

**ADDRESS BY BILL BENNETT
MINISTER OF COMMUNITY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

I know I have some colleagues here. Minister Krueger is here and Minister Chong is here. I don't know if Blair Lekstrom is here or not. But they've had this job. Murray Coell's had this job. George Abbott's had it over the past eight years. Everybody loves the job. It's a lot of fun to do.

I was told before I came here that I was going to be so busy that there wouldn't be time for fun and it's just going to be all work and everything. I've probably had, I don't know, 50, 55 meetings so far. Somebody used the expression speed dating. It's every 15 minutes. Maybe I'm just a brute for punishment. I don't know. I actually enjoy it. I enjoy meeting you, and I enjoy hearing about your communities and the challenges that you have to deal with. It's actually great fun, and I can hardly wait for next year.

I do hope to be back next year and the year after that, and maybe even the year after that as Robert said. I'd like to be the minister longer than five minutes. I've heard.... Some of you have been very forthright with me, and I appreciate that. You're always welcome to be very forthright with me, and it's likely that I'll be very forthright with you. I appreciate the fact that you want some stability, and it does take some time to learn the files as well.

This is, of course, my first UBCM as communities minister, so I thought that despite doing this a little bit yesterday in my short speeches I would just do a quick introduction. Married 35 years; two boys: one 30, one 25. I think my wife is in the room. She just flew down from Cranbrook. Beth, are you here somewhere? Why don't you stand up and be recognized? She's way more popular than I am at home too.

We live on an acreage outside the city of Cranbrook. It's an area where I can basically go out my back door, even my front door, and I can go hunting or fishing or hiking just right out the door. I burn wood in our home. I should say we burn wood because when I'm not there Beth loads the fireplace. But I cut the wood. Beth helps me sometimes. I split it and I pile it myself. It's one of the ways, along with hunting and fishing and hiking and so forth, that I stay connected to the land, and that's always been important to me.

However, although my roots are in rural B.C. and small towns, I am well acquainted with the cities in this province and love them all. I've got an apartment in Victoria that I live in part time with my roommate from Prince George, John Rustad. We're the odd couple, and neither one of us ever does the dishes. So I spend time in that interesting city over the past eight and a half years.

And I absolutely love Vancouver. I think Vancouver is the most beautiful spectacular city on the face of the earth. It's just a wonderful city.

I've also gotten to know over the past eight years.... Working on various committees and doing my ministerial work I've gotten to know cities like Abbotsford and Surrey and Kelowna, Terrace, Kamloops, Prince George, Penticton, Fort St. John and most of the towns and the villages in between. So although I am the rural guy — and it really isn't a cover; I really am — I'm proud of the diversity and the tremendous importance of our cities, and I'm genuinely honoured to have the opportunity to work with all of you.

I do want to thank the UBCM directors and staff for organizing the conference. Robert, congratulations; another just great conference this year. Well done. This is by far and away the best opportunity for us to come together with you, and by us I mean all government members. There's a number of ministers here this afternoon, and a number of private members here this afternoon, and we all agree that we come to this conference and we go away, I think, a lot better informed and a lot wiser. We get to understand what you folks are all about and the absolutely amazing diversity of issues that you deal with, often with minimal resources.

So it is a good experience for us. We look forward to doing it and we're going to keep doing it year after year as long as you keep electing us.

I'd like to take this opportunity to publicly congratulate the local government department in my ministry. I found out over the past three or four months that they like you too. They really enjoy working with local government officials. This is their 75th anniversary. That part of the old municipal affairs ministry was established in 1934 — and this is a quotation from those days — “as a medium of communication between the

province and its municipalities.” Of course, this department has played a vital role in shaping B.C.’s government system. I know the good people in the ministry of Community and Rural Development do look forward to continuing a strong relationship with you, just as I do.

Your theme this year; your theme this year is “A Province of Champions.” I quite like that. I actually believe and have believed all my life that we need champions, we need heroes. The lessons that heroes and champions offer to us and the inspiration that they offer to us are invaluable.

