



NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

The First Session
of the Forty-Eighth
General Assembly
of the Province of
Newfoundland and Labrador

March 8, 2016



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**Delivered at the Opening of
The First Session
of the Forty-Eighth
General Assembly
of the Province of
Newfoundland and Labrador**

**by His Honour
The Honourable Frank F. Fagan, CM, ONL, MBA
Lieutenant Governor
of Newfoundland and Labrador**

March 8, 2016

Creating the Foundation for a Stronger Tomorrow

100th Year Anniversary of Beaumont-Hamel

As we open the House of Assembly for the first time in 2016, I would be remiss if I did not pause for a moment to look back 100 years to an event which shaped our province, and has been forever etched in our culture and our history.

On July 1st, 1916, The Royal Newfoundland Regiment positioned near Beaumont-Hamel, left their trenches with orders to advance through No Man's Land, and seize enemy trenches. The troops met a barrage of enemy fire, and in just a matter of minutes, The Royal Newfoundland Regiment had been almost wiped out. This was a loss that touched communities throughout our province.

On the eve of the 100th anniversary of this tragic and historic battle, it is fitting that we take a moment to remember these events, the place they have in our history, and how they continue to shape our province today.

Honour 100 events in Newfoundland and Labrador began in 2014 and will continue until 2018, raising awareness in future generations of the sacrifices Newfoundlanders and Labradorians made during the First World War. My Government recognizes the importance of these events and we will continue to support the *Trail of the Caribou* pilgrimage, helping to send 16 students, four veterans, four legionnaires and others to Beaumont-Hamel. Additionally, General Rick Hillier will be leading this year's *Ambassador Program* which will feature 19 students from across the province who participated in heritage fairs with First World War themed projects.

I am pleased to advise that Her Royal Highness Princess Anne, The Royal Newfoundland Regiment's Colonel-in-Chief will be visiting our province from June 28th until July 1st, and will be taking part in many Honour 100 events.

Through generous gifts from donors, The Rooms has been able to develop a new, permanent Royal Newfoundland Regiment Gallery as well as, the Fortis Courtyard and Amphitheatre.

This July 1st, on the 100th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme at Beaumont-Hamel, Her Royal Highness will open this new permanent exhibition at The Rooms. Residents and tourists will be able to experience stories of the Great War and its lasting impact on the people and the identity of Newfoundland and Labrador. In addition, a full day of commemorative activities is planned for July 1st, 2016 to honour those from Newfoundland and Labrador who served in the First World War – and I encourage everyone to participate in this historic and momentous event.

International Women’s Day

Today being March 8th, it is my pleasure to have our province acknowledge International Women’s Day.

This year’s national theme is “*Women’s Empowerment Leads to Equality*”, and My Government is fully committed to advancing true economic, social, cultural, political and legal equality for all women and girls in our province. We take great pride in working closely and collaboratively with women’s organizations in achieving this goal.

International Women’s Day allows us to show our gratitude to all organizations supporting women - and to all women past and present - who work to advance true equality in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Your work is truly invaluable. Thank you.

A New Approach

Newfoundlanders and Labradorians understand that our province is at a critical juncture, and the election this past November was clearly about choosing the best team to get our province back on track.

My Government promised to deliver stronger leadership, better management, long-term planning, and an open government.

And we are working with our over 500,000 advisors to build the foundation today for a stronger tomorrow.

My Government received an important mandate from the people of our province on November 30th, the Premier and Cabinet were sworn in on December 14th, and Members of the House of Assembly were sworn in on December 18th, 2015.

And we immediately got to work.

My Government's cabinet of 12 ministers, plus the Premier, is efficient, capable and hardworking. They bring great experience from industry, business, healthcare, education and the public service to important portfolios focused on helping improve the lives of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

They also share the same commitment I do to listening first, ensuring the proper due diligence is done, and then making decisions that are in the best interest of the people of the province.

Ministers have been instructed to, without fail, act with integrity in all aspects of their service, striving for excellence in discharging their responsibilities.

As publically outlined, My Government will:

- Restore Openness, Transparency and Accountability;
- Build a Stronger, Smarter Economy;
- Improve Health and Healthcare;
- Support Safe and Sustainable Communities; and
- Invest in Our Future Through Education.

