

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

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**Empire Club of Canada**  
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**1950 Words**

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Good afternoon everyone...

It's great to be back at the Empire Club...and up here behind the podium for the first time as leader of the Ontario Liberal Party.

I want to thank the Empire Club for the invitation at such an important moment for our province.

You offer a platform to discuss the most important business and economic issues of our time, and how they converge with our politics.

Everyone in this room will be familiar with the Ontario budget...and the unpleasant truths about the economy it laid bare.

Growth is stagnant, barely expected to hit 0.3 per cent this year, even as the U.S. economy is charging ahead.

Our economic indicators are trending in the wrong direction:

Growth is down, business confidence is down;

The debt, deficit and unemployment rate are up.

No matter which party you support, there is reason to be concerned about the state of Ontario today...our economy...our health care...our education.

And we all know that people in this province are feeling deeply anxious about how to afford the essentials.

I'm not up here today to throw partisan barbs about how we got here.

I'm here to share my vision for a more prosperous Ontario....one with a thriving economy strong enough to fuel the progress we so desperately need.

I don't pretend that there aren't external market forces that have a major impact on where we are today.

But there are concrete actions we can and should be taking with the levers we have here in Ontario to pull us forward.

Change won't be easy — it's going to take a little grit.

But it is the only path.

Because right now, things aren't easy in Ontario.

I meet people every day who share their stories with me and it's tough to hear...

Single moms who can't buy groceries and pay their rent...

Young fathers waiting too long in an ER too far away with a sick and fussy baby..

Students who can't afford their tuition...

Seniors worried about a long-term care system too broken to be there when they need it.

People who are working hard and quite rightly asking – where is my money going?

We can do better than this...

I know that in Ontario, when we work together, we do remarkable things.

But we need leaders with grit...

We need to make the real people and businesses of Ontario our priority

And we need to make meaningful progress.

Because what we need *right now* is a strong and growing economy.

Strong economic growth is the prerequisite to building an abundant future.

I want to talk for a moment about Ontario Liberals and that old Grit philosophy of creating the economic conditions required to invest in the progress we need.

You know, I first became a Liberal as a teenager, when the country was seized with big debates about our Charter and the future of the federation.

Being a Liberal was always about ensuring the fundamentals were there to give people a fair shot at success – and a strong economy was part of that.

Back in the David Peterson days, when I went door-knocking, we used clipboards to identify votes.

Later, when I worked in marketing for McDonalds and Disney, the execs were using those bulky car phones.

Fast forward a few years, the other young mums I hung out with all had flip phones.

Then, when my kids got older – I ran for office.

As a Liberal MP in Ottawa, it wasn't unusual to carry not one but TWO blackberries

Wasn't the Blackberry a revolution.

It's easy to forget how novel it felt to carry your email on your hip.

I'm sure many of you can do an entire day's business from the palm of your hand – and maybe you're doing just a little bit of that right now...

It's pretty incredible to think, our handheld digital age was born not far from here.

Just down the 401 in Waterloo, Ontario.

That global revolution was sparked in one of our world-class universities.

We did that here in Ontario because we created the conditions for innovation...

And the legacy of the BlackBerry isn't just in your hand, but up and down the 401 corridor.

From Kitchener-Waterloo to Toronto to Ottawa, giants like Google, Oracle, OpenText, Shopify, Amazon, SnapChat and PointClickCare employ graduates of our public universities.

Every year, new grads launch start-ups in life sciences and biotech and fintech with ideas so advanced, it still sounds like science fiction.

But that opportunity...and *our* innovation economy is fragile.

Here's the hard, economic truth of what's happening right now in Ontario:

Our labour force is not matching employers' needs.

And our economic productivity is suffering because of it.

Now, we like to think of ourselves as a modern economy that can compete with the world.

But when you look at the data -- we are not competing.

Not with growing economies overseas...and not with our closest neighbour...

Ontario's economic output per worker doesn't rival that of Massachusetts or New York.

Ontario's productivity is just behind Idaho – and on par with [Alabama](#).

That's not good enough, but I'm even more concerned about what the future brings.

Between 2025 and 2030, our economy will undergo a massive disruption.

Technologies like AI will continue to change how we live, work and learn...

Retirements will soar – shrinking our workforce and straining our systems of care.

We will **still** be grappling with how to build homes people can afford...

And public finances around the world will **still** be coping with high interest rates...

Ontario is not an island that can withstand these national and global headwinds alone.