One of my favourite champion stories is of a famous British Columbian Olympian by the name of Peerless Percy Williams. At the 1928 Amsterdam Summer Olympics this Vancouver boy won gold medals in both the 100- and the 200-metre sprints. Now, Percy was an underdog. He suffered from rheumatic fever as a teen. He wasn’t supposed to win. In fact, his doctor had advised him not to even bother trying to compete. But Percy did what many of us have to do, many of you have to do, in today’s rapidly changing world. He found a way to adapt.

So he embraced some new training methods for those days, ways of doing things that nobody else had tried. For instance, he trained over there by running into walls, which I thought was the perfect metaphor for today’s current economic climate. At the Amsterdam Games in his hotel room in the evenings he would practise by crouching down in a starting position and then he would explode across the room into a mattress that he’d have propped up against the wall. This is a true story. He actually did this. Other athletes in the hotel apparently wondered what all the noise was about. They’d hear him running across his room and then the big thud as he slammed against the mattress on the wall.

Another thing that Percy did was he learned to restrain his initial sprint out of the blocks, which sounds simple enough today but the idea was to increase his speed over the race. Nobody was doing that in those days, and sports historians have said that his training techniques were revolutionary for their time.

The next three years after those Olympic Games, Peerless Percy Williams was literally unbeatable. Here was this 125-pound kid from British Columbia, Canada, whose doctor had told him to stay in bed. He became the fastest man on the planet and basically because he had the guts to do things different and it paid off for him.

Now, in another life, just to prove my bona fides as a rural guy, I used to operate fly-in fishing lodges. This is a long time ago, but I did it for a long time. I worked as an employee for many years and then eventually Beth and I bought some lodges. They were fly-in, so when I needed a tool or I needed some piece of material, I either tried to...you know, I would have to invent it essentially or else I’d have to fly it in at great cost.

I remember one time having an issue with a diesel generator. There was a stainless steel rod that had a brass bushing on it... Anybody that’s a little bit mechanical will kind of know what I’m talking about; it had to do with oil pressure. The bushing broke, and I didn’t have another bushing. It was going to cost, you know, around \$2,000 to fly this tiny little bushing in with a small float plane.

One of the guys who was working with me — he was my manager at the time — had recently left his wife and he said, “Let me just... Hold on. I’m going to go back to the cabin and get something.” So he went back and he got his wedding ring. I guess you can figure out what happened. It fit perfectly onto the steel rod and we got the generator going again and we had a bunch of happy American fishermen. We had a full camp full of fishermen but no electricity.

I’m told by my junior staffer that that’s called repurposing. It’s also innovation.

In the founding years of our province local governments were faced with the same necessity to invent what they needed for their communities: whether it was getting telephone service on the North Coast at the turn of the century, whether it was replacing that old mule that could no longer tow the fire wagon on the Kootenay frontier, or taming the rivers of winter mud that plagued the Lower Mainland’s unpaved streets.

Local governments have a history of innovative problem solving and leadership that you can all be proud of. Over the years you’ve continued to lead the way: providing social services to hundreds of thousands of people during the Great Depression, dealing with the population boom and the growth of new communities that started in the fifties, and then the social turmoil of the 1960s — which I participated in but cannot remember.

I didn't know if you'd get that or not.

In the 1990s you had to deal with tough economic times in B.C. as the provincial government downloaded more than \$800 million to you while the rest of North America boomed. I wish I could say that we don't have to face those kinds of challenges today. But whether it's the winter gales tossing down trees in Stanley Park, or protecting our communities from wildfires — such as we had this summer and back in 2003 — or icy spring floods in the Interior or, of course, last fall's economic meltdown that's still with us: when it comes to dealing with these crises, all of you in local government are still on the front lines, and you're still dealing with those big challenges. Fortunately you continue to live up to your legacy.

We still have champions of innovation and leadership around municipal councils and regional district board tables today. I would like to tell you about a few of those champions that are amongst you.

When I mention your name, if you wouldn't mind standing up and just stay standing while I just tell your story.

