



DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

Speaker: Honourable Keith Bain

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First Session

THURSDAY, MARCH 24, 2022

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HALIFAX, THURSDAY, MARCH 24, 2022

Sixty-fourth General Assembly

First Session

1:00 P.M.

SPEAKER

Hon. Keith Bain

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

Angela Simmonds, Lisa Lachance

THE SPEAKER: We'll begin the daily routine.

PRESENTING AND READING PETITIONS

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STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Premier.

HON. TIM HOUSTON (The Premier): Mr. Speaker, in January all members of the House and people from coast to coast were saddened to learn that Alexa McDonough had died at the age of 77.

Alexa McDonough was a person who made a difference: a difference in the lives of individuals, a difference in our public institutions across Canada, and a profound difference right here at Province House. She made historic, positive change in Nova Scotia as the first New Democrat from mainland Nova Scotia to sit in the provincial Legislature, and as the first woman to lead a major political party in Canada. Those achievements made her a trailblazer and a well-earned Officer of the Order of Canada and a member of the Order of Nova Scotia.

Mr. Speaker, there is no doubt that Alexa McDonough was a historic figure and a courageous and influential role model. Students of this Legislature will know that Alexa became known by a trademark phrase: “Mr. Speaker, I am shocked and appalled” was her trademark phrase. In fact, as her obituary noted, she became known as Our Lady of Shocked and Appalled.

As I read all the tributes to her, and there were hundreds and even thousands, Mr. Speaker, I was struck by one from her son Justin. He didn’t talk about her many accomplishments or what she did in her political life - he talked about how she conducted herself. Justin told a reporter that one thing he learned from his mom is that you can have courageous conversations and you can disagree with someone but it doesn’t mean that you aren’t going to be respectful and you are not going to appreciate their opinion. That’s something we should all keep in mind, certainly, as we go about our work here in this Chamber.

Alexa McDonough conducted herself with dignity. Respect was a hallmark of her long career. We would all benefit from following her fine example. Mr. Speaker, in fact, as we conduct ourselves as elected members inside and outside of this Chamber, we should be mindful of our own responsibility to keep the tone of our debates less shocking and less appalling. I know I certainly will work hard towards that goal.

Mr. Speaker, it’s an honour today to mark the life and legacy of Alexa McDonough and to extend sincere condolences on behalf of all members of this Legislature and certainly of the PC caucus to her sons Justin and Travis and her many, many friends and former colleagues. I ask that we observe a moment of silence for Alexa McDonough after my friends from across the way conclude their remarks. Thank you. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: Mr. Speaker, Nova Scotians, including myself, felt profound sadness back in January upon hearing of the loss of Alexa McDonough. News of her passing brought tributes from across the country and from those of all political stripes, a testament to her outstanding career.

Affectionately known simply as Alexa, she became a symbol for a renewed sense of politics in our province. She broke many barriers, both right here in Nova Scotia and

across the country. To stand here and address all of you in this Legislature where she once served is an immense privilege. Alexa's list of accomplishments and relentless courage while facing so many barriers leaves an incalculable legacy.

After winning her seat in Halifax Chebucto in 1981, she would serve as the only member of the NDP and the only woman to sit in this room for the next three years. Although she sat here alone, it did not impede her in making an impact that extended well beyond these four walls.

Alexa was known for her fearless and compassionate leadership, which led to a generation of women entering politics. A trailblazer, a champion for social justice and so much more, Alexa carried herself with the utmost decency and respect for the role she'd earned. We, as politicians in Nova Scotia, are better for it.

Mr. Speaker, her legacy in politics is one of the greats, but it is most certainly not all she will be remembered for. Her passion for community lives on in her children, Travis and Justin. I want to extend my heartfelt condolences to them both, as well as to her extended family and friends. Her passing is an immense loss to us all, and it speaks to the extraordinary mark she left in Nova Scotia and beyond.

I think it's safe to say that no matter what side of the House you sit on or which party you represent, Alexa embodied a style of politics that we all should strive for - one that puts people first. As we begin this legislative session, I encourage us all to remember the values that Alexa fought for - working together for the good of all Nova Scotians. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the New Democratic Party.

GARY BURRILL: Mr. Speaker, 41 years ago when the person in your position, for the first time, recognized the member for Halifax Chebucto and Leader of the New Democratic Party, and Alexa McDonough rose in the same quadrant of the House where I stand now, it was a historic moment in the life of Canadian democracy. Never before had a woman led a major political party in our country.

I turn to the tradition I come from, Mr. Speaker, and recall the New Testament words ". . . what she has done will also be told in memory of her." What Alexa McDonough did commands consideration. She was the first person of the CCF/NDP tradition to win a provincial seat in mainland Nova Scotia and the first New Democrat to win a federal seat in mainland Nova Scotia. She was the first woman of the social democratic tradition to win a seat anywhere in the province and twice, provincially and federally, she was elected leader without a seat and twice, against considerable odds, she won one and came into the House.

Alexa was leader of the federal NDP when our Party won six of the 11 federal seats in Nova Scotia in the 1997 election, the first time the federal NDP had ever prevailed anywhere in eastern Canada, thereby breaking the mould of two-party politics federally in Nova Scotia - a mould that had by then pertained for 130 years.

[1:15 p.m.]

Let us tell what she had done to advance the leadership of women in this country. A year and a half ago, on the 40th anniversary of Alexa being elected Leader of the Nova Scotia NDP, a small gathering was held to pay tribute and to mark the moment at the Women's Council House in the South End of the city. Alexa, of course, was there, as was her family, along with former leaders, a small group of her friends from that time, and the members of our caucus.

The program consisted of each of the women of our 2020 caucus offering a toast to Alexa's legacy and contribution. The members for Dartmouth South, Dartmouth North, Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier, and Halifax Needham all spoke about what Alexa had meant to them as girls and as young women, and the process by which they came and grew to think of themselves in the light of public service.

No record exists of what was said that afternoon, but everyone there was moved with the understanding that this caucus - in an organic and tangible way - stands as a living testament to the impact of Alexa's leadership and work.

I will finish by saying that this world we share, in which our time is short, is on a trajectory, an arc, a path. And though that path is not always clear, it is nevertheless present and it lies in the fundamental direction of greater equity and fairness on the way to an expanded scope and sphere of solidarity, community and sharing. The day to which that path is leading in truth may be closer than we think. When it comes, this name, Alexa, will be spoken not just with January's tears but too with all the honour accorded those who led the fight to get there. Thank you. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: I would ask that everyone please rise to observe a moment of silence.

[A moment of silence was observed.]

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Premier.

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, before reading my statement, I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Granted.

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, visiting us today in your gallery, the Speaker's gallery, is Mr. Andre Mereshuk, President of the Ukrainian Congress of Canada, Nova Scotia Branch. With him is Igor Yushchenko and Bohdan Luhovyy, who are both members of the UCC Nova Scotia Branch. I ask them to rise and accept the warm welcome of this House. (Standing Ovation)

THE SPEAKER: We welcome all visitors to the Gallery.

The honourable Premier.

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, when Ukrainians elected President Zelensky in April 2019 they thought they elected a popular young person, a young actor who promised to bring professional, decent people to power and to change the mood of the political establishment. They did that, but what they didn't know was that they had elected an inspirational and historic leader. A true and actual war hero.

President Zelensky's fierce determination and remarkable courage captured the hearts and minds of all of us, all of us who believe in democracy. His unvarnished love of his country and steadfast belief in the Ukrainian people galvanized the resolve of Ukrainians to stand up to the Russian invaders, defend their homeland and protect their hard-won freedoms. But the brave Ukrainians are doing so much more than that. They're fighting to uphold democratic freedom, safeguard the rule of law, and preserve the dignity of self-determination. Those are the values that Ukrainians cherish, just as they are the values that Nova Scotians and all Canadians hold dear.

Maybe that's why so many Nova Scotians admire President Zelensky and are in awe of the extraordinary acts of bravery we see every day from Ukrainians. Here in Nova Scotia, we always root for the underdog. In a David and Goliath confrontation, we side with David. When it comes to Russia's brutal, unjust, and illegal invasion of Ukraine, Nova Scotians stand with Ukrainians.

Our government was pleased to contribute \$100,000 to aid Ukrainian refugees and in my discussions with Minister Sean Fraser, I have made it clear that Nova Scotia will welcome as many Ukraine refugees as want to come to Nova Scotia. I have no doubt that Nova Scotians will open their homes, their wallets and their hearts to provide shelter, care and protection to those Ukrainians who choose Nova Scotia as their home. That's just who we are.

