

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick
Closure of the Throne Speech Debate
Premier Shawn Graham
December 7, 2007

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my great, great pleasure to rise today to close the debate on the Speech from the Throne.

At the outset, I want to congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, on your election. I know the value you place on the work we carry out in this House and I am certain you will bring decorum and discipline to this Chamber.

I want to thank His Honour for delivering the Speech from the Throne ten days ago and starting our government's second session. I also want to thank all of the staff here at the Legislative Assembly. It would be impossible to carry out the important work of this Chamber without them.

At this time, I also want to acknowledge the Leader of the Official Opposition for his formal response to the Throne Speech last week. I want to recognize the constructive tone he brought to the debate and I hope we can count on him and his colleagues to present positive and constructive solutions throughout this session.

Mr. Speaker, I want to express my sincere gratitude to the public service. When our government took office in October 2006 we called on our public service to bring forward ideas, to bring forward proposals and to bring us their best counsel and guidance. They have answered that call time and again.

I also want to offer a most heartfelt thanks to our caucus and our cabinet. Their leadership, their vision, their commitment and their work are driving this period of transformation.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank all New Brunswickers. There is a growing spirit of optimism spreading across the province. In all corners of New Brunswick, people believe that we can be and will be self-sufficient.

Because of this, I am confident that we will transform our government.

Because of this, we will transform our relationships.

Because of this, we will transform our workforce.

Because of this, we will transform our economy.

Because of this, we will build a better New Brunswick. We will build a self-sufficient New Brunswick.

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The transformation has begun with the recent unveiling of *Our Action Plan To Be Self-Sufficient in New Brunswick* and with this Throne Speech. We will transform our economy, transform our workforce, transform our relationships and transform our government.

To attract new Canadians and to bring home New Brunswickers who have left, to make New Brunswick the place to be, we need to transform our economy. We need to transform our resource industries and we need to seize new opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, I must speak about the forestry industry that has been hit hard by market downturns.

We were all saddened to learn last week that Abitibi-Bowater had decided to shut down their mill in Dalhousie. I am giving my personal word and commitment to do everything we can to find new employment opportunities for workers and to diversify the economic base in Dalhousie. My Cabinet colleagues - the Minister of Business New Brunswick and the Minister of Natural Resources - are also pledging the support and resources of their respective departments and the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour to work closely with the people of Dalhousie to see them through this very difficult period.

Mr. Speaker, during our meeting earlier in the week, I was reassured by the concern expressed by Prime Minister Harper during our meeting and by the fact the federal government is clearly prepared to "lend a hand" to regions that have been hit hard by the downturn in the forest industry specifically. We will work closely with our federal counterparts to find long-term, meaningful solutions for this troubled sector.

While we are tackling challenges in some sectors, there are also a number of very bright spots in the New Brunswick economy. The Atlantic Provinces Economic Council is predicting that New Brunswick will lead the region in economic and employment growth in 2008.

A booming energy sector was a significant factor in APEC's outlook. Our province is well on its way to becoming a North American energy hub and this Throne Speech takes further steps towards that goal.

Mr. Speaker, it was great to be part of the announcement with Team CANDU this summer on the feasibility study into a potential second nuclear generating station at Point Lepreau. We look forward to releasing the results of the study during this session.

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We will also launch a feasibility study into bringing natural gas to Northern New Brunswick. And funds will start to flow for the \$100-million Northern New Brunswick Initiative in the 2008-2009 Budget that will be unveiled next spring.

Transforming our economy will require transforming our infrastructure and I will have more to say on that in a moment.

Mr. Speaker, to transform our province, we need a new generation of healthy, productive and creative citizens who have the learning and skills to seize the opportunities offered by a better New Brunswick.

We will transform our workforce and we'll start by giving our kids the best start in life. Earlier this year, our government introduced our vision for education - *When Kids Come First*. Earlier this week, the Minister of Education tabled *A Benchmark Report on the targets of When Kids Come First* that will help us measure our progress on building the best education system in the country.

