession in 2008–09.

The most impressive decline in low income rates are for those aged 65 and older. In 2011, only 1.9% of seniors reported living in low income (compared to 3.4% in 2009). The highest poverty rate recorded for seniors was in 1977 when 24.8% of seniors were living on low income in Nova Scotia.

While there has been progress on the reduction in poverty based on this measure of poverty, the pattern depends on which measure of low-income is used. The three that Statistics Canada regularly publishes are the LICO, the Market Basket Measure (MBM) and the Low Income Measure (LIM). They are slightly differently in terms of their thresholds and each has strengths and weaknesses.⁴⁸

The MBM for 2011 shows that 131, 000 Nova Scotians live in low income, having increased slightly in 2009 likely due to the recession and then returned to 2008 levels (14.2% in 2008 and 14.3% in 2011). Using this measure, 9% of seniors cannot afford this basket of goods, and 20.7% of Nova Scotians under 18 years old are living in poverty. This measure is arguably a better indication of low-income than the LICO after tax because it shows how many people are not able to afford a basket of goods that reflects regional costs including child care and transportation (the latter being critical in rural areas where affordable public transit is rarely available).⁴⁹ In contrast, the LICO tells us how many people have an income below which a family will devote 20% more than the average family on necessities of food, shelter and clothing. This measure is based on the 1992 Family Expenditures Survey adjusted for inflation every year (it has not been rebased).

What are the statistics telling us? As one researcher has said of the LICO after tax measure and seniors' poverty rate: "How much of this is due to the improved circumstances of seniors, which are very real, and how much is due to a comparator spending pattern which is almost 20 years old? Based on current measures we can't tell."⁵⁰

One strength of the Low Income Measure — how many people are living below half of the median wage — is that it tells us more about income distribution and inequality. In 1976, 18.5% of the population earned less than half of the median wage versus 13.5% in 2011, almost the same as 1992 at 13.6%; while this is not remarkable progress, it is still significant when one considers the global context of increasing inequality and the recession in 2008.

The government should be cautious about how it measures progress on poverty reduction, and it should also pay attention to the root causes and barriers faced by groups who are more vulnerable to falling into and staying in poverty. The Employment Supports and Income Assistance caseload has changed very little over this period, with a slight increase for some time. In 2007/08 the average monthly caseload was 27,199 and in 2000/01 there was an average monthly caseload of 33,794.⁵¹ In June 2013 the Employment Supports and Income Assistance caseload was 29,103, with 44,606 individual beneficiaries including 12,637 children.⁵²

People with health and long term disability issues, and other barriers to paid employment including full-time care (child or elder) responsibilities, continue to be more vulnerable to poverty. Just about half of the social assistance caseload consists of people with disabilities and multiple barriers to employment.⁵³

Poverty rates are higher for women (who are more often unpaid caregivers), and especially for lone mothers. In 2011, women faced a poverty rate of 7.7% versus 6.2% for men; both men and women saw decreases in poverty from 9.5% for women and 6.9% for men in 2009. Unattached individuals still face a significantly high poverty rate of 22% (down from 26% in 2009).⁵⁴

Children living in female lone-parent families — despite significant decreases since 1997 — continue to experience a much greater likelihood of living in poverty than children living in two-parent families. In 2010, just over one in four (26.7%) children living in female lone parent families lived below the After-Tax LICO.

Aboriginal people experience very high levels of poverty, with child poverty rates as high as 40%, which means that Indigenous children in Canada are over two and a half times more likely to live in poverty than non-Indigenous children.⁵⁵ Recent immigrants and racialized Canadians also face high poverty rates.⁵⁶

One way to measure of the impact of government transfers is to compare poverty rates for all income sources to poverty rates for people receiving market income only. The child poverty rate in 2010 for families on market income excluding government transfers was 25.2% and the rate for those also receiving government transfers was 13%. The rate has improved slightly from 2009 when it was 13.7% and 27.1% for those on market income.⁵⁷ This suggests that government transfers lift almost half of these families out of poverty. Government income support is very important, and clearly when we consider the decline in seniors' poverty, a lot has been done and can be done to reduce poverty.

What Has the Government Done?

Various increases to social assistance and benefits: The current government increased personal allowances for those on income assistance by 22% since 2009. This represents an increase of \$31 per month. In 2010, there was an increase in the income threshold for the Nova Scotia Child Benefit and this benefit has increased by 22% since this government came to power. The government did make a slight increase in the income exemption and increased the cash asset allowance. It also allows income assistance recipients to keep their income tax refund.⁵⁸ The government also expanded eye exam coverage for income assistance recipients.⁵⁹

Introduced new low-income tax credits: The Poverty Reduction Credit of \$200 per year was introduced in 2010 and increased by \$50 in 2012. An Affordable Living Tax Credit was introduced (a quarterly payment attached to GST/HST credit payments in 2010) and in 2011, this tax credit was indexed to inflation and further increased in 2012. The Nova Scotia child benefit and the affordability tax credit are not targeted to those only on ESIA and thus not subject to income clawbacks as is the case with income assistance.

