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| Colombie-Britannique | 36e | 5e | Discours du budget | 15 mars 2001 | Paul Ramsey | Minister of Finance | New Democratic Party of British Columbia |

Hon. Speaker, it is my pleasure to present to this House our government's balanced budget for the year 2001-02.

In beginning this speech, I want to thank all members of the House for the opportunity to work with them over the years. It has indeed been a pleasure and a privilege to be a member of this Legislative Assembly. As I've prepared this budget, I've had the privilege of speaking with British Columbians from all walks of life. I've also read with care the report of the all-party committee of this Legislature which, for the first time, visited communities across our province to hear from citizens about Budget 2001.

This budget is about the choices that our government has made, based on what we have heard and the values we share with British Columbians -- choices about our future, choices about the kind of province we want to live in. We believe in compassion and fairness, in the dignity and worth of every person and in a strong and dynamic economy. These are the values that British Columbians want reflected in the decisions we make and the priorities that we set.

Hon. Speaker, this budget finds B.C. at a crossroads. We face two clearly different approaches to governing and setting priorities. One approach puts dramatic tax cuts ahead of everything else, including the needs of today's families. But the only way to achieve those dramatic tax cuts with a balanced budget is by slashing health and education programs. That's a simple fact. This government has a very different approach. It's an approach that puts the needs of today's families first with a balanced budget, a growing economy, and a focus on health care and education.

We understand that meeting the needs of today's families also meets the needs of today's economy. In this new economy, the quality of life we share and enjoy in our province is a critical competitive edge. For example, a strong commitment to the environment helps secure the international markets for our forest products. Excellence in education means B.C. can offer the skills and talent that attract employers and investment to our province.

A clean and green British Columbia ensures we remain a world-class destination and a place where entrepreneurs and skilled workers want to live and raise families. Quality health care is a crucial part of economic stability for communities right across our province. We need healthy, productive workers and low costs to industry for injury and illness. And helping the most vulnerable in our society means we will make full use of our most valuable resource: the people of British Columbia.

Because of the choices in this budget, hospitals across British Columbia will have more funding to hire nurses. Colleges and universities will have more resources and student spaces to train them. Children in aboriginal communities will have a better start in life with the new commitment to early childhood development services. More kids across British Columbia will have access to a school meal program in more schools. Thousands of British Columbians will find the door open to new opportunities in post-secondary education, with the price of tuition -- already frozen for five years -- actually falling. And finally, more of our parents will be able to live in the comfort of their own homes rather than in institutions, because there will be more community care and more home support services right across the province.

These are the results of the choices we've made. We can balance the budget and achieve these results. But we can only do so because we have put health and education and basic social justice first and rejected dramatic tax cuts.

This budget is built on a foundation that has grown stronger over the past year. The Premier said from the outset that he would change the way we do business in B.C. and get our financial house in order. His first direction to me was to

introduce a new piece of legislation, the Budget Transparency and Accountability Act. Soon after, I introduced the Balanced Budget Act, requiring us to balance the budget and keep it balanced. With these two pieces of legislation, B.C. has the most open, accountable, transparent budget framework in Canada.

As one of B.C.'s leading political observers recently wrote: "When the government financial reporting is this thorough, the numbers can be allowed to speak for themselves." This is why I can tell British Columbians with confidence: the budget is balanced -- last year, this year and next year.

The auditor general of British Columbia has confirmed that we not only reduced the deficit in fiscal year '99-2000; we eliminated it. The reports I'm tabling today for the current budget year confirm the trend we saw in our second and third quarterly reports for Budget 2000-01. We are on track to balance the budget again this year. The estimates I am presenting today for the coming year are sound. Our key assumptions are clearly disclosed. We are projecting a balanced budget for the third year in a row.

Let's look first at last year's economic and fiscal results. The province we live in today is a strong one. It is moving forward; it is growing steadily. Now, that may come as a surprise to people who have heard so much negative commentary on B.C.'s economy, but the fact is that our economy performed well last year. And while we expect some modest slowing, it's poised to do well in the coming year too.

British Columbia's economy started the new millennium on a positive note. Our economy grew by 3.4 percent in the year 2000. Exports grew by 13 percent. Our retail sales grew by more than 6 percent. The unemployment rate last year was the lowest it's been in 20 years, and there were 43,000 more jobs in B.C. at the beginning of this year than there were at the beginning of last year. More British Columbians were working in the year 2000 than ever before in our history.

