

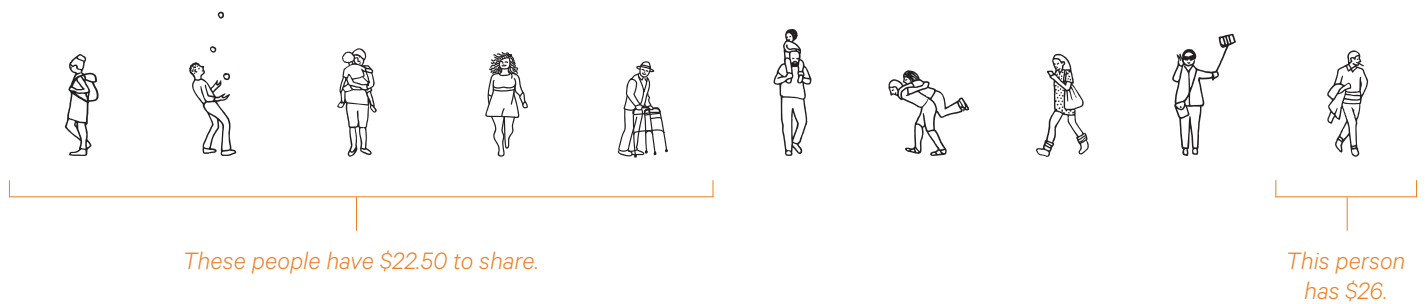


# Final Report

Prosperity Shared: The Commission  
for Economic Equality in Nova Scotia

# Why a commission?

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The NDP Caucus established Prosperity Shared: The Commission on Economic Equality in Nova Scotia to engage people in a conversation about building a province where prosperity is shared. We wanted to provide an opportunity to talk with people in their communities about the struggles they face, some of the solutions that already exist, and how an NDP government could expand on these solutions.

We want a province where prosperity is shared with everyone.

Right now, we see clear examples of how that's not happening. Nova Scotia has the lowest incomes in the country, the highest tuition fees, and the fastest rising food bank use.

While costs for communications services like cell and internet have gone down across the country, Nova Scotians are paying more. We are the only province in Canada where the number of children living in poverty is rising, which means more children are going to school hungry. And with most of us living pay cheque to pay cheque, it is harder to pay our power bills and maintain our homes.

**In Nova Scotia there is enough to go around. The wealthiest people in our province have seen their incomes increase while the rest of us are more and more worried about staying afloat.**

If Nova Scotia were a group of 10 people with \$100, the richest person would have \$26 to themselves while the bottom five would only have \$22.50 to share between them.

It doesn't have to be this way!

# What we did

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In September 2019 the NDP Caucus launched Prosperity Shared: The Commission on Economic Equality in Nova Scotia. We named three Commissioners to guide this work.

Janet Bickerton lives in Sydney. She is a nurse who has worked extensively in health and community development throughout Cape Breton.

Charlie Huntley is from rural Nova Scotia. They have a background in worker organizing, health promotion, and community education. They were instrumental in creating Glitter Bean Cafe, a worker-owner co-op queer-centred cafe where they are now a worker/owner.

Lana MacLean is a registered practicing clinical social worker. She has worked in the fields of addiction, mental health and acute care.

During October and November the Commissioners traveled to Dartmouth, Port Williams, Fairview, Bridgewater, Antigonish and Whitney Pier to take part in meetings moderated by NDP Caucus Chair Susan Leblanc and attended by NDP Leader Gary Burrill. Each meeting included a community meal, a presentation from a local organization about community-led solutions in the area, and an opportunity for community members to discuss what is needed to create economic equality in Nova Scotia.

The caucus put forward policy proposals on an ambitious provincial green energy efficiency and home retrofit program, a province-wide universal school food program, and government support for the expansion of internet infrastructure owned by municipalities, communities and not-for-profit groups in order to provide affordable internet.

More than 170 people participated in meetings around the province.

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“We will never deal with the health care crisis if poverty is not addressed”

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“Something is wrong if you have to work full-time but can’t afford a life”

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## Reflections on the Commission

Susan Leblanc, NSNDP Caucus Chair & Gary Burrill, NSNDP Leader

We didn’t really know if this was going to work.

A commission of activists and experts, loaded into a van, travelling around Nova Scotia, hosting consultations on making life in our province more fair and affordable. Not exactly the same type of appeal as, for example, a free community screening of The Last Jedi. But we did know it was important.



*Share the Orange! From left to right, Lana MacLean, Charlie Huntley, Gary Burrill, Susan Leblanc and Janet Bickerton*

We arrived at the North Woodside Community Centre in Dartmouth for our first Prosperity Shared meeting on the evening of November 10th. The chili was hot and plentiful, the room was set, and we were full of excitement, but a little nervous. What if no one showed up?

