

Leader of the
Official Opposition



Leader of the
Ontario Liberal Party

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**Leader of the Official Opposition
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Check Against Delivery

Good Afternoon.

Being Leader of the Opposition is the best job I've ever had.

It's rewarding and exciting and – at this time in Ontario's history – critically important.

Merci d'avoir pris de votre temps, malgré vos journées de travail fort chargées, pour être ici.

Et merci de m'accorder l'honneur de prendre la parole devant les membres du Canadian Club de Toronto et d'avoir ce face à face.

Cette institution est des plus importantes : le Canadian Club a été au centre de nos débats nationaux depuis plus d'un siècle.

Et le moment est opportun : nous sommes à l'aube d'un nouveau millénaire, nous sommes à la veille d'une élection et nous venons tout juste d'avoir un budget fédéral.

So thank you for taking time out of your busy workdays to be here.

And thank you for granting me the honour of speaking to the Canadian Club of Toronto – face to face.

The setting is significant: the Canadian Club has been at the centre of our national debate for more than a century.

And the timing is significant: a new century is just around the corner, an election is coming up, and we've just had a federal budget.

With those three things in mind, I thought it was interesting last week to hear the federal finance minister, in his budget speech, invoke the memory of Sir Wilfred Laurier, and what he had to say about a new century 95 years ago.

In fact, Laurier was speaking to a Canadian Club audience during the election campaign of 1904 when he was quoted as saying: "The twentieth century belongs to Canada."

Laurier's bold prediction that the United States would eat our dust did not exactly come true – although the Americans are indeed trying to buy our water.

But I do believe that in many ways the twentieth century has belonged to Canada and Ontario.

We have enjoyed a high standard of living, in large part because we have chosen our priorities well.

We built a public education system that has provided our children with the chance to succeed – regardless of their parents' station in life.

And finally – and this is where we really *have* topped our neighbours to the South – we created a quality, public health care system.

If the twentieth century has belonged to Ontario, it is because we built hospitals and schools that truly belonged to Ontarians.

But are we still doing that today in Ontario?

Have we lost sight of those priorities?

So – as we look forward to a new century - I too want to take up Laurier's theme.

But instead of seeking comfort in repeating his prediction, I prefer to pose a question:

Will the 21st century belong *to* Ontario – or will *it* own *us*?

The answer will depend on the choices we make.

Will we have a positive vision to guide us?

Will we use our resources wisely?

And will we be smart enough – and courageous enough – to take the long view?

To take on the future – instead of waiting to see where it will take us?

That is the question we all face in the coming election: who can best prepare us for the future?

I know you've heard Opposition politicians tell you the current government is mean-spirited.

But what's even more troubling – in my view – is that it's dangerously short sighted.

Take, for example, its' approach to getting our fiscal house in order.

It might surprise you to know that, so far, this government has added \$22 billion to the province's debt.

Almost \$10 billion of that is money it borrowed to pay for a tax cut before we could really afford one.

And that \$10 billion works out to \$3,600 in debt for each and every household.

What was the point of all the pain the government put people through – if we're still saddling our children with crippling debt?

Doesn't it make more sense to aim for sustainable tax relief – combined with debt reduction – when we truly can afford it?

If we are going to grow the economy, we must prepare our kids for the jobs of the future.

Are we really doing that today in education?

I support the notion of standardized tests in grade 3 and grade 6 – as long as we use them to improve schools.

I like the idea of clear, understandable report cards – as long as we give parents and schools what they need to make a child's next report card better.

In fact, I believe we need more accountability in education and, for that matter, all our public institutions.

You work hard. You pay a lot in taxes. You are absolutely right to demand value for money.

So why can't we also have report cards on how schools are faring *and* how well our government is doing in supporting our schools?

And is a back to basics approach really enough? Do we want to lurch back to the 1950s, or prepare for the next century?

I know the Premier loved Leave it to Beaver, and that kid was awfully polite and all, but I don't think he'd cut it in a modern software company.