As our economy gathered steam, the government's finances also improved. Over the past year we saw revenues increase as the economy grew and energy prices rose. Revenues from our strengthening economy exceeded forecasts by $810 million. Natural resource revenues -- principally oil, natural gas and electricity -- added another $1.6 billion. All told, revenues will exceed our targets by $2.5 billion, or 11.8 percent.

The result is that for 2000-01, we are forecasting a surplus of $1.3 billion. This compares to the billion-dollar deficit I projected in the last budget. B.C.'s fiscal turnaround has been very substantial. As a result, our debt picture is also considerably healthier than I forecast at the beginning of the year. Taxpayer-supported debt will be $24.5 billion at the end of the fiscal year. That's $3.4 billion less than I forecast in Budget 2000. For total debt, the target was $36.5 billion. We beat that target by $2.7 billion, for a final figure of $33.8 billion.

In fact, I can report to you that at the end of the fiscal year, British Columbia's debt will be lower than it was at the start. We will pay down British Columbia's debt by more than $400 million.

I'm also very pleased to report that B.C.'s taxpayer-supported debt-to-GDP ratio remains very healthy at 19.6 percent, the second lowest in the country. B.C. taxpayers saved $114 million in interest payments in 2000-01 because of lower debt.

Hon. Speaker, the province we live in today is a strong one. It's moving forward; it's growing steadily. The economy performed well last year. While we do expect slowing, it's poised to do well in the coming year too. The strengths we saw last year, along with our diversified export economy, will help B.C. ride out the downturn from south of the border.

In January I met with the 16 independent economists of the Economic Forecast Council to discuss the coming year. Their average prediction for economic growth for 2001 is 2.4 percent and for 2002, 2.9 percent. My forecast is consistent with those figures.

As our economy grows, it's also changing. Newer sectors of our economy -- knowledge-based sectors like high-tech and film -- are taking on a greater and greater role, encouraged in part by our government's incentives and partnerships. The value of film and TV productions alone grew by 10 percent last year. That's an additional $100 million injected into B.C.'s economy. The high-tech sector continues to show strong growth as well. High-tech employment has doubled in the last decade. It now accounts for more than 52,000 jobs in our province.

B.C. can also look to our energy sector for economic growth. Our natural gas industry has made the most of the recent rise in export prices, helped in part by the new regulatory structure that we introduced in 1998.

But we are taking nothing for granted. I want to assure British Columbians that we are watching U.S. and Canadian economies carefully. Partly because of recent developments in the U.S., I have built a prudence allowance of $300 million into this budget forecast. That prudence is crucial. It means that British Columbians can remain confident that the choices we are making in this budget are affordable. We will maintain a course of financial prudence in the coming year.

Government revenues are expected to total $24.6 billion. Government expenditures are expected to total $24.3 billion. There will be a positive balance of $300 million in direct government operations. This is offset by a projected net loss from Crown corporations in the coming year. In addition, the budget reflects a positive one-time impact of changes in how pension plans are governed, totalling $1.4 billion. I've also included a prudence allowance of $300 million in the fiscal plan. The net result is a forecast $1.1 billion summary account surplus for the year 2001-02.

We've chosen in this budget to fund the key priorities of today's families, and that includes not only services but also facilities -- the schools and hospitals, the post-secondary institutions and the transportation networks that are crucial to the success of B.C. As a result of this choice, using the same cautious approach from last year, I am projecting an increase in the province's debt. Total debt is expected to rise by $800 million, to $34.7 billion. That also includes the $300 million prudence cushion. However, if we're able to repeat the performance of the year now ending, we may well beat those targets.

Once more, let me remind members that this third projected balanced budget has been developed in accordance with some of the strictest accounting and reporting practices in the country. If, like last year, we beat our targets, then we will continue the balanced approach we've taken: looking to the needs of British Columbians while keeping our finances in firm control.

Over the coming three years we project government revenues to increase by approximately 2.5 percent per year. To balance the budgets in each of those years, we must live within those amounts. That means making some difficult choices and getting it right. We forecast that balanced budgets can continue beyond this year. Our fiscal framework includes balanced budgets through to 2003-04.