Our nerves were eased the minute the doors opened. That meeting, and the others that followed, saw rooms full of the everyday people of our province -- some students, trying to pay off debt; some parents, working harder and harder just to make ends meet; some folks who just wanted to find ways to help make their neighbours' lives better. Listening to everyone brought home just how important this work was and shone new light on the importance of communities coming together to examine our collective experiences and struggles.

Together we were able to acknowledge: there are solutions; it doesn't have to be this way.

But more than anything, what stood apart was the unanimity of voices that the status quo is not good enough. Nova Scotians are generous. We know that there is enough to go around.

In the end, it worked. People spoke. We listened. And we came away with an even greater sense of urgency about tackling these issues of affordability and income inequality. Nova Scotia can have prosperity that is shared. We can have an economy that works for everyone.

Of course, it wouldn't have worked without such a great team.

Commissioners Lana Maclean, Janet Bickerton and Charlie Huntley were dedicated, insightful and enthusiastic. Joanne Hussey and the entire caucus staff were undeterred in making the project a success. Our guest presenters from each community showed us the good things happening in our province when we set our minds to it. And of course, the community members who participated brought fresh perspectives, new ideas and solution-based thinking to every meeting.

Thank you, to all of them. Of course, our work doesn't end here. Our commitment to finding solutions and addressing these issues will serve as a cornerstone into, and well beyond, the next election.

**Susan Leblanc & Gary Burrill**



# Charlie Huntley

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In everyday life I see the numerous ways in which the rich hoarding wealth creates poverty and precarity for many. I see how that disproportionately affects disabled people, people of colour, and queer and trans people. As a trans person who works in the food service industry, I have a lot of friends struggling with job scarcity, income and housing precarity, and lack of adequate health and dental care.

The worst part of seeing so many people struggle and suffer is that there is enough wealth in this province to go around. We could fund universal health care (including mental health care, pharmacare, and dental care), provide housing, feed everyone, and create thousands of jobs, but the government actively chooses not to meet the needs of the public when it makes policy decisions that help the wealthy more than the everyday person. Changing that is at the core of this project, and what drew me to it.

This is clearly what drew people to the community meetings as well. They see the poverty in their communities, and the needless erosion of public services. They know we can do better. They know that we need to stop shutting down hospitals, libraries and schools if all of us are to lead healthier and happier lives.

There were presentations at every meeting by local community organizers who are working in a variety of ways to meet the needs of people left behind by government policies. One presentation in particular that I want to talk about was from the EAC's Emma Norton on green jobs and retrofitting. According to data produced by the Ecology Action Centre, tens of thousands of jobs could be created in Nova Scotia by retrofitting every building and home to be more energy efficient.

Creating green jobs became a more tangible and feasible idea for me when Emma laid out what types of jobs are green jobs. It's jobs for carpenters, graphic designers, plumbers, administrative staff, painters, engineers, and others. She emphasized the importance of starting energy retrofits in social housing, which makes sense. It's vital that saving money on energy isn't just something reserved for the wealthy.

What also struck me at all the meetings is how much people wanted to see incomes increase to meet the needs of all people regardless of whether they are a barista, a janitor, or unable to work. For some that meant talking about basic income; others wanted to talk about a \$15 minimum wage or living wage and raising the rates on income assistance.

Another issue emphasized at every meeting is that housing is too expensive. Nova Scotians are being squeezed between skyrocketing rents and stagnant wages or inadequate income assistance rates. People are struggling or unable to find adequate, affordable housing.

The situation is bleak for many Nova Scotians right now, but there are solutions, many of which we heard from people during our meetings. Government can raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour; it can raise the income assistance rates to an amount that is actually liveable; build more accessible public housing; regulate short-term rental housing; retrofit buildings and housing to save the public money and energy; and create jobs with equity hiring programs that prioritize hiring people of colour, disabled people, and queer and trans people. And government can ensure the rich pay their fair share in taxes.

People know that change is possible, but we need to organize and demand the government implement these solutions.

**Charlie**

## Lana MacLean

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What a privilege to spend time with Nova Scotians in their own communities across the province to hear directly from them what their hopes would be for all Nova Scotians to have Prosperity Shared!

As an African Nova Scotian woman and social worker rooted in social justice, participating as a Commissioner provided me a unique perspective to hear the needs, hopes and capacities of individuals and urban and rural communities. While people gave voice to their specific needs, there was also a resounding generosity to share resources and create local solutions that may be transferable to other communities.

