

Finders losers

FIND a million, pick it up; all the day you'll have good luck. The truth of this ditty seems self-evident. Discovering a \$1-million income error in our favour would be astonishing good fortune for most of us.

But for Finance Minister Neil LeBlanc and Community Services Minister Peter Christie, the discovery of a \$1-million budget under-calculation of gaming revenue produced a political headache and a reversal of bad policy this week.

Graham Steele, the sharp-eyed NDP finance critic who found the arithmetic error, prodded Mr. LeBlanc to use the windfall to restore a \$800,000 cut from houses sheltering victims of family violence. Mr. Christie, citing a surplus of shelter beds, had planned to close four of nine transition houses and to offer outreach services in their place. Mr. LeBlanc's first impulse was to add the \$1 million to his razor-thin \$1.3-million surplus.

But restoring the shelter funds was the public's clear priority. As a protest march of 300 people confirmed Monday, this tiny saving — 0.017 per cent of \$4.5-billion in program spending — generated more concern than anything in the budget.

Rightly so. People are ultra-cautious about putting domestic violence victims at risk. And Community Services had not produced a detailed plan to back up its promise that support for abused women and children would not suffer. This is not something the public wants to take on faith.

But rescue by the found \$1 million is a bit of a figment. This amounts to a 0.018 per cent increase in projected revenue — within any realistic margin of error for revenue forecasting. So while Mr. Steele deserved kudos for error-spotting, his find didn't effectively change the bottom line.

Nonetheless, on Tuesday, Mr. Christie backed off on shelter closures — as he should have done earlier. This was the right decision, not because of a new blip in revenue estimates, but because the public was entitled to due diligence, that is, to see and judge new family violence programs before closure of houses was contemplated.

Mr. LeBlanc can now surely find a saving of seventeen-thousandths of one per cent of program spending in less critical or contentious places.