We are all devastated by the unbelievable acts of Russian cruelty and the brutality that we see in Ukraine every single day, but we are also inspired and filled with awe when we watch the bravery, the heart and grit of the remarkable people of Ukraine. On behalf of all Nova Scotians, my wish for Ukrainian people is that they find honour in victory, forge new friendships and renew old ones, so that allies may share in the challenge of rebuilding their great country. Most of all, my wish is that those who sacrificed so much and fought

so hard finally come to know the tranquility that comes with long-lasting peace. Героям слава - glory to the heroes. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: It's now been over a month since President Vladimir Putin directed his military to invade Ukraine. We've all watched with horror as Russian forces have attacked Ukrainian targets, including widespread destruction and terrible human suffering. As Nova Scotians, as Canadians, and as global citizens we condemn in the strongest possible terms this act of naked aggression, but we raise our voice in solidarity and admiration of the Ukrainian people.

Along with their democratic allies, we here in Nova Scotia have marvelled at the determined resistance of Ukrainians in the face of this illegal Russian invasion. Under the resolute leadership of President Volodymyr Zelensky and in the worst possible circumstances, Ukrainians have demonstrated courage, a sense of community, and of patriotism. It's common to hear that Ukrainians stand in defence, not only of their own sovereignty, but of the integrity of rules-based international order, the order established after the Second World War that is so important to Canada.

Nova Scotians can be confident that the free democratic world is united in its response to Russian actions. Canada, the United States, partners in Europe, and around the world have taken sweeping actions, including unprecedented economic sanctions, to support Ukrainians and ensure that Russian aggression does not go unanswered.

Allied countries have flocked to support millions of refugees. As is our nature and in our interests, I urge Nova Scotians and Canadians to continue to do everything possible to support our besieged partners in Ukraine. To Ukrainians, we are praying for a rapid end to this terrible conflict. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the NDP.

GARY BURRILL: Russian imperialism has a long and dark history. Vladimir Putin is its 21st century embodiment and no reasonable person could remain unmoved and unshaken before the destruction and death the world is witnessing daily in the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Here in this Legislature, our thoughts turn naturally to the considerable Ukrainian and Ukrainian-descended population of our province, from Whitney Pier to Halifax, and elsewhere, and to the depth of concern and anguish that is being experienced by so many for their families, their communities, and homes.

Our minds cannot but turn, too, to the millions of people who are in exodus from the invasion at the moment, as nation after nation, including ours, prepares to open their

arms to the gathering torrent of Ukrainian refugees. Our spirits turn in hope as we see the many people in our province and our country who are stepping forward in a myriad of ways to support the humanitarian effort that continues to be unfolding.

We stand humbled, Mr. Speaker, before the courage of the people of Ukraine, and join our hearts in the global prayer that this aggression may be ended. Thank you. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage.

HON. PAT DUNN: Mr. Speaker, before I begin my remarks, I wanted to ask the following colleagues to rise in their places: the honourable member for Cole Harbour, the member for Halifax Armdale, the member for Preston, the member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island, the member for Halifax Needham, and the member for Eastern Shore.

These members have done something remarkable. They came together across political lines to create ground-breaking and historic legislation to address hate, racism, and inequity. (Applause)

I will introduce the bill shortly only because the rules of the House dictate that I do. I want to be clear that this is not my bill. This legislation came together as a result of frank discussions, compromise, and thoughtful debate on the part of the MLAs I named. They'll have a chance to respond to this statement and speak to this bill in a few moments.

This legislation was also made possible because of the hard work of the following, and these people are presently in the Speaker's Gallery: Deputy Minister Catherine Berliner, Associate Deputy Minister Dwayne Provo, DeRico Symonds - Senior Executive Advisor, Christine Gibbons - Executive Director of Strategic Policy and Innovation, and the dedicated staff at the Offices of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives and African Nova Scotian Affairs. (Applause)

Perhaps unknown to many, staff worked seven days a week to undertake an extensive round of engagement. They held more than 70 online sessions with organizations, community groups, and interested Nova Scotians. That's well over 100 hours of direct engagement. They ran a survey and gathered feedback through a website, by email, and by telephone. In the span of about six weeks, they heard from more than 2,000 Nova Scotians, and they analyzed and organized all that feedback so we could make informed decisions at the all-party committee.

The work these committed civil servants did will serve as the gold standard for governments across this country. It helped us produce legislation that will be the first of its kind in Canada. On behalf of all Nova Scotians, I want to thank them for their exceptional contributions to this process and to their province.

I also want to extend my sincere thanks to every Nova Scotian who participated in the consultation sessions. Their opinions, experiences, and suggestions shaped the work we did. I especially want to thank those who acknowledged that they have often felt overlooked or unheard by government and who took a risk in sharing sometimes difficult or painful experiences in the hopes of making things better across this province. I hope they can hear their voices reflected in the bill that will be tabled later today. I want to assure them that this is a step on our journey, not the end.

Today, with the introduction of legislation, we, as a province, will say with one voice that racism and hate are not acceptable in Nova Scotia. We are providing a framework to guide us as we dismantle racism and eliminate hate in our province. We are making Nova Scotia a stronger and better place for all Nova Scotians. I think that's an important message to share. When we say no to hate and racism and address long-standing inequity, we create conditions where everyone can thrive.

Mr. Speaker, when I began my remarks, I recognized six members of the Legislature from all three parties. I want to close by telling them through you what a humbling and fulfilling experience it has been to have worked with them in this process. I am thankful for their experience and for the expertise that each brought to this milestone legislation, and I am immensely proud of the work we produced. (Applause)

[1:30 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The honorable member for Preston.

ANGELA SIMMONDS: I rise to speak to the Dismantling Racism and Hate Act and to mark a historic day in our province.

Today we are one step closer to a Nova Scotia which is free from hate and discrimination. This legislation is groundbreaking. It has many remarkable features, but one of the most important things about this bill is that it won't let you forget it. It commands government attention, and it requires further action with specific timelines. It will help hold public bodies accountable, and it will help inform the effective actions, as it will provide decision makers with concrete data so that we can track and make real progress on fighting racism in this province.

It was built by the very people most impacted by the harms that it seeks to address. This is rare and a sad truth when we are talking about inequities. All too often, those with lived experience and first-hand knowledge of social issues don't have a platform like this. I'm proud that we took a deliberate approach to this by including more voices in this conversation.

The bill does not belong to any one single party or MLA. The bill in the form before you today is the work of an all-party committee, and it's the work of hundreds of Nova

Scotians who've added their voice through consultations. It is both by and for Nova Scotians, and this is why I think it is going to move the needle on eliminating systemic racism in this province.

It marks all of the differences when people in the room and making decisions on those are most impacted by the outcomes. This time, the people in the room did look like me, but they also looked like my colleagues: the honourable members for Pictou Centre, for Dartmouth South, or for Halifax Armdale. Thjs is what's important: that everyone in this room, those with lived experience, and those who are allies or who also share a vision of the future without such hate and racism - because we are only going to do this if we do this together.

The people in the room this time, they were where Nova Scotians are from, countless backgrounds and ethnicities across all provinces. This is to say that when we talk about serious progress, it's never with one community, but it's about pulling every community together and never alone. That's what we're doing, we're pulling all communities together.

Today is one critical step on the path forward to a more equitable Nova Scotia, and it's a step that we will take together. This is a trail I intend to keep on blazing and invite every single Nova Scotian who believes in a future free from hate and racism. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm pleased to be here today to speak about this important piece of legislation. The NDP caucus has been pleased to work with other parties to bring this forward. My community has been calling out for action on discrimination and racism in Nova Scotia for generations, and they have been continuing to do so tirelessly. For too long, African Nova Scotians have been treated as second-class citizens, and our province of Nova Scotia is often called the Mississippi of the North.

Make no mistake, there is no debate on racism and hate. Our experience is real, and the struggle is real. I am really glad that in 2022 we can present this piece of legislation here at this House of Assembly. This legislation is a positive start, but there is far more work to do to take this issue seriously.

I would like to thank everyone who provided their input, used their voice in this process, and the staff who worked tirelessly to make this happen. This has been a difficult process. The timelines for consultation with community were ambitious and were quite short with a suggested, predetermined outcome. The government has not yet committed to properly funding this work.