What I heard overwhelmingly was the need for all Nova Scotians to have access to a living wage and the urgency for affordable housing across the province. We can all move forward together to create meaningful prosperity that is shared. We all benefit when we're all doing well. The African philosophy of, "Ubuntu – I am because we are," speaks to the collective voices I had the honour to listen to over each community visit.

My hope for all Nova Scotians is we can implement a \$15 minimum wage and establish a provincial housing strategy that addresses the needs of the urban and rural communities that make Nova Scotia a place for someone to want to live, stay and play.

Thank you to everyone who came out to share their hopes and ideas. Wela'lin, Merci – Thank you!

Lana

## Janet Bickerton

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I was honored to be asked by Gary Burrill to be part of the NSNDP Prosperity Shared Commission.

I come from and live in Cape Breton and over the past 40 years I have witnessed the economic decline of my community and watched as my community has become more and more impoverished.

Not everyone is living in poverty; some are doing very well, but the impact of poverty affects us all. It is destabilizing and, over a relatively short period of time, makes its mark on community infrastructure and services.

Having the opportunity to listen to concerned Nova Scotians, I was curious to discover how poverty was being felt around the province and I was anxious to hear about initiatives and ideas for improving the lives of our citizens, especially the lives of those most vulnerable and affected by the lack of shared prosperity in Nova Scotia.



Something that I wasn't quite expecting to hear -- but made perfect sense -- is that Nova Scotians were so appreciative of being given an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with each other around these most important challenges facing our province. It is clear that people feel left out and unengaged.

People want to participate in our democracy and not just on election day. Citizens want to be engaged and engage with each other. And in fact, we need an engaged citizenry if we are to turn things around and create a more equitable society that will benefit us all.

Many issues and concerns were voiced and there were many passionate discussions. Three concerns really stood out for me.

People are disturbed that many Nova Scotians do not have access to food — that families have to depend on charity to try to meet their basic need for nutrition. People are distraught that something so basic to human survival is becoming out of reach.

I heard participants at commission meetings express grave concern that more and more of our people have no home; nowhere to live, to rest, to sleep, to get warm. Again, like access to food,

it is so basic -- a human need. Imagine, a province as wealthy as Nova Scotia and yet people, young and old, are on the streets, in shelters or forced to move nightly from place to place to find a sofa or piece of floor to sleep on.

I heard that the door to post-secondary education is closed for many. The opportunities that were once there for each of us as citizens to be educated and have a chance to build a better life are for the most part gone. Those in attendance who grew up in an earlier era credited low tuition and a student loan and bursary program that allowed them to follow their dreams regardless of the economic status of their family. Now, so many young people have stopped dreaming. They see no door, no route to post-secondary education.

I felt connected to the people who attended the commission meetings and I share their concerns. I felt heartened, even though the stories and the situations described were difficult. It was wonderful to know that Nova Scotians care deeply about the plight of each other.

Throughout the meetings there was a strong sense that we can build a better society, together.

We need policy and programs like a livable minimum wage for Nova Scotians, access to a healthy meal for all children every day at school, tuition-free post secondary education through our community college system, an increase in affordable and safe housing and funds to retrofit existing homes to make them safe, warm and energy efficient. These are just a few ways we can begin to even out the playing field. We need to share the prosperity that many Nova Scotians enjoy and that too many, at this time, do not.

I believe the provincial NDP have confirmed their direction. They are on the right track and Nova Scotians agree and share their concerns. To build a strong Nova Scotia we must ensure that it is a Nova Scotia for all. We grow strong by having government working with the community to create innovative solutions to help people and by having policies and programs that raise all of us up!

**Janet**

# What we heard



In communities around the province, when people came together to share a meal and ideas, they raised similar concerns and solutions regardless of their community or region of the province. These common themes were that:

- People see evidence of the negative impact of growing economic inequality in their community;
- Action must be taken to ensure everyone has access to appropriate, affordable housing options;
- People are concerned about the impacts of climate change;
- People are worried about being able to access the health care services they need when they need them;
- There is broad support for initiatives that increase food security;
- People want to be involved in decisions that affect them; and
- There is interest in expanding public services to ensure people have access to affordable transportation, child care and post-secondary education.

People spoke to a deep and widespread need for something better. In rural and urban communities around Nova Scotia people provided examples of worsening economic inequality -- rising housing, energy and food costs, low wages, and barriers to accessing health care, child care and post-secondary education. People came to the table passionate about community-building, food security, protecting the environment and social justice.

We heard people express concerns, not just about their own individual situations, but about their children, grandchildren, neighbours, future generations and communities as a whole. The values of generosity, mutual care and support, and collective responsibility were woven through every conversation at every table in every community.