"Gee, Wally, I don't know. Mom's gonna be awful sore if we use up that much RAM."

I'd rather *modernize* our schools... because in the new century...and the new economy... learning equals earning.

Today the typical office is Internet connected...e-mail ready...and Pentium processed.

But the typical school still has...well... pencils... at least for the vast majority of students for the vast majority of the time.

But it's not just a matter of providing our children with the right learning equipment. We have to equip our children to learn.

Study after study has confirmed that the single most important factor determining how well a child does in school is how *ready* that child is *to* learn when she walks into school on the very first day.

The new frontier in Ontario education is the development of children before kindergarten.

But the current government does not have a firm commitment to junior kindergarten. And it's absolutely silent on giving kids a head start by providing them with some sort of early education at age 3.

What else ensures our kids are learning?

Textbooks? Maybe. Class size? It can help.

But I think the first question parents have about school is: Does my child have a good teacher?

A qualified, experienced, competent, committed teacher.

I believe the current government has degraded the teaching profession. More importantly, teachers believe that.

Oh, some say the Premier put them in their place.

That might be true – unless you think a teacher's place is in the classroom.

The government isn't talking about it. But we are about to face a severe teacher's shortage in Ontario.

Demoralized teachers are leaving the profession in droves, opting for other careers or early retirement.

It goes far beyond normal attrition.

Today, in Ontario, we're short 690 full-time teachers.

In five years time, even if we run all our faculties of education flat out, fill every space, we'll be short 13,500 teachers.

What's worse is the greatest shortage will be in math and science – the areas in which we must excel if we are going to be innovative and productive enough to compete.

You tell me. Are we really preparing for the future?

Confidence in public education is eroding. Enrolment in private schools is up 15 per cent since the government assumed office in 1995.

As premier, I will compete to get those parents and students back.

Not because it's their civic duty. Not because it's the right thing to do.

I want them to come back because our public schools will offer quality and accountability... because our public schools can prepare their children for the future.

It's in health care where the government's approach has been the most shortsighted – and the most dangerous.

We're seeing the results in our newspapers each and every day.

I announced last week that the first thing we would do to improve front line care – especially in our emergency rooms – would be to hire the nurses the government fired.

The premier too has been talking about hiring nurses.

This must make the average nurse feel a bit like someone who suddenly gets flowers from the same person who broke her heart.

It was the premier's cuts to hospital budgets that forced the firing of the thousands of nurses he now *says* he wants to hire back.

What's tragic is the impact those firings have had on Ontario patients.

Ontario now has the fewest nurses per capita in Canada.

I sometimes say the toughest place in the country to find a nurse today is in an Ontario hospital.

What's almost as sad is the impact those firings have had on Ontario taxpayers.

Taxpayers spent \$414 million on severance, downsizing consultants and the other costs of getting rid of the same nurses we're now trying to get back.

Many of you are in business.

If your human resources managers worked this way, you would fire them.

But this isn't business. It's health care.

It's what happens when you bring your child to the emergency ward in the middle of the night.

It's what happens when your father feels a tightness in his chest and calls for an ambulance.

It's what happens when your doctor looks you in the eye and says: you need cancer treatment.

Are we really preparing for the future when we fire all those nurses?

Especially when the Canadian Nurses Association has estimated that Ontario will be short some 35,000 nurses by the year 2011?

We already face a shortage of doctors. For years, our rural and northern communities have been left without the physicians they need.

They're officially known as under serviced areas.

Well, today, the small, rural community of Kitchener-Waterloo is an under serviced area. So is Windsor.

For the first time, we have more under serviced areas here in the South – including major cities -than in Northern Ontario.

And as the baby boom turns into a senior's boom – and doctors retire – the shortages are going to grow.

That's why I've announced my government will offer medical school students free tuition – if they agree to set up practise in an underserviced area for five years.

