

Carole James, Leader of the Official Opposition

Thank you very much.

It's an honour and a pleasure to be here today.

I want to begin by thanking everyone in this room for all the work you do every day on behalf of our communities.

My sincere thanks to your outgoing President, Robert Hobson, and the UBCM executive for a very successful and productive year.

And my congratulations to your incoming President Harry Nyse. I look forward to working with you and your new executive in the year ahead.

Today I have with me almost my entire caucus. Don't worry, I won't introduce them all...

But I do want to single out our Critic for Community and Rural Development, Scott Fraser, the MLA for Alberni – Pacific Rim.

Like me—and like you—Scott is passionate about his community. He is a former Mayor of Tofino. And he is an extremely valued member of my team.

The last time I spoke to you, we were on the eve of municipal elections.

Many new faces were elected across BC, and they were joined by veterans who have served their communities for years.

Thank you all for giving so much of yourselves; your energy, commitment and ideas.

And thank you to all your families for their energy and commitment to local government as well.

I love the theme of this convention: A Province of Champions.

“Champions” is an interesting word.

As Robert Hobson noted, it's a word with more than one meaning.

One definition of the word champion is “a person who comes in first.”

As we head into the 2010 Games, I think it's appropriate to talk about British Columbia as a province of champions.

We'll have BC athletes representing us all as they pursue their Olympic dreams.

The 2010 Games may be the crowning achievement of their athletic careers, but their lives beyond the Games will be full of other personal achievements....through family, work or community service.

And for me, that's where the second definition of "champion" comes in.

Champion: "a person who fights for a cause."

By that definition, all of you here today are champions for your communities.

And now, more than ever, our communities – our province -- needs champions.

For these are difficult and challenging times in British Columbia.

Some of the most difficult in generations.

- The gap between rich and poor is growing and the middle class is feeling the squeeze.
- BC has the highest cost of living, the lowest minimum wage, the worst child poverty rate in the country, and homelessness is out of control.
- Far too many British Columbians don't feel safe walking down their street.
- The crisis in our forest industry continues to get worse, and we are no closer to achieving lasting settlements with First Nations.
- Climate change and environmental destruction threaten our economy and our future. .

And while, the recovery is coming, it is slow, it is uneven it is being threatened by the short-sighted cuts and economic policies of a government that has lost its way.

Having won the election on promises that weren't true, the government now looks to be in chaos.

The gaming grant fiasco is just one example. So too was the delay in infrastructure spending that kept you waiting for months.

Health services are being slashed. And school boards have had the rug pulled out from under them.

And then there is the HST.

\$1.9 billion in new consumer taxes right in the middle of a recession.

So, let's be frank.

British Columbians were not told the truth in the election.

We were not told the truth about the deficit.

We were not told the truth about planned cuts to public services.

And we were not told the truth about the HST.

I will give the BC Liberal government credit for one thing, though.

They have a way of bringing political opponents together. In ways many never thought possible.

I'll admit it.

Sharing the stage with Bill Vander Zalm to protest the HST was a bit surreal.

But I was glad to.

When a government doesn't tell the truth, it's important that British Columbians stand together.

It's important that we speak out.

Because trust is the foundation of good government.

And British Columbians don't know any more if this government is on the level.

Its Great Goals are often just tall tales.

After all:

What kind of government promotes literacy by cutting funding to libraries?

What kind of government says they're going to double tourism and then guts the budget for marketing BC to the world—right before the 2010 Olympics?

What kind of government fights obesity and inactivity by cutting sports for kids?

What kind of government promotes funding for the arts as an important economic generator and then slashes funding for the arts?

And what kind of government fights a recession by taking money out of the pockets of consumers?

The bond of trust has been broken.

The people don't trust the government. And the government doesn't trust the people.

As one commentator said the other day, the government is treating people like they are its enemy.

It's an attitude that is having a profound impact on British Columbians, including everyone in this room.

The provincial government downloads responsibility onto you, but it doesn't trust you to make the "right" decisions.

There are many examples:

The government doesn't trust Mayors to control Translink. But they do want you to pay for it.

And now the Minister won't even sit down with you to look for solutions.

The Squamish Lillooet Regional District listens to its residents and says no to private power development?

Wrong decision, so the government brings in Bill 30 to change the rules.

You think you should have a say in land-use decisions that affect your community?

Wrong again, so the government changes the rules again by amending the law to suit its interests, not yours.

Again, they don't trust you with authority.

Time after time, issue after issue, when communities took a different view than the government, the BC Liberals just changed the rules to suit their agenda.

And it seems that the longer the BC Liberals are in power, the more secretive, controlling, and out-of-touch they're becoming.

Cabinet ministers warn that forest communities have dined out on industrial taxes for too long.

And now the government won't even sit down with you to help solve the dispute you're having with industry over taxes.

The dispute between industrial rate payers and local governments should never have been allowed to go to court. It's undermined the partnership that should exist between you and the province.

Imagine if you called up Victoria and said hey, I didn't use Highway 1 this year. Can you deduct road maintenance from my tax bill?