Steadily increased the minimum wage to one of the highest in the country: Despite opposition especially from the small business community, this government has increased the minimum wage by 20% since 2009. The minimum wage increased to \$10.30 per hour on April 1, 2013.⁶⁰ Nova Scotia's rate is now the highest among the 10 provinces.

Investment in skills training and other workplace education programs: As was outlined in the previous section, the government has undertaken important initiatives in this area. Funding in these initiatives is critical to improve labour market productivity and provide more opportunities for those who continue to be kept out of the labour market or marginalized in 'bad' jobs within it.⁶¹

Housing and Homelessness: The government has committed to invest \$500 million in quality, affordable housing with the unveiling of the first-ever housing strategy for Nova Scotia.⁶² The government introduced a housing support worker initiative; in its first 18 months, this program helped 200 homeless find and maintain housing in the HRM.⁶³

Other income support initiatives: The government introduced other initiatives to support low-income Nova Scotians, including: cutting the provincial portion of HST from home heating and children's shoes, clothing and diapers; increasing the Seniors Property Tax rebate for low-income seniors from \$400 to \$800 in 2009;⁶⁴ and refunding provincial income tax paid by seniors who also receive the Guaranteed Income Supplement, starting in 2010.⁶⁵

What Are the Shortcomings?

The Nova Scotia child benefit and new measures such as the poverty reduction and affordability tax credits are important income supports, as is the commitment to index some benefits to the cost of living. However, the income they generate is not sufficient to make a significant impact on poverty.

TABLE 1 2011 Poverty Gaps for Social Assistance Recipients in NS⁶⁶

| Recipient | Total 2011 Welfare Income | MBM Threshold, 2011 | Poverty Gap | Total Welfare Income as % of MBM |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|-------------|----------------------------------|
| Single Employable | \$6,954 | \$17,740 | -\$10,786 | 39% |
| Single Person with a disability | \$9,791 | \$25,084 | -\$15,293 | 39% |
| Lone parent, one child | \$15,588 | \$3,0726 | -\$15,138 | 51% |
| Couple with two children | \$21,919 | \$35,480 | -\$13,561 | 62% |

Indeed, because increases to income assistance rates have been minimal and historically have not been indexed to the cost of living, the incomes of people who must rely entirely on income assistance to survive are well below any low-income measure.

While the province has increased some supports, the increases have not kept up with the increases in the cost of living and therefore the poverty gaps have all gotten worse.⁶⁷ In 2009, a single employable was provided income assistance equal to 41% of the MBM income; it provided 60% to a single person with a disability, 75% to a lone parent one child family and the income support provided to a couple with two children was equal to 68% of the MBM income.⁶⁸

Social assistance should be a real safety net that ensures people can sustain themselves in dignity, eat healthily, live in adequate housing, clothe themselves, and meet other basic needs such as access to transportation and basic communication tools. Not only does it not provide enough income support, the system itself is broken. It is stigmatizing; it robs recipients of their dignity.⁶⁹ It is a system based on exclusion, on ensuring that those in need receive the minimal amount of supports required only after producing mounds of evidence. It ensures that people have to rely on charities to feed their families and cover their basic needs.

Access to a job is not enough to bring families out of poverty. We know, for example, that Nova Scotians struggle to feed their families a nutritious meal whether they are on social assistance or working. There has been a 39.3% increase in the number of Nova Scotians accessing food banks. While 58% of individuals who used food banks in 2012 reported being on income assistance, 13% reported having employment. In addition, while 67% of food bank users report renting their home, 15% report owning their own home.⁷⁰ In Nova Scotia, 65,200 (17.1%) of households were food insecure in 2011, up from 13.5% in 2008, 15.9% in 2009 and 14.9% in 2010. The rate of severe food

insecurity (whereby household members miss meal(s), reduce food intake, or go without food for days) was above the national average at 4.6% or 17,500 households. Alarming close to one in four (23%) Nova Scotian children live in food insecure homes.⁷¹

Some income supports are needs-based and narrowly targeted, reaching very few people in need. For example, people with dependents were not eligible for the Poverty Reduction Credit, you had to be in receipt of income assistance the previous year, and the income threshold for this credit is very low at \$12,000 annual income.⁷² Many people struggling to make ends are not eligible.

The new government tax credits and the small increases in social assistance do not provide enough income support to lift people out of poverty or to prevent them from falling back in. Outreach and navigator-type programs are a critical part of what is needed to help access the services available, but the government must ensure that there is more affordable and accessible public services including supportive housing and mental health and addiction services. Priority needs to be placed on ensuring that the most marginalized and those facing complex barriers have access to the supports they need. These populations may never be able to be employed and may never be able to live in the private for-profit housing market.

What Are the Next Steps?