I am proud to have worked with my caucus in consultation with community to bring forward important elements of this bill that would not have been present otherwise, such

as stronger reporting mechanisms in the legislation and the requirement for public bodies to create strategies in response to this bill.

Of course, it is disappointing that we miss so many solutions that we know have community support like recognition of calls for reparations for slavery and systemic racism, a legislated ban on street checks, stronger language on race-based demographic data, and occupational health and safety enhancements to include psychological safety and racist behaviour. This was all information that was given by community through the consultation. We'd love to see some more of that added into this particular bill.

Despite these shortcomings, we have an opportunity here to work with communities and on-the-ground organizations as we work to improve this bill, an Act to Dismantle Racism and Hate. In fact, we will have an opportunity to do this in the coming days, when the bill comes to the Law Amendments Committee. Can we include more people in this process and ensure community is adequately consulted? Absolutely. Can we make this bill better and as strong as it needs to be? Absolutely.

If there's one principle that I would like us to hear and understand as we move forward, it is this: the end result of this process shouldn't be government telling government what it needs to do to address racism and discrimination. The end result of this process should be government listening to the communities most impacted by racism and discrimination that have been telling us what is needed for too long, and then to act on what it has heard and ensure that adequate funding is provided for outcomes called upon.

In short, I'm pleased to have come to this point, and I'm committed to seeing a bill that ensures my community and I feel safe and respected in our province. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Portland Valley.

HON. TONY INCE: Mr. Speaker, a number of years ago, I stood in this House and I spoke about the challenges of being the only one around. I spoke about having allies. This, Mr. Speaker, is a step in that direction. (Applause) I applaud all my colleagues, the staff, and everybody who worked on this bill.

As my colleague for Halifax Needham has mentioned, this bill will still need some work done on it. In the future, it's not only my community - LGBTQ, Indo-Canadian, Muslim, Southeast Asian, and I can go on. All these communities and folks will see that there is a piece of legislation that attempts - it's not final yet, but it attempts to ensure that their voices, their lived experiences, their culture and knowledge, and all that they bring to the table is heard and possibly implemented in some of the policies that we need to put in place to ensure that all Nova Scotians are listened to and respected.

I'll leave it at that. Thank you all. (Applause.)

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin by acknowledging my fellow committee members for their commitment to advancing equity and anti-racism in Nova Scotia. I would also like to recognize the extraordinary efforts of the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives staff in supporting our work. I know they have the hard job now. It was positive that so many of us elected officials and bureaucrats who have fought for so long for equity and justice were able to share our experiences and ideas. The passion for positive change was palpable.

At the same time, I do think it's important that today's record reflects concerns that we in the NDP caucus articulated throughout the process. Sadly, we can't watch or read our discussions directly because this committee was established and worked outside the normal legislative process, without a clear decision-making process and without public record through Hansard.

This is such critical work. We should never leave it to ad hoc approaches. We feel that the consultation process was rushed and did not leave time to collectively synthesize what was heard and consider intersectional issues. We know there are community proposals that could be legislated with immediate positive impact, and these may have been missed or dismissed along the way. I hope the government will take seriously the public feedback we received during the legislative process.

We also would like to have used this important legislation to do more than mandate the creation of a strategy. This is a mandate and a power that government already holds. I don't have time to list all of the gaps present in the bill, but they include some significant ones. We would still like to see the establishment of a standing committee of the Legislature on equity and anti-racism.

We will also continue the fight for the creation of a gender-affirming care advisory committee. This proposal was reinterpreted in the draft bill as the need to include the fight against homophobia and transphobia in the strategy. This is a far cry from the specific actions we in the community are calling for. We do need to fight transphobia and homophobia, but one clear way to do this is through equitable access to resources, and celebration and recognition of these communities.

Seeking a just and equitable Nova Scotia cannot be achieved by the leadership of MLAs and department officials alone. This leadership role needs to be shared with the communities most affected by ongoing racism and discrimination in our province. In this work, we should truly be the public servants.

I remain hopeful and optimistic because I know this bill is not the start of this journey. It builds on a legacy of fighting for justice and equity by people and communities

in this province. It's an important stop along the journey, and it is now time for government to catch up and step up.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Eastern Shore.

KENT SMITH: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to offer a few words about our equity and anti-racism legislation put forward by the historic all-party committee. There is only one place to begin my comments, and that is by extending thanks to the dedicated staff at the department who worked so hard to make this legislation happen.

The passion and dedication put forth in this bill by Deputy Minister Cathy Berliner, Associate Deputy Minister Dwayne Provo, Senior Executive Director DeRico Symonds, Executive Director Christine Gibbons, and all the members of their team, who put in countless hours of outreach and consultation. On behalf of all members of this House and on behalf of all Nova Scotians who will benefit from this Act, thank you. (Applause)

I, too, would like to thank the honourable members of this House who joined together as a cohesive unit to make this legislation happen. To the honourable members from Cole Harbour, Halifax Armdale, Preston, Halifax Citadel-Sable Island, and Halifax Needham: it was not always easy and we did not always agree, but we worked together through the challenges. I would like to believe, and I would like to hope, that we can be used as an example of how to successfully put party priorities aside for a cause that's far greater than the colours of our campaign signs.

This bill, although extremely comprehensive, is nowhere near the end of our commitment to equity. The racism, hate, and inequity that too many Nova Scotians have been subject to for hundreds of years is not going to disappear when this bill passes. It is, however, a monumental beginning. As the saying goes, Mr. Speaker, you have to start somewhere. This bill is a giant step in the right direction to end racism and hatred and bring equity to all Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Armdale.

ALI DUALE: Mr. Speaker, members of this Legislature, staff: First of all, I would like to say thank you to the Premier, who took the time and had the courage to create this committee. Without that foundation, we would not have a committee. The work of this legislation belongs to the staff who are here today. Their names have been mentioned one by one. Without them, we would not be here talking about this bill today. (Applause) Not only were they there but they have the ability and the courage to bring other departments that pertain to this bill who sit at the table, that could have a stake in this bill.

This bill and the action we took, and the outcome of that action is what Nova Scotia needs. This is what we've been elected to do, irrespective of what party we belong to, what ideas we uphold and what we believe, and we can see the outcome.

I believe we are headed in the right direction, but we are not there yet. I wonder sometimes in this House and this Legislature - this is not the first bill that pertains to hate. Neither will it be the last. I believe that. But I believe we are headed in the right direction.

I encourage each one of you - this is not a party line. Hate has no boundaries, has no colour, has no identity. We need to unite. We need to move forward for this province. We have the ability to attract the rest of the world, to show that we can lead the way, we can lead this nation. This bill is one of a kind. I can say proudly, being a Nova Scotian, that this is not the first time Nova Scotia has taken the lead with issues that nobody else had the courage to touch.

Mr. Speaker, I'll ask all my colleagues to rise and applaud the staff who are here with us today who made this happen. Thank you. (Standing Ovation)

GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

RESOLUTION NO. 174

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Mr. Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall:

(1) read and table the message from His Honour, the Lieutenant Governor, transmitting the Estimates of Sums required for the service of the Province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2023, for the consideration of this House;

(2) table the Estimate Books;

(3) table the Government Business Plan;

(4) table the Estimate resolutions;

(5) deliver my Budget Speech; and

(6) move that the Estimates of Sums required for the service of the Province for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2023, being Supply to be granted to Her Majesty, be referred to the Committee of the Whole on Supply.

Mr. Speaker, the budget will be presented on Tuesday, March 29, 2022.

THE SPEAKER: That was a Government Notice of Motion, so it requires unanimous consent of the House. We're agreed, there we go. Just to make it legal, folks, that's all.

The honourable Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

HON. JOHN LOHR: Mr. Speaker, I am reading this Government Notice of Motion as the Minister Responsible for Military Relations.

RESOLUTION NO. 175

Mr. Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas on March 19, 2022, HMCS Halifax deployed for northern European waters on Operation Reassurance to support Canada's NATO commitments; and

Whereas Nova Scotia supports Ukraine's right to national sovereignty, and we support Canada working alongside NATO partners to deter those who threaten the sanctity of democracy; and

Whereas Nova Scotia recognizes the sacrifices that members of the Canadian Armed Forces make so that Nova Scotians can enjoy the security and freedoms that we too often take for granted, and we look forward to their safe return;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this Legislature pause to recognize the crew members of HMCS Halifax and all those in uniform who serve to protect and defend democracy.

Mr. Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded?

