

# Response to budget address

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\*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY \*

### Opening Remarks

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I want to take a moment first to thank the many public servants in the Department of Finance and across government who have worked hard over the past weeks and months to develop this budget.

For the past two years, our Province—along with every other jurisdiction in the world—has had to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic. It has had a profound impact on daily life: how we interact with our families, friends and the world around us.

The pandemic has laid bare a plethora of issues—many systemic in nature—that have held back our province and its residents for years. We’ve seen the challenges in maintaining acceptable standards of care for our most vulnerable in long-term care. We’ve seen how our economy buckles when access to childcare is threatened. We’ve seen just how inadequate and ill-equipped our social safety nets are, even in the best of times. And we’ve seen how lower-income Islanders, women, and racialized Islanders continue to disproportionately experience the worst of what our society has to offer.

And while the pandemic has taken and continues to take so much from Islanders, the pandemic gave us an opportunity to reflect on how we have structured and operated our society. There was cautious optimism in the air: maybe the pandemic has finally awoken government to these persistent issues. There was hope.

But hope is a delicate currency, and there are few things more crushing in politics than having your hope betrayed. As we enter our third year of the pandemic, there is a growing sense of dread that the window for systemic change has closed, whether that’s because government simply does not care about meaningfully addressing systemic issues, or whether it simply doesn’t understand them in the first place.

It is perhaps not a surprise that a Conservative government would be unable to articulate, let alone deliver the necessary and transformational solutions to the major issues facing our province. After all, as a political philosophy, conservatism is the champion of the status quo when it isn’t trying to take us back in time.

Islanders cannot afford to go back in time. The status quo has not worked and is not working for so many Islanders, and just as it’s inappropriate to call our COVID plan “Moving On”, government should not be presenting a “Moving Backwards” budget.

The annual operating budget is an opportunity for government to announce new programs and services which signal its priorities. At least it usually is. Unfortunately, this Conservative government is more about telling stories than implementing change.

The thing with storytelling is that it's the spectacle, not the substance, that matters. The same cannot be said about public policy. Remember “shovels in the ground on day one” for a new mental health hospital? It was a promise that sounded nice, but it neglected that the original timelines were set for a reason—we need to ensure that healthcare staff are available and other community supports are in place. Well, it's been 1,038 days and counting since Day 1.

Remember Midwifery? The former Minister of Health announced midwifery services for Islanders back in 2019. It is now three years later and this government is, for the THIRD time, announcing midwifery services. A woman could create a new life and get it to school before you can change a policy.

Is this also what we can expect for the promise to roll out medical neighborhoods?

Even when they do manage to follow through on an announcement, it's usually way behind schedule, incomplete, or a complete mess when it's rolled out. How about the low-income dental program originally proposed by the Official Opposition -- something fairly simple -- that was announced multiple times, and was launched before the civil servants had the information to take applications and before government had even bothered to talk to the dentists?

If these Conservatives have displayed anything, it's that they can't even properly roll out relatively straight forward programs.

I wonder how they will manage something complex like creating an entirely new clean-tech sector that can compete with the much higher wages available in the rest of Canada and the U.S.? We already have serious issues staffing other sectors like construction and healthcare. We need clear details on how this government will staff this new sector.

There are some good measures in this budget, but they are not very ambitious, certainly not when you consider the extraordinary times we are in. And when you factor in this government's poor record of implementation, a number of the promises in here will never come to fruition. This is not a bold plan to meet the moment we are in. We need a budget and a government that is brave enough to aim higher.

This government's priority is paving roads, hiring their friends, and protecting the privileged.

## What are the priorities for Islanders?

During the last few months, the Official Opposition has held several community forums and we asked Islanders that question. We made space for their stories, worries, and dreams. What you hear from us on the floor of this Legislature is what we heard from them. This government has the same opportunity to learn and do better. Why does it continually choose to be timid instead of brave, safe instead of bold, predictable instead of creative?

This government has continued the tradition of “pre-budget consultations” that amount to little more than asking community stakeholders to send their hard work and well thought-out ideas off into the void. Very little seems to come from them, and there's certainly no accountability involved whatsoever.

## So - what did we hear from families and individuals?

The rising cost of living has been hitting Island families hard. In fact, last year PEI saw the largest increase to the cost of living of any Canadian province. This is not the kind of “leading the country” we want to see.

We are excited to see free school supplies for grades K-9 funded in this budget - it is long past time that all children have the same basic necessary supplies they need, without that cost being downloaded onto families. But let's be clear - this won't help with so many of the other expenses that families and individuals struggle with day-to-day.

Every family I know on PEI has been shocked by the prices they see at the grocery store. A grocery run that used to cost a family a hundred dollars has now doubled. Parents want to feed their kids healthy meals but it's becoming almost impossible. Families need a society that pays livable wages to all workers so that they can care for their children. Families feel like they are falling behind, wages are not keeping up with growth here on PEI, and a few boutique promises are not going to make a difference.

One of the biggest things government could do for families is to put more money in their pockets. In this budget, we'll see another raise to the basic personal exemption, which will leave people with \$70-odd more this year. Not all that helpful. But we have a missed opportunity here. It looks like government is going to keep all the revenue from the carbon tax, instead of returning it to people as rebates, as is done under the federal model. This would have given hundreds of dollars back to households making a real difference for Islanders.

It's great to see further investment in KidSport to increase opportunities for youth to participate in sport - but what about the kids who participate in dance, music, arts? Why do we pick and choose which programs are worth funding to support wellbeing, and which ones aren't? It sends the wrong message to kids and families who choose different ways to participate and express themselves and to youth with accessibility challenges - and in these troubling times, we need to be inclusive of all.

Childcare is critical to our social and economic wellbeing - the pandemic taught us that if we ignore childcare, we will suffer the consequences. PEI was one of the first to sign the childcare agreement with the federal government, which will not only benefit all Island families through the provision of affordable childcare, it will also support Islanders in participating more fully in the economy.

However, as we have heard over the past few years the challenge lies in hiring, training, paying, and retaining ECEs to meet the current and growing demand for early childhood education. We look forward to seeing real steps forward with federal investment and associated accountability.

## We've also heard what Islanders' priorities are for health in this province.

We heard from people from across the province about how worried they are about healthcare. They want a primary healthcare provider who knows them, cares about them, and will be an advocate and a champion for their health. Right now, we have over 20,000 Islanders without a primary health provider—more than one in every 10 Islanders. Islanders want to be proactive about their health and get the support and care that keeps them healthy and out of the hospital. They want to be able to age in place, in their homes and communities, with health care support available close to home.

Islanders want those who care for them when they and their loved ones are sick - nurses and frontline staff - to be valued, treated with respect, and retained. This government has done the exact opposite, and their words of thanks to our healthcare workers have rung hollow. This government has not invested in nurses in any meaningful way. They have not consulted with or talked to nurses on our frontlines during perhaps the most challenging two years of their careers. They have avoided championing nursing education initiatives that the Opposition has proposed. And, now, they're surprised that our healthcare system is understaffed and can't seem to fill shifts.

Islanders want to be confident that if they need surgery, if they are in chronic and extreme pain, that they will get the help that they need, when they need it. But again, because this government has not invested or valued the staff that provide these surgeries, we see wait times of years!

Islanders want supports for their loved ones with mental health and addictions. Islanders who struggle are valuable and worthy of our support. There is no hope for a mental health hospital during this government's mandate, that dream is long gone. But what other investments have been made to address this? Wait times for care are still inappropriately long, and the mobile mental health unit, while FINALLY operational, is only one tool and something Islanders needed long before it finally got off the ground.

And the big news story that this government came up with was to throw \$3 million dollars at a pet project for mental wellbeing that no one asked for. Islanders cried out for frontline help, for crisis help, and they got another layer of bureaucracy.

Islanders want their loved ones and themselves to have a safe and caring place to go when they get older. They want to stay home as long as possible, but when they do need a little extra help they want a long-term care system that is loving, that is caring and that is enjoyable. This government has accepted that "basic care" is good enough for our elders.

After two years, where we saw just how vulnerable seniors are in this province are, I am shocked this government does not have the will for real transformational change when it comes to seniors. It is not acceptable that 70% of deaths from COVID happened in private long-term care homes. I don't just believe our elders deserve to be safe, deserve to be physically cared for - I believe our elders deserve to live their life to the fullest.

It's encouraging to hear the Finance Minister say government will be launching a long-term care review "in the coming weeks." That's great! But the FORMER Minister of Health announced the same review almost two years ago so forgive me if I don't hold my breath. We need to stop accepting the bare minimum and start striving for a reality where our elders enjoy their days. And this budget does none of this.

It is also nice to see government finally acknowledge the lack of services for women and gender diverse Islanders, especially in the area of pelvic floor health - something this side of the House has been asking about for such a long time!

It is also encouraging to hear government will be continuing its program to provide menstrual products in our school system - another ask from the Official Opposition. We hope the Minister will keep her word and ensure ALL schools have access to these products, now.

As much as government may want the pandemic over, we cannot wish our way out of the pandemic. If government wants us to “live with COVID”, it also has to be honest about the fact that COVID will continue to disrupt our lives, and new variants may appear and cause harm to our communities and the most vulnerable among us.

While government is proposing a \$15 million contingency fund to address COVID, I seriously question whether that is enough to support Islanders and businesses who will struggle through future outbreaks of the virus.

What is government doing to support Island workers who will lose income by doing what’s best for their community by isolating to protect others from infection? What is government doing to support businesses that may have to reduce capacity or shutdown due to covid outbreaks?

## We’ve also heard what Islanders’ priorities are for the environment, water, land, and climate action.

I was glad to see last week the Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action (get it right Minister!) finally release his plan to decarbonize our province. The plan isn’t perfect (no plan is) but it provides a decent foundation to set our province on the right course.

But implementing that plan will take massive investment from government, both immediate and sustained for decades to come. And we’ll need even more to help us adapt to the climate changes that are already inevitable, to recover from those changes. The investment in this budget is nowhere near adequate to reflect the urgency of climate change. It does not signal a government that takes the future of our province seriously.

The net zero plan does identify one key action, and it’s one that we’ve heard loud and clear from Islanders from tip to tip. Province-wide land use planning focused on creating sustainable communities is one of the most impactful long-term tools we have in fighting not only climate change, but also a whole host of other issues, from protecting farmland to accessing services to individual and community well-being.

Proper land use planning in our province is about 50 years overdue, and from this budget it looks like we’ll have to keep waiting -- and our grandchildren will pay the price. Change won’t just happen; government needs to invest in it, and I doubt the small increase included in this budget is going to cut it. This government, like many before it, is choosing to perpetuate development that creates communities and regions that are increasingly disconnected, uncoordinated, car-dependent, unwalkable, and ultimately less sustainable.

Yet, we are encouraged to see this Minister engage in their portfolio in more measurable, meaningful ways. This engagement will hopefully help produce action, direction, and investment in key areas of climate action. We appreciate this. As we already see, that same level of engagement by the other Ministers of the government is noticeably absent and Islanders are paying a high price for their indifference.

## We've also heard what Islanders' priorities are for housing and social services.

Our Government exists to serve Islanders, and Islanders want more than anything else to be treated with dignity and respect by government when accessing services. When the department responsible for delivery of services to our most vulnerable populations - seniors, children, low income Islanders, people with disabilities - does not have a mandate of client-centered service, it means the experience of the client is not dignified.

Government after government has consistently underfunded social services, underfunded housing, underfunded the vital non-profit organizations who do the work that the government is unwilling or unable to do. I see little to no change in that approach in this budget. While it is a welcome announcement, will reducing the tax they pay really have enough of an impact to meaningfully improve the capacity of these organizations?

As the Green caucus has recognized for some time, poverty is a policy choice. The decisions and indecisions of government perpetuate systems and services that can actually keep people in the most difficult of circumstances with little to no means of escape.

Rearranging existing programs, adding more dollars onto the allowances that are given to those who need them, creating new rules and eligibility criteria for new programs - none of these marginal actions address systemic issues. They never have and they never will. They just keep those systems working, and keep the recipients insecure and on the edge of dignity. And to be clear - in PEI, 1 in 5 children live at or below the poverty line.

If we as a province truly want to meaningfully address poverty and all of the huge challenges it brings in health, education, and our economy, we have to stop doing what has never worked. We need to be prepared to stop delivering social support services in a paternalistic, 'we know best', conditional system that is designed only to keep people in their place.

Prince Edward Island has the unique opportunity to be the boldest jurisdiction in Canada by implementing a basic income guarantee, and truly modernizing the way we deliver social services. This government is choosing to stick with the old broken system rather than invest in something new and transformative that would set us up for the future. Not because it's the right thing to do, but because it's the easy thing to do.

When we put people first, we have no difficulty or hesitation to state unequivocally "Housing is a human right." When we accept this truth and apply it to how we approach the housing crisis on PEI, we will realize that this is not a business problem. This is a legitimate human need and right. And it's not enough to state that housing is a human right; we must also take all possible steps to ensure that right is realized for all Islanders.

We're seeing the continued investment in rent supplements. While I have no doubt that this assistance will support some tenants who are struggling to afford the cost of housing, I have to point out that the amount of money that we spend to fund these supplements is approaching the amount of funding we're investing to actually build new housing units.

We are in a crisis, and in light of new vacancy data yesterday moving in the wrong direction, street counts suggesting drastic increases in homelessness, and our future plans for population growth, I'm concerned that government is not doing everything it can to guarantee housing now and into the future.

## Citizen's Assembly

As if we needed any more indication that this budget does not represent a transformational vision for our province, we need not look further than the lack of any reference to fund a citizen's assembly. Last sitting, this Legislative Assembly voted in favour of a motion urging Government to establish a Citizens' Assembly, composed of 27 Islanders from across the province, to prepare and propose a model of proportional representation that could achieve the support of a majority of Islanders.

Proportional representation provides an opportunity to improve our politics for the better. It could give us a Legislative Assembly that is more reflective of the public we represent. It is an electoral system that would foster genuine—not illusory—collaboration, and lead to better policy-making. Despite government's acknowledgement in their very first Throne Speech that "...the illuminating recent debate over our democratic future revealed a desire to approach our democracy with an open and judicious mind...", our caucus and the public are disappointed that Government appears to be approaching our democracy with a closed mind.

## Conclusion

The overall message from this budget is: if things were not working for you before, they will not start working for you now.

It is time for us to reconsider the foundation from which we develop policy, programs, and supports. For far too long we have approached the budget only from a financial position. While we must be careful how we spend the public dollars government has been entrusted with, we must also remember that those dollars are provided by Islanders for government to do the collective heavy lifting that Islanders cannot do on their own. It's government's responsibility to provide for and safeguard our collective health and wellbeing.

It is time for us to apply a people-first lens. We simply cannot afford to ignore the endemic problems Islanders are facing on a day-to-day basis. The cost is far too high.

There are many opportunities that government could seize to improve the lives of Islanders. The window for transformational change is rapidly closing. Islanders expect their government to do better and it's time to step it up.

Even in the face of unimaginable challenges, Islanders have been, and will always be, resilient. I want to recognize their efforts throughout these difficult two years, especially as government shifts from leading a collective effort to downloading responsibility and risk to individuals. We can and should have hope that things will be better.

On behalf of the Official Opposition, I am grateful that there are programs and services in place that address some of the immediate challenges Islanders are facing, including many that have been championed from this side of the house. But we need a government that is brave enough to aim higher.

I am urging this government to broaden its focus, to see a bigger picture that includes all Islanders, and to work across all departments and programs to strive for real, meaningful, and systemic change.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.