When the auditor general confirmed our balanced books for fiscal '99-2000, the Premier said that this must not be a one-time event but the start of a trend. The trend is now clear, hon. Speaker. The books are balanced -- last year, this year, next year.

Budgets aren't just about numbers, though. They're about people, and they're about choices and about how we can improve the lives of British Columbians. The economy continues to grow, and the books are balanced. Now is the time to focus on improving our key social programs and to choose our quality of life as a competitive tool.

There are some, including my colleagues across the way, whose first priority would be to spend billions of dollars on dramatic tax cuts. It seems that for every issue that arises, for every problem that crops up, the members opposite can reply with only two words: tax cuts. They will tell you that they can do this without slashing services or running deficits because, they say, broad-based tax cuts pay for themselves. Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it just doesn't work that way.

Let me be clear. We believe in balanced budgets. We believe in strategic targeted tax relief, and we've introduced many tax measures over the past few years: research and development credits for the high-tech sector, competitive credits for our film industry, a streamlined regulatory and royalty system for the oil and gas sector. Our taxes for small business, the entrepreneurs who create the majority of new jobs, remain the lowest in Canada, and we have secured our position as having the second- or third-lowest overall taxes in Canada for most families.

However, when it comes to broad-based dramatic tax cuts, I've looked at the evidence. I've looked at impartial economic studies on the impact of tax cuts, and the cold, hard truth is: you can't have it all. Broad-based dramatic tax cuts will mean lower government revenues. It's like anything else that sounds too good to be true. From pyramid schemes to e-mail get-rich-quick promises to tax cuts without consequences, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

You know, even the economists advising the Leader of the Opposition acknowledge freely that dramatic tax cuts have a price. The Investment Dealers Association has called for dramatic tax cuts and running up a deficit. David Bond -- remember that name? -- has called for dramatic tax cuts and deep cuts in service to pay for them. I'm grateful to them for laying out so clearly and honestly, and in some cases at a serious personal cost, exactly what the effect of dramatic tax cuts would be.

I want to tell B.C. families: our choices are very clear. We won't run a deficit. We will balance the books. We won't bring in broad-based dramatic tax cuts. We will keep B.C.'s taxes among the lowest in the country. We won't cut services. We will improve health care and expand education opportunities. This is the way forward. Choices like these will ensure that the quality of life we enjoy that's so important to our economic success is maintained and improved for all British Columbians in the years to come.

Last fall, *Maclean's* magazine called B.C. Canada's education province. This is the area of our government achievements that makes me proudest personally. I was an instructor in our college system before I entered politics, and when I leave politics, I'll be returning to the education system. But it's an education system that is immensely improved compared to the one I left. When I return to Prince George, I may be teaching a course or two at a university that didn't even exist when I was elected. I'll be in a community where young people no longer have to leave their homes and families in order to complete a degree. I'll be working with students who are paying the second-lowest tuition fees in all of Canada.

When this government was elected, it inherited an education system that had sat on the back burner for decades. Our schools were underfunded. We had children jammed into more than 3,000 portables. Our colleges and universities had high tuition fees and the second-lowest participation rate in the country. Today our public schools get more money per student than in any other province. Full-time university enrolment is growing at nearly ten times the national average. Tuition fees have been frozen for five straight years, making them the second lowest in Canada.

Our government came to office determined to make B.C. the education province, with both high quality and open access, and, Mr. Speaker, we've done it.

This budget, Budget 2001, devotes 28 percent of total spending to meeting the needs of students -- to funding teachers, schools, colleges, universities, and skilled trades and training opportunities in our publicly funded education system. Next year our government will increase funding to education in B.C. by $312 million. We will also invest $505 million in capital funding to build and improve schools, colleges, universities and institutes.

Why have we made education such a priority when other provinces have not? We have done so because education is the key to ensuring that our daughters and sons can succeed and make good lives for themselves and also because when we invest in education, we invest in our future. Education is simply the best economic investment a government can make.

As I said to our university presidents at the University of B.C. last September, our goal isn't just to teach facts and formulas. We have a larger, often unspoken, goal of teaching young people how to think critically, how to think for themselves, because only those who are capable of critical, independent thought are capable of moving us forward as an economy and as a society.

