



SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

The Honourable Judith Guichon, OBC

Lieutenant-Governor

at the

Opening of the Second Session,

Forty-first Parliament

of the

Province of British Columbia

September 8, 2017

I wish to acknowledge the wisdom, culture and traditions of our province's First Peoples, and thank T'Sou-ke Elder Shirley Alphonse for providing opening prayers for us this afternoon.

We gather in the people's house, on the traditional territories of the Lekwungen speaking peoples, the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations.

WILDFIRES

As we open a new session of the Legislative Assembly, our thoughts and our hearts are with people in the Interior, where communities are fighting the worst wildfire season our province has ever seen.

More than 1,200 fires have burned 1.1 million hectares of land, an area four times the size of Metro Vancouver, or one-third of the size of Vancouver Island. Thousands of people were forced from their homes. And thousands more have yet to return, not knowing what awaits them. Buildings, homes, and livelihoods have been lost.

In times of trouble, communities come together. We are grateful to our firefighters, RCMP and Canadian Armed Forces, as well as the public employees and emergency responders who are working hard to keep communities safe. We thank the Canadian Red Cross and other service agencies, the federal government, and every British Columbian who volunteered, donated money and opened their homes and hearts to people in need.

Fighting these persistent and difficult fires remains a top priority. Together, we will get through this. Together, we will rebuild.

OPIOIDS

First responders throughout B.C. are also on the front lines of another crisis, which is more deadly and equally devastating.

Powerful opioids like fentanyl have taken too many of our loved ones. In 2016, we lost 978 people to overdoses, and 876 more in the first seven months of this year. People who had long lives ahead of them, full of promise and potential. People who needed help but died alone because they weren't aware of the risks, couldn't find treatment, or believed it wouldn't happen to them.

The scourge of fentanyl afflicts communities across North America. It demands an immediate and direct response, which your government is determined to provide.

HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING

While those driven from their homes by wildfires are beginning to return, other British Columbians find themselves without homes of any sort.

The circumstances that bring a person to homelessness can be as arbitrary and unexpected as a wildfire. But it is no less devastating. Those without homes need and deserve our help. Your government is determined to work with all levels of government—federal, municipal and First Nations—to address homelessness, which touches every region of our province.

These are challenging times. British Columbians have the talent, the strength and the spirit to meet these challenges, and many more.

IN MEMORIAM

As we mark the passing of British Columbians we have lost, let us not forget that their spirit lives on in the acts and the deeds that helped make our province a better place: community volunteer Tom Oshiro; environmentalist Gwen Barlee; sports trailblazer Barbara Howard; political scientist Norman Ruff; MP and womens' rights advocate Margaret Mitchell; yoga innovator Michael Stone; writer and commentator Merv Adey. And we remember Ian Moore Wilson, who was killed in a senseless attack of terrorism in Barcelona, Spain.

We honour them and their contributions to our province.

GOVERNMENT THAT WORKS FOR PEOPLE

British Columbians deserve a government that is working for people.

Families in B.C. work hard to give their children a better life than they had. They spend more and more income on a safe and secure place to live, and sacrifice more time away from home on longer commutes.

Young people dream of a post-secondary education. But high tuition and housing costs have put many of those dreams out of reach. Students graduate with a burden of debt that holds them back just as they are starting out.

Parents need safe, affordable childcare. Yet many must leave the workforce because wait lists are too long, spaces aren't available, or care is just too expensive.

Seniors, who need stable care and a helping hand, are struggling to find timely medical care, and an affordable home so they can live their final years in dignity.

Families want to raise their children in the communities they grew up in. Yet housing prices are so unaffordable they are being pushed out—a situation as astonishing as it is unacceptable.

And the people in B.C.'s rural and remote regions, who deserve the same opportunities as all other British Columbians, face higher unemployment and have fewer services in their communities.

The problems facing people today are the result of past choices.

Choices that resulted in:

- a generation of students learning in overcrowded classrooms
- out-of-control housing prices
- growing waits for services like health care
- and the rise of part-time, low-paying jobs

These are choices that have divided people, and created disparities between rural and urban B.C.

Our province cannot continue down this road. We cannot afford to shut people out of opportunity. And we cannot afford to leave families behind.

Starting today, your government will make different choices—choices that put people first.

We will listen, deal honestly with the problems facing us today, and bring people together to find solutions. We will defend B.C.'s interests, economy, environment and our coast. And we will share B.C.'s prosperity with all of the people who built this province.

