

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen.

I suspect you have all heard it said, "put your money where your mouth is." Tonight, I'm here to tell you, that when it comes to Atlantic Canada, this government has done exactly that.

We have spent more, we are spending more and we will continue to spend more by far for regional development in Atlantic Canada than any other government in Canada's history. And, even more important, by dedicating an agency to Atlantic Canada's needs, by making decisions locally and not in Ottawa, and by concentrating on small and medium-sized businesses, we are spending far more effectively.

That might not be greeted with universal recognition in the streets of Halifax, Fredericton, Charlottetown or my home of St. John's. It might not even win universal acceptance in this room ... though it should.

No one denies there are problems in Atlantic Canada. Some are quite serious, like the Northern Cod situation.

Others are more imagined than real, like the sense that in last spring's budget we were asked to pay a disproportionate share of the cost of keeping the nation's finances in order. Or the sense that proposed changes to the Unemployment Insurance system will seriously disadvantage seasonal workers.

And there are legitimate concerns about the people impacts of necessary adjustments like the base closure in Summerside and the future of various Via Rail routes.

Like all Atlantic Canadians I am aware of these problems and these concerns. As a minister in the Government of Canada I will work with my cabinet colleagues, with provincial ministers, and with groups throughout Atlantic Canada to find effective and innovative means to achieve economically viable and socially responsive solutions.

I want to talk to you tonight about the Progressive Conservative government's vision for Atlantic Canada.

And I want to put paid to the shibboleth that our commitment to regional development has wavered, that somehow the government is backing away from its commitment to Atlantic Canada.