



BALANCED BUDGET 2004 SPEECH

Introduction

Mr. Speaker.

Today marks a turning point in the history of British Columbia — a day that future generations will recall with pride.

This is the day we turn the corner; the day where we can see that — as great as this province has been; as great as it is today; the best of British Columbia is yet to come.

Today, we take a major step towards a better future — tabling a balanced budget, on time and on target... helping to lay a solid foundation for bringing out the best: The best in our economy; the best in our society; the best in our communities; and the best in all our people.

British Columbians deserve nothing less — especially considering the year we've just come through together.

BC was tested last year by an unforeseeable and unparalleled string of natural disasters that could have brought lesser people to their knees.

British Columbians were the first in Canada to deal with SARS.

We felt, along with the rest of the country, the impact of mad cow disease.

We endured a major drought, flooding and the most horrific forest fire season in our history.

But British Columbians passed that test. Because 2003 was also a year of triumph.

We faced some of the toughest challenges we have ever seen. And the people of British Columbia rose to the occasion.

Today marks a turning point in the history of British Columbia ...

This is the day we turn the corner ... helping to lay a solid foundation for bringing out the best

... the best of British Columbia is yet to come.

The Olympic bid brought out an undeniable spirit of strength and confidence

The people of this province have laid a strong foundation for future growth, opportunity and prosperity

This is not the time to turn back or change course

Government is making more than \$1.3 billion worth of new investments in our province and people

And, last year, we triumphed in a different, but no less significant, way as well.

We did it with the very same hard work and perseverance — the same dedication to a common cause and vision — that British Columbians are known for around the world.

We captured the dream of hosting the 2010 Olympics — right here, in British Columbia.

2003 brought out the best in us.

The Olympic bid brought out an undeniable spirit of strength and confidence; and a spirit of pride in what we can accomplish as a province.

British Columbians can feel the same kind of confidence in their future today — as we table a budget that is balanced this year, next year, and every year thereafter.

The first time I stood here as Minister of Finance — in July 2001 — I told the house that we were facing very serious challenges.

The province had for years been spending more than it was taking in. And an independent fiscal review panel told us that, if we continued down the same old path of poor planning and overspending, we would face a tidal wave of deficits year after year that would destroy our province.

I said at the time that we could overcome that challenge... with a clear plan to balance our budget by revitalizing our economy and getting our costs under control, while protecting funding for health care and education. And here we are, Mr. Speaker — as planned, as promised.

The people of this province have laid a strong foundation for future growth, opportunity and prosperity.

This is not the time to turn back or change course.

What got us here were tough decisions, hard work and discipline.

And because of that, today I am able to announce that, government is making more than \$1.3 billion worth of new investments in our province and people.

We're investing more in improved health services, in a better education system, and in greater access to advanced education.

We're investing more in services for children, youth and families, and more into opening up the Heartlands of our province to renewed economic growth.

With these investments, we are building for the future.

And, at the same time, we will balance the budget — this year, next year and every year thereafter.

Economic and Fiscal Update/Sound Fiscal Management

A balanced budget has always been a part of our vision — a vision we first set out in detail in 2001.

BC had just endured a decade of decline, and people — understandably — had lost their hope for a better future... for themselves, for their children, for our province.

They were giving up on British Columbia.

Our young people couldn't find work and were leaving the province. We were losing our future.

While the rest of the country was doing well, BC was not, and a steady flow of people were leaving, heading east or south.

That was what we inherited. That is how the province looked when we came to office, less than three years ago.

The Premier promised to turn things around; to build a new foundation for a brighter future. And, Mr. Speaker, he has.

Today, as planned, we are tabling a balanced budget — with a \$100 million surplus. And this is something we've achieved under legislated Generally Accepted Accounting Principles.

Now that may sound straightforward, but it is a major achievement — something no other province in Canada has accomplished.

It means the budget is balanced including the broader public sector — not just in ministries and Crown corporations, but schools, universities, colleges and hospitals.

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... the budget is balanced including the broader public sector — not just in ministries and Crown corporations, but schools, universities, colleges and hospitals

... we're projecting surpluses in each of the next three fiscal years

As the economy continues gaining strength, overall funding to ministries will increase by more than \$1.3 billion

... we are using year-end savings from lower debt-service costs to meet a significant part of our financial commitment to the 2010 Olympics

Nothing is left out. Because we passed a law that says the government has to tell the truth about how it handles taxpayers' money. There is no longer the ability in BC for governments to push a deficit onto Crown corporations or organizations such as school districts.

The budget we are presenting today shows the whole picture. And Mr. Speaker, it is a picture we're proud to show the world.

In spite of all the challenges we faced last year from forest fires, floods and changes in equalization payments...

In spite of all those blows — impacts that amounted to more than \$1 billion in additional, unexpected costs...

In spite of that, we expect to end 2003/04 with a deficit of only \$1.7 billion — excluding schools, universities, colleges and hospitals. That's \$590 million better than the target set in last year's budget.

Looking forward, we're projecting surpluses in each of the next three fiscal years. And we have cushions of more than \$400 million each year.

These numbers are based in part on economic growth projections of 2.8 per cent in 2004 and 3.1 per cent in each of the following two years. Independent private sector forecasters expect even better growth.