First I'd like to recognize Jim Ogilvie, the Mayor of Kimberley. Jim's been mayor in Kimberley for — I don't know the exact number of years — over three decades. It's well over 30 years. Back in the day when faced with the news that Teck Comino Sullivan Mine would be closing after over a hundred years in operation, Jim led the residents of Kimberley through a plan for transition. By focusing on the reality of life after the mine, the responsibilities of increasing independence from a one-horse town, a one-industry town, and working with the company to acquire reclaimed land, by saving the local ski hill from bankruptcy, and building a couple of championship golf courses, Kimberley turned itself from a mining town into a four seasons destination featuring the Kimberley Alpine Resort and the renowned Trickle Creek and Bootleg golf courses.

Today Jim is putting together a Paralympic training and performance centre at the ski resort that will be a legacy for decades to come. He tells me he only needs another \$150,000 and he'll have it done. If you know Jim, he never gives up. He's always looking for something for his community — which is the way most of you are, and it's the way you're supposed to be.

Jim has shown the kind of dedicated commitment and vision required to cause fundamental change under daunting circumstances. So let's hear it for Jim Ogilvie.

I'd like to recognize Dave Wilks next.

I'm thinking that we all remember last winter, eight of 11 men who were out snowmobiling in the Elk Valley. This was in my riding close to where Dave lives. They died while out snowmobiling in the backcountry of the Elk Valley. Sparwood's a small community, and everyone knows everyone else. Even one death is a huge blow to a small community like Sparwood.

I watched Dave lead the community through an effort...guiding people through this trauma of losing eight of their own. He did it on a very, very personal and individualized basis. He helped organize a candlelight vigil. He headed an absolute army of volunteers organizing a memorial that was attended by over 3,000 people. And he dealt with the media all week over this event, and the media was all over the world. There was CNN; there was NBC, CBC, all the major national newspapers. He spent hours talking to individual members of this community in their homes, helping them come through what was obviously an enormous challenge for each of them.

In speaking at the candlelight vigil — he doesn't know that I have this quote — this is what Dave said. He said: "We've come together as a community to show our strength and our hopes for all those who have been affected by the tragic events of the past two days. These 11 young men, all from Sparwood, touched each and every one of us. Sparwood changed that day, and we must recognize we all have a role to play. The families deserve it, the boys deserve it, and every one of you deserve it."

Dave, I know your words touched a lot of people that day and that whole week. I know that after the ceremony or after the candlelight vigil, Dave spoke on national television, and two trust funds were set up and the money literally poured into these two trust funds for the families. Well done, Dave.

I'd like to recognize the efforts of the mayor of B.C.'s second biggest city: Dianne Watts of Surrey. In 2007 Dianne and her colleagues launched an innovative crime strategy that hadn't been used before in North America, with over one hundred people and 50 different organizations and three levels of government all participating in the strategy. Now Surrey has gone from being labelled as the city with the highest rate of auto theft in the entire English-speaking world to being recognized for its success in community-centred crime reduction. Surrey has achieved some spectacular results including a 50-percent decrease in auto thefts and double-digit decreases in property crimes.

Their economic development strategy, equally important, also takes bold, innovative approach to attracting new business to their city centre and South Westminster areas by offering reduced development cost charges and reduced tax rates, made possible by the Community Charter, in those two zones. The city is performing the difficult balancing act of attracting new business while ensuring it takes place in the areas of the city where it's most appropriate.

I know Dianne actually was just up in my riding in Fernie talking to some local builders and developers. We had several mayors from the area there.

You're a great role model, Dianne, for everybody here. Keep up the good work.

Doug Findlater, mayor of West Kelowna, and Dennis Bontron, mayor of Lillooet: are you guys here? There they are.

Any mayor or local government rep who's been through a forest fire emergency knows what these two fellows went through this summer. A lot of us have been through something like that. But it was obviously very, very close to their communities. Our communities need their leadership when under threat, and they sure got it this summer. To Dennis, Doug, and to all the local government reps, to everyone who has had to respond to that situation with forest fires — that hit us hard both this summer and in 2003 — well done, congratulations.