Today in B.C. we need those critical thinkers more than at any time in our history, and here's why. A strong resource sector will always be an important part of our economy and part of our identity as a province. But the world around us is changing. Technology advances so quickly that even our brightest innovators don't truly know where the future will take us.

But one thing is certain. Today our natural resources -- the keys to our future, to prosperity in British Columbia -- are not just trees and minerals but knowledge and skills and ideas. The place where those resources first develop -- the incubator for innovation, for the new technology, for the future itself -- is our education system: our schools, universities, colleges and institutes. That's why we've made such a concerted effort to drive up the quality of education from kindergarten to the post-secondary level.

In British Columbia over the past nine years we've built new schools at the rate of one every 19 days. We've cut class sizes in the early grades to give young children the individual attention they need in those critical years. We've hired 4,000 new teachers over the past ten years and replaced 658 portables with permanent classrooms just since 1998.

We've created six new career technical centres, where young people are allowed to kick-start their training and access up to one year of tuition-free study in a trade or technology while they complete their high school diplomas. We've wired every public school and every campus in this province to the Internet and connected many remote communities for the first time as well.

We've opened three new universities and created 40,000 post-secondary spaces across B.C., including 2,000 spaces earmarked for high-tech. And we've done something that no other province in the country has done: frozen those college and university fees for five years. Today, as a result, a B.C. student graduates with at least $7,000 less debt than the average Canadian student.

But we haven't opened those doors at the expense of quality. The latest *Maclean's*survey of universities ranks B.C. institutions at or near the top in every category in the country. We refuse to put that record at risk and close the door on our economic future for the sake of dramatic tax cuts. Now is simply not the time to stop the teaching and learning. Now is the time to build on our success and invest in our young people.

Today I am increasing funding to B.C.'s elementary and secondary schools by $169 million -- our government's tenth straight year of increased education funding. This will allow our schools to meet our classroom commitment: no more than 20 students in every kindergarten class; no more than 22 in grades 1, 2 or 3. It also means we can expand or replace 22 schools and make improvements to another 190 this year.

As well, schools that need seismic upgrading will have access to a $123 million fund over the next two years to make public facilities safer. Last week B.C. hosted a meeting of North American seismic experts, and I'm pleased to tell you that they confirmed that the approach B.C. is taking is the right one in dealing with this issue.

This budget also funds five additional career technical centres in Vancouver, the Okanagan, north Vancouver Island, the Pacific Northwest and the Fraser delta. And this budget takes a visionary step forward in post-secondary education. Instead of freezing tuition fees for a sixth year, we're cutting tuition fees by 5 percent.

We understand that this initiative must not come at the expense of quality. The tuition cut won't take a single dollar out of the system, because I'm raising post-secondary funding by 8 percent -- an increase of $143 million. It will mean more than 5,000 new student spaces in our universities and colleges. It will continue to support an expanded package of financial aid that allows B.C. students to graduate with some of the lowest debt loads in the country.

The demand for skilled workers in Canada is growing. In the next ten years 60 percent of the jobs will be in skills, trades and technology. There are already vacancies in our province, and I believe -- this government believes -- that those B.C. positions should be filled by skilled B.C. workers.

With this budget, B.C. will embark on a plan to double the number of apprenticeships and skilled trades training spaces over the next four years to 50,000 spaces. That's our assurance that when the skill shortage hits -- and we know it will -- B.C. will be ready not just to ride it out but to thrive and prosper. The Premier set our sights high with his call to make B.C. a home of opportunity for everyone. But I know that with the talent and energy and determination of our young people, along with the support of a government that believes in them, it's a challenge that we will meet.

It's been said that the quality of a society is judged by how it treats those citizens who need help most. That's both a social and an economic imperative -- social because fairness is one of our defining values as Canadians and as British Columbians, and economic because when we fail to use the talents and imagination of every member of our society, we sell ourselves short, and we all lose out. Anyone who isn't prepared to address the needs of the least advantaged and the least fortunate simply isn't prepared to govern. Government must not walk away from its social responsibilities.