The motion is carried.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill No. 96 - Entitled an Act to Dismantle Racism and Hate. (Hon. Pat Dunn)

Bill No. 97 - Entitled an Act to Strengthen Nova Scotia's Social Safety Net. (Hon. Brendan Maguire)

Bill No. 98 - Entitled an Act to Amend Chapter 380 of the Revised Statutes, 1989, the Public Utilities Act, Respecting Equity and Sustainability. (Claudia Chender)

Bill No. 99 - Entitled an Act to Amend Chapter 8 of the Acts of 2015, the Quality-improvement Information Protection Act. (Hon. Michelle Thompson)

Bill No. 100 - Entitled an Act to Amend Chapter 18 of the Acts of 1998, the Municipal Government Act. (Lorelei Nicoll)

Bill No. 101 - Entitled an Act to Amend Chapter 32 of the Acts of 2015, the Marine Renewable-energy Act. (Hon. Tory Rushton)

Bill No. 102 - Entitled an Act to Amend Chapter 504 of the Revised Statutes of 1989, the Wildlife Act. (Hon. Tory Rushton)

Bill No. 103 - Entitled an Act Respecting Youth Food Security. (Hon. Iain Rankin)

Bill No. 104 - Entitled an Act to Amend Chapter 9 of the Acts of 2002, the Interjurisdictional Support Orders Act. (Hon. Brad Johns)

Bill No. 105 - Entitled an Act to Amend Chapter 24 of the Acts of 2021, the Protecting Access to Health Services Act. (Hon. Brad Johns)

THE SPEAKER: Ordered that these bills be read a second time on a future day.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, I would like to seek unanimous consent for Bill No. 105 - an Act to Amend Chapter 24 of the Acts of 2021, the Protecting Access to Health Services Act - to be put to the order paper under Public Bills for Second Reading.

THE SPEAKER: Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call the order of business, Public Bills for Second Reading.

THE SPEAKER: We're going to ask the Government House Leader if she'll introduce that again after Question Period.

Before we get into Question Period, I have one special request that has come to me in the form of a member's statement.

The honourable member for Eastern Passage.

HON. BARBARA ADAMS: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to celebrate the life and legacy of my mother, Marjorie Claire Hare, who passed away last night at the age of 92. She was a secretary and a volunteer who made it her mission to improve the lives of others. She was always the life of the party and made sure that everyone else enjoyed themselves as well. She was a member of the IODE for her whole life. She sang in the church choir and was a lifelong member of the Dartmouth Curling Club and bridge club. She enjoyed dancing, travelling, and the Toronto Blue Jays.

She loved her children - David, Marilyn, and myself - but she had a special bond with all of her grandsons: Bryan and Scott Boutilier, John and Chris Lavoie, and Michael and Patrick Hare. She was so delighted to be a great-grandmother, finally, to little Spencer a year ago.

My mother loved politics and had a special bond with our premier, Tim Houston. Her sister Barbara Mackenzie and the entire family will miss her humour and her smile, but we will be sustained by all of our wonderful memories. We love you, Mom. I ask all members of the Nova Scotia Legislature to join me in celebrating the life and legacy of my mother, Marjorie Hare. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Sincere sympathy from all the members of the House of Assembly.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS

THE SPEAKER: The time now is 2:03 p.m. We'll continue Question Period until 2:53 p.m.

The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM.: N.S. POWER MEETING - DETAILS

HON. IAIN RANKIN: A Freedom of Information request reveals that on November 24th, approximately two months before Nova Scotia Power submitted their increase request to the Utility and Review Board, that would destroy the solar industry and increase power rates on Nova Scotians, the Premier met with Emera, which I'll table. Can the Premier confirm that he was indeed at this meeting, and share who else was there?

THE PREMIER: I certainly probably was there. I don't remember that meeting specifically or who might have been in attendance, but as Premier I meet with a lot of people. I consider that a significant part of my job, so there's no question that I would have met with Nova Scotia Power numerous times. In fact, I convened a meeting with every elected federal member and the Leaders of both other parties with Nova Scotia Power at one point to specifically discuss the Loop.

I certainly consider it my responsibility as Premier to meet with many people to discuss many issues, so there's no doubt I would have had the meeting with them. I don't remember who would have been specifically there. It might be the one the member was at, for all I know.

IAIN RANKIN: I appreciate the answer that he met with Emera a number of times. I'd like to ask the Premier: What was discussed at this meeting?

THE PREMIER: I'm not sure, specifically, but I can tell the member that the meetings that we've had with Nova Scotia Power and Emera representatives have generally been around the Atlantic Loop.

IAIN RANKIN: Was the Premier made aware at this November 24th meeting that Nova Scotia Power would be submitting their plan to increase power rates and destroy our solar industry in two months?

THE PREMIER: Again, Mr. Speaker, I don't remember the exact discussion. Certainly, the discussions we've had, as I mentioned, were oftentimes dominated by Atlantic Loop discussions. There have been discussions about their general rates increase application. There will be a lot more to be said about that as well. Our obligation is to protect the ratepayers of this province and we will do just that, as we have shown very specifically and very swiftly with the discussion around solar.

In response to the part of the question about solar specifically, I was not aware of any attempts to make any changes to the solar program in this province. When I found out, I acted very, very quickly. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the New Democratic Party.

PREM.: COST OF LIVING - RECOGNIZE

GARY BURRILL: Mr. Speaker, I'm going to ask you and the Premier to push a grocery cart with me up a couple of aisles. Let's start in the freezer aisle: frozen peas, \$2.99 at the start of the pandemic, \$4.19 today; concentrated juice jumps 69 cents to \$1.49; frozen pizza \$3.99 to \$6.99.

These increases in the grocery bills of every household in the province are far greater than the government's recent 40 cent increase in the minimum wage. My question to the Premier: Does the Premier not realize that more is required from his government in order for people's paycheques to keep up with the cost of living?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, I assure the member that we're well aware the list is much more expensive than the few products he has mentioned. The cost of living has gone up. Nova Scotians are struggling. Canadians are struggling. People around the world are struggling under the weight of inflation. That's not a Nova Scotia issue - that's just a human issue right now.

To answer the member's question specifically about the minimum wage, the member may or may not be aware from his time in government, which would have used the same process, that there's an independent committee that goes through a lot of process to determine the changes to the minimum wage.

My philosophy in general is when the Province of Nova Scotia asks people on a volunteer basis to do some work on behalf of the Province, they should respect what those people come back with in terms of findings. We respect the work of that committee, and we will be implementing their findings.

GARY BURRILL: Let's take our cart around to the next aisle then, Mr. Speaker, to the dairy case: Cheese slices have gone up from \$4.99 to \$5.99; cheese itself from \$4.99 to \$8.99 a block; eggs from \$2.99 to \$4.99. Let's compare this increase this year with the increase this year in income assistance rates, which is zero. A fact which is unaltered by today's DCS announcement.

My question to the Premier: In this moment of intense cost of living pressure, will the Premier agree to follow the example that has been set by New Brunswick and index assistance rates to the cost of living?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for raising this very serious issue. We're looking at a number of things; we've taken a number of actions. I think any objective viewer of the response of our government to a number of issues would say we're moving pretty quickly. We've accomplished an incredible amount as a government, in a very short order. (Applause)

Of course, events of the world continue to impact the lives of Nova Scotians as they go to pay for a number of things. We're very conscious of that, and we will continue the theme we've already established - the credibility we've already established with Nova Scotians - that wherever possible, we will act. We will not leave a single stone unturned when it comes to supporting Nova Scotians. We'll continue to do just that.

GARY BURRILL: Hold on to your hat, Mr. Speaker, we're heading for the meats.

THE SPEAKER: I'll recognize you first.

GARY BURRILL: Thank you. The first thing we're going to see when we get there is hot dogs have gone from \$4.99 to \$8.99 for a 900-gram package, chicken breasts \$6.49 a kilogram, in 2020 we picked them up and that's \$13.21 today; bacon - today is payday in the Province of Nova Scotia so maybe we'll have some bacon - \$4.99 to \$8.99 in less than a year.

Now what's in this cart? These are the budget priorities of the people of Nova Scotia. My question to the Premier: Will he give his word that his budget next week will have at the top of its list making sure that everyone can afford to fill their carts with the things that the people of our province need?

THE PREMIER: I can assure the member that the priorities of this government are the priorities of Nova Scotians. They have spoken loudly and clearly that they agree with that every time they have been asked.