Finally I'd like to recognize Mayor Stephanie Killam from the District of Mackenzie. Stephanie, along with Canfor and the company's unionized employees and the province, led to the restart of a large sawmill in her community after more than a year of downtime.

To get there, she worked with my colleague Pat Bell. I know that's Pat's riding, and I know how hard he worked there, as well, on that situation, to bring stumpage rates in line with the surrounding area. Employees took a wage cut, and the district reduced taxes on the mill by 25 percent for three years. That's a savings to the company of about \$100,000 per year.

It's one of cases where because of Stephanie's leadership and her commitment to her community, everyone was willing to make a sacrifice so that in the end, by innovating and doing things differently, everybody gained.

Stephanie met with me when I was up in Prince George recently, and she said something to me that I wrote down because it stuck in my mind. She said: "I know the world has changed for Mackenzie, and I know it will never be the same. But if we work hard and work together in partnership, we can keep our community strong and vibrant."

Stephanie, I want to say that I think on behalf of everyone here, you are an example of leadership to both your community and to communities across the province. Well done.

Now, I know that the folks that I have centred out here today are not alone. I know that everyone here is making a difference in your community, and that's why you do what you do. Many of you are full-time politicians whether you get paid to be full-time politicians or not. Many of you are working full time and often for probably about 25 cents an hour.

Many of you probably encounter folks around town that like to bend your ear about potholes and zoning applications. I know. I've been in your shoes. You're at the grocery store at 10 or 10:30 at night, and you're tired. It's on a Friday night, and really, all you want to do is go home and get your shoes off, you know, and get your feet up. Somebody wants to bend your ear and tell you about whatever it is on their mind. We all do it, and it's part of the job.

I guess, you know, the way I look at it is your constituents and your taxpayers are invested in your communities. They're invested through their homes and their businesses and their volunteer work, and they're invested in all the decisions that you make. Your decisions have an impact directly on the quality of their lives.

That's why our government, under the leadership of the former Vancouver mayor and the past UBCM president, Gordon Campbell, has taken such large steps to support you in your efforts. Frankly, it wasn't always so. For those of you who were not in politics at the time, in the 90s the provincial government offloaded over \$800 million in costs onto local government and hamstrung them with outdated provincial legislation. I actually found an old UBCM news release from those days that said that. It was quite interesting. Now, I know that's a partisan comment, but it's also a fact.

Since 2001 we've empowered communities with new legislation like the Community Charter so Dianne Watts and her council can do the things economically that they're doing in Surrey. It gives you broad authority to take action that's best for your community. We've added more than \$2.5 billion of funding to local governments, and more than half of this has gone to capital projects, improvements like roads and drinking water and sewage systems.

In order to assist those of you with a smaller tax basis, a lot of the communities in rural B.C., we've doubled small community and regional district grants, and of course, for those of you in the larger centres we now return 100 percent of all the net traffic fine revenues to your coffers. Since 2004 that's \$297 million that you didn't have before that you have now, and I know it helps.

For the past eight years our government has consistently made large investments across the province. I've travelled the province from stem to stern, just like most provincial politicians have, and you see the new schools, the additions to colleges, seven new universities, magnificent highway construction like Kicking Horse Canyon if you have seen the Park Bridge, the Sea to Sky Highway, the Cariboo connector, strengthening visitor information centres across the province, investing in 33 different airports, new seniors facilities in so many of our communities across the province, huge improvements to hospitals in many places and clinics — more than \$4 billion invested over the past seven years. Of course, that was before last Thursday, when Premier Campbell and our federal partners announced the largest community infrastructure investment in the history of B.C. and the second-largest community infrastructure program in the country.

A lot of the investment obviously will go into rural British Columbia, and you know, this is important to me personally, because I've spent my whole life in small towns in rural areas of Canada. In terms of opportunity and quality of life, there's only one British Columbia. There's only one B.C., and there's only one economy in British Columbia. You know, when government lowers the personal income taxes to the lowest rate in Canada, the taxpayer in Creston, in Cranbrook and Clinton gets the same benefit as the taxpayer living in a condo overlooking Robson Street, and when we invest in water and sewer or recreation infrastructure, we're investing in Valemount as well as Victoria.