That is why we introduced the B.C. family bonus a few years ago, an innovative program to help low-income working families and reduce child poverty. That program has now become the model for all of Canada. It's why, in the last budget, I announced the groundbreaking new approach to providing parents with safe, affordable before- and after-school child care. We are now in the second year of the Premier's four-year program to increase the number of child care spaces in our province to 85,000 -- double what it was in 1992.

In this budget, I've set aside an additional $45 million for Child Care B.C. The expansion means their program will find spaces for nearly 33,000 children in before- and after-school care and save their parents up to $1,100 per child each year. We are also offering a modest improvement in the combined B.C. family bonus and national child benefit. It will increase by $72, to $1,332 per child per year.

We've put a special focus on children living in poverty. The budget sets aside an additional $3.5 million for our in-school meal program for children in need -- a first step in meeting the Premier's commitment to double that program in four years. We're increasing funding by $27 million -- one half of which has been provided by the federal government -- for early childhood intervention initiatives, so we can address minor problems in children's lives before they become major ones. Roughly half that amount will help aboriginal children, both on and off reserve, to get a good start in life.

The budget also includes an additional funding of $60 million to assist British Columbians living with disabilities. This means more people with disabilities will receive benefits.

Hon. Speaker, I believe that one of the great things about this province is our commitment to a society where we can all make a contribution, where we all have opportunities to succeed and prosper. This budget moves us closer than ever to achieving that goal.

Our highest priority in this budget is health care. Our public health care system has long been one of the best things about being Canadian. I know that from difficult personal experience. I was 22 years old. I was a student in the United States, newly married, trying to get a start in life. One night I doubled over in pain and ended up in hospital. It was acute appendicitis, and I had emergency surgery. There were complications. I spent three weeks in hospital. But I was young, and I recovered fairly quickly from the surgery.

What I did not recover from, for a long time, was the hospital bill. It nearly bankrupted Hazel and me, just as we were starting out. I nearly had to abandon my education. It's all too easy to find Americans who tell you similar stories. Today, as we speak, more than 40 million of them lack any sort of health insurance. But it doesn't happen in Canada -- not anymore, not since medicare.

That's why it's crucial to make the choices that improve our publicly funded health care and don't put on us on the slide -- intended or otherwise -- towards the American private health care model. Our publicly funded health care system is the most important service we have. But I know there are places where we have to do better. Years of federal cuts on top of rising costs for new treatments and prescription drugs have taken a serious toll, and health care is under stress, not just in B.C. but right across Canada. Even though we've increased health care spending every year since we were elected by a total of $3.8 billion, we haven't been able to keep up with growing needs.

Nothing is more important to this government than improving health care. No priority is higher in this budget. This budget devotes 52 percent of new program spending to meeting the needs of patients, to funding doctors and nurses, hospitals and services in our public health care system. This year our government will increase funding to health care in B.C. by $959 million. I want British Columbians to know that more than two-thirds of this increase is dedicated to regional programs in their communities.

That's $681 million for services that include everything from new continuing-care beds in Port Hardy and Keremeos to home support services in the North Okanagan, funding and operating a new MRI machine in Prince George and a CT scanner in the Comox Valley, more cardiac care in Kelowna, more renal dialysis in Victoria and more cancer treatment on Vancouver Island. Good, reliable public health care is part of being a British Columbian, and that must hold true no matter where you live in this province.

This budget funds the largest capital investment in health care in the history of British Columbia -- more than $1.6 billion over the next four years. That will mean new and expanded hospitals, a new cancer agency in the Fraser Valley and more facilities in communities right across B.C. These are the choices this government has made, and that's why broad-based dramatic tax cuts are the wrong direction for British Columbia.

The past year has seen real progress on health care. In the spring the Premier went to work with the other provinces to convince Ottawa to restore some of the funding that had been cut, and that effort has produced positive results. In September we put that money directly into hospitals and medical equipment, and in December we launched the health action plan to train and hire more nurses, buy critical equipment and provide more community and long-term care. All told, last fall we invested $130 million from the federal government for equipment and added $370 million from provincial surpluses this year. Now, with the resources this budget makes available, we can make continued progress towards the level of quality and service that British Columbians deserve.

Let me be clear. I firmly believe that if we do not do this, if we fail to invest the funds that health care needs, then we will open up the back door to U.S.-style private care. As long as we sit on this side of the House, that must never happen in British Columbia.