For years, Newfoundland and Labrador was the only province in Atlantic Canada to pay an additional salary to MHAs serving as Parliamentary

Secretaries and Parliamentary Assistants. To further demonstrate My Government's commitment to fiscal prudence and transparency, we have eliminated compensation for these positions.

Just three days after being sworn in, My Government canceled the process to collect pension overpayments that seniors in our province had received through no fault of their own.

It was a priority for My Government to reverse this hardship and we are pleased, as a new government, that we could put this issue to rest for the pensioners impacted.

A Commitment to Openness and Transparency

My Government is committed to openness and transparency.

It is only fitting then, to announce that the first Bill My Government will introduce in the House of Assembly, will be an Act to Establish an Independent Appointments Commission and to require a merit-based process for various appointments.

This commission will be the first of its kind in Newfoundland and Labrador, taking the politics out of government appointments. We believe that appointments to our agencies, boards and commissions should be merit-based, not politically motivated, as in the past.

The Independent Appointments Commission will be non-partisan and screen qualified candidates for Tier 1 agencies, boards, and commissions, including senior executive positions. It will be a much needed level of independent review to the appointments process, clearing a path for the most qualified people to apply, be considered on their merits, and be selected. The Public Service Commission will launch a website detailing membership requirements for all agencies, boards, and commissions and identifying upcoming vacancies.

My Government will also create new and expanded roles for Members of the House of Assembly. We will create and use all-party committees to review legislation, and other issues in our province. My Government believes all members of this House should also show respect for the House of Assembly and we will encourage cooperation, respect and integrity as MHAs perform their duties.

A New Relationship with the Federal Government

We have an important opportunity for a renewed relationship with the Federal Government. The election of Canada's New Government last October, combined with the election of Newfoundland and Labrador's New Government in November, gives our province greater opportunities for partnerships.

The Prime Minister has renewed a sense of hope, collaboration, and respect throughout our country.

A strong relationship based on open dialogue will serve our province well.

My Government continues to work with the Federal Government on critical issues for our province. As we find ourselves in a difficult fiscal situation, having a partner in Ottawa is more important than ever. We will advocate for our fair share of federal presence and spending. We will seek to maximize access to federal programs that align with our priorities, including infrastructure, and we look forward to the fulfillment of federal commitments which the Prime Minister and his Ministers have made to the people of our province.

My Government is doing its part on the national stage. We have welcomed 260 Syrian refugees, we are an active participant in the national climate change discussion, and the Premier just chaired the Council of the Federation meeting of Canada's Premiers in Vancouver which focused on climate change and the economy.

Fiscal Situation

Our province is facing a fiscal situation which is unprecedented, and My Government is committed to working with all Newfoundlanders and Labradorians to achieve long-term sustainability.

Addressing the serious fiscal reality is My Government's top priority.

As part of our approach, on December 22nd, My Government publically released the Fall Fiscal update – putting out more detailed information than ever before.

If left unchecked, our province was on the road to sustained deficits in the \$2 billion range, and net debt reaching upwards of \$23 billion in just five years.

We have seen considerable uncertainty in the price of commodities, which is affecting the fiscal situation of our province. As we continue to face these challenges, it is important to put these changes in perspective. On November 5th, oil was trading at around \$50 a barrel, and last week it was around \$36. This is a drop in price of more than 30 per cent since November alone.

Last year's budget was based on oil trading at \$62 a barrel, but was revised at the Fall Fiscal update to \$48 a barrel. For every dollar oil trades lower than the forecast, it results in about \$25 million less in government revenue.

Our fiscal update projected the provincial deficit to be around \$2 billion this year alone, meaning if nothing changed, we would have to borrow \$15.4 billion by 2020-21.

If we do nothing, it would be like borrowing over \$7 million a day, every day. That is close to \$300,000 an hour – essentially a new home mortgage every hour of every day. Think of it as maxing out your \$5,000 credit card limit – every minute of the day.

Bond rating agencies and major banks are watching the province closely. My Government is focused on protecting our credit ratings, as we do not want to be paying more for borrowing purposes.

The magnitude of this problem will require short, medium and long-term measures to correct the course. Decisive actions will be implemented with Budget 2016 this spring, followed by medium-term actions throughout the course of the year, followed by longer-term actions in Budget 2017.

Given the seriousness and scope of the current and forecasted fiscal situation, a new approach is required that moves beyond single year pre-budget consultation efforts.

Our Government Renewal Initiative and engagement process is providing information government can use to address our fiscal realities and lay a stronger foundation for the future.