THE SPEAKER: Before we go any further, I would just like to remind some of the visitors in the Gallery that there is no clapping allowed when there's clapping taking place. That is part of the rules for the Gallery.

The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM. - N.S. POWER: RATE INCREASE REQUEST - DISCUSS

HON. IAIN RANKIN: On January 27th, Nova Scotia Power submitted their increase request to the UARB. The application would increase power rates by 10 per cent and propose new net metering charges, a plan that would destroy solar energy and put additional costs on Nova Scotians already squeezed in the cost-of-living crisis.

In the days leading to Nova Scotia Power's increase request to the UARB, did the Premier meet with any members of Nova Scotia Power's executive or anyone employed by Emera to discuss these increase requests?

THE PREMIER: Are you speaking specifically about the solar issue? Have I met with Nova Scotia Power or Emera? I don't recall, Mr. Speaker.

Honestly, my answer is the same. I meet with Nova Scotia Power to discuss a number of issues. I meet with all kinds of employers in this province. I meet with people all day every single day. I take that very seriously as my responsibility to promote Nova Scotia here and abroad and understand the impacts of things happening in our economy. (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. There's some chatter going on.

The honourable Premier.

THE PREMIER: I'm happy to look at my calendar and see who I met with on the specific days that the member might be referring to, but I want to stress this point because it might not have been in the member's briefing note. Just in case he or his team missed it, we acted very, very swiftly to protect the solar industry in Nova Scotia, and we will continue to act very swiftly to protect the ratepayers of this province at every opportunity.

IAIN RANKIN: Curiously swiftly - almost like you might have been ready for it.

Mr. Speaker, the same freedom of information request reveals that on Thursday, January 20th - just seven days before Nova Scotia Power submitted their increase request to the UARB - the Premier had another meeting, this time with Nova Scotia Power. I can table this as well. Can the Premier confirm that he was at this meeting seven days before the request came through and share who else was there?

THE PREMIER: I'm happy to check my calendar and see whom I met with and who might have been in attendance at that point in time. There's no denying that I met with Nova Scotia Power. I don't know if that's what the member is trying to get at. If that's what he's trying to get at, absolutely, I have met with Nova Scotia Power. If the member is curious if I have met with Emera, absolutely, I have met with Emera.

I meet with all kinds of people every single day. My responsibility is always the same - protect the ratepayers of this province. As much as I have met with them and understand what they're doing, I act in the interest of the ratepayers of this province at every single opportunity. My government and I will continue to do that. Stay tuned, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM. - N.S. POWER: JAN. 20TH MEETING - DETAILS

HON. IAIN RANKIN: I'll take that as admission that he had that meeting among several other meetings leading up to the increase request.

Seven days before, what was discussed at that meeting on January 20th? Seven days before that increase request came in. You mentioned ratepayers. Was it requested? Was it talked about at that meeting?

THE PREMIER: I'm not sure specifically. Listen, I'm not trying to be evasive. I really just don't remember. I will say to the member quite clearly that the changes to the solar program were not something that I was made aware of at any point in time. Discussions would have included the Atlantic Loop.

To the extent that there have been any discussions, any contemplation about a rate increase, I would have absolutely made it crystal clear to Nova Scotia Power and Emera that I will be taking every step I can to protect the ratepayers of this province. I can guarantee the member and every single Nova Scotian that they know that I am very, very serious.

[2:15 p.m.]

IAIN RANKIN: I hear you loud and clear on the solar, but was the Premier informed at this meeting on January 20th - a black and white question - that the increase would be coming in just one week later?

THE PREMIER: Again, I don't remember the contents of the specific meeting. I can tell you in general terms that we had discussions about the Atlantic Loop. I certainly was aware that Nova Scotia Power was contemplating a GRA application, and I will tell you they knew my response to that at that time, and they know it every single day since. And soon, Nova Scotians will also know my exact response to any talk of increasing the rates on Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition on another new question.

PREM.: N.S. POWER RATE HIKE - AWARENESS

HON. IAIN RANKIN: Mr. Speaker, while he seems to now say that he knows a little bit but maybe not the amount, the Premier told the media on January 31st that he was shocked by Nova Scotia Power's increase request to the UARB. I'll table that.

We know from a Freedom of Information request that seven days before Nova Scotia Power submitted their increase request to the UARB, the Premier met with them. I find it hard to believe the Premier was not informed of a situation that would have a huge impact on the wallets of Nova Scotians. Why does the Premier believe that Nova Scotia Power did not inform him?

THE PREMIER: Perhaps I'll submit something to the member that he may not have considered. Perhaps I was shocked that they actually tried it.

IAIN RANKIN: I'll try again. When was the Premier actually first made aware of Nova Scotia Power's UARB increase request that would destroy the solar industry and leave hundreds of Nova Scotians who work in this industry out of a job, and a 10 per cent increase?

THE PREMIER: I don't remember the exact date, but just for perspective and point of reference, the question is: When was I aware of the plans and the potential impact on

the solar industry in this province? I would say that I was made aware of it about two hours before I killed it.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

PREM: ENERGY POVERTY - IMMEDIATE ACTION

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Mr. Speaker, my question is also for the Premier. Here's a fact about which there is no mystery: We have one of the highest energy poverty rates in the country. Nearly 150,000 households in Nova Scotia are paying more than they can afford on home energy - and I'll table that. In fact, the Premier referenced energy poverty when he said earlier this year that schools need to be open because that's "the place where children are most warm." And I will table that.

My question for the Premier, which I hope he'll answer, is: Wouldn't he agree that the knowledge that some families can't afford to keep their homes heated demands immediate action to lower home energy bills?

THE PREMIER: There are a number of issues facing Nova Scotians and I would agree that they are all very serious, like food security, energy security - there are a number of issues facing Nova Scotians. We're doing what we can as a government. I think Nova Scotians see that. We can always do more.

Today we announced some changes to the HARP program. The member might not have had a chance to see those yet and to understand the positive impact that will have on a number of Nova Scotians. We take the issue very, very seriously and we do what we can on behalf of Nova Scotians every single day.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Mr. Speaker, Nova Scotians were shocked earlier this year to learn, as we've been discussing, that Nova Scotia Power is proposing to raise residential rates by 10 per cent within the next three years. Between sky-high housing prices, volatile rates at the pumps, and groceries becoming more expensive by the day, many people have no idea how they will pay for higher bills.

My question is: Notwithstanding the programs announced today, will the Premier go beyond short-term small fixes, recognize the problem, and commit long-term to ensuring that no household in this province is left in the cold because they can't access affordable energy?

THE PREMIER: Mr. Speaker, I completely reject the premise that the significant investments this government has made to support Nova Scotians are small. I completely reject the premise that they're insignificant. I think they're very significant in the lives of Nova Scotians. I think if the member was honest about the steps we've taken in so many areas around supporting . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The Premier cannot express whether a person is honest or not, so I'd ask him to withdraw that.

THE PREMIER: For that particular use - I apologize for that - any objective observer who looked at the steps we've taken as a government to support so many Nova Scotians. I could talk about CCAs, I could talk about a number of programs that we've taken, issues that have been sitting on the desk waiting for somebody to have the courage to deal with.

They found those people who have the courage to deal with the issues. They're sitting on this side of the House in a PC government, and we will continue to do more and more for Nova Scotians every single day.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

PREM. - RATE INCREASE: OCT. 8, 2021 MEETING - DETAILS

HON. KELLY REGAN: That didn't take long. In addition to the November 24th and January 20th meetings, we know there was a third meeting with all MPs and Opposition Leaders on October 8th, and I will table that.

My question to the Premier is: At this meeting, were there private conversations regarding the Nova Scotia Power increase request that would destroy the solar industry, and increase power rates in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis?

THE PREMIER: I don't believe so. I think this was a meeting where we all met at One Government Place at a certain time. We got together, probably had a few pleasantries before the general meeting started. Certainly, the member's leader was at that meeting, and he can exactly fill her in on what was discussed at that meeting. The meeting was about the Atlantic Loop. That's what the meeting was about.

KELLY REGAN: What I actually asked was about private conversations. Is the Premier actually telling us that over the course of three meetings on October 8th, November 24th, and January 20th, not once did Nova Scotia Power bother to mention their increase request that would increase power rates and destroy the solar industry?

THE PREMIER: The first question was about the solar, and I'm very clear, I was not aware of the changes to the solar industry. There were discussions that they were contemplating a rate increase. Quite frankly, I was surprised and shocked that they went through with it.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Bedford Basin on a new question.

