

2013 AMO Conference

Inspiring and Aspiring Communities

Check against delivery

It's an honour to be back at AMO.

A lot has happened in the year since I last spoke with you.

Frankly, a lot has happened in the last month in Ontario politics.

But, most people...

... and by that I mean the people who live outside the bubble that seems to surround Queen's Park...

... most peoples' daily concerns are still very much the same:

- Will I keep my job? Will my kids get one?
- What happens to my Mom or Dad if their health fails?
- How am I going to pay the bills this month?

And, as municipal leaders, I know you understand this.

I learned during my years on Hamilton City Council...

People aren't impressed with political games and self-serving stunts.

They expect us to deliver results.

New Democrats have been working hard to do exactly that.

I know these are challenging times.

And I know it can be hard to find answers that are both fair and balanced...

... while being tangible and effective.

We've seen a government that after years in office makes cynical decisions to hold onto power...

And it can be tempting to grandstand on the sidelines and maneuver for political benefit.

But New Democrats are determined to make life better for the people who make our province work...

... and we know that municipal leaders like you are key to making that happen.

We know that these are tough times for the people we represent.

While the economic recession has been technically over for some time...

... Ontario's economic recovery has been slow and unsteady.

Our unemployment rate hovers above the national average.

And in some of your communities it's reached double-digits.

Ontarians' wages aren't keeping up with inflation...

And last year the average wage actually started falling backwards...

...one of the only provinces where this was happening.

The culmination of job losses, destroyed savings, and overall economic anxiety has put the squeeze on families...

... particularly middle income Ontario.

There are success stories...

But there are also too many people who feel like they're falling behind

People are worried about the future:

Worried about the sort of Ontario that will be there for their children.

And worried in a much more immediate sense: about paying the bills, finding a job and making ends meet.

There's no doubt that Ontario is facing new challenges...

... and new opportunities.

I like to talk about my father who came to Canada from Slovakia...

...at a time when a man like my Dad could walk into a plant...

...and land a job that he'd hold for most of his life.

It was a time when you could raise a family on one salary.

It was a time when someone like me...

.... the daughter of an autoworker...

...could get an education without taking on a mountain of debt.

Every generation wants to improve life for their families.

I know I want to see a world of opportunity open up for my son.

Today my son doesn't have the same kind of job security that my father had, but, I believe we can embrace new

industries and bring new innovative jobs to Ontario.

I believe we can use that same innovation to create a new generation of work in industries like manufacturing and forestry.

I believe we can adapt our healthcare system and our schools for an aging population and a world of new skills.

And I know we can build a stronger province working with municipal governments.

In fact, I know, the provincial government will *need* to work with municipalities if we're going to meet any of these challenges.

As municipal leaders, I know you have your hands full making ends meet for your communities.

And I know that that you have your frustrations when it comes to making the government see things from your perspective.

I believe it's always a good idea for politicians to shut our mouths and open our ears...

... even if that means getting an earful.

Over the last year we've been meeting constantly with Mayors and Councillors across the province.

And our Municipal Affairs Critic, Cindy Forster, has been listening as well.

As a former Mayor herself...

... she gets it.

And I'm proud to have as part of my team at Queen's Park people with real practical experience in government at the municipal level whether it's former Mayors like Cindy and Michael Prue of East York...

Or former Deputy Mayors like Peter Tabuns...

Or former City Councillors like myself.

I'm even more proud to be joined today by two new MPPs with their own experience in local government.

Peggy Sattler, the newly elected MPP for London West served as chair of the Thames Valley school board in London and on the Ontario Public School Board Association executive.

And Percy Hatfield the new MPP for Windsor-Tecumseh.

By electing Percy, the voters of Windsor-Tecumseh not only sent an experienced municipal heavy hitter to bat for them, but they also sent a former AMO vice president, and Chair of the Large Urban Caucus, to Queen's Park.

This is a team that understands how important municipal government is...

... and the challenges municipal leaders face.

They've been there.

They know how hard it is to balance the books.

Tradespeople know that there's a right tool for every job.

And municipal leaders will agree:
Property tax isn't the right tool to pay
for every service.

Yet it is virtually the only option
municipal leaders are stuck with.

Balancing the books...

... making sure the numbers work...

... is important to New Democrats.

The Government of Canada's own
records show...

...that New Democrat governments
have a better track record of balancing
the books than any other party.

Better than the Liberals.

Better than the Conservatives.