My Government is using a series of approaches and tools to ensure public sessions are engaging and produce the type of information needed to inform our decisions. These include a discussion document, the Dialogue App, social media, and public engagement sessions.

People recognize the seriousness of the problem and they want to be a part of the solution.

And we want to continue to hear from Newfoundlanders and Labradorians on the long-term solutions, as well as on the short-term actions for Budget 2016. The mandate of this approach is to:

- Identify a combination of measures to increase revenues and reduce expenditures;
- Eliminate waste and identify opportunities to do things better and more efficiently;
- Modernize the role of government in the provision of public services; and
- Establish multi-year fiscal targets.

The choices ahead of us will not be easy; everyone will have to accept some level of sacrifice in the months and years ahead if we are to provide critical services, while restoring accountability and stability to government finances.

It is My Government's responsibility to consider all the options put forward by the people of the province and continue to have an open and honest discussion with all residents.

I am pleased to say the public have responded in a productive and real way.

To date, over a thousand people have participated in engagement sessions, including 16 public sessions, nine public service sessions and several stakeholder driven sessions. There have been almost 30,000 users on our Dialogue App, generating over 1,700 ideas and 4,400 comments. We have also received over 600 email and phone submissions and over a hundred ideas or comments from fax and regular mail. This provincial engagement is about bringing forward ideas that contribute to the work of My Government as they identify a combination of measures to increase revenues and reduce expenditures.

My Government will continue with this process, producing short, medium, and long-term solutions, until our provincial fiscal situation has improved and stabilized.

While dealing with our fiscal reality, My Government must continue to keep the economy moving. We will deliver the programs and services our province needs for a stronger tomorrow, while also living within our means as we correct our province's fiscal situation. We will provide the better management, long-term planning and open government the people of our province expect and deserve.

Infrastructure

My Government recognizes communities are facing infrastructure challenges throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. It has been well-documented that investments in public infrastructure support economic growth and create employment opportunities. My Government will invest in public infrastructure and seize every opportunity to leverage funding provided by the Federal Government through various programs. We will explore ways to make funding more predictable and flexible to fit our needs, and take an asset management approach to help guide investments.

Delivering on My Government's commitment for multi-year infrastructure planning and a comprehensive transportation strategy that supports economic growth, we are developing a Multi-Year Transportation Infrastructure Plan that outlines major projects for the coming years.

This plan will expand the current rankings beyond smaller-scale road and bridge improvement projects to a managed and proactive road and bridge construction and maintenance program. This will result in strategic investments in pavement, bridges, culverts, guiderails, drainage structures, and physical transportation infrastructure assets.

The Multi-Year Transportation Infrastructure Plan will emphasize a transparent and accountable approach to transportation assets in our province.

Decisions will incorporate life-cycle cost considerations to ensure our province is receiving the best value possible.

This plan will move My Government from a reactive approach to a proactive, long-term plan that uses our limited funds more efficiently and effectively by making full use of our province's short construction season.

Multi-year planning will serve as a cost-saving measure for My Government. We will take advantage of early tendering and collaborative potential by grouping smaller projects in the same area into larger tenders that take advantage of economies of scale.

This year, My Government will invest in the improvement of educational facilities throughout the province. We will fund repairs and maintenance of K-12 school facilities to ensure students and teachers continue to have safe, comfortable and high quality learning environments. We will fund ongoing capital projects such as new schools and extensions to existing school facilities to address student capacity in growing areas.

My Government is committed to providing the best care to the seniors in our province. As such, we cancelled a recent request for proposals on long-term care as the terms were far too narrow in scope. My Government will explore all options for the development of these facilities to make sure we get it right.

My Government will also pursue a transparent, value-for-money analysis on how best to replace the century old Waterford Hospital. For My Government, mental health will be as important as physical health. Providing modern care requires a modern facility in which to deliver it.

My Government is committed to the long-overdue replacement of Western Memorial Regional Hospital in Corner Brook. To our surprise, after \$40 million spent on the project over the last number of years, there was no tender-ready document. A priority for My Government is to develop and finalize a tender-ready document by the end of this year.

Innovation and a Strong Economy

My Government believes the answer to building a stronger, smarter economy is through diversification, job creation and growth. An important part of realizing that potential is through further growth of our tourism industry.

There are approximately 2,500 businesses in the province's tourism sector, of which 82 per cent are small businesses, creating an estimated 18,000 jobs.