Our first priority must be to solve the nursing shortage. Every province in Canada is facing it, but that's no excuse. We have to act, and act now. The health action plan includes a strategy to attract more British Columbians to the nursing profession, to educate and retain more of the nurses who are already on the job and to bring in more nurses from elsewhere. This budget will provide the necessary funding to meet those commitments and to pay nurses what they're worth.

In Budget 2000, we funded 400 new post-secondary spaces for training nurses. We delivered on that commitment, and now we're going further. Next year we'll create a further 400 spaces for nurses, and in addition, funding of $12 million will increase the number of nurses working in B.C. and help us educate and retain existing nurses. That's a direct boost to front-line care in communities right across B.C.

Families in those communities also deserve to have doctors ready and willing to help them if the need arises. It doesn't matter if you live in Cranbrook or Kitimat or Kelowna. I know, as you do, that doctors, especially in the north where I live, are looking for more compensation. This budget funds the health action plan commitment to B.C. doctors, and that includes doctors in B.C.'s rural and remote communities.

Not only does this plan offer incentives to attract and keep doctors in those communities, it creates new residencies for physicians and other health care professionals. Our goal is more doctors with more skills helping more B.C. families.

But nurses and doctors aren't the only care providers that we need to consider. Our health system relies on dedicated, caring people at all levels, and I challenge the members opposite to recognize that those contributions do include everyone from orderlies to specialists and, yes, to housekeeping staff and toilet cleaners.

We designed the B.C. health action plan to address bottlenecks within the system, bottlenecks that can delay care. This budget provides $2.8 million for additional intensive care and critical care beds and $8.9 million for transitional or flex beds in acute care. It makes a further investment of $70 million to continue our program of renewing and purchasing vital twenty-first century diagnostic and treatment equipment.

There's more to the health action plan than increasing resources. It's also about making every health care dollar go further and do more. That means preventing illness and injury wherever possible. To that end, the budget provides $2.2 million for increased vaccination and immunization, and it funds our innovative new "B.C. HealthGuide" program, including the NurseLine and on-line services. This gives people the information they need to make informed decisions about their own health.

It also means enhancing home support and nursing for the elderly, the chronically ill and the disabled. This budget provides a 10 percent increase in home support and nursing. That's $39 million more to help British Columbians live independently in their own communities surrounded by the people who love them. It increases funding for enhanced palliative home care by $2.9 million, to help those whose illnesses cannot be cured live in comfort and dignity.

We are investing, as well, in health knowledge with the creation of the Dr. Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research. Our investment of $110 million from the 2000-01 surplus will enhance the cutting-edge medical research being conducted here in B.C. and will help B.C. attract more of the brightest research minds in the world.

Let me make something else clear. Access to health services in B.C. means access to a complete range of services, and that includes access to therapeutic abortion services for women who choose to use them. It also includes new developments in reproductive health, such as the morning-after pill. We must never go back to the days when politicians used public policy to impose their private views on the women of this province. Those services must be safeguarded, they must be expanded, and they will be funded in this budget and in every future budget this government has the privilege to bring before the House.

Hon. Speaker, I want to address another issue where there is a growing need for services. This budget includes funding for B.C.'s mental health plan. It increases it to $31.5 million. That's more than triple last year's investment and will mean real and immediate improvements in the level of mental health care in communities throughout B.C.

Hon. Speaker, this budget puts more nurses, more doctors, more beds, more equipment and more services in B.C.'s hospitals and communities. It respects the differing needs of our regions. It reaffirms that in B.C. we're strengthening public health care, not sliding toward an American-style two-tier system. The Premier has put it best: "As long as we have anything to say about it, B.C. will never have a health system that checks your credit rating before it checks your pulse."

The province we live in today is a strong one. It's moving forward; it's growing steadily. I believe government has a responsibility to meet the needs of a growing and innovative economy and to support continuing prosperity and opportunity for every British Columbian, no matter who you are or where in B.C. you call your home. That means better education and training. It means ensuring a skilled creative workforce. The commitments in this budget to education and training, along with the investments we've already made, will provide world-class skills and education opportunities for British Columbians, and they will build on our impressive strengths and emerging technologies. It means a fair and equitable B.C. We must ensure that all British Columbians have an opportunity to participate in and benefit from our economy.

