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Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

I take great pleasure in welcoming you to this Second Session of the Forty-Third General Assembly. In this year, our 500th since Cabot's voyage, we have much to celebrate. We enjoy the bounties of the land and sea. And we have wealth in the talent and abilities of our people.

This is our birthright as Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. We hold them in trust for our children and our children's children. Let us pass on, to those who will follow in the next 500 years, that birthright, with nature unblemished and a culture yet further enriched.

Keeping Commitments

In February of last year, our citizens elected a government that sought the people's support based on a platform of thoughtful optimism, genuine partnership, and good governance. That platform was costed, detailed, and distributed widely. It set out a clear direction and a plan of action - to maximize benefits from natural resources, revitalize rural communities, develop new industries, provide services that people need and do so within the means available to us. And, in all this, there was a commitment to discuss openly and honestly the decisions to be made.

That platform has become the basis of government's policies. Yesterday, My Government released a report card setting out its progress in implementing those policies. The Record to Date is a thorough assessment of My Government's progress in fulfilling its commitments to the people of our province. It is an assessment that My Government will update throughout its mandate.

Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

Fishery & Aquaculture

The 1990s have been a challenging chapter in the life of our province and our people. The collapse of the ground fishery dealt us a heavy blow that is still being felt today, especially in our rural communities. We will not be whole again until there is a return to prosperity in the ground fishery by those who make their living from it.

My Government promised a renewed commitment to our fishery in a spirit of partnership with the fisherpeople of this province, and with the Government of Canada. Government is committed to protect, rebuild and sustainably harvest our groundfish resource. Together, the industry and both levels of government participate in the Fisheries Resource Conservation Council, charged with recommending sustainable measures of harvesting, based on resource conservation, growth and regeneration.

My Government has also worked with federal and industry partners in developing the Fishing Industry Renewal Board's Policy Framework for Fish Processing. This framework points the way to more stable employment and income levels as stocks recover.

Last year, landmark legislation was passed in this House establishing the Professional Fish Harvesters' Certification Board. This is a move toward meaningful stakeholder participation in the regulatory process, and a recognition of fishing as the professional occupation that it is.

My Government also promised to devote its energies to create a thriving aquaculture industry in this province. It has energetically worked towards this over the past year, providing funding for aquaculture research and development, financial investment and marketing, planning, education and training, and extension services.

Aquaculture is recognized by My Government, and by its industry partners, as having tremendous potential for our economy. The expanding salmon and trout farms in Bay d'Espoir stand as shining examples of an aquaculture industry moving forward, employing hundreds of people, with prospects for further growth in employment.

Our people have shown great skill and ingenuity in developing new fisheries, such as shrimp and porcupine crab. Their efforts to do so must be encouraged, so that when groundfish resources re-build, the fishery will be better able to provide good and stable incomes. There is recent news that our shellfish stocks are stronger than ever, and the prospects for an expanded shrimp fishery are most encouraging. Indeed the fishing industry as a whole continues to generate in excess of $500 million annually to our economy. It is a critical element in My Government's economic development initiatives.

The Smelter/Refinery and Trans-shipment Facilities

In the past year, My Government has ensured that the Voisey's Bay smelter and refinery and the offshore oil trans-shipment facility will be built in this province. These are developments of profound significance for the future of our province. Our vast natural resources will not simply be shipped away to the benefit of others. They will be developed here, for the benefit of our people.

Construction of the mine and mine mill in Labrador, together with the construction of the smelter/refinery complex at Argentia, will provide some 3500 jobs for our people. Direct and indirect employment will create 3000 jobs, once all Voisey's Bay facilities are in full operation.

Construction of the offshore oil trans-shipment facility will employ 300 at peak. The terminal and the shuttle tankers to feed it will create 120 permanent jobs. My Government will continue to work with industry to ensure our people are trained and ready to seize the opportunities that will flow from these two important projects.

Mining

Other mining opportunities are being developed throughout the province. Two new gold mines began production in 1996, as did a gypsum mine at Fischells. Another gold mine at Nugget Pond has started processing and is expected to produce its first gold bar shortly. A slate quarry in Keels and an antimony mine at Beaver Brook, near Glenwood, are also expected this year.