And those same governments have maintained a lower debt to GDP ratio.

From Tommy Douglas 50 years ago...

... to Greg Sellinger today...

... New Democrats have shown the world they can tackle deficits.

But the key to their success is to seek a balanced path to balanced books...

... one that looks at government revenue and government spending.

One that balances a plan to eliminate the deficit...

... with a plan to get households back on solid footing.

That's important provincially...

... but it's an even bigger challenge municipally.

Property taxes take a big chunk out of household budgets – regardless of ability to pay.

That's why there are some services for which municipalities just shouldn't be stuck with the bill.

New Democrats have been clear: the uploading of downloaded services needs to happen...

... and can not be delayed.

We will continue to move forward with relieving municipalities of financial burdens they never should have had in the first place...

... but we also need to ensure we don't slip new burdens onto municipalities.

Government decisions that threaten to compromise the economies of municipalities...

...whether it's closing gateway visitor centres...

...or allowing child care centres to close as 4- and 5- year-olds move to all-day kindergarten...

... is passing the buck...

... and it's not fair.

Municipalities need the tools and resources to meet the needs of people in a balanced way.

You also know we have to deal with our infrastructure challenges...

... both inside *and* outside the GTA.

We've heard a lot of promises around infrastructure from this government over the years...

... but too often commitments have been followed by backtracking.

You told us you need to see reliable, sustainable, funding to address the infrastructure deficit.

Instead, we see shortsighted decisions that scrap infrastructure when we need it most...

... like killing the ONTC at exactly the moment when new mining discoveries require northern infrastructure.

During the last general election we committed to following through with a \$35 billion infrastructure program...

But also a program to help pay for repairs to rural and northern roads and bridges

...and a commitment to pay half the operating subsidy for municipal transit...

....a commitment that would free up significant funds for transit capital investment.

These are the kinds of commitments that will strengthen municipalities for the future. I understand your need to plan not just for this year, but for five, ten, fifteen, twenty years out.

That's why permanent,

Reliable,

funding is so important.

It's also important that we approach this funding in a fair and balanced way.

I've been clear that New Democrats are not interested in seeing new unfair taxes and road tolls hit family budgets.

And we're also not interested in an infrastructure plan that only solves the problems of one region of our province...

... or pits urban areas against rural interests.

We've seen time and time again how short-sighted political decisions...

... whether it's scrapping the slots at racetracks program...

... or failing to consult before moving ahead with energy projects...

... have created division.

An unbalanced, unfair approach that leaves people feeling that they're being left out...

... or left behind...

... isn't success.

We know we have work to do.

Despite a rather cynical attempt to call byelections on a long weekend in the middle of summer, the voters of Ontario have made their views clear.

And we heard a message loud and clear.

People are frustrated over government scandals that cost us more than half a billion dollars in public funds.

They want government to be accountable.

That's why we're going to work hard this Fall to deliver a Financial Accountability Office so the people of Ontario have an independent officer providing insight into Ontario's finances...

... and the government's spending decisions.

They also sent a message that they want results.

Voters sent more New Democrats to Queen's Park to stand up for their priorities.

I know full well that a forestry worker who lost his job in Dubreuilville

. . . Or a person who's been laid off from her manufacturing job in London.

. .

Doesn't give a hoot about which party can score more political points.

They just want results.

And they know we'll deliver.

The proposals New Democrats brought to the budget make so much sense to Ontarians that the government is now openly trying to take credit for them.

Make no mistake about it.

Without the hard work and determination of our NDP team, and the advice we took from Ontarians, this year's budget would never have included the important measures that will make life easier for everyday people.

There's no doubt that we're facing some challenging times.

But now we have to choose whether we rise to the challenge...

... or get swamped by it.

We won't get the change we need by sticking to a status quo that just isn't working....

... or by offering political games...

... when what's needed is hard work...

... and a determination to do what's best for the people who elected us...

... not the party whose banner we carry.

As a former City Councillor...

... I know you will all hold me accountable to not just talk the talk but also to walk the walk.

On behalf of my colleagues in the New Democratic caucus...

...thank you for listening.

And I look forward to working with you in a spirit of optimism and hope....

... and a determination to build a better Ontario.

In a minority legislature...

... listening to others...

... and actually hearing what they're saying...

... is more important than ever.

Because this is our real opportunity,

to tackle our challenges head on...

to accomplish our goals together...

to finally get things done for Ontario