

# Presentation to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

## Pre-Budget Consultations 2017

Good morning.

My name is Barry Stevens, and I am president of the Toronto and York Region Area Council of the Council of Union Retirees of Canada, known as CURC. With me is Sue Craig, a member of our board.

We represent retired union members in one of the most densely populated and highly unionized regions in the country. Seniors today form a larger cohort in society than ever before; we are living longer. That is, of course, largely because we lived through the postwar decades when society's wealth was shared more fairly.

Unions fought hard to win us the benefits of that period. But over the last four decades, the upper class, the famous "one per cent," has been regaining its position. We now have greater inequality of income and wealth than at any time since the 1920s.

Today's young people are the first generation in a long time who are not doing better than their parents, and may not live as long.

But that can be changed.

Our proposals for the 2017 Ontario budget are for taxing and spending in ways that will benefit the majority at all ages.

We call for:

- renewing and enhancing public services
- reversing privatization
- fairer taxation
- fairer cost-sharing among municipal, provincial and federal governments

#### [Renewing and enhancing public services](#)

No budget today can fail to take into account the urgent need to address climate change.

We believe a budget that moves towards greater social justice will also help to prevent further climate change and to prepare for extreme weather that is already inevitable.

Many of us still alive today actually remember the ice-man and the milk-man delivering their goods in horse-drawn vans. We learned to write in the days before throw-away pens. We took refillable pop bottles back to the store for the five-cent deposit. We remember our teachers cutting sheets of paper in half for short assignments and tests.

And we also remember the days before universal health care coverage. So while some of what we advocate will sound like “back to the future,” we don’t want to go *that* far back.

### Health care

Let’s start with health care.

It is well known that a single-payer, universal health care system is more efficient than a patchwork of private, for-profit schemes. And that it delivers longer lives, better infant and maternal health, and more effective family planning.

But these days, insurance companies are hustling to cover services not covered by OHIP, nor by employer plans in these days of precarious jobs.

We say: Stop the slide into privatization and start exploring big *increases* in the services covered by OHIP.

### Pharmacare

If the Ontario Drug Benefit Program were turned into a full-blown pharmacare program, the government would have considerable bargaining power over drug prices as purchaser of all the prescription drugs dispensed in the province. It’s about time.

But for starters, the government could eliminate both the deductible and the co-payments levied under the ODBP.

And more . . .

By the same token, we call on the government to explore funding dental care, dental surgery and vision care, including eyeglasses, contact lenses and corrective surgery.

We also urge full coverage of rehabilitation services such as physiotherapy. Far too many people are under-served and/or are being impoverished to pay for services we really need. Put some real money in the budget to start researching these possibilities this year.

### Affordable housing

Seniors will benefit from an increase in all forms of not-for-profit, co-op and rent-geared-to-income housing. This will enable us to live in the wider community for longer.

As well, seniors and our families will benefit from better funding for homes for the aged and other special-needs housing.

### Transportation

We seek restored provincial funding for transit -- not just capital but operating subsidies. Lower fares will be possible for everyone, as well as reduced rates for seniors. Commuters will all share in the cost, regardless of where they pay their property taxes.

A pleasant transit experience keeps cars off the road, reducing congestion and greenhouse gas emissions. Everyone benefits.

### Reversing privatization

Expanding public services can only be done by arresting and reversing privatization.

Hydro is an example.

Ontarians pay the highest electricity rates in Canada.

An article in the January 9 Globe and Mail asserts that most of the steep cost increase over the last 20 years has been caused by diverting public money into private hands – even *before* we see any effects from privatizing Hydro One.

We say: Restore the generation and distribution of electricity to public hands. Buy it back.

We cannot sustain a reasonable lifestyle without electricity. It is much too important a resource to be controlled by for-profit enterprises.

What goes for Hydro goes for other vital public services: Health, housing, transportation and all the others.

### Fairer cost-sharing

In order for the cost of the services we need to be allocated fairly, there will have to be some reversal of the government downloading that started in the 1980s – from the federal government to the provincial government, and from the province to municipalities.

Senior governments have access to fairer taxation methods – even if they don't always choose them. And the provincial

government controls the methods local authorities may use to levy funds.

The government of Canada's largest province should be in a position to lead the fight to persuade the federal government to resume paying its fair share. But Ontario should not wait for that before it begins to upload costs dumped on municipalities starting decades ago.

Ontario can be a leader, as it was in the fight for reform to the Canada Pension Plan. Which we appreciate, even though it was too late for us.

#### Fair taxation

Certainly the government knows how to design taxes based on our ability to pay, and greater fairness in the tax system has the potential to raise more funds for needed public programs.

Creating jobs in a wide range of public services will also increase the tax base.

Greater fairness is needed in all forms of taxation and of user fees for public services.

All the measures we are calling for work together.

Everything we propose today has been done before, either here or in other Western democracies. The measures we outline have been popular with voters, and have contributed to civil societies.

You can't do it all at once but you can make a start. You can put money behind creating the kind of society you want to grow old in.

Thank you.