

My name is Sara Filbee. I am speaking today about the kind of government that Nova Scotians, and indeed Canadians, deserve in these troubled times. More than ever, we need transparency, accountability, evidence informed decisions and an openness to debate to ensure we, both as a province and nation, are well served. We need good government, honest government and accountable government. None of Bill nos. 1, 6 and 12 are that. Due to time limits however, I will focus on Bill no. 1.

The Conservatives recently obtained a super majority. It is telling how their very first actions are to seek more authority without public scrutiny or accountability. To wrap themselves in the Team Canada flag and yet to increase what is effectively a tariff on fellow Canadians. Given what is going on south of the border, it is incomprehensible that they are using their supermajority to take a more authoritarian approach to government. Or in the words of PC Cole Harbour MLA Leah Martin seeking to “overpower the special interests and professional protestors” and to “bypass the media when we need to”.

Bill No. 1 indulges the Conservatives’ undemocratic instincts by attempting to gag the Attorney General and her officials, deny access to information and discourage Public Servants from speaking truth to power. Backing off on the AG provisions does not change what was clearly their intent with this Bill.

The proposed doubling of the current 5% deed transfer tax on non-residents is a good example of what is not good government. This tax was initially paired with even more problematic property tax increases for these same non-residents. In neither case was there any evidentiary basis for such policies or consideration of the potential impact on Nova Scotia. Premier Houston was not even aware that two decades previously, similar proposals were withdrawn by the Conservatives after an expert report made it clear just how bad an idea it was.

In the end, the Premier listened to Nova Scotians saying that he didn’t want to cause reputational damage to Nova Scotia. As the property tax was so much more egregious, the Deed transfer tax increase for non-residents survived. However, it was a bad idea then and is a bad idea now. Perhaps the Conservatives are a little less concerned with the reputation of Nova Scotia given their supermajority.

We need to be Team Canada more than ever before. Our Premier has positioned himself as an early mover in the whole of Canada movement

responding to tariff threats. He pledged that under his leadership we would be taking the “first meaningful step to eviscerate internal provincial trade barriers.” When opposition by a provincial politician to the Eastern pipeline surfaced, he quite rightly said: “It is only small-minded thinking that causes Canada to be dependent on foreign nations”. Debates on pipelines aside, both these statements are important nationally during this significant crisis.

And yet, the deed transfer tax on non-residents is clearly a form of tariff. Instead of doubling, it should be removed, or at the very least restricted in application to non-Canadian citizens. In the absence of evidence the tax is needed, it is hard to understand why, now, when Canada is urgently working to come together, the government seeks to strengthen what is effectively an interprovincial trade barrier against the very people, fellow Canadians, that they pretend to open their arms to. Just how seriously do they think the rest of Canada will take us when our actions belie our lofty proclamations?

The claim that this will support much needed accessible housing does not fly as it didn't last time. Since the 5% tax was introduced, there has been no appreciable reduction of homelessness.

While we may need to seek new revenue sources they must be examined for their net financial and reputational impacts and there remains no such evidence.

Indeed, there are other, more effective options available to us. Why not prevent those owning two or more homes (in a time when too many have no home at all) from capping their property taxes at the cost of living? This protection was originally to ensure people were not taxed out of their homes and not to protect the bank accounts of those who can afford more than one residence.

Or pull the cancellation of Bridge Tolls in Halifax, originally proposed to reduce congestion and traffic bottlenecks contrary to the advice of expert traffic engineers. This strips millions from our budget for the benefit of Halifax residents at the expense of everyone else.

Please. We need a statesmanlike approach to governing now not an authoritarian one. Please consider which side of history we will be on as a province. Please do not take away the right of the people of Nova Scotia to good, honest and effective government. And we cannot and must not be out of step with our fellow Canadians during this crisis.