PREM.: N.S. POWER OCT. MEETING - INCREASE DISCUSSED

HON. KELLY REGAN: Okay, yes. So, the Premier had three meetings with Nova Scotia Power before they submitted their increase request to the UARB. The Premier has said that the ratepayer is his top priority.

My question is for the Premier: At the October 8th meeting with Nova Scotia Power, did the Premier ask them about their plan for the power rate increases?

THE PREMIER: Well, certainly, the last thing I would want in this province is a power rate increase, and I certainly wouldn't be encouraging somebody or asking one about it.

The question is asking if I asked them if they were contemplating a rate increase at an October 8th meeting. I don't know what would have been discussed on October 8th. I probably don't even know where I was on October 8th, to be honest, Mr. Speaker, but I'd be happy to check my calendar, and maybe ask my wife, who's in the gallery today, where I was on October 8th. I don't remember.

I certainly was not encouraging a rate increase, if that's what the member is suggesting. Absolutely not, and I was not aware of any solar increase until it became public.

KELLY REGAN: To be clear, I did ask about both the solar power program decimation and the power rate increase, first of all, in my first question. I get it, it's been a number of questions, but I just want to make sure that I understand what the Premier is saying. He's saying he doesn't remember, he absolutely did not; it's all over the place.

At the Premier's November 24th meeting, two months before Nova Scotia Power submitted their increase request that would destroy the solar industry and increase power rates, did the Premier ask Emera what their plan was for power rate increases? Was the Nova Scotia ratepayer his priority then?

THE PREMIER: Look, they keep asking and the answer will be the same. I don't remember the exact discussions and what was asked of what particular - and I can't even - I know the member is hoping that I can help the member understand, but it's impossible for me to weigh in on what the member may understand or not understand.

I'll be very clear about this: I was not aware. I was not aware of any changes to the solar industry until I found out and I acted upon those. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

NRR: N.S. POWER RATE INCREASE - QUESTION

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Mr. Speaker, a mere seven days before Nova Scotia Power submitted their plan to make power rates unaffordable, the Premier met with Nova Scotia Power.

I'm asking the Premier: At this meeting, did the Premier ask Nova Scotia Power their plan to increase power rates?

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, I can be very clear here. Our department and our government, just like the previous government, meets with Nova Scotia Power on a regular basis. They're a regulated utility that serves our ratepayers, but bear in mind that as soon we took the chair of government, we assured ratepayers that they are top of this government's mind.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Apparently, we have a new Premier.

Mr. Speaker, on February 2nd - my question is directly to the Premier of Nova Scotia - the Premier told reporters that his obligation was to the ratepayers of this province. Did the Premier's obligation to ratepayers start on February 2nd - two hours before he found out - or did he just forget about all this in his three meetings, that we know of, with Nova Scotia Power on October 8th, November 24th, and January 20th?

TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, our concern in this government and in the PC caucus started in 2020, when we started writing our mandate letter to go to the election.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

DHW: HEALTH CARE NOT IMPROVING - ACKNOWLEDGE

SUSAN LEBLANC: My question is for the Premier. The surgery backlog is growing, Mr. Speaker. According to records from the Nova Scotia Health Authority, there are currently more than 27,000 people in Nova Scotia waiting for surgery. This is more people and more lives on hold than at any other time during the pandemic or any other time in the last five years.

Can the Premier admit that the Nova Scotia health care system is not getting better under his government? In fact, it might be getting worse.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: I don't agree at all. I know that the wait-list is long. We've had the most difficult wave of Omicron in the last seven or eight weeks. Our health care workers in this province work diligently. They have been going above and beyond.

We know the wait-list is there. We know that it's a concern and we will be announcing things in the next few weeks that tell you, and tell Nova Scotians, that we are going to get to the bottom of the list. Not a minute at a time, not a patient at a time, but in an aggressive way to get to this list.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I really look forward to that plan coming out. I believe it's scheduled for next Thursday. I also want to echo my colleague in saying that yes, Nova Scotia's health care workers are true heroes, and we need to keep supporting them as we move through the pandemic.

The Progressive Conservatives claim that they are going to extend the hours - speaking of solutions - of operating rooms in order to get through the backlog of surgeries. A series of Freedom of Information requests received by our office show that there are no records related to this election promise at the Nova Scotia Health Authority, the Department of Health and Wellness, or the Premier's Office. I can table those FOIOPs. I'm worried that this might be evidence of a broken promise from the Houston government.

Mr. Speaker, does the Premier think it is fair that he promised Nova Scotians solutions and instead, so far, has only delivered longer surgery wait-lists?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: Mr. Speaker, we've been delivering solutions to health care in this province since September 1st and we have a long list that we are more than happy to share. We know that that list is long. It's been inherited from others, not created by us. We will work diligently and move mountains in order to address that list. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

NRR - N.S. POWER: SOLAR DEAL - RESPOND

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Mr. Speaker, upon the Premier learning about Nova Scotia Power's rate increase request and their plan to destroy the solar industry, one may say it appears that the Premier's advocacy for the solar industry is merely a red herring. The question is for the Premier: Was there a deal to support the solar industry in exchange for a 10 per cent rate increase?

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: As the minister responsible for the department for energy that intertwines with the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, the very simple answer is no.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Mr. Speaker, the Premier knew about Nova Scotia Power's increase request before they made their application and chose to do nothing until the public voiced their displeasure. My question for the Premier: Was this their plan all

along, that the Premier would look tough for the solar industry while allowing a 10 per cent increase to be imposed on hard-working Nova Scotians? Was this really the Premier's plan?

[2:30 p.m.]

TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, if we're talking about toughness, look out for the next couple of weeks.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

NRR: N.S. POWER RATE INCREASE - AWARE OR NOT

LORELEI NICOLL: Mr. Speaker, on January 6th the Premier's Office was directly sent notice that Nova Scotia Power was activating its Emergency Operations Centre. I'll table that. My question to the Premier: Is the Premier telling us that he was informed of this routine activity but not of Nova Scotia Power's plan to increase power rates that would devastate Nova Scotians in the middle of a cost of living crisis?

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. I can speak to this a little bit but when something is activated in an emergency situation, many departments on this side of the House would be notified, similar to the previous governments. During an emergency situation, the lead for our department is the same as it was in previous governments: It would be going through the EMO. Communications do take place during emergency situations to ensure the safety of all Nova Scotians.

LORELEI NICOLL: It wasn't just anyone, Mr. Speaker, at Nova Scotia Power who informed the Premier's Office of the activation of the Emergency Operations Centre. It was the Executive Vice President, Regulatory, Legal, Planning and Government Relations for Nova Scotia Power. My question is for the Premier: Why does he believe that a Nova Scotia Power executive would reach out to his office about a routine activation but not about their increase request to the NSUARB that would put hundreds of Nova Scotians working in the solar industry out of work?

TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, executives from Nova Scotia Power talk regularly with our government at different levels. I am sure if they talked to the Minister responsible for EMO, executives talk to them about the emergency situations as well.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Yarmouth.

EMO: RATE INCREASE KNOWLEDGE - CONFIRM

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, on January 13th, a mere two weeks before Nova Scotia Power would submit its increase request to the NSUARB that would

make power unaffordable for Nova Scotians, the Premier's Office was once again notified by the Executive Vice President of Nova Scotia Power that the Emergency Operations Centre was being activated.

Can the Premier see, considering in addition to three meetings and that not once but twice the Premier's Office was informed about this routine activity, why some might find it hard to believe that he was not informed on Nova Scotia Power's increase request that would hike power rates in Nova Scotia and destroy the solar industry? I'll table that.

HON. JOHN LOHR: Mr. Speaker, as minister responsible for the EMO, perhaps I can shed some light on the situation, at least as it relates to snowstorms or weather events.

At the moment when the notice would go to the Premier's Office, the provincial command centre would be activated. This provincial command centre, as some members on that side would know, would have wide-ranging responsibilities to communicate with all the fire departments, public communications, many different parts of the government infrastructure, including Nova Scotia Power, due to the importance of electricity and power outages and the impact they have on individuals. This would be the reason for these notifications.

We would not have any control over who in particular on the Nova Scotia Power side would make that information available to us but it is very critical to the province.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Mr. Speaker, we know that a Nova Scotia Power executive reached out to the Premier's Office multiple times about a routine activity in the same month that they made the increase application and that they made decisions to impact the solar industry.

