

## CARE PANEL SPEECH (FINAL) 11, 2020

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***(CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY)***

### **INTRO**

Hello and thank you for the invitation to today's event.

I also want to thank CARE and Mun for hosting these events and having this important, if not sometimes difficult, discussions.

In looking at today's line-up, you can likely guess that some of us don't necessarily always get along or view the world through the same colour glasses.

While we don't always agree, I think I can say that everyone in this room here today shares one special interest – the success of this province and its people. We are all passionate about this province – it's part of why we all do what we do and why we are all here today.

Bottom line - despite the challenges that our province and our people face, we are extremely lucky to call this place home and despite the current challenges, there is so much potential – if we do things right.

We must all work together to ensure that we are doing all that we can to leave behind a better province than the one we inherited. That is our shared responsibility – and that should be our North Star; it should guide every decision that we make.

**The Power of the Public Sector**

Only a few short weeks ago, most of the Eastern part of this province was hit by a brutal storm. Given the impacts of climate change, we can expect more of these extreme weather events in the future.

We are a resilient, hardy, caring and empathetic people and I think that was on full display here during the storm and the resulting cleanup.

What was also very clearly on display is the vital importance that the public service and public sector workers play in our province.

Workers braving brutal storm conditions to deliver healthcare, snowplow operators working 16-hour shifts to clear roads, and the list goes on and on. These workers do this every single day, but their importance and professionalism was on full display during the storm.

I shudder to think about how we would have made it through the storm and the state of emergency with an even more whittled down, beleaguered, and overworked public service.

**FINANCIAL SITUATION OF THE PROVINCE**

While I am first and foremost a labour leader who has a job to represent our members, I am also a person who lives, works, and raises a family here in this province.

This is my province, too.

I have a responsibility to represent my members, but I also have a responsibility to ensure that the province functions to its fullest and provides opportunities, good jobs, strong public services for our members now and for our members into the future.

I am fully aware of the financial situation of the province.

Our union and our bargaining teams have made difficult decisions in recent years to balance the needs, wants, and wishes of our members with the fiscal reality. Our members have helped to improve the situation of the province.

Just recently, and an effort to provide much-needed stability to our province on a labour relations and economic front, we negotiated a contract extension which was recently accepted by 15 of our public sector bargaining units.

Our members have helped to contribute, they've played their part, but we need to find balance – we cannot simply balance the books on the backs of public sector workers, their families, and the services that we all depend on.

The public services contribute greatly to our province; they are the foundation upon which our society is built – both socially and economically.

### **THE PEOPLE AND SERVICES BEHIND THE NUMBERS**

I have been the President of NAPE for a little over four years. In that time I have visited over 200 communities and countless workplaces across this province.

In my travels, I have heard from workers, town counsellors, concerned citizens, and representatives of various NGOs and everyone in between.

It's easy to sit in a board room in downtown St. John's or the Confederation Building and talk about and contemplate cuts and layoffs, office closures, or service reductions.

It's entirely another matter to see what the impact is on regular people in their homes, workplaces and communities.

Behind the graphs and numbers and FTEs there is a real person. Behind every cut there is a service that someone depends on to make their life a little better, a little easier, a little longer.

There is a human element in all of this. We must not lose sight of that.

## **SIZE OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR**

Our province is facing some difficult decisions in the coming months and years.

However, we must ensure that we are dealing with the issues we face in a reasonable and measured way.

Our highly rural population, our aging population, poor health indicators, struggles to attract and retain immigrants, the recent decline in revenues and the deficit, to name a few of the more pressing and immediate challenges.

So, how do we tackle these problems?

Well, I would argue that slashing and burning is not the answer. There are real and measurable ripple effects to drastic cuts in the public sector. We must be careful to ensure that the medicine is not worse than the disease.

It's nothing new for conservative and neo-liberal groups and organizations to advocate for the decimation of public services, wholesale layoffs, and privatization of public services.

Trim the fat, streamline, right size, etc. - we've heard the terminology. And it sounds fine on the surface.

However, you must think about the absolute havoc that drastic cuts and layoffs would create in our province: thousands of jobs gone, clinics, hospitals, offices, and public services shut down, a massive increase in income inequality, a sharp increase in unemployment, deep cuts to education and healthcare, and little to no opportunities for youth to stay, work, and thrive in the province.