1. Address the Poverty Gap left by the Income Assistance System: Fixing the broken social assistance system should be a priority. At the very least and as an immediate step, both the personal allowance and shelter allowances should be substantially increased to address gaps between assistance and real life needs as reflected in the Market Basket Measure. The shelter allowance does not reflect actual shelter costs, which leaves families making difficult often using their food budget to pay for shelter costs. It is essential that those living in poverty also have access to the special needs they require.⁷³ Part of addressing the poverty gap should include increasing the Affordable Living Tax Credit as the one income support not targeted only to income assistance recipients.

2. Decrease Income Clawback in the Income Assistance System: The ESIA claw-back provision on earned income unfairly penalizes income assistance recipients when they gain paid work. Currently, those who apply to ESIA applicants have no earnings exemption – when an employed per-

son applies to ESIA, all of their earnings, no matter how low, are taken into account to determine a household's eligibility for assistance. Because ESIA payment levels are so low, families who are working, but not able to pay for their basic needs (food, shelter and clothing), still may not be eligible for assistance. Those in receipt of ESIA have 70% of their net wages deducted from their basic entitlement; the government only allows the ESIA recipient to keep the first \$150/month plus 30% of their earnings. The only exception is for the small number of recipients with disabilities who are in supported employment who can keep \$300/month plus the 30%. This clawback is unfair and a significant barrier to recipients who want to move into the labour market, especially women who tend to do more part-time work than men. **All recipients should retain \$300/month plus 50% of their earnings.** A more reasonable earnings exemption would help workers to remain in or re-enter the work force and this should also apply to those who are applying for ESIA as well as recipients. ESIA can bridge the transition to a better job and lower the barriers as the recipient tries to ease into the workforce.

3. Develop and Implement a Poverty Elimination Action Plan: Using targets, benchmarks, timelines and measures in a Poverty Elimination Action Plan, the government should demonstrate that it is closing the gap between welfare rates and the actual cost of living that includes a nutritious diet, clothing and footwear, shelter, transportation, and other necessary goods and services; ensure that recipients moving from welfare to work are adequately prepared, supported and significantly better off as they transition to the labour market; and that those unable to participate in the labour market receive the supports and special assistance they need to live healthy lives. In the long run, the province should be working with other provinces and the federal government to create a **national guaranteed basic income** to lift all Canadians out of poverty.

4. Public services help level the playing field: In addition to income, it is critical that those who have the lowest disposable income can rely on good quality public services. Public services help ensure that those who need services are not penalized for where they live, their race, sex, or gender or their income level, how able bodied they are, or whether they are healthy (mentally or physically). It is especially important that these services exist over the life span and as early as possible. Ultimately, services should be universally accessible.

One example of a public service that could be developed is a public system of early learning and child care. Childcare in Nova Scotia is currently

provided through a market-based approach, which results in high costs for parents, and unmet demand (in other words, not enough affordable child-care places in the province).⁷⁴ The Nova Scotia government has focused much of its additional funding for child care on the provision of 1000 more subsidies since 2009. However, Nova Scotia still has a very low rate of children receiving subsidies as a percentage of regulated spaces — in 2009, it was 21%, rising to 27% in 2012.⁷⁵ Most provinces are in the 30–40% range.

In addition, we have a very narrowly targeted system designed to ensure that the least number of people are eligible.⁷⁶ A critical problem with providing subsidies in a market-based system is that subsidies do not guarantee either accessibility or affordability. Public investments aimed at poverty reduction for families must also include access to a well-designed, affordable early childhood education system. More generally, a targeted system of income supports, rather than the development of high-quality universal public services, leaves too many people in a trap where they are unable to afford to transition to paid employment because they will have a significant amount of their earnings clawbacked, lose child care subsidies, pharmaceutical, dental care coverage or access to other essential services.

5. Creation of good jobs: A comprehensive poverty elimination action plan must include a focus on the creation of good jobs. As such, the recommendations in the jobs and the economy section of this report apply here as well. Increasing union density, stronger labour standards, more funding for skills training and workplace education, and continued implementation of labour market strategies centred on ensuring more opportunities for those who are underemployed or historically unemployed (First nations, African Nova Scotians, women). Access to better paying, more secure jobs with benefits, will all go a long way to reduce poverty and address income inequality. Investing in social infrastructure also creates good, public sector jobs.