These resources are ours to develop and process for the maximum benefit of our people. My Government is committed to an appropriate royalty regime that will allow for all citizens to share fully in the riches produced. Every opportunity will be explored, including the viability of a copper smelter in this province. And My Government will continue to work with the mining industry to promote new mines and quarries in Newfoundland and Labrador. Mining exploration was at a record high of $91 million in 1996. This compares to $12 million in 1993, $15 million in 1994 and $70 million in 1995. In 1997, exploration is expected to remain strong at over $70 million.

Petroleum

The recent mating of the Hibernia platform demonstrated to the world that Newfoundland & Labrador is a major player in the world's oil and gas industry. Hibernia's success has also paved the way for a diversified offshore petroleum industry. The Terra Nova project is now undergoing an environmental review.

A new generic royalty regime was put in place for petroleum projects in 1996. The benefits of the generic regime are already evident. Clearly, it has accelerated the planning of the potential development of Whiterose and other offshore oil fields, and has spurred renewed offshore exploration. For example, Amoco is planning an exploratory well on the Grand Banks in May, the first drilling activity there in five years.

Beyond this, the generic regime was critical in persuading Petro Canada and its new partner, Norsk Hydro, to undertake a major, long-term commitment to exploration and development in the Jeanne D'Arc Basin. My Government is delighted with Petro-Canada's decision to establish an office in St. John's for east coast Canadian oil and gas development. Government expects to see similar offices opened by other major east coast energy players.

My Government is also exploring a new labour relations regime for our offshore industries that will ensure we are competitive with other regions, both here in North America and abroad.

Forestry

In forestry, My Government has announced a new, $5.7 million forest research and education facility in Corner Brook, which will open in 1998. Government has negotiated a new three-year forest management strategy with the federal government, resulting in many silviculture projects throughout the province. And, an additional five-year cost-shared silviculture plan has also been negotiated with Abitibi-Price and Corner Brook Pulp & Paper.

My Government has produced a 20-year forestry plan that, after extensive public consultation, will become the basis for the long-term, sustainable development of our forest industry. New areas for economic growth, such as on the coast of Labrador, will be pursued vigorously, as will new opportunities in integrated saw mill operations. The commitment to a sustainable and structured forest plan for this province, in partnership with the Government of Canada and with industry, is being kept.

Agriculture

In agriculture, My Government continues to act in partnership with industry to target opportunities and to deal with restraints on development, including the need for public grain storage, expanding grain production, alternative feed trials, food marketing co-operatives, and an agriculture awareness campaign. And we are pursuing an increasing number of niche markets and developments in the foods processing and agrifoods sector.

Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

Our natural resources can help us to pay for needed public services and to service our debt. It can also lay the foundation for a healthier, more diversified economy. My Government believes that the tourism industry can help to provide new growth for our province.

Cabot 500 Celebrations

This year we are pleased to welcome Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, and Prince Philip to our Province to greet the Matthew on its arrival in Bonavista. We will also be joined by a host of other leaders from across Canada and abroad. Indeed, the Cabot 500 Celebrations will place our province in the international spotlight. This must be translated into permanent, sustained growth for tourism in our province. My Government has promoted these Celebrations with enthusiasm, hosting five major anchor events, providing financial support for fifty events, and in-kind support to over sixty Come Home Years throughout the province. Some of the regional events are annual events, enhanced for this Cabot anniversary. Others, such as the Placentia Festival of Flags, the Gander Festival of Flight, and the Northern Lights Cultural Festival, are special Cabot 500 events.

We are already seeing the fruits of our labours. The influential American Bus Association has named the Cabot 500 Celebrations the top event in North America in 1997. Nine cruise ships carrying over 5,200 passengers are slated to visit 14 ports of call both on the Island and in Labrador, and there is a 250% increase in convention activity planned for this year. Our advertising campaigns have won five international awards in the past seven months, and the province has been the subject of extensive coverage in such publications as the New York Times.

Growth in Tourism

My Government will build on this success, with further promotional efforts focusing on American, European and Japanese travellers. As promised, My Government has also developed a new state-of-the-art central reservations system with NewTel Communications, which became operational in December of last year. And, through the Economic Renewal Agreement, it has supported the enhancement of interpretation centres throughout the province, including the Ferryland Interpretation Centre, the Signal Hill Tattoo, the Fleur de Lys Dorset Eskimo Site, the Ryan Premises, and the Grenfell Interpretation Centre in St. Anthony.