So, let's dig a little deeper on the size of the public service.

The simple numbers of how many people work in government in 2020 vs. 2003 (which is a common reference point) doesn't tell the whole story.

From 2013 to 2016, we have seen hundreds and hundreds of front line workers laid off in multiple departments. Budget 2013 contained over 1000 layoffs alone. The 2016 budget saw over 650 people lose their jobs. This doesn't include the layoffs or the positions left vacant in between those budgets.

When you dig a little deeper still, you will find that many departments have actually shrunk since 2003, in some cases, quite dramatically.

We must also keep in mind that prior to 2003 the public service had just gone through years of being cut to the bone, so to compare the numbers to that year also muddies the waters.

We are a large and complex province. Our public service needs to be properly resourced to ensure that the needs of the province are met – to drive our economy and to care for our people.

The public and private sectors are intertwined; public spending has a multiplier effect, creating jobs and the infrastructure and support necessary for a well-functioning economy. Simply put, public sector employment supports private-sector jobs. Public sector employees spend their money in their home communities, which in turn, supports the private sector.

So, while we must be cognizant of the province's ledger, we must not be so short-sighted as to cause long term and lasting damage to our province via crippling austerity measures.

As the saying goes: a hatchet is a poor tool to dig yourself out of a hole.

## **AUSTERITY**

A broad range of leading economists, even the International Monetary Fund (not the most progressive of think tanks), have come to the conclusion that austerity policies do more harm than good.

On top of this, we must think about the disproportionate way in which austerity measures impact our provinces most vulnerable.

Not only does NL have significant income inequality, but women, indigenous people, minorities and other vulnerable groups experience this inequality the most. Austerity budgets impact the poor and working-class families disproportionately, and in particular, they impact women more than men.

If you think we can cut public services, if you think our public services are bloated, if you think there are too many public sector workers, if you think we can cut jobs, then I plead with you to step away from the spreadsheets, the formulas, and the FTEs and spend a day with the workers that make up our union – in our Dickens-era prison, in our long term care homes, in our labs, our hospitals, our schools, in the plows that help you get to work, in the planes that put out forest fires, in our courtrooms, in our streets, and in our offices where they are constantly asked to do more with less.

Sit down with me and take the calls from workers that are burnt out, stressed out, dealing with work-related mental health injuries and PTSD. With the workers who have given just about every piece of themselves to their jobs and the people in their care, who've broken their bodies and their minds dealing with what they do every day at work.

You do that for one day and I'm sure you'll see the whole situation in a new light.

That's all I ask. Behind every one of the numbers is a real person just trying to do right by the people they serve, their families, and their communities.

Think about what they did during the storm and what we applauded them for, what we were all so proud of – and then realize they do that every day with little to no fanfare or praise.

## **PRIVATIZATION:**

Beneath the thin veneer of buzz words like collaboration, innovation and modernization there is a very clear agenda to cut and privatize public services – and who stands to benefit financially from such a move, I wonder?

In almost every example, governments and lobby groups argue that privatization is ‘innovative’ and ‘more efficient’, but the real-world experience shows that the opposite is true.

The Ontario Auditor General released a damning report about privatization in that province, saying that the project’s cost over **\$8 BILLION** more than the public option. The list of problems, in Canada alone, goes on and on and on.

Privatization has primarily been about private investors and companies dipping their hands in the public purse, at the expense of taxpayers.

There are many areas in which governments have moved to privatization as their economic saviour. Let’s pick out a couple.

### **Snow clearing**

Ontario’s Auditor General says that roads are less safe since privatization –it’s taking twice as long to clear the highways and far less salt and sand is being used.

Investigations are uncovering hundreds of shortcomings.

### **Long Term Care**



Research shows us that staffing levels and hours of care are higher in public long-term care facilities than in private facilities. Public facilities perform better than private on a range of quality and outcome measures includes rates of pressure ulcers, weight loss, nutrition and hydration, and restraint use. Over-medication is also more of an issue in private facilities.

A study of long-term care facilities in Ontario found that for-profit facilities have significantly higher rates of both resident death and hospital admissions.