The industry generates a billion dollars in visitor spending each year. To further support this important industry, we are undertaking a new visitor exit survey this year to collect information on non-resident visitors to our province.

My Government understands the importance of investing in tourism marketing as a way to grow the industry and we will put further focus on marketing our province's natural and cultural heritage.

With the growth of the tourism industry comes new opportunities for businesses in our province. My Government is working with craft producers and retailers to ensure our products meet the demand and expectation of our travelers with respect to price, design and a "sense of place". In cooperation with the Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador we will focus on new product opportunities.

My Government knows that growing a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation presents tremendous economic potential for Newfoundland and Labrador. To that end, we will develop a new Provincial Innovation Strategy in collaboration with industry and innovation partners to drive economic growth. We will consult with our partners and the public on a strategy that focuses on innovation, productivity, and competitiveness, to maximize benefits from private and public technology investments in all sectors of the economy.

Cooperation within the Atlantic Region on population growth will help us attract and retain more people, including here in our own province. Collectively today, less than five per cent of our population in Atlantic Canada was born in a different country, in contrast to more than 22 per cent in the rest of Canada.

My Government will develop a Young Entrepreneur Retention Program to encourage innovation and youth retention. We want our youth to live here, invest here and build businesses and stable careers. My Government knows that innovation projects inspire youth to explore their creative thinking abilities, while also improving their collaborative problem solving skills.

Business incubation provides entrepreneurs with resources and services to channel innovation and accelerate the successful development of start-up and fledgling companies. My Government will expand business incubation, in collaboration with Memorial University, to provide prospective entrepreneurs with increased access to investors, advisors, space and networking services, with the end goal of seeding new businesses throughout our province.

We believe reducing waste is critical in helping companies become competitive. We will continue to work with the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters to support lean training and other initiatives to help improve companies' competitiveness.

Ensuring we maximize supply chain opportunities with respect to large industrial projects associated with our natural resources as well as federal aerospace and defence expenditures is critical. Through these

opportunities, companies are able to build capacity and expertise that will enable them to expand and export their service offering to international supply chains.

As we continue to work toward increased economic diversification, the ocean technology sector and Arctic development opportunities present great potential for economic growth. The ocean technology sector in our province enables activities and expansion in economic areas such as oil and gas, fisheries and aquaculture, defence, security transportation, environment, marine recreation and tourism. My Government will capitalize on existing strengths in research and development infrastructure and expertise, a private sector with unique capabilities, and support from all levels of government to further elevate the province to a unique position in the global ocean technology sector.

The Arctic is an area which offers great opportunities for Newfoundland and Labrador. Through the Arctic Opportunities Initiative, considerable work has begun with respect to positioning the province as the path to the Arctic and creating an environment that will benefit local stakeholders and northern communities, and will further attract global industry leaders.

As geographic neighbours, Newfoundland and Labrador and Nunavut have a common sense of culture and a like-minded approach to safe and sustainable development that respects the environment and traditional ways of life. Implementation of the recent Memorandum of Understanding with Nunavut will be a priority for My Government. We are also actively seeking to secure partnerships with other like-minded Arctic jurisdictions.

As the offshore oil and gas industry faces challenges with the downturn of world commodity prices, My Government is committed to the creation of an Oil and Gas Industry Development Council. This council will bring together key stakeholders to develop a long-term vision and implementation framework for the future development of the industry, with a focus on making it more sustainable and competitive, and bringing benefits to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

My Government is committed to creating conditions for increased exploration and development in our offshore. These include pursuing options to explore and develop our natural gas reserves, streamlining the regulatory approval process, and finalizing the generic offshore royalty regime.

And we are committed to opening the books on Muskrat Falls – a cold eyes review of the project. This review will analyze the cost, schedule and associated risks of the project and is the kind of due diligence that is long overdue. We will make this report publically available and will use evidence-based decision making on future decisions on this project.

My Government will take steps to support the mining industry to encourage expansion and grow the contribution the industry makes to the provincial economy. This will include increased investment in the Junior Exploration Assistance Program.

We will lead the development of a social enterprise strategy, in consultation with the not-for-profit sector, to enhance the benefits of the sector for the economy. Building on the success of our Memorandum of Understanding with the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Co-operatives, a similar approach will be taken.