Your government will work hard, today and every day, to make life better and help families get ahead—guided by the values of help and hope, respect and dignity, justice, equality, and fairness.

Your government will build a better B.C. where no one is left behind.

FOUNDATIONS OF A BETTER B.C.

That work begins by setting a strong foundation, starting with a government-to-government partnership with Indigenous Peoples.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Working with First Nations and all Indigenous communities, your government will embrace the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and address all of the Calls to Action issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission into residential schools.

These are important commitments, which your government takes very seriously.

We cannot continue to push these actions further down the road to a day that never comes. Together with First Nations and all Indigenous Peoples, your government will seek to bring these principles to life.

We must build a true partnership, based on rights, respect, and reconciliation. We can only move forward together.

REFORMING YOUR GOVERNMENT

A government that is working for people must start out on a new path, with new ways of working that transform our politics and put people first.

Your government is based on a new and innovative agreement between two parties, which provides the basis to move forward on important initiatives to reform our democratic processes, protect our environment and build our economy. An agreement rooted in the belief that the Legislature works best when we recognize that no single party has all the answers.

All sides must come together to deliver a government that works for people—a government they can count on.

This fall, your government will put people at the heart of our politics.

Government will reform B.C.'s campaign finance laws to eliminate corporate and union donations, put strict limits on individual contributions, and make sure that only people living in B.C. can donate to our political parties.

Your government will bring forward legislation to move B.C.'s fixed election date to the fall of 2021, and every four years thereafter, to make sure government's annual budget and financial priorities are focused on people, not politics.

Government will set the terms for a referendum on proportional representation to take place no later than November 2018, and will actively campaign in favour of reform, so that citizens can be assured that every vote counts.

And new lobbying restrictions will make sure former public office holders do not improperly benefit from their experience serving the public.

Your government is encouraged by the broad support for these reforms that exists across all parties in this Legislature. It is a welcome sign to British Columbians, who expect their interests to be at the heart of government decision-making. The people of B.C. must always come first.

BRITISH COLUMBIANS MUST BE HEARD

Governments must listen. They cannot ignore the problems families face. And they cannot deliver lasting solutions before they understand the heart of the matter.

Many of the problems facing people today have deep roots in the past, problems that have developed over years. It will take time to find the right solutions.

Your government will be listening to British Columbians and asking their views in preparation for a full budget in February.

Government will be consulting families on the issues that matter to them, from the housing crisis, to child care, to environmental management.

By listening and building a common understanding of the problems people are facing, the solutions that make life better will be found.

VISION FOR A BETTER B.C.

Government's success cannot be counted in the number of regulations it creates, bills it passes, or pronouncements it makes. Success must instead be measured by how its actions and decisions benefit people.

Government is working for people when it acts on the things that matter most: Relief from high costs and fees, better access to services, and an economy that works for everyone. These are your government's priorities. And they are the markers of progress that matter.

AFFORDABILITY

Too many families were left behind for too long. It's time that we made life more affordable. Your government has already started making better choices to help families get ahead.

A \$100 increase to monthly income assistance and disability rates will help to lift families out of poverty.

And removing unfair tolls on the Port Mann and Golden Ears bridges will give daily commuters well-deserved relief.

These are the first steps of a government that's making life more affordable. There is much more to do.

This fall, your government will take steps to help renters. Fixed-term lease loopholes will be closed, so people are no longer vulnerable to significant rent increases. And we will increase support to the Residential Tenancy Branch, to make sure tenants and landlords are treated fairly.

Your government will establish a Fair Wages Commission to put our province on the path to a \$15-an-hour minimum wage. The Commission will set the course for stable and predictable increases over time, helping those who have earned so little for so long.

Decisive action is being taken to fix the problems at ICBC and BC Hydro, to make sure our Crown corporations can deliver the best possible service to the people of B.C. at the lowest possible cost.

For the first time in the history of this province, your government will work with citizens to create a legislated poverty reduction plan. B.C. is the only province in Canada without such a plan. This important work will get under way in the coming weeks.

Government will deliver a provincewide universal child care program that is safe, accessible and affordable. It will start by creating more spaces to help families waiting months and years for quality care, and training more early childhood educators. Government will consult with families and child-care providers this fall on the best way forward.

The crisis in housing affordability affects people of all incomes in all parts of our province. Government will deliver a comprehensive housing strategy to create homes for people. Working with municipalities, co-operatives and the private sector, government will increase the supply of rental, social, co-op and owner-purchase homes. And government is examining options to curb speculation in B.C.'s housing market. Your government is determined to make housing more affordable for everyone.