Occupational Health and Safety

IN NOVA SCOTIA, occupational or industrial injuries and deaths continue to be a problem. While the province is proud of decreasing the percentage of injuries by .06% from 2011 to 2012, the death rate increased by nearly 16%.⁷⁷ Workers Compensation Board (WCB) loss time claims and the average duration of these claims remain higher for Nova Scotia than the regional (Atlantic Canada) and national averages for each of the last five years.⁷⁸

The Workers' Compensation Board of Nova Scotia's *2012 Annual Report*⁷⁹ notes 32 workplace fatalities (up from 27 in 2011), and the average age of workers succumbing to a workplace fatality was 62.⁸⁰ The number of injuries on the job fell in all age categories except for workers aged 55 and over. In fact 49 more workers over age 55 were injured in 2012 compared to 2011.⁸¹

These startling facts — that the average age of a person who dies on the job is 62, and that workplace injuries increase with workers' age — suggests that older workers hang on to their jobs for too long, even if they are physically demanding and potentially dangerous, likely because of financial need. This financial need could reflect the lack of adequate pensions, especially in private sector jobs such as construction, hotel and restaurant, and cleaning. Statistics Canada reports that 60% of Canadian workers have no pension plan other than the statutory Canada Pension.⁸² In addition, part-time workers often are not able to pay into pension plans, or would have very limited pensions based on earnings. Indeed, pensions are so low that

about 42% of Nova Scotians receive GIS because their incomes fall below \$15,000 for singles, and \$23,000 for a couple.⁸³ Not only do we need to consider the problems of low income due to reliance on CPP, we have to consider the thousands of Nova Scotians who hold part-time jobs, and who pay much smaller amounts into CPP and private pensions (if they have them).

What Has the Government Done?

Here are some highlights of key initiatives undertaken by the current government, in reverse chronological order:

Consolidation of Regulations: In June 2013, separate regulations made under the Occupational Health and Safety Act were consolidated into the Workplace Health and Safety Regulations. This consolidation makes it easier for workers to access information on their rights and on their employers' obligations.

New Protections: These new regulations passed include new protections for workers who work at heights (employer has to demonstrate sufficient training was provided) and workers on public roads or parking lots (employer must complete hazard assessment and have written safe-work procedures).

Commitment to more Inspections: In June 2013, the government also announced that they would perform more surprise workplace inspections and it launched a public education campaign to encourage people who see unsafe conditions or workers doing unsafe tasks to call a telephone hotline.

Strengthening Prosecution: The province is working with the Public Prosecution Service to pursue harsher penalties for employers with serious and repeat offences. In May 2013, the government announced that it is designating one specialist crown prosecutor to be responsible for occupational health and safety prosecutions.

Fully Compensate Widows: in April 2013, the government amended the Workers' Compensation Act to fully compensate about 100 women who remarried prior to 1985, after their first husbands had died in industrial accidents.⁸⁴ In 1999, the province changed legislation so remarried women continued to receive their survivor's benefits, retroactive to the date of their remarriages. However, benefits for women who remarried before 1985 were only retroactive to 1999.⁸⁵

Five-Year Strategy: In March of 2013, the government released a new five-year workplace joint safety strategy between the Department and the WCB. This strategy lays the groundwork for fundamental improvements to how workplace safety is perceived, monitored, and enforced. The plan includes a proposal to enact regulations for mandatory training for workers on Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committees, which will reinforce the Internal Responsibility System that underpins the Occupational Health and Safety Act.⁸⁶

In 2011, the government **increased fines** for employers who break the Occupational Health and Safety Act resulting in injury or death to workers. When an injury or death occurs on the job, employers must pay a minimum fine of \$250,000 increasing to \$500,000 for any additional offence.⁸⁷ There is already provision for employers having to serve up to two years in prison for violating the OH&S Act; to date no one has been jailed for that.⁸⁸

New Penalties: In January 2010, the government changed the OH&S Regulations to levy penalties against employers, supervisors and employees who violate the Act or Regulations even if it is the first occurrence, as well as for employers who disobey safety orders issued by provincial occupational health and safety officers. Here are some examples of typical orders: ensure the provision of respiratory protective equipment; train staff on safety procedures; prevent violence in the workplace.⁸⁹ If there is no injury, administrative penalties for an employee who ignores an order starts at \$100.00, for the supervisor \$250.00 and the employer \$500.00 for the first offence. It increases for subsequent offences. If an injury does take place, or there is potential for injury, the fines double, and can be tripled for subsequent offences.⁹⁰ In July 2013 the government released a discussion paper on proposed improvements to the administrative penalty system based on feedback from the public and stakeholders. The proposals include important improvements including a more efficient appeal system, consistency in the issuance of fines, and ensuring monies collected through fines are reinvested in health and safety initiatives.

What Are the Shortcomings?

The current government made important changes to the Occupational Health and Safety Act and its Regulations. However, enforcement is crucial. In 2012–13, the province conducted 2,481 job-site inspections, but given the

accident and workplace death rates alone it is clear that more are needed. It is very concerning to hear of the number of inspectors who have quit their jobs. According to the *Chronicle Herald*, 18 inspectors have quit over the last two years.⁹¹ With thousands of workplaces in NS — many of which are small and scattered — the worry is that many go without health and safety inspection year after year with only about 34 inspectors on the job in the province at any one time.⁹²

What Are the Next Steps?