My Government will remain focused on ensuring Newfoundland and Labrador firms are positioned to capitalize on all new international trade agreements, including the Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. We will continue to advocate our province's interests during negotiations on the development of a new Agreement on Internal Trade. The unfettered movement of electricity between provinces is one consideration in this agreement and we are working to see that realized.

Climate change is one of the greatest long-term challenges facing the world today, and as such, My Government will develop a new provincial greenhouse gas strategy. The Federal Government has committed to developing a national climate change plan, in consultation with provinces and territories, and we will participate in this work.

My Government will create a Global Network of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. In keeping with our commitments to openness and informed decision making, the Global Network will complement government's engagement processes by allowing us to connect with Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who live and work both inside and outside our province.

Planning for Growth and Job Creation

There have been few times in our history when coming together for the future of our province has mattered more. Supporting Newfoundlanders and Labradorians in gaining new skills, building new businesses, and thriving in a new economy is a priority for My Government. We are focused on creating a stronger, more diversified economy that supports business growth and job creation, remaining competitive and ensuring our policies are targeted at the attraction and retention of qualified working-age people and their families.

We will engage with the Federal Government on the need for innovative and responsive labour market arrangements to support employment programs and skills training for our residents. This is especially relevant for displaced workers, youth looking for their first job, workers in seasonal industries, newcomers, and those underrepresented in our labour market. Federal labour market arrangements must provide flexibility to allow provinces and territories to meet the evolving needs of their regional and local labour markets.

We will consult with industry to assess areas of demand and offer innovative incentives for employers in the skilled trades who increase the number of apprentices they take on. Apprenticeship placements will give young people a role in our diversifying economy and help stop the historic flow of our skilled workers to other shores.

As our province prepares to tackle an unprecedented fiscal challenge, industries based on renewable resources, such as the seafood industry, take on even greater importance as we look for ways to strengthen and

diversify our economy. The sustainable development of both the fishing and aquaculture sectors are priority areas for My Government, as they are key economic drivers for many communities.

The seafood industry continues to be an important part of the provincial economy employing approximately 18,000 people in harvesting, processing and aquaculture operations, and generating indirect benefits for many more individuals and enterprises. In 2015, the production value of the Newfoundland and Labrador seafood industry reached a record high, exceeding \$1.2 billion.

My Government will support harvesting, processing, marketing, and aquaculture initiatives in order to diversify and increase the overall viability and competitiveness of the Newfoundland and Labrador seafood industry.

We will work closely with the seafood industry to market local seafood internationally, providing market research and intelligence, and contributing to eco-certification initiatives.

We have reconvened the All-Party Committee on Northern Shrimp Allocations to present a united provincial voice on this important matter. My Government understands that the continued application of the federal “Last In, First Out” policy, in the face of a declining shrimp resource, will have major negative impacts on people and communities throughout our province.

My Government is planning for the return of the cod fishery. We will form a Fisheries Advisory Council that will create a strategic action plan on cod revitalization. In collaboration with communities, industry and the Federal Government, this plan will focus on environmental sustainability, harvesting, processing innovation and marketing.

My Government will develop a new agriculture strategy to enhance our response to the needs and recommendations of farmers, processors and consumers, focusing on land development, innovation, competitiveness, increasing local food production and value-added processing opportunities.

The development and diversification of the provincial forest industry will also be a priority for My Government. To achieve this, we will ensure that the 10-year provincial sustainable forest management plan is followed.

A new Act to replace the aging Public Tender Act is under development by the Government Purchasing Agency. The intent of the new Act is to better support public bodies in obtaining “best value” in their purchases and to reduce administrative burden for both suppliers and public bodies. Introduction of changes to the Public Tender Act are a priority for My Government.

Some of the brightest, most hard working Newfoundlanders and Labradorians work in the public service, and My Government recognizes their experience, knowledge and dedication are important to enabling the work of this government. It is essential that we take a collaborative approach to dealing with our fiscal situation and engage with the public service to utilize their expertise in delivering the programs and services Newfoundlanders and Labradorians expect and deserve.

A Strong Social Agenda

My Government has committed to three public inquiries. All are of utmost importance, particularly those involving loss of life, but are at different states of readiness. We will proceed with the inquiries accordingly.