BETTER SERVICES FOR PEOPLE

It's time B.C.'s economic growth was put to work for the people who built this province. Your government will make better choices that connect people to the services they count on.

Education is one of your government's highest priorities. There is no greater or more important investment we can make in our economy and our future. Education is the key to opportunity for young people to realize their full potential.

Your government will fix the problems in our education system, and invest in student success. The September budget update will take our first steps toward restoring proper funding for B.C. classrooms, and give students the supports they need to succeed.

This government's priority is making sure children are ready to learn, and have classrooms to learn in, as B.C. moves toward full implementation of class size and composition requirements.

Government is already making education more affordable and accessible by eliminating tuition fees for Adult Basic Education and English Language Learning, adding trades training spaces at B.C. colleges and universities, and making college and university tuition-free for former children in care. Government will consider additional measures to reduce the burden of debt on post-secondary students.

There is so much more government can do to deliver the services that people count on.

Increased support for people with disabilities is long overdue. Starting January 1, 2018 government will provide people with disabilities access to the transportation supports they need, including an annual bus pass for those who want one. It's the right thing to do.

Your government will promote and protect public health care, helping the thousands of British Columbians who can't find a doctor and are waiting longer on surgical waitlists. Your government will build new hospitals and urgent care centres, so that patients and families get quality health care where and when they need it. And your government will first reduce, and then eliminate, unfair MSP premiums.

And we must do everything we can to address the overdose crisis. When people are in trouble, they need help right away. Creating the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions is the first step. Your government will make sure people living with addictions have better access to treatment options. And we must increase enforcement to help get deadly drugs off of our streets.

Investments in public transit help reduce gridlock and get people and goods moving. B.C. will work collaboratively with local mayors, and with our partners in the federal government, to deliver better transit options for people, including more buses and expanded rapid transit.

And your government will promote diversity and fight inequality with a renewed human rights commission, because every person should feel welcome to share in the future of our province.

A STRONG, SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY

It's time that British Columbians shared in the benefits of our strong economy. Your government will make better choices to invite people in to B.C.'s continued economic growth.

This government will support B.C.'s traditional industries, including forestry, mining, agriculture, and natural gas development. We will make B.C. a world leader in engineered wood products, and grow our value-added sector. And your government will continue to fight for a fair deal on softwood lumber that is good for B.C. forest workers, our softwood industry, and the communities that depend on it.

This government will invest in natural resource projects that create jobs and opportunity for people—where British Columbians receive a fair rate of return for our resources, First Nations are meaningful partners, and where B.C.'s land, air and water are protected.

And government will continue to support communities hit hard by this year's wildfires and floods. Natural disasters bear high economic and environmental costs. Our people are strong, our communities resilient. When the fires are extinguished and the crisis has passed, British Columbians will come back even stronger than before. Government will work with them to rebuild local economies, including forestry, tourism, small business and agriculture.

There is much more to do.

Starting with initiatives to spark innovation and growth of a sustainable economy. This fall, your government will establish an Innovation Commission—an initiative of the Green Party Caucus—to encourage new investments in B.C.'s technology sector. Government will promote innovation in every region of our province, because everyone deserves to benefit from, and share in the wealth created by, the 21st-century economy.

Your government will take decisive action on global climate change, the greatest challenge of our generation. We must do everything we can to reduce emissions and keep global temperature increases below two degrees. Together, we will fight climate pollution and create opportunities for people, including thousands of jobs through energy retrofits and public infrastructure.

And this government will make important investments in the future of our province. New schools, hospitals, roads and homes for people will give communities the services they need, and attract new jobs and investment. Your government will work with local and federal governments on public infrastructure that builds up our province and our people.

This is your government's vision for a Better B.C.—where our economy remains strong, families get ahead, and communities get the services they need and deserve.

No matter where in this great province we call home, we are united in our belief in the potential of each and every one of us.

The wealth we create together can lift people up, sustain us, and create a better future for everyone.

The road ahead won't be easy. It will take time for the better choices this government is making to take hold—transforming people's lives, revitalizing our communities, and bringing all of us together.

It will happen, starting with the work that takes place here in this Legislature. That work must start and end with the people we are here to serve.

We set out on this journey with a renewed energy, hope and optimism. Help is on the way for the people of B.C. Who have waited many years for relief. Who are ready for a government that is working for them.

Your government will not let them down.

Thank you to all for your service. You and your families sacrifice much so that you may work for the betterment of all British Columbians. I wish you success with this second session of the 41st Parliament. Thank you.