Would it be concerning to the Premier that Nova Scotia Power didn't inform his office of these major changes? I am concerned that the Premier is evading this question and leaning on his ministers and I would like the Premier to answer this question directly, please.

JOHN LOHR: I would like to reiterate the importance of when these weather events are happening that the provincial command centre gets notified and the Premier gets notified, and this is the reason that these notifications would happen. At that moment in time, for Nova Scotia Power and for us, that would be top of mind, what is going to happen in these weather events. Those types of notifications would not have anything in particular to do with any other policies of Nova Scotia Power or our relationship with them.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SNSIS: LOBBYING RULES - STRENGTHEN

SUZY HANSEN: My question is for the Premier: In 2018, when he was questioning Premier McNeil from the Opposition side, he said that our lobbying rules may be working for the Premier, but they are not working for any Nova Scotian who is trying to find out a basic level of information. Government should not be afraid to operate in the open, and I can table that. Mr. Speaker, does the Premier still agree that government should not be afraid to operate in the open?

THE PREMIER: Yes.

SUZY HANSEN: In 2018, we saw how weak the Nova Scotia lobbying rules are when former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien was lobbying Premier Stephen McNeil. The Registry of Lobbyists sent a letter to Mr. Chrétien asking about the meeting, which Mr. Chrétien was able to simply ignore. The Registrar's Office had no power to investigate or require an answer. Mr. Speaker, will the Premier strengthen the rules around lobbying and provide the Registrar with the power to investigate when rules are broken?

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: I think what our government has demonstrated through the early days of our mandate is that we are very open to modernizing legislation in this province that impacts Nova Scotians from one end of the province to the other. This is another piece of legislation within the department that we can certainly have a look at, and we appreciate the member's input in those dialogues.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Preston.

NRR: LINES OF COMMUNICATION - IMPROVE

ANGELA SIMMONDS: News of a rate increase from Nova Scotia Power has many of us anxious about the financial future of our families in this province. In an economy where rent has become unaffordable, owning a home has become unattainable, and wages are not reliant on this province with keeping with the pace of the trends.

Mr. Speaker, I'll ask the Premier. One day after the increase request was made public on January 28th, the Premier's Office was once again contacted by an executive vice-president for Nova Scotia Power about a routine activity, and I will table that. My question to the Premier is: Why are the lines of communication so open for routine activities but not for issues that would negatively impact the pocketbooks of Nova Scotians in the midst of the cost of living crisis?

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, I have reiterated many times here on the floor that Nova Scotia Power reaches out many times through emergencies, through conversations, through the RFP that was just released about wind. I've had several conversations when the previous government was in power with many ministers and talked

about Nova Scotia Power. Nova Scotia Power's communication back and forth with this government is no different than previous governments.

ANGELA SIMMONDS: Mr. Speaker, we must stop our reliance on coal. The Premier has big plans to get us off coal by 2030, but we have not seen the action that is required to do so, and to do this we must pivot hard and fast by generating our electricity from clean and renewable sources. We must make smart investments in our energy sector. We do this by respecting and trusting relationships with Nova Scotia Power, and this will be necessary for this to get done.

Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Premier: What will the Premier do to make sure he is more informed in the future and to improve the relationship with Nova Scotia Power?

TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, it's a great pleasure to have that question, and I agree 100 per cent with the member opposite. We did make ambitious targets to have 80 per cent of our energy renewable by 2030. One of those initiatives is the existing one that has already been created by previous governments, but in recent months the RFP was released for another 350 megawatts of power to be included. Another 10 per cent of renewable energy is coming onto our grid.

We've also set standards for a maximum cost that those procurement groups can actually charge Nova Scotia Power. That's how we're protecting ratepayers in Nova Scotia, and there's more to come yet.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

NRR: N.S. POWER DEC. 7TH MEETING - CONFIRM

CARMAN KERR: We know that not only did the Premier have meetings with Nova Scotia Power, but an additional information request, which I'll table, reveals that on December 7th at 4:30 p.m., the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables met with Nova Scotia Power as well. Can the minister confirm that he was at this meeting?

HON. TORY RUSHTON: If it came through FOIPOP and says I was there, I was probably there. I'll be glad to have a conversation with that member opposite, once I go through my notes, and have a review of what was at that meeting.

CARMAN KERR: The Freedom of Information request had the names of Nova Scotia Power representatives redacted for a reason I can't understand and am appealing. Will the minister share who else was in attendance at that meeting?

TORY RUSHTON: As I said, I would be glad to look at the calendar and look at the notes and have a conversation with the member opposite. Sitting here today, I certainly

cannot recall certain meetings at a specific time on a specific date, but I'll certainly have a look and communicate with the member opposite.

NRR: OTHER MEETINGS WITH N.S. POWER - DETAILS

CARMAN KERR: The Premier met three times with Nova Scotia Power, and on December 7th, the minister may have met, or may not, with Nova Scotia Power once again. Can the minister share with the House what was discussed at those meetings?

HON. TORY RUSHTON: I'd have to go back. Once again, I can't reiterate enough in this session today that I can't remember specifically, but I'd be glad to look back and review notes and have a conversation.

CARMAN KERR: Was this the meeting that Nova Scotia Power informed the minister or staff of their increase request that would destroy the solar industry and place additional costs on Nova Scotians and the cost of living crisis?

TORY RUSHTON: When Nova Scotia Power filed their rate increase with the Utility and Review Board, there's no law that states they have to come to the Premier or the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables. They did this on their own. We didn't know until the official public actually knew what was in that document.

To have conversations and confirm or deny whether something was in discussion or not, I'll look at my calendar and be pleased to have the conversation and move this discussion further of more important things that need to be discussed: health care, renewable energy, how we're going to get to the climate change programs. Let's have the important discussions. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier - and I'm going to call order for silence with all the chatter.

DCS: CANADA CHILD BENEFIT CLAWBACK - ADDRESS

KENDRA COOMBES: My question is for the Minister of Community Services. A recent article entitled "Child-care benefit temporary clawback kicks Nova Scotia families when they're down" points out when a child is taken into temporary care or custody of the minister, there's often a lengthy delay between the time a child is returned to their family and when the Canada Child Benefit is received. I will table that.

This delay puts vulnerable families in an even more precarious situation unnecessarily. Other provinces have found solutions for this problem. Why hasn't Nova Scotia?

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: This is a really important question, one that we are having discussions about. What's happening brings me great concern, but as we know, it is under federal jurisdiction.

One thing that we're doing, though, is always putting the child first. That will always be our number one priority: to ensure that the child is safe and taken care of. We have great social workers working with the families in order to reunite. Thank you.

[2:45 p.m.]

KENDRA COOMBES: Mr. Speaker, in 2018 the member for Dartmouth North wrote to the minister to raise concerns regarding this clawback of the CCB. The minister at the time indicated a willingness to work on the issue.

In December 2021, the Child Welfare Advocacy Coalition wrote to the minister to advocate against the clawback. The department has been aware of this issue for at least four years. My question for the minister is: Why hasn't anything been done to fix it?

KARLA MACFARLANE: Again, as a follow-up, my number one priority is the child in any situation, but again, this is under federal legislation. When the federal government decides to change that piece of legislation, we will all be very happy.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

NRR: N.S. POWER RATE HIKE PLANS - QUESTION

CARMAN KERR: Mr. Speaker, on January 28th, the day following Nova Scotia Power's increase request that would destroy the solar industry and place unaffordable rates on Nova Scotians, the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables stated that "this government will protect ratepayers." I'll table that.

My question is for the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables: Did he intend to protect ratepayers at this meeting by asking Nova Scotia Power their plans for rates in this province?

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member opposite for the question. I think Nova Scotia Power, along with all Nova Scotians, knew that when they put their X beside a PC government, we were going to stand up for Nova Scotians, we were going to stand up for the ratepayers, we were going to stand up for climate, and we were going to stand up for health care.

There are many, many important issues that we can be debating here today - not who was at a meeting and who said what.

CARMAN KERR: I still don't know who was at the meeting and who said what. (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The member for Annapolis has the floor.

CARMAN KERR: Did the minister inform the Premier about the contents of these meetings in December when he met with Nova Scotia Power?

TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, just a point of clarity from the heckling: I never once said the Nova Scotia Power rate increase wasn't important to this government or Nova Scotia ratepayers.

We have conversations from minister to Premier all the time, Mr. Speaker. The members opposite know this. When we heard the official news of what Nova Scotia Power put in the rate increases, our staff and our department went to work immediately. The Premier and his staff went to work immediately. Why? Because we are invested and we are committed to Nova Scotia ratepayers to protect them every step of the way. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis on a new question.