Recently, a number of high profile cases in our province have raised concern about whether the police should conduct investigations into its own members, or whether one provincial police force can objectively investigate members of the other. In response to these types of concerns, many provinces in Canada have created civilian-led organizations to investigate serious incidents involving the police. This provides a mechanism for independent investigations thereby removing the potential for real or perceived bias. To enhance public confidence in investigations involving the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary, we will identify and pursue an appropriate

model for the establishment of a Serious Incident Response Team for Newfoundland and Labrador.

A properly functioning Office of the Chief Medical Examiner is integral to the administration of justice in our province and protects against potential miscarriage of justice. The office provides critical information and expert advice to inform police investigations, the courts, and families in circumstances involving, among other things, suspicious and sudden deaths. My Government intends to review the operational and organizational requirements of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, in conjunction with Eastern Health, to ensure it is properly resourced and structured to effectively fulfill its mandate.

In September 2016, My Government will implement full-day Kindergarten. Despite our financial challenges, we are committed to providing the infrastructure, resources, and professional learning to support full days of play-based learning for children throughout our province. This investment will positively impact academic achievement and the social and emotional development of children in our province, giving them a solid foundation in the start of their public education and indeed for the rest of their lives.

As we transition to full-day Kindergarten, we will work with all stakeholders to ensure a smooth transition.

My Government recognizes the critical role education has to play in creating a strong future for our province and we are committed to improving our K-12 education system, focusing on a number of priority areas and strengthening accountability to the public. To this end, we will establish a Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes, which will consider topics including: early learning, mathematics, reading and literacy, inclusive education, student mental health and wellness, multicultural education, Aboriginal education, and teacher education and professional development.

My Government recognizes the role child care plays in early childhood development, gender equality and economic development. As a review and subsequent revision of the inclusion supports program is nearing completion, revised policies will help ensure children with diverse needs

are included in the programs offered in regulated child care services with the required support.

The completion of a review of the Early Learning and Child Care Supplement Program will ensure effectiveness in increasing the number of qualified Early Childhood Educators working in regulated child care and to explore potential changes to the program.

As we continue to promote safe, caring and inclusive school practices, My Government will develop guidelines supporting equity and inclusion of all students, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender-nonconforming students. This will complement the training provided to district staff for the implementation of teacher training across the province with the purpose of building awareness of LGBTQ inclusive practices.

In keeping with our commitment to openness and transparency, we are committed to holding School Board Elections and are currently assessing a number of options to expedite this process.

My Government will ensure the most effective programs and services are in place to prevent all forms of violence and abuse against women and other populations at risk and build a safe and caring province. Everyone has the responsibility to prevent violence. Therefore, we will work in collaboration with community partners, Aboriginal governments and organizations, victims of violence and individual residents to achieve this goal.

In November 2014, the House of Assembly passed a motion committing to legislation to respond to the Child and Youth Advocate's request to change the Child and Youth Advocate Act to mandate public body reporting of deaths and critical incidents. My Government recognizes the importance of doing everything we can to protect children and youth and will be moving forward with this initiative.

My Government is committed to the development of a Health Promotion and Healthy Living Strategy that will focus on two key areas: Youth

Wellness and Chronic Disease Prevention and Management. The strategy will be comprehensive and include all people in Newfoundland and Labrador, with a specific focus on youth. We are committed to reversing our persistent rates of chronic disease which are among the highest in Canada. In order to achieve this, we must encourage healthy lifestyles amongst all our residents – especially our youth. In consultation with our community partners, we will identify the most effective actions to reverse some of the trends of today and realize a stronger, healthier tomorrow for all.

By 2025, 25 per cent of our population will be seniors, so now is the time to ensure we are meeting the current demands and prepared for our rapidly aging population. As such, My Government is committed to an Office of the Seniors' Advocate to ensure an independent voice to advocate on behalf of seniors.

My Government is committed to furthering the status of persons with disabilities. We envision a truly inclusive society where accessibility and inclusion for all is essential. This requires a fundamental shift toward full equity for persons with disabilities throughout our province.

Poverty and inequality are problems which affect all people in our province. Poverty makes it more difficult to get and stay healthy, to find and keep a home, to obtain an education, and to gain and keep work. Without these basic things in place, the demand for social supports rise and health care costs increase for all residents.

We will continue to work across various government departments and agencies, with the Federal Government and with community partners to focus especially on vulnerable youth, seniors, mental health, affordable housing and initiatives that will prevent and end homelessness. My Government will work diligently to ensure accessible and affordable housing is available throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, paying particular attention to the needs of seniors and youth.

