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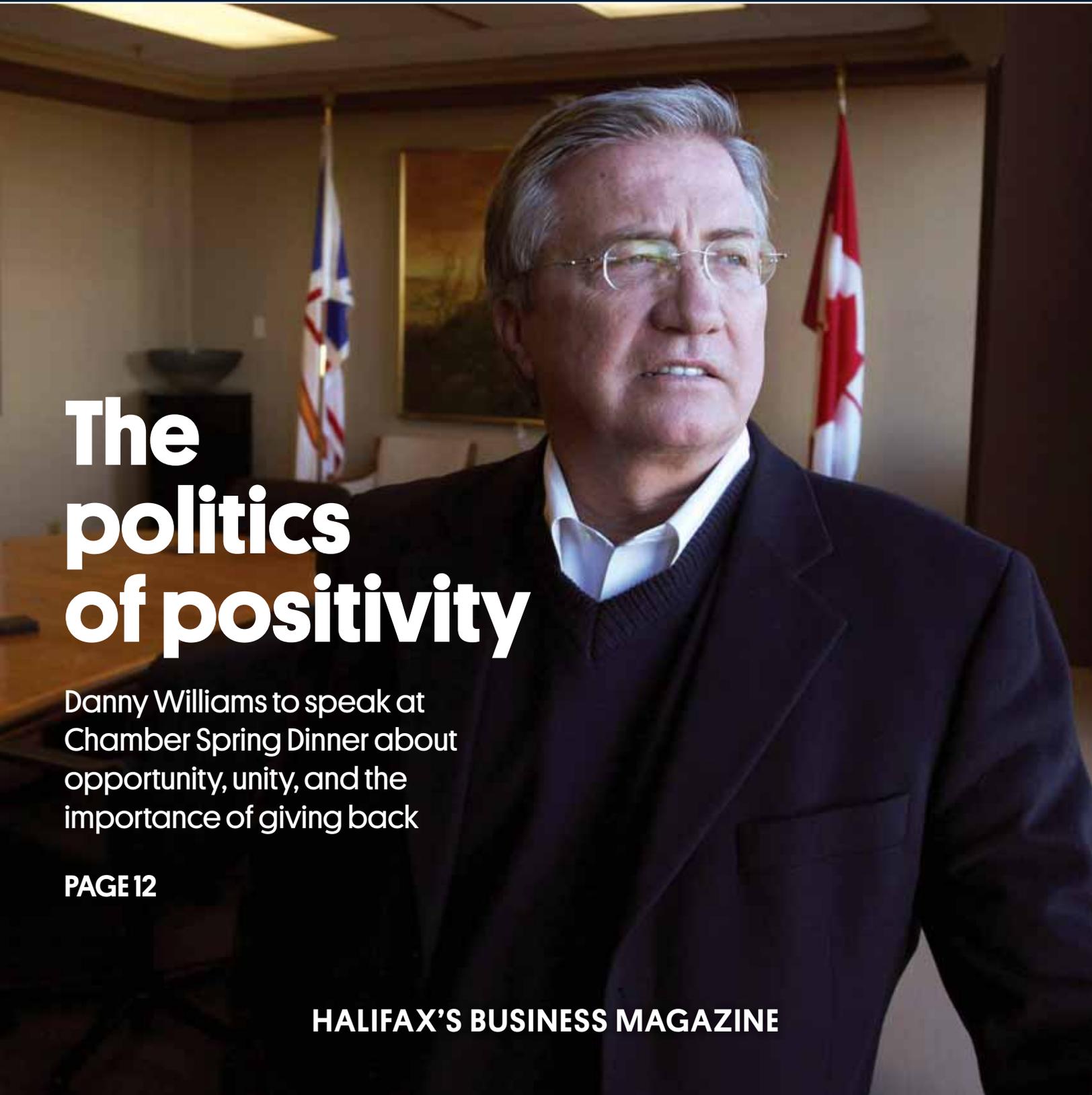
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# BUSINESS VOICE

HALIFAX CHAMBER OF COMMERCE | APRIL 2016 | VOLUME 25 ISSUE 03



## The politics of positivity

Danny Williams to speak at  
Chamber Spring Dinner about  
opportunity, unity, and the  
importance of giving back

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**HALIFAX'S BUSINESS MAGAZINE**

# The politics of positivity

Danny Williams talks about opportunity, unity, and the importance of giving back

By Erin Elaine Casey

Photos: Contributed

**D**anny Williams doesn't mince words. His penchant for calling it like he sees it is legendary. "I went into politics with the attitude that I'm going to do what I have to do, and if I don't get elected again, fine," he says. Considering his government enjoyed approval ratings well above 75 per cent, this no-nonsense approach seems to have served him well.