NRR: POWER RATE HIKES - PREVENT

CARMAN KERR: There was mention of official meetings. I'm wondering if there were any unofficial meetings as well.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier said that he would fight for the Nova Scotia ratepayer and that they were his priority. My question is for the Premier, and it is simple: Since January 27th, when Nova Scotia Power submitted their increase request, has the Premier met with Nova Scotia Power to specifically discuss the 10 per cent rate hike?

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, I can't speak for whether the Premier met with Nova Scotia Power then, but I can speak for what the minister responsible for that has done. Yes, we have met with Nova Scotia Power since that, and we've informed Nova Scotia Power that this government is not happy.

CARMAN KERR: Mr. Speaker, for years Liberals made sure that Nova Scotians saw stable power rates throughout the rate stabilization plan. What is the Premier doing to ensure that Nova Scotians are not faced with a devastating rate increase in the middle of a cost of living crisis?

TORY RUSHTON: Mr. Speaker, the member opposite should be aware of a decision made by the Liberal government in 2015 to agree with Nova Scotia Power to reduce the amount of solar energy a homeowner can produce on their rooftop. It's our government that is going to change that. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM.: RATE INCREASE NOTIFICATION - SPECIFY

HON. IAIN RANKIN: We're just not getting clear answers. That's the reason why we continue to ask questions about the several meetings that we know about, Mr. Speaker.

The Premier was clear about solar. He is very proud that he reacted very quickly to address the solar issue, but he was not clear on rate increases. He has said that he was talking about rates, but he did not come clean and say that he knew about the increase request that was put forward by the UARB. (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The Leader of the Official Opposition has the floor.

IAIN RANKIN: Mr. Speaker, this caucus does believe that power rates and their request to increase 10 per cent on the pocketbooks of Nova Scotians is a serious matter and warrants attention in this House.

I would like to ask very clearly: Was the Premier aware unofficially - because it was noted that it was official - or officially that the request was going to be put in seven days later by Nova Scotia Power?

THE PREMIER: Look, I'll be as clear as I can for the Official Opposition. I have met with Nova Scotia Power a number of times. I have met with Emera a number of times. I have met with them together. I have had meetings with them when the member was there as well. Absolutely, I want there to be no question that I have met with Nova Scotia Power and Emera.

I also want there to be no question that in those discussions the potential of a rate increase has come up. As a matter of fact, it's my understanding that they were prepared to make that rate increase very early in the Fall, but after meeting with me and seeing my response to it, did not and held off. They ultimately . . . (Interruptions)

I'll be clear. If you want me to be clear, I'll be clear. Do you want me to be clear? You can keep asking questions if you want. (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The Premier has the floor.

THE PREMIER: We have had a number of discussions around the Atlantic Loop, of course. Those discussions continue. I'm actually very proud of the work that is being done to meet the renewable targets that this government established - by the way, the most aggressive and ambitious targets in the country. We will work very hard to establish those.

IAIN RANKIN: That 80 per cent renewable target was set by the previous government, Mr. Speaker. The greenhouse gas reduction target that was put in legislation was put in place in 2019 - three environment ministers ago - by the previous government. We just want to know: When did the Premier know about this request for increase by Nova Scotia Power, a serious issue facing Nova Scotians?

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The time allotted for Oral Questions Put by Members to Ministers has expired.

The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic on a point of privilege.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Mr. Speaker, on a day when we honoured Alexa McDonough and the Premier himself said he would do better, the Premier called the member for Dartmouth South untruthful, and about the member for Bedford Basin, he said I can't help you understand. I ask that the Premier retract those statements here in the House today.

THE PREMIER: I don't think that's a point of privilege, but in the spirit of the proceedings here today, I would say I already retracted my comment to the member for Dartmouth South. If I said anything that offended the member for Bedford Basin, I sincerely apologize for that.

THE SPEAKER: With that, we're going to be taking a 10-minute recess to get ready for the bill that will be coming forward and for everybody who might wish to go outside even just to take their mask off just to take a breath of fresh air.

[2:54 p.m. The House recessed.]

[3:16 p.m. The House reconvened.]

THE SPEAKER: Order, please.

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call the order of business, Public Bills for Second Reading.

PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 105.

Bill No. 105 - Protecting Access to Health Services Act.

THE SPEAKER: For the sake of the record, I note that unanimous consent was obtained to add this bill to the Public Bills for Second Reading on today's Order Paper.

The honourable Minister of Justice.

HON. BRAD JOHNS: Mr. Speaker, I move that Bill No. 105, amendments to Protecting Access to the Health Services Act, be now read for a second time.

Legislation was introduced to protect patients and health service providers from disruptive activities at or near health care facilities and allow delivery of health services to patients who receive care in their home. This legislation will further protect health service providers, including executive health service decision makers, from protests, intimidation, and harassment at their homes.

Some people disagree with public health policy decisions that have been put in place to help protect us all. Everyone is entitled to hold their own opinions. Nova Scotians have a right to peaceful protest. As an example, protestors are welcome to protest outside the Legislature, where the business of government is debated on the floor of the House of Assembly. However, protestors do not have a right to intimidate and harass those who have the responsibility of making tough decisions around health policy decisions at their own homes. (Applause)

Mr. Speaker, we have seen by now certain individuals who have used social media to encourage people to protest at the private homes of elected officials and senior policy makers. This is absolutely unacceptable and cannot be tolerated. Protestors cannot intimidate or harass health service providers or their families at their homes.

The amendments that we are debating today will provide police with additional enforcement tools to immediately disband protestors at the residence of health service providers. There are penalties for those who contravene the law, including fines and the possibility of arrest. People cannot be allowed to stalk other people at their own homes.

Not only are our health service providers being threatened, harassed, and bullied but so are those whom they share homes with. Their loved ones - their families - deserve to be protected. This is not Nova Scotian, Mr. Speaker. It's not Nova Scotian behaviour at all. That is why these amendments today are very rational amendments. I look forward to the support of my colleagues from all parties as this bill moves forward through the legislative process.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: I'll just rise to say we're in support of the legislation and the amendment. We thank the minister for putting in the work to get this bill forward. We know that the people who make these very difficult decisions that impact lives have a lot of courage. They should be left alone - especially at their personal residences where they have their families - in the name of safety, in the name of decency. We'll be supporting this bill.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Like my colleagues, I look forward to passing this legislation today. Our caucus is in support of this legislation. I'll note that one of the changes, which is to protect executive decision makers at their place of residence, is something - we also contemplated protecting physicians at their residence in the original bubble Act, which was passed by all members of this House a couple of years ago. I think we can all agree that people should be free from that kind of interference.

I think we talk a lot about health care providers, but we also acknowledge that the people who have been making the decisions - particularly those in the last few years who have taken us through this pandemic - we owe them a debt of gratitude. I'm sure it's taken years off their lives, so whatever we can do to make things a little easier for them, I think it's within our power and within our duty to do that. With those few words, I'll take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Justice.

HON. BRAD JOHNS: Mr. Speaker, I now move to close the debate on Bill No. 105.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is for second reading of Bill No. 105.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Ordered that the bill be referred to the Committee on Law Amendments.

The honourable Minister of Justice.

HON. BRAD JOHNS: Mr. Speaker, I would ask for unanimous consent that we bypass the Committee on Law Amendments and Committee of the Whole House on the bill, and to add Bill No. 105 to the order paper under Public Bills for Third Reading.

THE SPEAKER: The request is that there be unanimous consent that we bypass the Committee on Law Amendments and that the bill come forward for third reading. Do we have unanimous consent?

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call the order of business, Public Bills for Third Reading.

PUBLIC BILLS FOR THIRD READING

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 105.

Bill No. 105 - Protecting Access to Health Services Act.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Justice.

HON. BRAD JOHNS: Mr. Speaker, I would now ask that we close debate on third reading on Bill No. 105.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is for third reading of Bill No. 105.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Ordered that the bill do pass. Ordered that the title be as read by the Clerk. Ordered that the bill be engrossed.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Speaker, that concludes government business for today. I move that the House do now rise, to meet again tomorrow, Friday, March 25th, between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. Government business will include second reading on Bills No. 96, 99, 101, 102, and 104.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is that the House rise to meet again on Friday, March 25th, between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We stand adjourned until 9:00 a.m. tomorrow.

[The House adjourned at 3:26 p.m.]