Presentation to N.S. Legislative Committee

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By Jon Peirce

Let me start by relating a personal anecdote that made me aware of the idea of environmental emergency many years ago. As a young English professor at Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania, I was only about an hour's drive from the nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island when it had its meltdown. The thought that we might all be annihilated drove us all—faculty and students alike—to near-distraction, to the point where it was impossible to think about anything else. After a day of this, I knew I could not teach in such an environment, and fled to Toronto, where my wife was then living. I spent a week there, not returning to Pennsylvania until it was clear that the emergency was over. If only for that week, I was an environmental refugee, fortunate to have a safe haven to which I could repair in my hour of need.

Fast forward some 40 years. As I drove home from church yesterday, I heard of the terrible plight facing Californians. There, persistent wildfires—in large measure the result of climate change—have become so severe as to cause the state utility to shut off electricity to nearly one million homes, so that electric sparks will not worsen the fires. Many have already been forced to evacuate their homes; many more will be forced to do so in the days ahead. I don't even want to think about the hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Californians who will be forced to the state's already overcrowded highways in an attempt to find safer conditions.

This is not the first climate emergency California has faced. Some years ago, a drought became so severe that experts were saying the state might soon have

to choose between water for residential purposes and water for business and industry. As the state's population increases, the looming water shortages can only become worse. Before long, it may be necessary for the state to start paying residents to leave in order to have adequate water supplies for those who remain.

Fortunately we are not yet in a situation as dire as that of California. But we've already seen considerable evidence of climate change, as in the increased frequency and severity of hurricanes and other wind storms, and in the temporary pollution of what were previously considered pristine seas off our South Shore. Our own situation is becoming urgent.

The bill being proposed as an important first step in dealing with the ongoing climate emergency, and I support it. True, some may say the targets set in the bill should be "higher." Perhaps they should. But in the larger scheme of things, targets are just numbers, which can be modified if necessary. What's important is that we all recognize the urgency of the situation, and stop "thinking to rule," so to speak, in the belief that things will somehow return to normal if only we ride more bikes and use fewer plastic bags. It won't, and these "retail" measures alone would be far from adequate to meet even less stringent targets than the relatively moderate ones put forward in the bill. We need to start thinking about some of the big, wholesale changes we'll need to make if we're to have any chance of pulling through at all. If the bill can get us to start focussing on these big changes—and I think it can—then it will have done a major service.

What are some of the new directions we should be taking? We could do worse than to start by taking a look at one of the bill's key principles, sustainable development. To me, at least, sustainable development entails protecting what are arguably the province's two most important industries: seafood and tourism.

Anything that puts these two industries at risk is a big no-no. The type of resource [sic] development we're seeing in the pulp mill along the Northumberland Strait and in mines elsewhere in the province is putting these industries at serious risk. No one wants to eat fish from polluted waters, and tourists don't want to come to swim or boat in polluted waters, or to camp beside them. So if we are serious about this bill, and about truly sustainable development—bearing in mind that world-wide fossil fuels are being phased out—we're going to have to get out of the energy business, or at least that part of it involving coal or petroleum, and also out of mining.

The second set of wholesale changes need has to do with transportation, which according to a recent study is the source of 28% of all Canadian greenhouse gas emissions. The greatest part of this clearly comes from cars and trucks. Except to a limited extent in Metro Halifax, it is all but impossible to live without a car in Nova Scotia. The passenger rail network, which when I first came to Halifax as a graduate student in 1970 provided twice-daily service to Montreal and service to Yarmouth and the Annapolis Valley as well as to eastern Nova Scotia and Cape Breton has shrunk to thrice-weekly service through Amherst and Truro to Halifax. There have also been major reductions in bus service over the years. While other parts of the world (including even parts of that socialist hotbed, the U.S.), are modernizing and expanding their rail services, Nova Scotia is on the verge of becoming a transportation orphan.

What's needed is a major rebuild of the rail system. Entire dayliner runs could be put in for the cost of a few miles of highway twinning. Rebuilding the rail system would set in motion what the economists call a "virtuous cycle." Rebuilding the system would create many good jobs; maintaining it would create many more—all this in addition to reducing the number of cars and trucks on the

road, and the amount of greenhouse gas emitted. A decent passenger rail system, with service to most parts of the province, would also mean that many seniors who really shouldn't be driving but now drive because they really have no alternative could get off the road. This in turn would lead to fewer accidents, reduced health care costs, and more. For far too long, rail has been judged by a different standard than highways and air travel; subsidies to it are viewed in a different and far more negative light than subsidies for roads or airports. Yet rail is the cleanest and greenest way to travel, by a country mile. John A. Macdonald built the country by building a transcontinental rail line. We can rebuild it, and save our environment into the bargain, by rebuilding and modernizing our rail service, currently amongst the worst in any developed Western country. But to do this important job, we need to stop thinking in automatic pilot, and recognize a rail system as an investment rather than a cost.

The wages of sin is death. We've all, both as individuals and as a society, sinned against Mother Earth, against our own children and grandchildren, and against our fellow creatures and inhabitants on the planet—animals and plants alike. Going on as we have is simply not an option; the results would be too horrific even to contemplate. Finding a new way to live is absolutely imperative.

But we must not think that this new way will entail sacrificing our well-being. It will not require us to don the hair shirt of asceticism. If we go about things right, we can have a better life while helping to save the planet. What sane person could say he or she actually enjoys driving to downtown Halifax and trying to find a parking spot on Spring Garden Road? Isn't it easier and pleasanter (not to mention cheaper) to use public transit to get to downtown Halifax? As for longer-distance transportation, what sane person could say he or she actually enjoys flying to Montreal or Ottawa, packed in with others like cattle being sent to the Chicago

stockyards? Don't you think that many of us would make the energy- and planet-saving switch to train travel for this journey, if only there were trains available at reasonable cost that could make the journey within a reasonable time frame? And what person with even a minimal appreciation of good food would pick the stale, mouldering Chinese garlic if truly fresh garlic from our local farmers were regularly available?

In other words, the way of life is the better way, the joyous way. The money needed to bring it about—and there's no use pretending that the amount will not be considerable—should be viewed not as a cost, but an investment, one that will pay big dividends in anything but the very shortest term. Let us therefore embrace the way of life wholeheartedly, using this bill not as a be-all or end-all, but as a starting-point, a springboard for further investigation and inquiry. If we stick to the bill's principles (like sustainable development) in the changes we make, both individually and collectively, we won't go wrong.

No, this bill isn't perfect. But it is a good start and I would therefore urge that it be passed as quickly as possible. Needless to say, political will is required to ensure that there is money and expertise made available to implement the necessary changes to our economy, our transportation system, and our agriculture. Without such political will, all that will be done will be of the nature of tinkering. It will continue to be business as usual—and it will in all likelihood lead to our destruction. But the bill puts us in a better position than we would be in without it. Now it is up to us.

Thank you.