There is more the NS government could do to improve health and safety for workers. The following recommendations could make a significant difference:

1. Make registration with Workers Compensation universal and ensure consistency with other Canadian jurisdictions: In Nova Scotia, many employers are exempt from registering for Workers' Compensation. Indeed, although there is a long list of industries that require registration, there are glaring exclusions. These include: universities and schools, hospitals and clinics, police forces and farms. While these employers can opt-in, there is no requirement to do so. In the universities, for example, often only workers in the physical plant, custodians or cleaners are covered by WCB — not the hundreds of other employees on the campus. This is the case at Saint Mary's University; with more than 500 employees on the campus, only the 60 plus in facilities management are covered by Workers' Compensation.

In other provinces, notably Saskatchewan, registering with Workers' Compensation is the norm, not the exception; virtually all employees are covered. This system of Workers Compensation is needed to safeguard the welfare and benefits for injured workers.

In addition, the government should consider how to **expand coverage**; For those workers who are covered by the Worker's Compensation Board in Nova Scotia, their coverage for injuries resulting from stress and mental injury is not on par with other jurisdictions. All Canadian jurisdictions except Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia recognize and compensate gradual onset stress as a workplace injury.⁹³ While the Workers Compensation Board has made recent policy changes to recognize acute traumatic stress (such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) the current definition of "accident" in the Workers Compensation Act recognizes only acute traumatic events and therefore denies coverage to workers who suffer from gradual onset stress.

2. Ensure that nonphysical workplace violence is a violation of Health and Safety: Manitoba and Ontario outlaw bullying in their Health and Safety Acts, and Quebec and BC prohibit it under their Labour Standards acts.⁹⁴ Saskatchewan's wording in its Occupational Health and Safety Act is especially useful as it distinguishes between harassment which breaches human rights such as religion, gender, sex etc. and personal harassment such as bullying, insults, refusal to work or co-operate with co-workers. In addition, the prohibition against harassment and bullying applies at employer-sponsored events which are often outside the workplace and normal work hours. It also applies to harassment by customers, clients or contractors.

The Saskatchewan law grew out of the controversial case of Murdoch Carriere, a provincial government manager in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan.⁹⁵ At a criminal trial he was convicted of assault but cleared of two sexual assaults on former employees; still, 8 women employees complained about his bullying behaviour. The government allowed him to resign and after he launched a lawsuit against the government, the government settled out of court paying him \$275,000. The 9 women who suffered harassment were only compensated \$15,000 each.⁹⁶ As a result of this case, the Saskatchewan government made workplace bullying illegal under the Occupational Health and Safety Act in 2007.⁹⁷

While physical violence in the workplace is now against the NS Occupational Health and Safety Act, there is no mention of workplace bullying or personal harassment. Other jurisdictions, like the federal sector⁹⁸ have defined violence broadly to include non-physical mental injury.

Nova Scotia can ensure that workplace bullying and harassment are considered violations under the Health and Safety Act by either expanding the “violence in the workplace” regulations to include bullying and harassment or by removing the word “physical” from the definition of violence

To truly protect workers from bullying and violence the regulations should be amended to require a qualified third party investigation when there are allegations of violence within the workplace. In most facets of Health and Safety an internal approach is effective; the workplace parties know their workplace and its nuances better than anyone else. However, when the hazard is violence or bullying and the source is one of the workplace parties, attempts at internal resolution are unlikely to succeed.

3. Pass Regulations to the Occupational Health and Safety Act to protect workers who work in isolation or alone: In Saskatchewan, similar

legislation dubbed “Jimmy’s Law” was passed in the wake of the 2011 case of a gas station attendant who was killed as he worked the ‘graveyard’ shift.⁹⁹ The Regulations spell out safe cash-handling processes, “use of video cameras, a check-in system, and a personal emergency transmitter available to all employees working in late night retail.”¹⁰⁰

In Nova Scotia, under the previous Conservative government, MLA Keith Colwell introduced a private member’s bill, Bill 18 in Fall 2007, to amend the Occupational Health and Safety Act.¹⁰¹ The amendment called for safety measures to apply to workers working alone or “in isolation” in late night hours, in retail premises such as gas stations and convenience stores. The amendments included checks on the person’s safety, organizing contact people for the worker and steps to eliminate certain hazards. But Bill 18 stalled at first reading.¹⁰²

Bill 18 was inspired by the horrific and brutal attack on a woman, who worked alone at night at a gas station in Dartmouth, NS in August 2007.¹⁰³

These three recommendations are based on laws and regulations in other provinces. Our minimum wage is above the median for all Canadian jurisdictions; our health and safety laws should be held at least to that standard.

4. Provision of Better Jobs: The average age of workplace death in Nova Scotia raises a red flag pointing to root causes of injuries as well as death. Strengthening of occupational health and safety legislation, regulations and enforcement, is only part of what is required to prevent the injuries and deaths. Workers need to have access to more full-time jobs with security, more unionized jobs where workers have more protection and where workers are provided more of a voice in collectively managing issues in the workplace. Providing adequate compensation and benefits including sick benefits as well as strengthening the CPP can provide workers with safer and healthier choices.