But here's the thing – it's not all doom and gloom.

We CAN do something about this.

If I were Premier today, I'd acknowledge the urgent need to do more — faster — to prepare our workers and employers for the future.

If I were Premier today, I'd spend less time on pocketbook gimmicks and more time on THE fundamental differentiator for our economy: education.

Education that starts with a strong daycare system so young moms — and dads! — can get back to work and keep our economy growing.

And continues with Kindergarten classrooms with enough teachers and early-childhood educators to give students the care they need AND give them a lifelong love of learning...

A system where we stop dumbing down our math classes and prep our students to compete with the world...

A plan to help kids still struggling after the pandemic to catch up...

So they are ready for college or university or an apprenticeship....

And nowhere is that attention required more urgently than at our colleges and universities.

Our colleges give us the workers we need to fix the crisis in health care and in housing — and they are on the brink of collapse.

Our universities are facing steep cuts that will directly impact students now and for years to come...

The need has never been greater to give our children the best possible education...

I don't blame our colleges and universities for filling in their funding gaps with foreign students...that was their only option.

But now it's time to balance that out...and we don't need to make the pain worse with funding cuts right now... .

The crisis we see in our education system today did not happen by accident.

It is reckless, and it is imperiling our economy.

Without strong economic growth, we will not be able to support the public services we want...

We won't be able to fix our healthcare system...

We won't fix the housing crisis that is holding us back.

And we won't have the money to invest in the infrastructure we need to fight and withstand climate change...

So here's my plan.

In two years, if I'm elected Premier, I will put the development of a highly skilled workforce at the centre of our economic plan.

It's the right thing to do...

And it's just about the one thing we can control.

Because I don't have a crystal ball...

I can't predict who will win the U.S. election...or whether NAFTA will survive another Trump White House...

I can't predict exactly how many jobs will be disrupted by AI or what new possibilities life sciences and advanced manufacturing will bring...

And I can't predict what new geopolitical threats will mean for our supply chain...

But the provincial government can control one thing:

Preparing our workers with the skills and education they need to succeed in this competitive, changing economy.

It's a big task, but here are three practical steps to get us started:

ONE....

Let's fund our colleges and universities properly.

Let's strike a new deal for our colleges to teach the essential skills that our workforce demands...

Let's start treating our care workers with respect and dignity so our nurses and PSWs and ECEs can build a life that's comfortable

TWO...Let's fix our public schools and invest in our educators so that Ontario students are getting the best start

AND THREE...let's tear down the barriers between our education system and our businesses, so we can identify and focus on the skills that employers need most.

Education is the absolute foundation of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century economic plan. We can't compete without it.

And without a robust economy, we can't deliver the public services that are the scaffolding of society.

Public services that have allowed generations of immigrants to come here, build a home and a better life...and find the support they need when they need it...

So they in turn can grow their families and their businesses, and our economy....

You probably have a personal story about that...I do...

My grandparents came to Canada after World War Two from Poland by way of France

They gave up everything to come to Ontario and build a better life.

My grandfather worked as a janitor for the Globe and Mail for 40 years – in the old building on Front Street...

He told me how he would spend his days cleaning all that white marble and polishing those iconic brass railings.

I'll never forget the first time I opened the front door of that building to do an interview with CTV.

It hit me like a wave.

This was where he toiled for decades.

And in one generation – I was walking in there as a Member of Parliament.

His hard work made that possible for **me — and for my children.**

And I thought...how is it that in one generation we can come so far.

Well, it's because in Ontario, when we have grit, we create the conditions for progress.

I want that to still be possible today.



I want to restore that sense of abundant opportunity for today's generations, who are instead struggling to afford homes, saddled with tuition debt, worried about the climate crisis and the cost of childcare.

That opportunity is what's at risk when our productivity lags and our economy teeters, when we fail to compete on a global scale, when we can't afford the services people rely on for a fair shot to get ahead.

So that's what I'm here to fight for.

That's what's at stake when we talk about the economy.

The work starts now. Step by step.

By listening. Doing our homework.

Because Ontario Liberals are going to put together a plan that actually reflects what people and businesses across Ontario need right now.

It is possible to feel optimistic about what the government can do for you.

And my plan is to make that very clear over the next two years.

To everyone in this room...you are the leaders...

Whether you're in our party or not...I want to hear from you.

Because we have work to do.

Ontario is counting on us.

Thank you.