Or, my kids graduated last year. Please don't bill me for education.

You can imagine the response.

You have the responsibilities. They grow every year.

But you don't have the certainty or the control you need to meet those responsibilities.

That's why I am committed to breaking the cycle of false promises from governments of all political stripes and engaging in an honest discussion about revenue sharing and local autonomy.

This discussion has been going on for 20 years and there is nothing to show for it except more downloading of costs.

And it's why I am committed to being a good faith partner.

A leader who understands that partnerships are built on trust.

A leader who isn't afraid that someone else's idea might be better than their own.

A leader who works everyday to earn your trust, and lays out a positive and inclusive direction for the province.

It's true, the challenges are great and the future uncertain.

But in BC we are blessed with great advantages

All the building blocks are there for us to be a leader... in innovation, in green jobs, in sustainable growth.

We have the universities, the infrastructure, the resources and the spirit.

But most importantly we have the people.

I would like to acknowledge one of those British Columbians today.

This past summer, a young British Columbian named Ali Howard swam the entire length of the Skeena River, from the Sacred Headwaters to Port Edward, more than 600 kilometres.

Why did she do it?

To bring international attention to the collapse of the salmon fishery and the environmental threats to BC's rivers.

Two weeks ago, National Geographic nominated Ali for its Explorer of the Year award for her campaign work. It's a wonderful honour for an amazing British Columbian.

Ali Howard is with us here today.

Please give Ali a big hand. Talk about a champion!

Ali understands that in BC our environment, our economy, the well being of our communities are all interconnected.

That's why I again call on the provincial government to act to protect wild salmon stocks.

Move to closed containment technology.

And listen to the recommendations of your panel on the Pacific Salmon Forum who say it's time to bring First Nations and local government to the table to help manage our rivers and streams.

Because one level of government can't meet our challenges alone.

Top-down, centralized control from Victoria just doesn't work.

The issues are too complex to all be managed out of the Premier's office.

For example, if the Premier wants to set climate change goals then he had better be prepared to work with you on climate change solutions.

But this government has cancelled the very programs we need to meet our targets, and it won't even meet with Metro Vancouver Mayors to deal with funding shortfalls at Translink.

The government set the targets but provided no means of achieving them.

And no matter how many times you tell them that it takes money to build transit, the government won't listen.

As a first step to improve transit across the province and to meet our climate change goals, today I am calling on the provincial government to cancel the corporate tax cuts scheduled to come in over the two years related to the carbon tax.

And put that money into a Provincial Green Fund for transit improvements and climate change solutions in communities across the province.

By 2012 that would mean \$150 million in annual contributions to the Green Fund. That would go a long way toward hitting the emissions reduction targets as set out in law by the government.

That won't solve the problem. But it will be a good start.

And I am also once again calling on the government to finally restore democratic accountability to Translink by returning control to elected representatives.

Because accountability and democracy are key to meeting today's challenges.

And re-building trust in the provincial government is critical.

The experience we've just had with the budget and HST should never be repeated.

When British Columbians go to the polls they deserve the truth so they can make an informed decision. It's the foundation of democracy.

That's why I am calling on the government today to move the fixed election date to the fall of 2012 so that the next election won't tempt them to write yet another fictional budget.

Yes, it would shorten the government's mandate by six months.

But that's a small matter compared to the need to ensure an honest election debate about the choices we face. And moving the fixed election date to the fall would accomplish just that.

Just last week, the government's own budget advisory panel told them the same thing.

So let's just get it done.

Second, let's establish an Independent Budget Officer who will ensure that the public will always get the truth about BC's finances.

The Budget Officer would report to the Legislature, not the Premier's Office, and would restore transparency and accountability to the budgeting process in BC.

My Finance Critic, Bruce Ralston, has tabled the legislation. All the government has to do is allow it to be debated and vote for it.

These changes will help restore trust in government and in the idea that government can be a force for good.

As a public servant who believes passionately in the values of justice, fairness and opportunity, I know that building and maintaining this trust is essential.

That so few took the time to vote in the last provincial election should concern us all. And I take my share of the responsibility for that result.

We can – we must – do better.

My whole public life has been devoted to the idea that what unites us is stronger than what divides us. That everyone has a contribution to make.

Today, in an uncertain world, those values are more important than ever.

British Columbia is an amazing province. We are all so lucky to call it home.

But BC has become a deeply divided society: rich and poor, business and labour, rural and urban, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, us versus them.

The only way we'll ever bridge those divides is if we actually start listening to one another.

Connecting our values to the daily lives of British Columbians.

Re-connecting each other to our shared future.

We will come out of this recession stronger and more united, if we pull together, if we restore faith in our institutions and in our democracy.

These are difficult times.

But BC has brighter days ahead, and in so many ways local governments are going to be leaders in the economic recovery and the new economy that emerges.

I want to work with you, and learn from you, as we plan to ensure that all British Columbians benefit from a successful, sustainable and modern economy.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you today, and I hope you enjoy the remainder of your meetings.