Health Care

PUBLIC HEALTH CARE is often the number one priority of residents in Nova Scotia. From prenatal to end-of-life care, Nova Scotians properly expect high quality public health care that is accessible when needed. The health care file has by far been the current government's strongest portfolio. With a commitment to public-sector innovation, the government has successfully developed new models of care and expanded access to health care.

The government has taken the health care portfolio seriously and made strategic investments in people's health.

What Has the Government Done?

Collaborative Emergency Centres: Based on the Ross report,¹⁰⁴ the provincial government introduced an innovative, team-based approach to providing health care that is improving rural access and reducing ER closures. This model is now being exported across the country as other provinces try to tackle some of these challenges.¹⁰⁵ There have been challenges as the centres were introduced, but overall the model is sound.

New legislation: The province has passed some of the strongest legislation in the country to protect the future of public health care and stop private, for-profit corporations from setting up clinics here.¹⁰⁶

Nurse Practitioners: Funding has been put in place for additional nurse practitioners. Nurse practitioners work in collaboration with a physician, and often with a broader team of health care workers to improve access to primary and preventative care. The government has also added nurse practitioners to long-term care facilities¹⁰⁷ to improve care for seniors.

First mental health care strategy: Estimates suggest that more than 180,000 Nova Scotians experience mental health issues. Many suffer alone or in silence. In 2012 the government released the first-ever mental health strategy and invested millions in mental health services in a five-year plan.¹⁰⁸

Reduced ambulance fees: The government reduced ambulance fees for people living in long-term care facilities, those with mobility issues, and low-income individuals.¹⁰⁹

Prioritize oral health: The government will hire a Chief Dental Officer and it has expanded basic dental coverage to 40,000 plus kids. The government increased the age limit for the Children's Oral Health Programme, from 10 to 13 years of age, given up to 40,000 children access to basic dental care.¹¹⁰ When the program was originally created, it insured all children, in the 1970s it was reduced to children 16 and under. In the 1990s it was reduced to children 12 and under, and then to children 10 and under. These cuts resulted in thousands of children losing access to basic dental care. The government's action restores coverage to thousands of kids, but thousands more still lack basic dental coverage. In addition, it provided additional funding to allow the the IWK to expand dental surgery for children.¹¹¹

Insulin pumps: The province is providing funding for about 1,000 young people with diabetes from ages one to twenty-five to receive insulin pumps.¹¹²

Help for autistic children: The province is investing to ensure all pre-school age autistic children have access to Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention. Previously under 50% of children who needed access to this service received it.¹¹³

Fair Drug Pricing Act: The province capped the cost of generic drugs at 35% of brand name drugs, reducing the cost for consumers and for public pharmacare plans. Today, seniors pay less per prescription.¹¹⁴

What Are the Shortcomings?

At the end of the day, many of the problems in the public health care system are related to lack of sufficient funding. This stems from chronic underfunding by the federal government. Originally when Medicare was created, the federal government was to cover 50% of the costs of public health care, 1 in every 2 dollars. Today it provides around 18%, one in every 6 dollars. This funding gap is a major reason for the problems in the public health care system. And, it is only going to get worse with the federal government cutting \$21 million from public health care between 2017–24.¹¹⁵ By 2024, Nova Scotia will receive \$157 million a year less in federal transfers.¹¹⁶

The government in Nova Scotia could be doing more to use its resources more effectively and efficiently by investing in primary health care that ensures that the most appropriate care provider is able to provide the most appropriate care, which also needs to include more of a focus on prevention, and the social determinants of health, as well as case management for those with chronic diseases. Strides have been made, to ensure nurse practitioners and midwives provide primary care, but more could be done. Priority needs to be placed on the provision of care closest to the community that ensures transparency and accountability for the best allocation of resources and most effective health care utilization based on the “values, strengths, resources and expectations of the community.”¹¹⁷

What Are the Next Steps?

Health care is expensive, whether we pay for it public or privately. We can all either collectively cover the cost health care, or we can privatize it and make people pay out of pocket directly. Increasing the share of private expenditures will not solve the problems in the health system and indeed, is likely to make them worse.¹¹⁸ With a strong public health care system we all receive the care we need, and it costs all of us less money.¹¹⁹ Investments in the following are key next steps:

- 1. Long Term Care:** The population of seniors is growing and we need to invest in more long-term care facilities. Previous governments allowed private, for-profit operators to take over most of the long-term care sector, a major mistake that allows public dollars to flow to private profits instead of care for seniors. This must be reversed and future long-term care facili-

ties should be built on a non-profit basis, funded by the province and controlled by the local community.

