

**Opening remarks by the Hon. David Alward
Premier
Government of New Brunswick**

**Public Policy Forum
24th Annual Testimonial Dinner & Awards
April 28, 2011**

Good evening, everyone.

Tonight is an opportunity to honour some extraordinary stories of innovation, of determination, of setbacks and of big successes.

And it's a chance to discuss how we can drive more success, innovation, and smart ideas into the future across our country.

It's an honour to act as your co-host with Elyse Allan tonight. Elyse is the kind of business leader who keeps Canada moving forward.

That includes the leading-edge work she has helped to spearhead in New Brunswick through GE Canada's partnership with the Irving Group and Kent Homes manufacturing energy efficient structures.

I want to start by thanking the Public Policy Forum for inviting me to join all of you.

It's a pleasure to be here. You know there's nothing like a royal wedding and yet another federal election to make a public policy dinner seem exciting!

I was more than a little bit worried when I heard how well Brad Wall did speaking here two years ago. But I was relieved when I heard about my good friend Premier Dexter's performance last year ...

How about the wild ride Jack Layton is on in these latest polls? Whoever could have predicted this to happen?

A lot of people said it couldn't be done. Many have tried and many have failed to do what Jack is now doing.

And surprisingly I'm not even talking about the polls. I'm talking about the fact he is a popular leader with a mustache and no hair.

As someone whose mustache conveniently disappeared in time for a leadership run, I can't help but admire that!

The image consultants told me to shave the stache and they tried 14 different haircuts on me before our election. Yes this is not a wig.

Who knows, maybe Jack is onto something and it's not too late for Stephen and Michael to grow a little stubble for the stretch run.

The Telegraph Journal, New Brunswick's provincial newspaper, had a story this week that said this event would be an opportunity to introduce me to the Toronto elite and the rest of Canada. Not to mention a chance to be on CPAC. Can you imagine the excitement for a farmer like me to be on such a prestigious channel ... when you can find it on the dial!

But I thought you would already have known all about me thanks to my centrefold feature in Herefords Today that ran after the election win last fall.

If you're not familiar with Herefords Today, I can tell you it is one of Canada's pre-eminent political magazines. It ranks right up there with MacLean's magazine.

A MacLean's reporter said after last fall's election that my French reminded him of how painful it was to listen to his father reading text off a cereal box.

Je suis fier d'être le premier ministre de la seule province bilingue au Canada. Et j'aime sincèrement la langue française. C'est une langue avec tellement d'histoire, de nuances, et de richesses.

It's a very elegant language. At times it sounds almost musical **except** when it's coming out of **my** mouth.

But I'm working on it. My goal is to one day be as eloquent in French as I am in English, and all New Brunswickers know just how **eloquent** that is!

Ultimately, though, it's not how you say it – but what you have to say.

I'm very grateful for the opportunity to take part in this tribute to some truly distinguished Canadians.

And I'd like to take this opportunity to congratulate tonight's honourees.

You can all be very proud of your work to improve the quality of public policy and public management in Canada.

I hope many more Canadians will:
be inspired by your outstanding contributions;
and choose to become engaged in matters of public policy.

Citizen engagement is absolutely crucial for any democracy, and it's something that we -- in New Brunswick -- believe in firmly.

After all, politics is about people: their communities, their ideas, and their priorities.

As government leaders, and as policy thinkers, our responsibility is to connect the ideas and priorities of individual citizens with the decisions that impact their communities and their families.

The longer you are around politics, the easier it is to see that government's get decisions right most often when they involve those who will be affected.

In fact, responsible governing isn't seeing public engagement as just a smart choice, but as an essential piece of preparing every decision a government takes.

A farmer must till the soil and prepare his fields, even before he plants his crops or starts thinking about the harvest.

Now as a farmer and a politician I can tell you which job is usually more popular with the average guy on the street.

And there is a reason for that.

When governments get lazy, and don't do the work they should be doing alongside citizens and close to communities, they usually get it wrong.

And even if they make a sound decision, but it is implemented with a bulldozer rather than by following the proper engagement process, it won't get very far.

In New Brunswick, the people have made it abundantly clear that it is not good enough to watch from the sidelines.

People want to be involved and they want their voices to be heard. The challenges we face now are way too serious for us not to be working together and tapping into all the ideas we possibly can.

And there's one challenge in particular that's very serious for us.

It's the rising cost of health care, by far our most expensive government service today.

Successive governments from Frank McKenna to Bernard Lord and Shawn Graham have invested vast amounts of money in health care in New Brunswick over the last two decades. Nevertheless, the cost of delivering these services has only gone up and it's still growing.

I can tell you this spending represents a huge challenge for a province with a small and aging population like ours.

Every year, there are more people who need more from our health-care system in New Brunswick. At the same time, it's becoming more and more difficult to cover the costs of providing the care people need.

Certainly, this situation is hardly unique to New Brunswick.

Across Canada, governments are facing the same challenges. Provincial and territorial governments are dealing with rising health-care costs and aging populations.

The situation is just unfolding faster in our province than it is elsewhere. That's due to our demographic makeup, which doesn't leave us much room for complacency. It also forces us to lead the way toward innovative solutions that can be implemented across the country.

So where does public policy fit into the urgency to act?

In a period of austerity, there will inevitably be a push to cut the resources we dedicate to driving policy, as it has happened so many times when money becomes scarce.

In New Brunswick, like in many other provinces, we are doing what we can to make government run more efficiently, with less duplication and more focus on front line services.

But we are also aware that it is counterproductive to remove the capacity to make decisions with the innovation and vision that is required to tackle the tough times ahead.

In New Brunswick governments in the past have cut much of the policy grey matter that once existed.

But there is a new initiative underway that will help us find answers to the very serious questions that we face as a government... and really as a society.

The Social Policy Research network brings together leaders in government, civil society, and academia to work through these questions together.

Ultimately the Social Policy Research Network will help find the answers to avoid an erosion of vital government services, and to build an even greater quality of life for our families and future generations.

This is an example of the kind of policy work that has a very real, a very tangible connection to the kind of government we can provide, and the kind of society we can aspire to live in.

And inevitably, the need for other jurisdictions to address these challenges will become as urgent as it is in New Brunswick now.

The emerging crisis is clearly unsustainable.

That's why I believe it's time for a national dialogue on health care.

We need to start discussing our common challenges and tackling them through a collaborative approach.

New Brunswick literally cannot afford to sit back and watch how other provinces handle the demographic bombshell – that's because it is hitting us first.

Ladies and gentlemen, we're moving New Brunswick in a new direction. We're moving toward a sustainable health-care system based on a more robust, knowledge-based economy that runs on innovation and creativity.

Thanks again for your warm welcome.

Il m'a fait grand plaisir d'être parmi vous ce soir.