Our Throne Speech builds on that vision with:

- A long-term plan for early learning and child care.
- A new "I'm Ready for School" initiative to ease the transition into kindergarten, especially for children at-risk.
- A Diversity in Learning initiative to support trades and vocational education in schools, and
- A province-wide learning disabilities strategy and a literacy strategy to support bold targets to increase literacy to the levels necessary for self-sufficiency.

Mr. Speaker, early in the New Year, we will also be receiving the recommendations of the working group on post-secondary education. I will speak frankly: this has been one of the most hotly-debated subjects during our 14 months in office - as it should be. Education is key to our future success and its something people feel personally and deeply attached to. It's probably the reason why no government in 40 years has taken it on to this magnitude.

That's why it is so important that it be done right. And why it's essential that the working group has the time to get it right so in the end, we have an integrated post-secondary education system that is first-rate and student-centred.

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While I don't want to pre-judge the working group, I will say this: debt loads for our graduating students are too high, they must come down, and they will.

As well, I am very excited that our population growth strategy for the province will be introduced early in the New Year. Through this strategy, our government will build partnerships to expedite and streamline the immigration process and improve settlement services for recent immigrants.

We want to make New Brunswick the place to be by attracting at least 5,000 new immigrants per year by the year 2015.

Mr. Speaker, as a government, we won't achieve self-sufficiency alone. We need partnerships and relationships with other governments, business and labour organizations, post-secondary institutions, community groups, the non-profit sector and New Brunswickers that will sustain these changes over the long term.

The Throne Speech outlines how we will transform our relationships with other governments, other jurisdictions, our First Nations, our communities and the non-profit sector.

As I mentioned earlier, I recently had the opportunity to meet with Prime Minister Harper. This is the fourth time we have met since I took office and the first since the release of *Our Action Plan to be Self-Sufficient in New Brunswick*. I remain very optimistic that the Prime Minister and his government will understand the value of investing and partnering with us in building a self-sufficient New Brunswick.

Earlier today, Mr. Speaker, I had the opportunity to meet with Federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty. Minister Flaherty shares our interest in innovative strategic infrastructure investments and I am optimistic that the federal government will want to invest in some of the initiatives I will speak to in a few moments.

As well, I know my cabinet colleagues have been very active in promoting our self-sufficiency agenda with their federal counterparts. And, Mr. Speaker, I would encourage our friends across the floor to encourage their federal cousins to make the important investments required to make New Brunswick the place to be. After all, a better New Brunswick is good for everyone regardless of the side of the House we're on.

Mr. Speaker, we're asking all New Brunswickers to join in the journey toward self-sufficiency. But we also know that government has a duty to lead by example. If we are asking New Brunswickers to consider new ways of doing things, we need to be prepared to embrace new ways of doing things as well.

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Minister Murphy will be unveiling a new Provincial Health Plan that will ensure we can meet health care needs today and in the future by focusing on six priorities - achieving better balance, enhancing access, improving efficiency, harnessing innovation, making quality count and building partnerships.

Our provincial health plan will be a perfect example of how we can and must look to do things differently in order to make them better.

Mr. Speaker, the report of the Task Force on Self-Sufficiency urged that a key focus of the self-sufficiency agenda must be to accelerate investment in strategic infrastructure so that it can drive economic development, particularly as it relates to: ensuring competitive transportation to Canadian and U.S. markets for goods, services and people; the integration of the provincial economy; the delivery of cost-effective public services; tourism development; and wireless communications.

This commitment to investments in strategic infrastructure was reiterated in *Our Action Plan to be Self-Sufficient in New Brunswick*.

And today, Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak of some very significant and bold steps that our government will be taking.

Later today, I will be joining with Minister Greg Thompson in signing an important framework agreement. This agreement will invest hundreds of millions of dollars to assist New Brunswick communities in making the infrastructure investments necessary for building a better New Brunswick.

These sorts of partnerships with the federal government are important and we certainly hope to see more in the future. But we must also transform the way we as a provincial government address the road and public infrastructure needs of New Brunswick.

Mr. Speaker, on Tuesday, the Minister of Finance will table a Capital Budget that will be the province's largest in history. We will be investing in highways, in safety and security, in health care facilities and in schools.