1997 Year of the Arts

My Government has also helped restore funding to the 1997 Year of the Arts, as a commitment to the celebration of our rich culture and heritage. Over 1,300 individual artists will demonstrate their talents in 78 exhibitions ranging from music and dance to theatre and the visual arts. Public funds, coupled with generous donations from our corporate citizens, will help bring our songs and stories to life like never before.

Looking beyond 1997, My Government is committed to working with the thousands of Canada Winter Games volunteers to host the best games ever in 1999. And we look forward to the 1998 Newfoundland & Labrador Winter Games in Labrador West, following on the great success of the Summer Games held last year in Conception Bay South.

Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

The development of advanced technologies is seen by My Government as key to our advancement as an economy. The Internet and its applications are changing how we work and where we can work. It offers the people of our province enormous opportunities. Our information technology companies aim to penetrate Scottish and Irish markets as easily as they might those in Nova Scotia or Ontario. For these businesses to grow, Government must provide a positive climate by maintaining a sound fiscal position and a quality standard of education and training, and by spearheading strategic promotional efforts to penetrate new markets and attract investment.

SoftWorld '98

This New Economy has allowed our information technology companies to transcend borders and find partnerships and markets around the world. It was in this spirit that My Government signed an agreement with the Aberdeen region of Scotland to bid as co-hosts for the SoftWorld '98 software conference in St. John's. SoftWorld '98 will provide a catalyst for further promotional efforts by My Government, in tandem with the information technology industry in this province. SoftWorld '98 will showcase the innovation, talent and entrepreneurial spirit of our province.

ERA and Advanced Technologies

Through the Economic Renewal Agreement, My Government has established a research infrastructure fund to ensure that the research and development facilities at Memorial University continue to foster advanced technology businesses.

And, it has invested $5 million in the Canadian Centre for Marine Communications so that it may increase the commercialisation of Newfoundland-based technologies in marine communications, navigation, and surveillance.

A further $10 million has been pledged to the efforts of Operation ONLINE - a joint private-sector, university and government initiative that has assumed a lead role in matters relating to our information technology sector. I am particularly pleased to note that My Government continues to support our world-class expertise in distance education and tele-medicine, and recently supported the establishment of a Chair of Telelearning at Memorial University.

Through investments in satellite and multimedia technologies, Memorial University, the Provincial College, and the libraries will be equipped to develop and deliver courses throughout rural Newfoundland and Labrador, thereby allowing us to overcome the inherent problems of our geography.

Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

Rural Revitalisation

Renewal of rural Newfoundland and Labrador stood squarely at the centre of My Government's mandate one year ago, and it created a Department dedicated to this purpose. There is a demonstrated commitment to our 20 economic zones, which are key to long-term sustainable growth. We must make way for local people to author and implement solutions unique to their economies. In the months ahead, My Government will build on these abilities by announcing a new initiative, in partnership with the Government of Canada, that will provide small business training and counselling services in each of the 20 economic zones.

Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

Aboriginal Affairs

Labrador and its people stand as proud members of this province and unique partners in our ongoing story of these past 500 years. Indeed, for centuries the aboriginal peoples there have hunted the land, fished the waters and raised their families in Labrador, and they are now asserting a greater measure of control over their communities. In its commitments to the people of Labrador and the whole province, My Government agreed that the negotiation of land claims must be given top priority.

Negotiations have been substantial and intense and therefore have had moments of pause and difficulty. Yet the will on both sides of the table remains strong, and the results of the past year speak for themselves: conclusion of an agreement in principle with the Labrador Inuit is possible in the near term, and a self-government framework agreement has been signed with the Innu Nation. For the first time in Canada's history, a four-way joint approach to the environmental assessment of a major resource development has been negotiated. Indeed, both the Inuit and the Innu have joined My Government and the Government of Canada in the assessment of the Voisey's Bay mine project.

Labrador's Place

It is important that all of those who live in Labrador share in the development of its riches. My Government continues to work toward its commitment to officially change the province's name to Newfoundland and Labrador.