During his tenure as Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador from 2003 to 2010, the country watched in awe as Williams fought tooth and nail for his province. He inked groundbreaking agreements with the largest oil and gas companies in the world, re-negotiated the Atlantic Accord with the federal government, and started the development of the Lower Churchill project, ensuring "have" status for a part of Canada that since Confederation has suffered considerable economic hardship.

But what occupies his thoughts today, six years after leaving public life? When asked what we can do to lift Atlantic Canadians up to meet the economic and social challenges they face, Williams answers without hesitation. "There's a bigger systemic problem — it's about leadership, it's about politicians, it's about the right mix of people to run our governments."

"I was told you cannot, but you can run government as a business," he says. "It has to be run as a business with a social conscience. You won't get a lot of

*Danny Williams,  
Q.C., LLB, Hon. DD.L –  
Atlantic Canadian business  
person, Rhodes Scholar,  
and former Premier of  
Newfoundland and Labrador –  
will join us on  
Thursday, April 28th, 2016  
as the keynote speaker at  
the Halifax Chamber's  
Annual Spring Dinner.*

*Business Voice sat down  
with Mr. Williams to talk  
about leadership,  
demographics, and how  
to build a positive future for  
Atlantic Canada.*

For tickets and information on attending this event please visit [www.halifaxchamber.com](http://www.halifaxchamber.com)

senior entrepreneurs who want to do this. There are so many factors — the negativity, the criticism. We need to encourage these people to have some input into government or to be in government."

Part of what good leadership can do is change the way we see ourselves. "Perception becomes reality," explains Williams. "I like to put the best spin on everything. In Newfoundland and Labrador, we're a proud people but we weren't wearing that on our sleeve. We had to lift our chins up and stick our chests out. We had to rebrand the province, and it started with new tourism ads. We started spinning Newfoundland for what it is, not what we wanted it to be. It's about our rocky shores, our culture, our jellybean houses, our music, our red-haired freckly kids. We invested in the arts, and promoting the arts. And we promoted our heroes, like Brad Gushue and Mark Critch and Rick Mercer. This drives people to new levels."

He points out that Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and PEI all have the right ingredients to feel that same pride of place, but we have to build each other up, not tear each other down.

"In Atlantic Canada, we sometimes try to bring successful people down to where we are. But you need to be positive and inspired and help Atlantic Canadians feel good about themselves. You need positive leadership, and then you tackle the big problems."



One of those big problems, as Williams sees it, is a lack of opportunity for young people. “Our youth are going through a very difficult time, with social media and peer pressure, and dependence on a screen,” he explains. “We talk about all kinds of equity, but I think we need some youth equity, where we give young people a fair chance to get through the door.”

The era of opportunities being available mainly to those with the best family and social connections must end, he argues. Businesses have a responsibility to give young people a break. “You can mentor people, invest, and give back. There are so many young educated people who can’t get work terms and experience. We’ve got to take it a little on the chin, take some of these kids into our offices and businesses.”

With Atlantic Canada facing serious demographic problems such as youth outmigration, an aging population, and difficulty attracting and retaining newcomers, Williams believes that investing in youth is not just something nice to do —

“*In Atlantic Canada, we sometimes try to bring successful people down to where we are. But you need to be positive and inspired and help Atlantic Canadians feel good about themselves. You need positive leadership, and then you tackle the big problems.*”

— Danny Williams

it’s something we need to do. “We have an aging demographic, with the exception of Aboriginal people, and young Canadians are the ones who’ll be paying the bills later. We’ve got to get our youth involved. An aging population costs money.”

Williams comes back to creating a culture of positivity as a first step to addressing demographic challenges. “Let’s take repatriating our own — young people are coming back. They feel they have a future here.” He points to strategies his government used in Newfoundland and Labrador, like competitive personal and business tax regimes and youth advisory boards. “You have to create the right atmosphere for your own people.”

Attracting and keeping newcomers to Canada is another piece of the puzzle. “We’ve always been a bit narrow-minded on immigration,” Williams muses, “and even though there are some immigrant communities in the region, it’s not something we’ve reached out for. You’ve got to reach out and welcome people, and set up communities for people so they stay in the Maritimes.”



“When I stepped down, there was a vacuum in my life... ‘Holy sh\*t’ — I just jumped off this train and I’m in no-man’s land! But I got used to it after a couple of months. I’ll never retire. I wouldn’t be fit to live with.”  
— Danny Williams

No stranger to bold assertions, Williams doesn’t hold back when it comes to government spending priorities. “Government cannot continue to provide all the services it provides,” he says. As an example, he cites the need for a much more efficient healthcare system. “40 to 50 percent of provincial budgets go to healthcare. The toughest thing to do in government as a premier or minister of health is to make cuts. But tough decisions have to be made. You need leadership with the nerve to do it.”