2. 2014 Health Accord: The provincial government has spoken out clearly against the federal government's cut to public health care. All four Atlantic Premiers have come out against the cuts and called on the federal government to negotiate with the provinces on the future of public health care.¹²⁰ The \$36 billion in cuts coming from the federal government could devastate the public health care system across the country.

3. Community Health Centres: As recommended by the Nova Scotia Alternative Budget 2013,¹²¹ the province should invest in a network of Community Health Centres across the provinces. CHCs are designed to improve preventative and primary health care services in their community. CHC's are democratically run by the patients who use the services and the workers who provide them. This allows services to be tailored to local needs and gives the flexibility to meet those needs, including the needs of the most vulnerable.¹²²

4. Reduce poverty and inequality, address health inequities: Poverty is estimated to cost \$2.3 billion per year in Nova Scotia. \$600 million per year is the cost to the government of Nova Scotia and most of that is in health care.¹²³ Higher socio-economic status is associated with greater access to resources and better health status.¹²⁴ There is also an association between the degree of social inequality in a society and mortality and morbidity rates.¹²⁵ To address health inequities is to address "the unfair and avoidable difference in health status" as a moral imperative that will save money in the long run. Investments in the social determinants of health are investments in "the conditions in which people are born, live, work and age, including the health system."¹²⁶

Nova Scotia Power

NOVA SCOTIA POWER was privatized by the Conservative government in 1992, for less than half of what it was worth.¹²⁷ In 1998, the Liberal government passed a new law allowing the creation of Emera,¹²⁸ the corporation that currently owns Nova Scotia Power.¹²⁹ This new law allowed Emera to use the profits it made from Nova Scotia Power to buy up other electrical utilities in New England and the Caribbean, expanding their corporate empire. Today, Emera is a multi-billion dollar company with operations in Canada, the U.S. and the Caribbean. Nova Scotia Power is a private, for-profit corporation wholly owned by Emera, with 488,000 customers in Nova Scotia. It has made over \$2 billion since it was privatized in 1992, and brings in over \$110 million a year in direct profits for its shareholders. Recently, Nova Scotia Power requested and was given a major rate hike by the Utility and Review Board.¹³⁰ Nova Scotians currently pay among the highest electricity rates in the country.¹³¹ Change is seriously needed.

What Has the Government Done?

Capped executive compensation: The provincial government capped the amount of money the ratepayers of Nova Scotia contribute toward executives at Nova Scotia Power Inc (NSPI). Although Nova Scotia Power executive compensation has now been capped, it is still at the highest for the public sector.¹³² The government regulation still allows the Board of Emera

to pay the CEO of Nova Scotia Power more than that, but it must come out of their profits, not out of ratepayers' pockets.

Reduced Nova Scotia Power's rate of return: Nova Scotia Power has a legislated rate of return that they are authorized¹³³ to make each year, no matter the cost to residents or the quality of service. The provincial government reduced this rate slightly from 9.6% to 9.2%.^{134,135} Indeed, this is the lowest rate it's ever been, even though interest rates are about half this level

Environmental Protections: This government created some of the strongest environmental protections in North America and has received a Climate Change Leadership award.¹³⁶ Nova Scotia's Renewable Electricity Plan¹³⁷ includes a legal requirement for 25 per cent renewable electricity supply by 2015, using only made-in-Nova-Scotia sources, and established a further target of 40 per cent by 2020. These changes help move our province toward green and renewable energy and creates good jobs in a greener economy. This is a move to transition to a sustainable future, which should stabilize rates in the long term and help bring our rates in line with the rest of the country. As part of this plan, the government created Efficiency Nova Scotia,¹³⁸ a non-profit corporation designed to help Nova Scotians reap the benefits of energy efficiency. Efficiency Nova Scotia operates arms-length from the government and is not part of Emera.

What Are the Shortcomings?

The main shortcoming, and the one that underpins all others, is that the current government has not seriously considered other models for electricity, including public ownership or cooperative ownership. NS Power Inc. is a barrier to achieving the government's renewable energy goals. The government has initiated many different programs that are to work side by side with NSPI, but in the end are compromised by the lack of control that the Nova Scotia government has over the utility. One example of this limitation is the province's Community Feed-In Tariff, or COMFIT. It is designed for locally-based renewable electricity projects. COMFIT projects must be community-owned and connected at the distribution level to NSPI. This program is unable to provide enough flexibility for small community organizations interested in developing local electricity including solar power because of what NSPI is willing to pay for the electricity.¹³⁹

The Nova Scotia government is limited in terms of what it can do to address the costs of power and the challenges faced by those Nova Scotians who struggle to pay their bills. It is unacceptable that Nova Scotia is one of the few provinces where it is still legal to shut people's power and heat off in the winter, which NSPI does on an arbitrary basis.¹⁴⁰ In attempts to address the high price of energy, the provincial government also eliminated the provincial portion of the HST on home heating as a way to decrease electricity bills. Unfortunately this is a very expensive subsidy to all Nova Scotians,¹⁴¹ and the focus on prices produces a trade-off between energy costs and the environment given that the cheapest energy source is coal.¹⁴² The government needs to provide universal access to green energy cost savings opportunities, which would require developing energy policies that address energy affordability and social security, as well as environmental goals.

