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**NOTES FOR REMARKS**

**Honourable Michael G. Baker, Q.C.  
Minister of Justice**

**Nova Scotia Barrister's Society  
Bar Council Meeting**

**Acadia B&C  
Casino Hotel Nova Scotia  
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*Check Against Delivery*

## ***Introduction***

Good Afternoon. It's a pleasure to be with you today.

I look forward to this opportunity to address the Council, and discuss issues that are important to our legal community and province.

This has been an important year for us all. Justice issues are becoming increasingly high profile and important to our communities.

This has provided us with momentum and new opportunities to work together to strengthen our laws and legal system so they are able respond to the needs of individuals and our society.

Your society and members are key to addressing these issues. We need to work together, along with other partners, to reach this goal.

## ***Issues and Opportunities***

At the department we are increasing our focus on building safe communities.

Issues in this area have been highlighted by recent reports of criminal behaviour and resulting concerns among our citizens.

These anecdotal stories were backed up with the release of statistics showing Halifax is competing with major cities like Toronto and Vancouver for the dubious billing of having the highest violent crime rate per capita.

Other issues like marijuana grow ops, illegal use of prescription drugs and border security issues also have an impact on our province's ability to reduce these rates.

While community safety is bigger than legislation, we know that real changes are needed to these areas.

We have introduced the *Safe Communities and Neighbourhoods Act*, which will empower Nova Scotians to seek community safety orders.

Under the Act, a complaint could lead to a court order to shut down illegal liquor, drug, prostitution and gaming locations - criminal activity that threatens families and communities.

This Act gives Nova Scotians another tool to get crime out of their communities. Our goal is to

have it passed in the House this spring.

Action is also needed to address youth crime, an issue that took a tragic turn with the death of Theresa McEvoy.

Last year I ordered an inquiry into the issues and events surrounding this case and the young man eventually convicted in her death.

As you know, retired Justice Merlin Nunn is now leading the inquiry and will delivery a report and recommendations based on the testimony and submissions heard during the inquiry.

At the same time, we are already working on ways to address youth crime.

A year ago I met with outgoing Justice Minister Irwin Cotler, pushing for changes to the *Criminal Code* to make motor vehicle theft more than a property offense.

We also want changes to the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* to see a wider range of options to give courts more leeway to hold that small percentage of out-of-control youth pending their trial date or sentencing.

We know that these are issues being faced by other provinces, and we will work to ensure the new federal government lives up to this commitment.

We also know these issues go beyond the law, and have begun discussions with police, health and social services agencies around the social issues that contribute to youth crime.

Our goal is to empower communities and families so they have the resources they need to prevent young people from getting into criminal behaviour in the first place.

We are also working on better supervision of people serving conditional sentences in our province.

Last fall we introduced legislation that would see Nova Scotia become the first jurisdiction in Canada to use GPS technology to monitor offenders under conditional sentences.

We are in the process of implementing a trial project over the winter and spring. It will be mandatory for people to provide information to probation officers who prepare pre-sentence reports.

We will also provide more access by victims to information. For example, corrections staff will be able to tell them whether the offender is in custody, the terms of conditional release or parole, and details surrounding release.

I also continue to call on the federal government to live up to their responsibilities regarding legal aid funding.

We must return to a fifty-fifty cost sharing legal aid to ensure these services are available to Nova Scotians who need them.

Provincial and Territorial Ministers have also passed a unanimous resolution calling for an immediate federal commitment to significantly contribute to new civil legal aid funding.

Also on the civil front, we have introduced new legislation allowing Nova Scotia to sue tobacco companies to recover million of dollars in health-care costs, now funded by Nova Scotia taxpayers.

The Tobacco Damages and Health-care Cost Recovery Act follows similar B-C legislation that has been held up by the Supreme Court of Canada.

We also continue to work to improve our court infrastructure. The new Justice Centre in Port Hawkesbury opened last summer, and improvements were announced late last year for the Port Hood Court House. We will also be building new courthouses in Bridgewater and Yarmouth.

### ***Closing***

I know all of these issues are also important to you.

We continue to need your expertise as we work toward strengthened and modernized legislation and legal services for Nova Scotians.

The Society plays a critical role in ensuring high quality legal services are available to Nova Scotians when and where they need them.

The Society and its members are also key to educating the public about the importance of our legal system.

I would suggest that the Executive of the Society set up meetings with all of the lawyers in the legislature. We need to improve the relationship with that group and the Society. We are entering a new era in public life where our legal system will be under increasing scrutiny.

Again, thank you for this opportunity, and I would welcome any questions.