Rethinking our priorities means making better connections between productivity, demographics, and labour market issues, and making it easier for people to stay and work in the Atlantic region. “Something that’s been successful in Québec is good childcare policies,” says Williams. “You need to compensate for the costs of two people going out to work. Even though childcare is going to cost a lot of money, maybe that’s a conscious choice this generation might make.”

He draws a parallel between personal and government spending. “There’s

no point putting money in the bank if your house is falling down,” he insists. “When we have money, we have to catch up. Things are cyclical. You’ve got to take your time, plan the way through, and have a positive attitude to keep people motivated. You can’t have people scared, keeping money in drawers and socks.”

One of the big questions we face as a region — and a country — is how can we work together to build a better future. “As a premier, I worked with really good premiers from other provinces, but they’re representing their own interests,” says Williams. “The glue needs to be the Government of Canada.”

Asked what the federal Liberal sweep might do for Atlantic Canada, the former Progressive Conservative premier balances diplomacy with humour, saying that change is good. “Governments get stale. If you’re in too long, you start to believe your own nonsense,” he laughs. On a serious note, he points to a renewed opportunity for unity of purpose. “I like the freshness Trudeau’s brought to the country. The proof will be in the pudding

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“It’s a big competitive world out there, and if we can get over our parochialism here in Atlantic Canada, and all pull together on the same oar, it would benefit everybody.”

— Danny Williams

over time, but I like what he’s doing and I think he has a soft spot for the Atlantic region.”

The need for unity doesn’t end with government. Williams describes two separate but related problems: what he calls corporate greed and union greed. “Heads of major corporations have a responsibility to give back and make this a better place,” he says, “and unions have a responsibility to increase productivity and let young people in. With other countries out-producing us, we can’t afford to be complacent.”

Even though he left public life six years ago, Danny Williams is anything but idle. After retiring from politics, it wasn’t long before he was up to his eyeballs in business and community development. He brought the American Hockey League back to St. John’s as the franchise holder of the farm team for the NHL’s Winnipeg Jets, and has since added a Montréal Canadiens farm team to the roster. He is also in the process of building one of the largest land developments in Atlantic Canada in the west end of St. John’s.

Leaving politics was an adjustment. “Because you’re 24-7, always on call, always on alert. When I stepped down, there was a vacuum in my life,” he admits. “Holy sh\*t – I just jumped off

this train and I’m in no-man’s land! But I got used to it after a couple of months. I’ll never retire. I wouldn’t be fit to live with.”

He misses the people, and the campaigning. “When you’re there on the doorstep or the patio, you’re equals. I’d spend time talking to people and finding out what their concerns are.” Like a lot of Atlantic Canadians, his party politics are a family tradition. “I’m a Progressive Conservative because my parents were, but I’m not very partisan. I do miss the team spirit.”

He pauses for a minute before adding with a chuckle, “I don’t miss the bullsh\*t, but I do miss the people.”

Ultimately, Danny Williams believes that change has to come from leadership, the media, entrepreneurs, and everyone else who gets that we need to celebrate success. “If we don’t embrace success and encourage positivity, people are going to move on and walk over us.” About this, he is emphatic: “We should never let this situation hit bottom. We have an opportunity to catch this before it actually happens.”

Most of us have seen how quickly and effectively communities in our region can mobilize to offer support in times of tragedy. Williams knows we can channel that strength into a whole new attitude. “We’re a small community in

Atlantic Canada,” he says. “People really need to be working together. We don’t need to be fighting over territory — we should be doing collective marketing of our region.”

“It’s a big competitive world out there, and if we can get over our parochialism here in Atlantic Canada, and all pull together on the same oar, it would benefit everybody.”

Williams returns again and again to the need for positivity. “There’s lots of good news stories out there, but social media lets people hide behind their screens. Naysayers and curmudgeons! The people who are positive and successful are too busy to participate in that stuff.”

In the end, Williams says working together and working hard, while being brutally honest about our challenges and opportunities, is what’s going to carry us through.

“I’ve done very well, I’ve been very bloody fortunate, and I felt I needed to give back. I’ve got enough money. You can only drive one car at a time. I want to look in the mirror at the end of this journey, and feel I made a positive contribution. There’s a lot of people in Atlantic Canada who’ve made a lot of money, and they have a social obligation to give something back.” ♦