

Premier McNeil, Now is the Time

Byline: Valerie Payn

By the time Premier McNeil delivers his State of the Province address to the Chamber on Wednesday, he will have been in office for almost one and a half years. As hard as it is to believe, this government is nearing the mid-point of its mandate. It is standard political wisdom that it gets harder for governments to make tough political decisions the closer they get to an election.

This February we will also see the first anniversary of the release of the Now or Never Report, which was unequivocal that our province is in desperate need of major change to avert serious demographic and economic decline. Encouragingly, the Now or Never Report has had surprising staying power among Nova Scotians. It has been a staple of conversation over the past year as we all try to do our part to make Nova Scotia a more successful province.

One of the major themes of the Now or Never Report was that the private sector would have to play a major part in building a more dynamic economy in Nova Scotia. We have been speaking with our members constantly over the past year and we are extremely proud of the actions they have taken to build stronger and more innovative businesses. We have heard from members who have done everything from investing in training and new equipment, hiring youth and recent immigrants, and exploring partnerships that will let them compete on a global scale. While there is certainly much more to be done, our members have shown that they are ready to do their part.

While the conversations among Nova Scotians have been encouraging, there has been a definite shortage of action to combat our province's financial problems. Laurel Broten's Tax and Regulatory Review report made it clear that Nova Scotia's high tax burden is getting in the way of stronger economic growth. Reducing the tax burden is also one of the chamber's top two priorities for this year under our 2013-2018 Strategic Plan. When we speak to our members, they list Nova Scotia's tax burden as one of the biggest irritants of doing business in our province.

Additionally, our province is facing serious fiscal challenges. According to the Broten report, the provincial government has posted operating deficits in 20 out of the past 30 years. These deficits have led to a provincial debt load that will have exceeded \$15 billion by the time the next budget is released. Postponing action on these problems will only make the underlying situation worse.

For the provincial government, their upcoming budget is a chance to convince Nova Scotians that they are serious about implementing the kind of changes Ray Ivany and the other commissioners say we need. Fortunately, the Premier is working from a position of political strength. Not only does he have a majority, but his government has had consistently strong approval ratings since entering office despite taking on some difficult political fights over the past year.

This enviable political position combined with the recommendations of the Broten and Ivany Reports gives this government a very strong mandate to implement transformational change in Nova Scotia. We sincerely hope they will not let this opportunity go to waste.

Valerie Payn is the President and CEO of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce