

Commentary

New Brunswick deserves a Progressive Throne Speech and Government

Since the outcome of the September 24th provincial election, much of the public discussion has been about who would form the next government.

As is now better known than before, this system we inherited from the United Kingdom says that it is the legislative assembly, meaning the elected members, that will ultimately determine who governs, in a process managed by the Lieutenant-Governor. Also, we learned that the government in power before the election has the right to call the legislative assembly, read a Throne Speech and try to form a government even if it did not receive the highest number of seats.

Whoever actually ends up forming the next government should take the results of the election as an indication that citizens want changes and that they need to govern differently.

The first change the new government should implement is a more collaborative working relationship between the four political parties in the legislature and a change in the electoral process.

The results of this election as well as others before have shown that our present system of first past the post does not reflect the will of citizens. This needs to change and the next government should put in place the mechanism to bring in some form of proportional representation before the next election.

The second change is for the new government to bring forward a progressive agenda addressing the issues of gender equality, poverty, workers, seniors and public services.

Women have made great strides in our society in recent decades. Their presence in the labour force continues to increase, as have their numbers in colleges and universities and they are taking their place in the business world. Unfortunately, they still face discrimination and violence.

The new government needs to bring in pay equity legislation in the private sector, develop a provincial strategy on gender-based violence in the workplace and introduce sex education programs as early as elementary school. It also needs to better fund transition houses for battered women, and include more women in decision-making structures.

In 2009 the province put in place a poverty reduction strategy but the number of citizens living in poverty has not declined significantly. There is an urgent need to raise the basic rates for citizens living on social assistance and change the policies they live

under. The new government should start increasing their income so that in ten years' time, their total net revenue will be equal to the Market Basket Measure.

Workers are the ones that make our economy function but one third of our workforce is still making \$15 an hour or less. A progressive agenda would, as was proposed by three of the political parties, bring the minimum wage to \$15 an hour over a four-year period. It would also review all labour laws and modernize the Employment Standards Act to better reflect our changing economy and workforce.

We are constantly hearing that our society is aging and we are not ready for the impact it is having on our economy and society. Currently twenty percent of all citizens in our province are more than 65 years old and the number living in poverty has increased in the last ten years. We need to become more seniors- friendly and this means providing financial assistance programs for seniors, addressing the issue of seniors' abuse, and ensuring that nursing homes, special care facilities and home services are delivered according to the New Brunswick Official Languages Act. There is also a need for a Seniors' Bill of Rights that protect seniors and give them a voice.

The new government must bring back into the public domain the Extramural Program and TeleCare that were privatized into the hands of Medavie Blue Cross. It also has to stop the development of new nursing homes through the Public-Private Partnership model. As for new public services, we need to integrate the present community care sector which has developed as needed or based on individuals' interest, into the public system so that it can provide the same level of services across the province. The same has to be done with the child care service, the ambulance services and the NB Drug Plan.

Of course, the protection of the rights of minorities should be included in any progressive agenda.

Finally, the government should ensure progressive sources of revenue by as diversifying our economy, encouraging value-added transformation of our natural resources and developing a green economy but also increasing royalty revenues from our natural resources and taxes on corporations.

This new legislative assembly, which includes many third-party voices, provides the perfect opportunity to move our politics in a progressive direction in service to a progressive majority.

Geoff Martin and Jean-Claude Basque were involved in the Progressive election platform: *Building a more equal society* in New Brunswick in 2018.

Organizations signatories to the Progressive Electoral Platform: Association francophone des aînés du NB, Canadian Labour Congress, Canadian Union of Public Employees- NB Division, Federation of NB Faculty Associations, NB Common Front for Social Justice, NB

Coalition for Pay Equity, NB Federation of Labour, New Brunswick Union, Regroupement féministe du NB.