And, yes, Mr. Speaker, I want to assure the students visiting today from Clément-Cormier that they can expect some very good news for their school next week. A multi-million dollar investment will be made to renovate their school next year.

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The investments that will be announced will be significant but they will be necessary if we are to build a self-sufficient New Brunswick. As any home-owner can tell you, making necessary investments at the right time pays off. Fixing that foundation may seem expensive in the short term, but the cost will be far higher if you let it crumble.

On Tuesday, the Minister of Finance will also table an economic and fiscal update that will indicate that our economy is strong and will continue to grow. It's clear the time is right to make important investments in infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, the Capital Budget will include a new initiative that will transform how we build roads in New Brunswick. It's one of the many transformational actions this government will undertake in the coming year. The Department of Transportation use its award-winning asset-management solution to transform the way it manages and maintains New Brunswick's roads and bridges. This approach to managing our highway system will help the department to identify the right time and the right way to make improvements to our roads at the lowest cost to taxpayers.

The basic premise behind asset management is simple and it makes good business sense. It costs less to keep a road in good condition than to rebuild it once it is in poor condition. We can invest the money now or we can wait and spend five to six times as much in five years. The answer is clear. If roads are treated at the appropriate time, we can do work on a larger volume of roads and keep our roads in better condition.

Mr. Speaker, asset management takes the politics out of paving.

Mr. Speaker, this means we will have a safer, more efficient highway system to the benefit of our economy and all those who depend upon our road system to travel to and from work and school each day.

The Asset Management System will result a significant increase in rehabilitating the province's existing inventory of highways, bridges and roads. The Asset Management System alone will result in a new annual investment of \$178 million in rehabilitating the province's existing inventory of highways, bridges and roads. Mr. Speaker, this is just part of the investments we will be making in roads in this Capital Budget. My friend, the Minister of Transportation, will have even more good news next week when he unveils the details of the largest transportation capital budget in New Brunswick's history.

With the Asset Management System, New Brunswick is leading the country – it's the first of its kind in Canada and has been recognized as an industry-leading solution.

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I want to commend the work, the dedication and the initiative of the staff of the Department of Transportation as they are the ones who developed this innovative approach to managing the province's highways and bridges.

DOT's staff received the prestigious provincial "Knowledge Industry Recognition Achievement" (KIRA) award in 2007 for their asset management solution, which has caught the attention of other provinces as well as agencies within the United States, Australia and Costa Rica. I thank everyone who has made this pioneering initiative a reality.

As Asset Management proves, we have the opportunity to lead the country in creative solutions. That's why the time has also come to solidify our expertise on public-private partnerships. New Brunswick has enjoyed project-by-project success on public-private partnership and expertise has been built up throughout government. Public private partnerships are about letting each sector do those things they do best. They allow government to set the outcomes, define the performance measures and protect the public interest. And they allow the private sector to deliver on these.

Mr. Speaker, New Brunswick has a number of successful P3 arrangements: Evergreen Park School, Leo Hayes High School and the New Brunswick Broadband Initiative. Most recently, we opened the new Trans-Canada Highway project; an award-winning partnership between the New Brunswick Highway Corporation, the Department of Transportation and SNC-Lavalin Capital Inc.

It's time to take that experience to the next level.

A government working group has been reviewing best practices and approaches, examining lessons learned in other jurisdictions and determining how New Brunswick could best benefit on public-private partnership opportunities. The working group examined the best use of P3s, roles and responsibilities and how we can best ensure that the public interest is protected.

While we anticipate the complete report in the near future, it is clear that New Brunswick has the opportunity to emerge as a leader in this area. And the time is right to seize this opportunity. And, Mr. Speaker, we *will* seize that opportunity.

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Mr. Speaker, in 20 years, when we have built a self-sufficient New Brunswick, when our province is the place to be, the envy of all of Canada- we will look back and know that this government did their part, this government made the necessary investments to lay the foundation for that transformation.

Through these investments, through the initiatives outlined in the Throne Speech, our government is moving boldly ahead on our self-sufficiency agenda. I am calling on all New Brunswickers to join us.

Together we will transform this province.

Together we will build a better New Brunswick.

Together we will make New Brunswick the place to be.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.