In each community there were also many examples of these values at work. Across the province there are many successful programs and organizations filling the gaps created by widening economic inequality:

- The Mobile Food Market in the Halifax Regional Municipality helps provide **access to affordable, healthy food** for people who may not otherwise have access to a grocery store or farmers market.
- The town of Bridgewater is working to address energy poverty with a program that includes energy monitoring equipment for low income homes, a **retrofit financing program and community-owned solar**.
- The Antigonish Affordable Housing Society has built 14 units of **good quality, affordable homes for people living on low incomes**.
- In Dartmouth North, the Community Van brings clients to programs and services that will benefit them, allowing them **access to the broad range of services and programs in the community**.
- In Kings and Annapolis Counties the Valley Community Learning Association offers a range of **free classes and one on one tutoring** in Adult Basic Education, literacy, English as an additional language, numeracy, health literacy, family literacy, computer literacy, trades-related upgrading and youth programming.
- In communities across the province people acknowledged the **quality and diversity of programming** and support provided by their local library.

# What do we need in Nova Scotia to make sure prosperity is shared by everyone?

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When this question was posed, participants across the province made it very clear that big changes are needed to address economic inequality and other forms of structural discrimination.

## System-level changes suggested included:

- changing the tax system to make sure the rich pay their fair share;
- ending government subsidies to large corporations;
- increasing incomes; and
- providing more support for cooperatives and community-owned services.

People want to see provincial funds used to make it easier for them to afford the basics by investing in universal public services like mental health and dental care, child care, long-term care, and post-secondary education. People need access to quality, affordable housing and suggested co-operative and co-housing models, rent control and supportive housing.

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“People who are best suited to make a decision about that community are people who live in that community”

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Across all of the discussions participants expressed a strong desire to be engaged in decision making and to know that local voices were heard in the process of developing and implementing solutions.

At the closing of each meeting, participants were asked to imagine what they could do if they didn't have to spend so much energy on the basics, but instead could focus on thriving.

This proved to be a very challenging question.

The day to day experience for many people is so focused on ensuring their basic needs are met that there is not space for them to consider how things could be different. Many people imagined they would spend more time helping others by volunteering and participating more in their community. Participants could see how their health would be improved if they were able to access medications they need, lower their stress and access healthy food. Many also expressed a desire to pursue more education - to finish a degree or learn another language.

## What we need to do now...

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Nova Scotians who participated in the Commission have a vision for what needs to be done.

### **Nova Scotians need to see action on housing.**

People raised the need for rent control and significant investments in new, affordable cooperative and not-for-profit housing. There was interest in pursuing a provincial program of home retrofits to reduce heating costs for those who were already housed.

### **Nova Scotians need things to be more affordable.**

Many suggested increasing the minimum wage to a standard that would ensure people can afford the things they need. People also identified the need to reduce the cost of the essentials. Examples include establishing a low cost, high quality, universal child care program, lowering the cost of cell and internet bills, and increasing access to healthy food by expanding existing school-based programs, community gardens and mobile markets.

### **Nova Scotians need greater access to learning opportunities.**

Many people pointed to increasing tuition fees as one of the examples of growing economic inequality in the province. They acknowledged that post-secondary education is important but increasingly out of reach for many people. Parents spoke about the burden of debt their children were facing from tuition fees and the impact this had on their future plans. Many people spoke about the need to address this by eliminating student debt, and reducing or eliminating tuition fees. People also spoke about the important role that libraries play in communities by offering free access to materials and learning opportunities.

### **Nova Scotians need access to strong, publicly funded health services.**

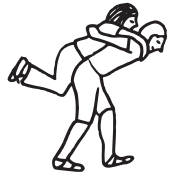
Many people spoke about the negative health impacts they have experienced as a result of living on low incomes. People have to make choices about the medication and treatments they can afford because our publicly funded health system doesn't cover the cost of prescriptions, dental care or timely mental health treatment. There was significant interest in expanding access to publicly funded health services to fill these gaps and to ensure health services are available across the province when and where they are needed.



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We can build an economy from the ground up that is centred on human and environmental values.

We can do things differently, so that the wealth we all produce can provide access to health care, a place to live, and opportunities for everyone.



We can take on the climate emergency in a way that improves the quality of life for people who today are struggling to get by.

We have the people, the skills and the resources. All that has been missing is the political will.



The NDP Caucus is committed to a vision for Nova Scotia that prioritizes economic, social and environmental justice.

We know that we are all better off when prosperity is shared.



Imagine a province  
where prosperity is  
shared by everyone.



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