This budget's commitments to expanded and improved child care, to support for families through the B.C. family bonus and to assistance for people living with disabilities mark our determination that no one should be left behind. It means supporting public health care. Our publicly funded and publicly run system is a competitive advantage to every business located in Canada. This budget invests nearly $1 billion in additional funding to ensure that communities right across our province can offer high-quality health services to the workers who live there.

It means protecting our competitive energy prices -- electricity prices. B.C. has enjoyed, for the past seven years, stable prices for our electricity, prices that are the third-lowest in North America, prices that offer an important competitive edge for our businesses. Our government is committed to maintaining that advantage, so that businesses in B.C. never face the kind of crisis currently affecting companies in Alberta and California. Only by maintaining a strong public utility and rejecting both privatization and deregulation can we ensure that B.C. continues to have the power to grow.

We must also commit ourselves to sustainability. Finding the balance between protecting our environmental heritage and addressing the needs of the working forest is critical, both to ensuring the health of our forests and to reassuring our markets. Our forest industry faces tough competition, no question about it. The Forest Practices Code is an environmental warranty that we offer to our customers. Gut it and you gut our forest industry as well. Keep it strong, and we hold onto those markets, we build customer confidence, and we ensure that our forests are producing timber and creating jobs forever.

There are other economic benefits to protecting the environment. It gives us new opportunities in the emerging field of environmental technologies. Our world-class parks and wilderness areas have become prime destinations, and they attract not only visitors but high-tech workers and employers who come to stay and put down roots. Good environmental policy is good economic policy, and this budget is firmly grounded in the value of sustainability.

We must have economic certainty around our land base, and that means settling the historic question of the claims of B.C.'s first nations. This is fundamentally a matter of justice, but it is also vital to the future of our regional and resource economies. An independent accounting firm has calculated that unsettled land claims create enough uncertainty to cost up to $1 billion in lost investments and jobs. That billion-dollar shadow cast by the risk of confrontation and division darkens the future of communities of every part of B.C.

Fair and balanced land claims can lift that shadow. They can offer the kind of certainty that encourages investment for the future. They can bring opportunities for growth and self-reliance to aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities alike. And they mean that tax dollars that British Columbians have contributed to our federal government can, at long last, come back to our province to be invested in our regions and communities.

Finally, we come to our quality of life, which has long been a source of pride to British Columbians, and it's also a source of real economic strength. We have healthy, safe and vibrant communities, and there are places where talented workers want to live and raise children. They're in places where employers want to invest and locate.

And we build those communities. We build them with hospitals and schools, with safe drinking water, and this budget funds legislation to ensure a safe, healthy supply of drinking water throughout B.C. We build those communities with physical infrastructure. In the new economy, we also build them with digital infrastructure, and this budget includes a $1.4 million initiative to include public access to the Internet in rural B.C. We build those communities with environmental infrastructure, like the $10 million this budget invests to upgrade trails, roads and campsites in B.C.'s parks.

Mr. Speaker, this budget -- like the government -- takes a comprehensive view of a modern, dynamic economy. We choose to see the big picture in all its dimensions instead of the narrow view that sees dramatic tax cuts as the one and only priority. That narrow view would see the chaos of deregulation and privatization. It would see quality education restricted to those who can afford to buy it. It would see our markets vanish as we gut the environmental guarantees our customers seek. It would see regional economies adrift in turmoil and division as land claims go unresolved. Our government has made a different choice, a better choice, a choice for today's families.

This budget presents a vision of a province British Columbians have told me they want to live in. It's a province where the air and water are clean, where our forests are healthy. It's a province of mountains and valleys so beautiful they take your breath away even after you've seen them a thousand times. It's a province of diversity, a growing place of opportunity, of hope. It's a province of compassion that cares for the least fortunate and protects the vulnerable, a province of the future -- modern, forward-looking, confident. This is our British Columbia.

Hon. Speaker, members of the House, we've balanced the books -- last year, this year and next year. We've kept personal income taxes among the lowest in Canada. We've put new resources into health care as our top priority. We're making B.C. the education province and cutting tuition. We're making social justice for all an important part of the social fabric of the province -- a province of diversity and opportunity for all. I'm proud to table the 2001-02 budget -- a budget for today's families.