We will consult with labour organizations and employers to establish a consistent minimum wage formula that is reflective of changes to the cost of living. This review will occur in 2016.

We will ensure the work of the All-Party Committee on Mental Health and Addictions continues. The All-Party Committee has heard from many people throughout our province about their experiences with and hope for the mental health and addictions system. This work will inform a new Provincial Mental Health and Addictions Strategy.

My Government will proclaim the Health Professions Act into force for midwives, and will enact new midwives regulations. This is a key public protection initiative, ensuring that only those individuals who meet the requirements set out in the regulations are able to practice in our province. We consider the regulation of midwifery a long-overdue step towards providing an additional safe birth option in our province.

We will work collaboratively with Aboriginal people and governments to ensure development decisions are made with openness, transparency, and accountability, incorporating the concerns and interests of Aboriginal communities. We will also ensure programs and services provided reflect Aboriginal needs.

My Government will continue to seek the repatriation of the remains of Demasduit and Nonosabasut from the National Museum of Scotland to ensure their protection and preservation within their ancestral home.

I am pleased to say My Government will finalize the land transfer to establish the Mealy Mountains National Park Reserve in Labrador. Becoming Canada's 46th national park, the 10,700 square kilometres of stunning landscapes, vegetation and wildlife will be protected. This area, featuring the Mealy Mountains themselves, has cultural importance to Aboriginal and other people in the region and will also play a key role in wildlife conservation and tourism in our province.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its Final Report on December 15, 2015. My Government continues to assess its recommendations, and is preparing a formal response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action.

The Federal Government has launched the design phase of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. My Government fully supports this initiative and recently participated in the

second National Roundtable in Winnipeg on February 25-26. We will honour the undertakings we've made at that roundtable.

We will also continue to participate in the Northern Development Ministers' Forum to advance the diverse and common interests of the people living in Canada's North.

We will continue to co-chair the Labrador West Regional Task Force and consult with all stakeholders in the region in order to facilitate the sustainable development of the area.

We will work to empower communities in all areas of our province by exploring regional opportunities that further improve community sustainability. This will help ensure our province's local governments are well-positioned to respond to changing social, economic, and fiscal realities.

An advisory committee has been formed and public consultations will take place this year across the province.

My Government will examine options to improve municipalities' ability to access Crown Lands such as long-term leasing and lease-to-own arrangements. This will have a positive economic impact for municipalities and assist them in pursuing new developments.

To support greater engagement with municipalities, My Government will hold a Premier's Forum on local government in the fall of 2016. This annual event will allow community leaders to discuss directly with the Premier and Minister of Municipal Affairs issues of concern relating to their municipalities.

In partnership with the Municipal Assessment Agency and Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador, in 2016, My Government will undertake a review of the Assessment Act, 2006. This review will address known operational issues associated with the timing of assessments, assessment criteria, implementation of the associated mil rate and special purpose properties. Interested individuals and businesses will be given the opportunity to provide their input on this legislative review.

Protecting Our Future

Though we face unprecedented fiscal challenges, My Government is steadfast in our determination to correct the course. With the resources of a nation within the boundaries of our province, we believe there is a bright future for Newfoundland and Labrador. Together as a province we will rise to the occasion, but we will all need to do our part to build that strong foundation now.

My Government takes its responsibilities seriously, and we will use our resources to not only benefit the present generation, but future generations as well. As part of a Legacy Plan, we will restore fiscal balance to our province and establish a diversified wealth fund once we have moved back to surplus. Working together and addressing our reality, together we will leverage our resources to create a legacy of wealth for our children and grandchildren.

My Government is faced with difficult challenges and difficult choices. But challenges are nothing new for Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, we've been facing them for over 500 years. And we've also fared better when we faced them together.

The choices ahead will not be easy, but we will always make them based on evidence, with a fundamental belief in openness and transparency.

All Newfoundlanders and Labradorians will be a part of the solutions, as we build that stronger tomorrow.

The unprecedented fiscal situation we find ourselves in requires an unprecedented response. And Newfoundlanders and Labradorians will rise to the challenge. Together, we will overcome our immediate challenges, and build a solid foundation for a sustainable future.

Estimates of expenditure will be laid before you in due course and you will be asked to grant supply to Her Majesty.

I invoke God's blessing upon you as you commence this new Session.

May Divine Providence guide you in your deliberation.

Thank you.

