

# N.B. not an example

Starving health care and public services not the answer

- The Guardian (Charlottetown)
- 6 Dec 2022
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If we want a functioning health-care system and reliable public services that are accessible to all, then government must properly fund those services. I'd like to reply to the recent article (P.E.I. budget good news and bad news, Nov. 23) by Alex Whalen and Jake Fuss of the Fraser Institute. They claim in their article that the Dennis King government should follow the fiscal example set by the premier of New Brunswick, Blaine Higgs, by restraining spending and consistently balancing budgets.

The Fraser Institute offers this advice even though the King government has announced an \$86 million surplus for 2021/22 and has balanced the budget twice in three years. P.E.I.'s economic growth has also outstripped N.B.'s in 2021 and 2022 and is predicted to do so again in 2023. As of October 2022, P.E.I. (5.4 per cent) also has a lower unemployment rate than New Brunswick (6.7 per cent). So maybe we aren't doing as bad as the Fraser Institute would like everyone to think. There is always room for improvement, though.

Much of the budget surplus money in New Brunswick came from Ottawa and was supposed to be used to help the people during the pandemic. Instead, Higgs sat on the funds and used it to create budget surpluses. I'm sure the Fraser Institute likes this approach. However, what about the 56,000 people in New Brunswick who don't have a doctor and aren't able to access emergency care because of closures? The health-care system in New Brunswick, like P.E.I., came apart at the seams during the pandemic. Years of underfunding, neglect, and understaffing finally took its toll. Instead of Higgs investing the surplus money in health care and needed public services he decided to provide tax cuts — the largest going to the wealthy. Is this what we want Prince Edward Island to look like, too? If we want a functioning healthcare system and reliable public services that are accessible to all, then government must properly fund those services. Encroaching privatization is not the answer either. Islanders don't want a two-tier health-care system based on one's ability to pay.

## **RETENTION PROGRAMS**

In Prince Edward Island, Health P.E.I. has publicly admitted there are major challenges. There are shortages in all sectors and so these types of initiatives are essential. For example, P.E.I. is launching a nursing retention incentive program to retain workers, and so there is a will and acknowledgement that change is required.

UPSE is currently working with government to address some concerns about the rollout of this program, however, we understand the importance of this initiative and more like them are needed.

So, to the Fraser Institute, I think a broader analysis is required when considering fiscal restraint and responsibility. Perhaps it isn't realistic or healthy to frame the problem only in economic terms. What about the health and safety of the citizens in one's province? What about the elderly and the infirmed in long-term care homes? What about the workers in both the public and private sectors who provided the essential services during the pandemic and through hurricane Fiona? These workers deserve a living wage, so they aren't forced into working two or three jobs to ensure they have affordable housing and food on the table, and don't have to decide between critical medications or the ability to heat their homes. Sadly, this is the reality for many Islanders.

I know our members have been working tirelessly to ensure Islanders receive the vital services and care they deserve. They have done so while working short staffed, under incredible amounts of stress, and with little or no appreciation for their situation.

## **BOTTOM LINE**

If we want a functioning healthcare system and the vital services that Islanders depend on every day, we need to invest in those services to ensure they are adequate and sufficient to meet the needs of a growing population. It's not always and only about the bottom line. It's also about the people — especially during challenging times. We need to have programs and services in place for the benefit of all — especially our seniors and the most vulnerable. So, should P.E.I. follow the example of Premier Higgs in New Brunswick? I think the answer is a resounding “No.”