As a regulated monopoly, NSPI will do only what it is told to do by the Utility and Review Board (URB). A public utility would still be challenged to achieve a balance among often competing of affordability, public ownership, and responsible environmental stewardship. However, this is still “preferable to a privatized for-profit ethos, ample dividends for foreign shareholders, and escalating salaries for executives – all set against the backdrop of the province’s continuing reliance on coal-powered electrical generation.”¹⁴³

What Are the Next Steps?

1. Public ownership: The problems with Nova Scotia Power cannot be adequately addressed without a move away from private ownership. Nova Scotia and Alberta are the only two provinces in the country without some form of public electricity utility. In every other province, these utilities work to develop the economy, provide good jobs, and keep rates low for consumers. Nova Scotia’s experiment with private, for-profit electricity has been a failure. Its service is shoddy at best.¹⁴⁴ It does not operate in the public interest.¹⁴⁵ CCPA Research Associate, Christopher Majka has written on opportunities and potential pitfalls of public ownership, and concludes on the need to return at minimum the electrical grid to democratic, public control.¹⁴⁶

The provincial government should commission a public consultation on Nova Scotia Power, with the goal of developing a strategy to bring all or parts of the utility back under public ownership. It is in the public interest to ensure that not only is the province working to mitigate greenhouse gases and address climate change, it must also increase domestic energy security,¹⁴⁷ while creating sustainable prosperity for all Nova Scotians.

Conclusion

CCPA REPORTS ARE designed to promote more transparent and accountable public policy, by asking questions and making recommendations that help advance a more participatory, evidence-based, public policy process.

The CCPA is a non-profit, charitable organization, funded by our members (individuals and organizations). The CCPA is non-partisan. This report, like all other reports published by the CCPA, assesses government policy and makes policy recommendations. No matter the political party that forms government, the lens used to undertake a critical analysis of government policy and to develop policy recommendations remains the same. The three questions that guide our work are: Do the public policies (and our policy recommendations) advance social and economic justice? Do they advance environmental sustainability?

Regardless of expectations based on political party stripe, once a party forms government it is expected to govern to advance the quality of life for all the citizens of the province and especially those most in need of government assistance. All governments must be expected to make strides to protect the environment and ensure we have a future. All governments are expected to ensure that all its decisions are transparent, so that citizens can hold them accountable.

The assessment in this report highlights some of the positive steps that the current government has done, but also underlines the shortcomings in its approach, and makes recommendations to address those shortcomings and advance a socially and economically just, as well as environmentally

sustainable agenda. Setting aside government spin, we recognize that the government had a specific platform that it ran on including cutting the HST on home-heating (which the CCPA has not supported as effective policy)¹⁴⁸ and balancing the budget in four years (a timeline we also did not support). Also, the current government faced political, social and economic challenges when it came to office.

Our reports, over the past four years, have been critical of the current government's overarching focus on achieving a fiscal balance and cautioned the government not to go down the path that would lead to program and service cuts, given the social deficit that exists. We produced alternative provincial budgets every year to provide feasible recommendations to advance this agenda. We point readers to the analysis in those budgets and the recommendations made in them for a full roadmap. This report tackled new issues not addressed in previous budgets (occupational health and safety, NS Power). This report also spent more time illuminating the government's track record on other issues that have figured in alternative budgets and numerous publications (poverty, jobs and the economy, health care).

As we cautioned in the introduction, this is not a report card per se. It does however highlight progress on some indicators, including senior's poverty. Any progress on poverty is impressive given the challenges posed by recession, which saw unemployment rise and also given the narrowing of eligibility for unemployment insurance (pressures that would increase the social assistance caseload). The current government has also been willing to take a different approach on economic interventions, taking a stake in some enterprises, while supporting community-based non-profit initiatives including social enterprises and community transportation initiatives. Supporting more democratic forms of economic activity, whether co-ops, or public-stakes, or facilitating unionization is critical to address income inequality and reduce poverty. Doing things differently in health care has been a priority as well, with the establishment of Collaborative Emergency Health Centres. The advances the government made on Occupational Health and Safety laid the ground-work for more improvements and protections that indicate a willingness to tackle some of the root causes of the problems.

The government's ability to make significant progress on all of these issues does depend on whether it has the resources to do so; does it have the revenue to ensure regulation, enforcement, public services, or public funding is available to support reducing poverty and inequality and advancing the quality of life in our province? Making our tax system more progressive is an

important step. The CCPA-NS will continue to work to hold the government to account on these issues no matter which party wins the next election.

Notes

- 1** For a description of the key goals and tools of neoliberalism, see Jim Stanford, *Economics For Everyone*, p. 48 (Fernwood, 2008).
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