Second Opinion

Process to hire NEW AG FLAWED

On May 26, PEI MLAs unanimously agreed to name Darren Noonan the Island's next auditor general. In moving the appointment, Finance Minister Darlene Compton said "I'm confident that he will ensure our government continues to be financially transparent and accountable in our management of taxpayers' dollars."

Today there are MLAs who want a do-over.

What no MLA knew that day is the recommendation, forwarded by an independent committee appointed by the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, omitted a significant detail. Noonan, while unquestionably talented and accomplished, lacked the paper qualifications established by the Chartered Public Accountants of PEI, a self-governing body, to conduct or sign off on public audits - the meat and potato work of the Auditor General.

This lack of current credentials is understandable given Noonan's career trajectory. For 16 years he was a respected public accountant, rising to partner in a prominent Charlottetown firm. Over the last 13 years, he built a single car dealership into multiple dealerships, which were sold last year. While he continued to be a member in good standing of CPA PEI, he did not practice public accounting during his tenure in the automobile industry.

CPA PEI represents 700 current and retired public accountants. It was formed five years ago when various accounting designations merged and oversees the onerous process when an accountant applies to renew their public accounting license. Regulations require completion of "1,250 chargeable hours of practice as a public accountant within the immediately preceding five years."

Last week, more than a month after starting his new job, Noonan applied for the necessary credentials, even releasing a press release through the Clerk's office, stating his application was granted.

But just as MLAs were denied full context (Noonan is only the third AG in Canada appointed without credentials established by a provincial governing body), his release glossed over the license renewal process.

We don't know if CPA PEI waived the 1,250 hour requirement, which would gut its credibility as a self-governing body. If the requirement remains, how will the AG complete the necessary work, how will it impact his new role, who will pay for it and how long it will take to complete, because the auditor's office is routinely understaffed and overworked. Regardless, the requirement speaks to the significant learning curve for any public accountant wanting to return to practice.

Paul MacNeill

Against the Tide
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Legislative Clerk Joey Jeffrey says it's the responsibility of CPA PEI to explain its actions. CPA PEI isn't talking. Neither is AG Noonan. Silence does not build trust.

While Darren Noonan is the face of the issue, this is not about him. It's about process, conflicting authority and public trust. Noonan has achieved much in his career, but in the past 13 years while the audit industry experienced significant structural and legislative change, he was growing a private business, for which he deserves praise. Some will argue his entrepreneurial background is of significant benefit. Maybe. But that misses the point.

This is about a flawed process, starting with a hiring committee comprised of two HR experts and an accountant with significant auditor general experience. A request to release names of the committee members was refused. What's lacking is a front line perspective of the political nuances unique to the vital role the auditor plays in holding government accountable. Why not a former premier, cabinet minister or deputy minister instead of a second HR hired gun? This is not a middle management position.

The hiring recommendation was brought forward by the legislature's Audit Committee, which includes Compton, Official Opposition leader Peter Bevan-Baker and the Clerk. MLAs were offered application scoring sheets and Noonan's resume. There was no mention whether a legal opinion pertaining to the conflict between the Audit Act, used to select an AG but silent on credentials, and regulations giving CPA PEI the right to dictate public accountant standards, was asked for, or received. If no legal opinion was received, it should have been, and released to MLAs.

Instead no red flags were raised and when details became public, MLAs of all political persuasion were angered and embarrassed, resulting in a deterioration of trust between the Clerk, who overseas the operation of the legislative assembly, and its members.

PEI's Auditor General is our last line of defence. The AG is charged with shining light in the dark corners of government and delivering unbiased examinations into how and why government does what it does. We must trust the AG will diligently and effectively ask questions and investigate on our behalf. Since the new government was sworn in, all members of the house have spent a large amount of time promoting trust, transparency, and doing government business differently. It's unfortunate this process fails to follow that lead and unnecessarily taints the Office of Auditor General by planting the seed of doubt in a vital public institution.

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What better time to stop flying than now?

Rachel Collier

Sure, hop on a lightweight aluminium vessel and barrel through the air at 500 mph if it's the most convenient mode of travel.

If it suits your fancy, cram in, three people per two metres of economy class seating space, possibly beside people from across the country, increasing your risk of catching or spreading COVID-19.

If air travel truly floats your boat, why not petition your MP or other political representatives to assist airlines financially as they struggle to turn a profit amid a pandemic? After all, assisting airlines could help the economy return to normal.

But remember it was just last year that, after sailing across the Atlantic from Europe, Greta Thunberg stepped off a sail boat onto North American soil. She propelled the latest climate related science and climate activism, including ICPP 1.5C report and the contagious feeling of flight shame, into North American media and collective consciousness.

Thunberg led students to the streets in droves. On PEI and around the world they demanded we change our actions to save the planet before it's too late.

During the pandemic Ms Thunberg hasn't stopped working. She recently released a podcast. Some of the main messages were our old normal will not float this boat of a somewhat hospitable environment. It will sink it and we are now at the point where we must do the seemingly impossible. Our reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic are proof societies can react swiftly and drastically to a crisis.

Air travel is a huge contributor to climate change. So are a number of cultural habits driven by our 'normal' economy.

As we decide how to move forward with or from the COVID-19 pandemic, we have decisions to make. The knee-jerk reaction for many might be to return as soon as possible to the beast of an economy we know best.

But maybe now is the perfect time to move in a different direction - ideally not by plane.

Rachel Collier

OUR SPACE

By Eastern Graphic Staff

The arts can help us mentally persevere through these hard times

Sean MacDougall

As the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread across the globe and people were confined to their homes a topic that quickly arose was mental health.

Being under lockdown orders and spending day after day in the same quarters can feel draining.

Now that some restrictions are being lifted, make no mistake though we are not out of the woods yet, there is still anxiety being felt around the virus, movement across provincial and national borders and a second wave. Aside from this, small business owners, especially those dependant on tourism, will be feeling more stress this year. The tourism season may still exist but it certainly won't stack up to last year.

There are numerous ways to help maintain our mental well-being from regular exercise, social interaction (with physical distancing in mind) and the arts.

Art therapy can be a powerful tool in coping with compromised mental health and you don't have to be resigned to a certain medium. The arts come in many forms from painting to music, drawing, poetry, photography, wood carving or any activity that calls for a touch of creativity.

Something to be mindful of when venturing down the path of art is it's not about the finished product you create. It is about the process of getting there. The time it takes strategically placing brush strokes on a canvas, or choosing the right words in your prose can serve as a revealing process giving self-affirmation, emotional release and stress relief.

Studies on the merits of art therapy can be found from the likes of Harvard Medical School and the National Institute of Health. They show that creating something artistic releases dopamine, a chemical produced in the brain for feelings of happiness. The Canadian Cancer Society even lists art therapy as a "complimentary therapy" for cancer patients coping with the stress of their diagnosis.

Another aspect to be aware of is the organic nature of exploring a form of art. It is not something you can be forced to do. It has to be something you're curious to try.

Whether you find yourself mentally strained from working at home or stressed about the survival of your business, taking some time to explore a sense of creativity can pay dividends by presenting a way to refresh our minds.

Sean MacDougall