But My Government also understands that the needs of Labrador's people are more than symbolic, and it has given tangible evidence of this. In this past year, there has been a new regional hospital announced for Happy Valley-Goose Bay; a new school for Hopedale; the Ptarmigan Trail in the South Coast; the re-establishment of government services in Labrador West; the re-establishment of the Labrador Air Subsidy for the South and North Coasts; and the recent news that Labrador West will be the site for the 1998 Newfoundland & Labrador Winter Games.

My Government will continue to support the notion that those who live closest to a resource should have a full and fair opportunity to benefit from its development. In the days ahead My Government will announce additional measures aimed at improving the quality of life in Labrador's communities.

Labrador has not always received its full and fair share of the riches that it generates. The grievances of its people have been heard, and they are understood. My Government has worked hard this past year to meet real needs, even in difficult times of restraint. My Government stands by its measured accomplishments in Labrador over this past year with the pride one finds in taking the first steps on a long, but prosperous journey.

Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

A Three Year Budgetary Plan

This year's budget will mark a new way of managing public money. This year, My Government will present a three-year, forward-looking budget that tries to be fair and honest with the men and women who work in the public service. Public employees and their families want to know where they stand so they can plan for their futures. This budget will give them a greater sense of stability.

Making Difficult Choices: Program Review

Last July, My Government announced an exercise called Program Review. Program Review has meant a systematic, comprehensive rethinking of government's role entering the 21st century. My Ministers have combed through government's inventory of programs, one by one, and asked three questions: Is this program in the public interest? If so, is it being run efficiently? And finally, can we afford it?

The conviction behind this exercise is simple: given that our debt is high, given that our third largest expenditure of taxpayers money after health and education, is interest on that debt, and given that our revenues from the federal government are decreasing, we must start making fundamental, rational choices. If we continue across-the-board cuts, where each department and service is asked to cut an equal percentage, we avoid the challenging decisions that must be taken. Instead, My Government will listen to people and reflect their values in the choices it makes. My Government will set priorities, and make choices.

Besides striving to get government right, we also have to make it more responsive. People want more control over their own lives, and a greater say in their children's education, in the managing of their health care, in tending to their communities. People want these decisions to be made visibly and openly. My Government knows this, and understands it. This year's Budget will establish a leaner government, but also a government with more local decision-making over issues that affect people within their own communities.

Education Reform

This is the example we followed in reforming our education system, where our school boards are being reorganized and given greater flexibility in determining their priorities. The number of school boards has been reduced from 27 to 10 to lessen

administrative overhead, and the chief executive officers of the new interdenominational boards have been appointed by the boards themselves.

Education reform is proceeding, allowing more of our resources to be directed where they count most - in the classroom. And while enrollment numbers may decline, the demands for a quality education have never been greater. Therefore, My Government will meet new needs of our students by making strategic investments in equipment, facilities, and learning materials, as well as supporting initiatives that meet more traditional needs, such as school lunches.

Child Poverty

In the year ahead, My Government will demonstrate its commitment to our youngest citizens by working to eliminate our province's and our nation's biggest blight -that of child poverty. The new National Child Benefit is an important step in this direction. We will continue our efforts in a spirit of partnership with the Government of Canada and community leaders, so that together we may focus on ensuring that all of our children receive the services and programmes they need, both in school and at home.

Savings from Program Review and other efficiencies will allow us to make strategic investments in nutrition, adoption, foster care and family service improvements. These investments will make our education, social services, and health care stronger, more stable, and more responsive.

Health

One of My Government's most important responsibilities is the health of our citizens. My Government promised that health care would receive stable funding for the next three years.

In September, My Government announced plans to restructure hospital services in St. John's, including a plan to move the Janeway Child Health Facility adjacent to the General Hospital. This new child health facility, in association with the Health Sciences Complex, will improve access to specialty services and equipment and bring ill newborns and new mothers together. It will maintain a separate space for health care delivery, and a separate emergency room for children. The $100 million needed for this new facility, and additional renovations to the General Hospital and St. Clare's Hospital, will come from the efficiencies achieved through restructuring health care services in St. John's.