We will pay, but only if new doctors come, and stay.

It's an attractive offer, when you consider that because of the government's tuition hikes, it now costs as much as \$44,000 to earn a degree in medicine.

Are we really preparing for the future if we're not addressing the need for basic medical care – a need that's going to grow over the next twenty years?

The government's approach has been equally short sighted when it comes to hospital closures.

You know that the Health Services Restructuring Commission was appointed by the government to close hospitals.

And you may know that the government closed hospitals *before* the proper community care was in place.

But did you know the commission's mandate was to look at Ontario's health care needs up to the year 2003?

Our population is growing. It's ageing. Twenty years from now, we'll have a million more seniors than we have today.

And the current government has been making hospital decisions based on our needs in the year 2003? A mere four years down the road?

Are we really preparing for the future? For the next century?

I'm committed to taking a second look at the commission's decisions.

I'm absolutely certain some will have to be reversed.

I've had people say to me: don't reopen that issue, it's too emotional, too risky.

I say: what we can't risk is the long-term health of Ontarians.

Wait, a minute, you say. I see the premier on television vowing swift action to solve the health care crisis.

Remember his record.

When it was suggested in 1997 that we were losing too many nurses, too many front line health care workers, the premier compared those professionals to hula hoop makers, who lost their factory jobs when the hula hoop fad died.

Just days ago he said: "I don't know that the situation is getting worse."

Now the government says it will put out all the fires – and the Premier will drive the fire engine – and the pumps will be primed with water from Paul Martin's reservoir.

Remember his record.

And ask yourself: will health care really be the Harris government's mission next year, or the year after that?

If we have another four years of this government, will the health care system that transformed Ontario in the 20th century, really be there for us in the 21st century?

Sure, change is necessary. Do we constantly need to find efficiencies? Of course.

But don't bungle the job when we're talking about people's health – and people's lives.

In the weeks ahead, I'll be outlining a new approach to health care, a positive vision, that will repair today's damage, and meet tomorrow's needs.

One that puts patients' needs ahead of politicians' self-interest.

While our health care system has been struggling – and our classrooms have barely been coping -- the government ad industry has been booming.

The current government has spent \$90 million of taxpayers' money on partisan, political advertising.

It's a new record. Never has this much public money been spent on so much propaganda.

Flyers, and television, radio and print ads that have one purpose: the re-election of Mike Harris.

You can't turn on a TV or radio without being subjected to one.

That's wrong.

The Tories say we Liberals did some of this in government, and so did the New Democrats.

You know what? It was wrong then too.

That's why I've announced I'll introduce an Act to Protect Taxpayers from Partisan Advertising – within 100 days of becoming premier.

For the first time, an impartial referee, the Integrity Commissioner, will decide if a government ad is partisan.

And if it is, the government's political party will pick up the tab – not the taxpayers.

The money wasted on propaganda could have been spent to put nurses in our emergency wards – or doctors in our communities – or computers in our schools.

Look, I know how hard you work. This is a tough, competitive city. In a tough, competitive world.

You put in a lot of hours. And you pay a significant chunk of your pay cheque in taxes.

You don't ask for a lot from government.

So the one time you take your elderly mother to the emergency ward in the middle of the night – she should get decent care.

You've earned that. You've paid for that.

The one time you ask for just a little bit of extra help – maybe some speech therapy – for your child in school – it should be there for him.

You've earned that. You've paid for that.

If we take the long view, that care will be there, that extra help will be there too.

And when we take the long view, we understand that, in a highly competitive global economy, those jurisdictions which invest heavily in the *knowledge and health* of their people win.

Good health care and good education aren't just good for our people. They are good for our economy . . .

The 21st century will indeed belong to Ontario – if we really prepare for the future...if we take on the future... instead of waiting to see where *it* will take us...

Who can best prepare us for the future?

That question is what the election will be all about.

And I'm confident my team, the Ontario Liberals, will offer the best answer.

Thank you.