## **Liquor**

In the last five years alone, this province received over **\$700 million from the NLC**.

Since privatization, Alberta has foregone almost **\$2 billion in tax revenue**, despite increases in per capita alcohol consumption. A review found liquor prices were higher, on average, in the two privatized provinces – BC and Alberta. Apart from the economic impact, research shows that privatization of liquor stores has profound social and public health consequences – drunk driving, domestic abuse, heart, liver and kidney issues, to name a few.

## **Municipalities**

Columbia Institute's Centre for Civic Governance's latest report, "Back in House: Why Local Governments are Bringing Services Home," says that across Canada and around the world public services that were once outsourced are now finding their way back in-house to municipalities, mainly because using in-house services saves money.

Like the Town of Hawkesbury, who saved money and got much better results by moving their snow clearing back in house. Or the Town of CBS who did the same for garbage collection. Or the 13 other municipalities across Canada covered in the Centre's case study report.

Put simply: privatization costs more and delivers less. When you put profit into the equation, something has to give – usually that means less pay, poor quality of service delivery, corners cut, and mistakes made. These can put public safety at risk – and may not even save the money that was promised.

Let me be clear, I am not against the private sector - I represent many workers in the private sector. A strong, vibrant, diversified, and properly supported private sector is absolutely critical to our economic and social well-being.

However, we have to be wary of the promises being made, the cost analysis being used, and the real impacts of privatization in terms of quality of services delivered.

### **SO HOW DO WE GET THERE?**

Certainly, NL faces a number of challenges, such as a highly rural population, the aging of the population, struggles to attract and retain immigrants (from other provinces and internationally), the fall in revenues and the deficit. Despite these challenges, the government's hands are far from tied on policy, and there is not only room for a creative vision, but a dire need for such a vision.

From labour's perspective, the long-term vision is of a province that is richer in good jobs, fairer, and more environmentally sustainable. It is a future where we tackle inequality and poverty. This is a vision for a fundamentally different economy. Instead of an economy focussed on attracting foreign investors to export resources and

maximizing corporate profits, it is an economy focussed on generating and supporting a diversity of Newfoundland and Labrador businesses, good jobs, and quality of life for communities and the people who live here.

We need to give people a reason, particularly young people and immigrants, a reason to stay here, to come here.

I clearly don't have the time to get into it now, but the labour movement has made extensive submissions to the government on the path that we think will be the most prosperous – all of which are available on our federation of labour or Common Front websites.

I will say that engaging with front line workers is a key to our collective success. Just last week, government officials met with a group of our members to talk about inefficiencies in a public service – that small group was able to come up with \$1 million in savings without any job losses or service reductions.

Once I saw the final lineup of speakers and what I believed they would cover, I decided to devote my time here today warning against what we should not do – in terms of the lessons learned in other jurisdictions who leaned heavily into austerity.

While this is the case, I want to be very clear:

Labour wants to be – I want to be - part of the solution.

Not only do we want to be I would argue workers must be an integral part of the path forward.

Labour has a vested interest in all of this, but we are not unreasonable. We want a bright future for our children just like everyone else here today.

My plea, is to engage front line workers, engage unions in the process like CARE has done here today.

## **CLOSING**

I have only scratched the surface on topic areas I would like to talk about and ones that we need to address as a province – 20 minutes is hardly enough to get anyone from this province even warmed up when they're asked to speak.

I haven't been able to touch on minimum wage – of which we have the second-lowest in the country. On youth out-migration, wage inequality, affordable and accessible childcare, taxation system, developing green jobs for a new economy, or on our unemployment rate, and the list goes on.

And for that, you can blame the organizers for only giving us 20 minutes haha.

(PAUSE)

The issues are complex.

The task at hand is immense.

But I have no doubt that the people in this room and the people of this province can overcome if we pull together like we always do.

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I look forward to the discussion today and am very happy to be part of this process.

Open and honest debate and dialogue while looking at evidence and best practices in other jurisdictions is the only way that we are going to get through this.

Whatever route we choose will be challenging, but must be careful to ensure that the cure is not worse than the illness.

We're all in this together. Let's not lose sight of that.

Thank you.