Speaking of infrastructure funding, since I'm the one that brought it up, I do want to apologize to you for how long it took me to deal with this situation. Our federal partners were very good. We struggled with it, because frankly, we don't have the money, but you know what? The bottom line is we got the money out the door. It's almost \$720 million or \$730 million in projects. You're going to get it done.

I guess the main thing is we got it done; we got the money out the door. Congratulations to everybody who got projects, and for those who didn't get projects, come and see Kevin Krueger after.

Now, we do understand... I think this is a point that's overlooked sometimes. We can better fulfil your expectations if we have a constructive relationship with the federal government, and we do. We've had a constructive relationship with two different political parties who have been in power since we were elected in 2001, and that will continue. Premier Campbell leads the charge on that. You know, you just get a lot more, I think, for your taxpayers, your constituents, when you have that constructive relationship. It's true of the relationship between UBCM and the province, and it's certainly true between the province and the federal government.

You know, just, I guess, about two weeks ago Premier Campbell was able to work with our federal counterparts to kick-start the northwest transmission line with a \$130 million federal commitment from the

green infrastructure fund. That investment will lead to new mines, and it'll lead to independent power production. You know, more importantly, I think, what it's going to lead to is jobs and opportunities. I've spent enough time in the northwest to know that the people in the northwest generally want jobs and they want more opportunities, and this investment will certainly help with that.

A quick word to you about a program that my ministry delivers, the Community Development Trust, and in particular the Job Opportunities Program. We put another \$60 million into that just, oh, I guess a month or so ago: \$30 million from the federal government and \$30 million from the provincial government. I happen to know a lot of laid-off forest workers, unfortunately, in the Cranbrook area and over in the Elk Valley, and I know they want to work. I know that they can collect Employment Insurance, but I know they'd rather work. The Job Opportunities Program, as a lot of you have said to me in our meetings the last three days.... A lot of you have said: what a great program. It really helps people. It helps them retain their dignity. It helps them have some hope for the future. And when it helps the working person, it helps the family and it helps the community. I just think it's been such a great program, and we're going to carry it on next year as well.

Starting on October 30th the Olympic torch will begin its cross-Canada journey. I read in the newspaper sometimes and some nights on the television news — even on the floor of the Legislative Assembly I hear sometimes — that not everybody likes the Olympics. That's okay. That's all right. I'm betting that even my colleagues on the other side of the floor in the Legislature are going to be on the edge of their seats for the hockey games, and I'm also betting that when some young Canadian amateur athlete does something so spectacular and so unexpected, we're all going to feel the pride and the love for our great country.

So we're going to help you celebrate the torch relay through your communities, and frankly, a celebration is a good thing. Positive energy is the intangible in everything that we do. And there will be more to celebrate, I think, in 2010. There are growing signs of a recovery in the economy. The Conference Board of Canada has said that B.C. will have the strongest economic growth in the country starting in 2010. Obviously, we hope they're right, and we think they're right.

As you continue to look for ways to grow and to strengthen your communities, as you look for new ways of getting things done, my ministry, my staff and I will be there to support all of you. There is an interesting addendum to the peerless Percy Williams story. He wasn't alone in his quest for gold. His friend and his coach, Bob Granger, helped him with the innovative training that took peerless Percy to the podium. When the Canadian Olympic Committee didn't choose Granger as the sprint coach for the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics, Granger was so determined to get to those games that he made his way to Amsterdam as a deckhand on a cattle boat.

I want you folks in local government to consider me and my staff as your Bob Granger, your friend and adviser, someone who is in your corner who you can turn to when it comes to advice on how to do things differently. I'm pretty sure that Percy and Granger didn't see eye to eye on everything, on every new training technique. That's natural. That's not a problem. But they had the same goal, and that was achieving the best.

When I look around this room today, I am truly humbled by your perseverance and your accomplishments and by your courage to be on the front line of innovation, so on behalf of my colleagues here in the B.C. government, I want to thank you for all that you do. I want to wish you success and happiness over the next year. Thank you.