My Government is committed to maintaining services and funding, to improving physician and medical services to our rural areas, to community health, and to making strategic investments to improve health care delivery.

Social Services

In the area of Social Services, My Ministers are ready to make fundamental changes in the way Government formulates policy and delivers services. Long overdue changes to the delivery of income support and employment development programs will emphasize the strong and natural linkages that exist between them.

Employment is the key connector of people to economic development. Every effort must be made to assist able-bodied individuals who receive income support, so that they may develop new skills to return to the workforce. My Government is steadfast that the status quo is no longer acceptable because it no longer works, and Government will take bold new measures to bring about meaningful change.

The Strategic Social Plan

In keeping with My Government's commitment, a Consultation Paper for a Strategic Social Plan was released in June of last year, and a 15-member Social Policy Advisory Committee was formed shortly after.

This Committee is diversified in its membership, drawing from the ranks of social action groups, volunteers, educators, health care providers, environmentalists, aboriginals, and persons with disabilities, as well as representatives of labour and academia.

The Social Policy Advisory Group has travelled the province extensively to discuss the Consultation Paper and to listen to the concerns of people in this province. It is now in the final stages of completing its report. In the coming year, My Government will develop a Strategic Social Plan that will eventually be integrated with the province's Strategic Economic Plan.

My Ministers are convinced that economic and social development cannot take place in isolation from one another. They must be combined to paint an accurate picture of the socio-economic state of our province, and result in a long-term plan that is effective in improving our economy and our social welfare.

Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

The Harmonized Sales Tax

While My Government works to ensure that our wealth and resources are distributed fairly in our economy, and that our money is spent wisely so that we live within our means, we must also work to keep our economy growing - to stimulate the economy and create more wealth for us to share. Government can help by ensuring that more money is kept in the pockets of our citizens. Indeed, this year will see the biggest tax cut for Newfoundlanders and Labradorians since Confederation in the form of the new harmonized sales tax.

According to the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, no other province will be benefit as much as ours from this new integrated tax.

The consolidation of the GST with the RST will result in a more efficiently administered tax, cutting down on the duplication which currently exists. In this Session, My Government will ask this House to consider a new Tax Administration Act that will revise the administration of our provincial taxes in light of this new arrangement.

The Legislative Agenda

You will be asked in this Session to consider many other pieces of drafted legislation, with a view to their enactment. Among those to be considered over the next year are: an amendment to The Schools Act, 1996, that will provide for a French-first language school board; and a new Farm Practices Protection Act that will assure arable land will be retained for farming purposes. Numerous other pieces of legislation will be laid before you in this Session of the House for your consideration. These will each be tabled at the earliest possible opportunity so that Members can properly prepare for the upcoming proceedings.

This House established a Select Committee to Review the Property and Casualty Insurance Industry in this province, and that Committee has begun its public consultations, with a view to presenting recommendations to this House by November of this year.

The Committee has listened to the people and uncovered a significant level of dissatisfaction by the general public in rate setting and underwriting practices of the insurance industry. My Government will welcome the Report with its recommendations to address those industry practices which are identified as problems by the Committee.

Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

In these past 500 years, we as a people have carved a good life and a peaceful existence for ourselves in this place. What has helped us along is our time-tested ability to turn adversity on its head, and, with a strong will and good humour, to create opportunity.

In the years ahead, we must remember this talent, we must have faith in our abilities, and we must call on our strengths. The real opportunities for Newfoundland and Labrador have never been brighter. We stand together this year, inviting the world to celebrate our history and to join with us as we prepare for the new millennium and all that it heralds. We must be ready for it. We must take stock of our circumstances and make our choices, now.

We must maximize the benefits we will gain from our natural resources, and allow this to be the backbone of a new, diversified economy. We must move away from the notion that any one big project will solve the problems that face us. We must firmly, but compassionately, act to bring our debt under control. We must reinvent the delivery of government services so that we protect them both for this generation, and for future generations. And we must do all these things knowing that the sacrifices we make today are the investments we reap tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

Estimates of Expenditure will be laid before you in due course and you will be asked to grant supply to Her Majesty.

I invoke God's blessing upon you as you commence your labours in this Second Session of the Forty-Third General Assembly.

May Divine Providence guide you in your deliberations.