As the economy continues gaining strength, overall funding to ministries will increase by more than \$1.3 billion. And, because we've managed prudently, we also have savings — unspent funds — for the year just ending.

We're refocusing some of these savings — \$66 million — to help:

- address waitlists and meet other pressing needs in health care,
- offset maintenance costs for post-secondary institutions,
- improve literacy, and
- establish new arts and music initiatives under the mandate of Legacies Now.

In addition, we are using year-end savings from lower debt-service costs to meet a significant part of our financial commitment to the 2010 Olympics — a showcase for all the best that British Columbia has to offer.

Spirit of 2010

Mr. Speaker. Hosting the Olympics is an honour, and an amazing opportunity to tell the world our story...

The story of a province whose citizens are confident; secure about the future and their place in the world;

A province with a thriving economy; a vibrant business sector; a healthy environment; and endless potential for future growth.

It's the story of a place where everyone, in every region, has the opportunities they need to bring out the best in themselves, their community and their province...

A place with an enviably high standard of living... and even higher hopes for the future.

That is the spirit of 2010. And that is the story we want to tell the world about the people and the province of British Columbia.

We also want to tell the story of good fiscal management and, to that end, we're moving now to meet our Olympic funding commitments.

We're investing \$55 million to fully fund our share of the Olympic endowment — offsetting future costs for operating venues.

We are also investing \$51 million as the first installment in our funding commitment for venue construction — and all the jobs and growth that go along with that initiative.

This means we've met 20 per cent of our financial obligations for building venues.

And, Mr. Speaker, most of that investment is from year-end savings — money that was earmarked for servicing the debt... money that, because of prudent fiscal management, we're able to reinvest in economic and service priorities.

These investments are further proof that our plan is working.

So are the improvements we have seen in our economy.

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The 1990s were the decade of decline. This is the decade of opportunity.

The plan we introduced in 2001 — a plan we continue to build on today — was specifically designed to turn things around

We're on track to meet our commitment to reduce the red tape and regulatory burden ...

Revitalizing the Economy

Since we introduced our economic plan in 2001, we have seen a major, positive change.

The 1990s were the decade of decline. This is the decade of opportunity.

At the turn of the millennium, our province was in trouble.

Businesses were closing. Investors were leaving. And young people were choosing to build their futures somewhere else.

The jobless rate was rising. Disposable incomes were falling behind. And, in 1999, as we now well know, BC became a have-not province.

The plan we introduced in 2001 — a plan we continue to build on today — was specifically designed to turn things around through a series of bold, decisive actions, including:

- cutting personal income tax rates for all British Columbians by 25 per cent;
- cutting the corporate income tax rate from 16.5 per cent to 13.5 per cent;
- eliminating the corporate capital tax for general corporations; and
- eliminating the sales tax on production machinery and equipment.

That was just a start.

We've also put in place targeted plans to revitalize key economic sectors.

We've updated employment standards.

We've restructured Crown corporations.

We've eliminated almost 90,000 needless regulations. And we're on track to meet our commitment to reduce the red tape and regulatory burden on British Columbians by one-third by June of this year.

These are just a few examples. We've achieved a great deal. We've laid a strong foundation for a prosperous economy and, with this budget, we are building for the future.

That means, first of all, building on the Heartlands Economic Strategy the Premier announced last year to strengthen every part of our economy, starting with our number one industry, forestry.

Forestry

As part of our Forestry Revitalization Plan, we're investing \$176 million over the next three years to expand and enhance the BC Timber Sales Program.

Its mandate is to get more value from our forests — and help ensure that more people, and more communities, benefit.

The program markets Crown timber competitively, at auction — establishing a credible reference point for costs and pricing, as we implement a market-based stumpage system.

The timber is harvested mainly by smaller operators, including many Heartlands communities and First Nations. They will have increasing opportunities to benefit from our public forests in the next three years.

We will increase the amount of timber marketed through the program from 13 per cent to 20 per cent of the annual allowable cut — creating new opportunities for business growth, and supporting local economies.

We will also invest \$6 million over three years in small scale salvage operations — creating further opportunities for First Nations and other communities that want an enhanced role in this evolving industry.

As well, we will invest the same amount — \$6 million over three years — to make a modest increase in the annual allowable cut ... to allow for timely harvest of timber damaged by pine beetles and fires.

At the same time, we will continue to build on the Premier's efforts to open new markets for our forest products in China and elsewhere — and continue working with the industry and the federal government to solve the softwood lumber dispute.

We will work with people and communities to strengthen BC's forest sector. And, Mr. Speaker, we'll do the same with one of our fastest-growing industries — oil and gas.

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With this budget, we're building on our Oil and Gas Development Strategy — helping to expand investment throughout British Columbia

We are investing a total of \$1.3 billion over the next three years to improve transportation infrastructure

The \$135 million Northern Development Initiative ... will be in the North, of the North and for the North

Oil and Gas

With this budget, we're building on our Oil and Gas Development Strategy — helping to expand investment throughout British Columbia.

Last year alone, drilling activity increased by almost 40 per cent. And, to keep that momentum going, we're investing in:

- targeted royalty credits
- infrastructure development, and
- programs to give more young British Columbians the skills they need to work in this well-paying industry.

We are also dedicating \$17 million over three years to lay a firm foundation for the offshore oil and gas initiative.

And we will continue to work with the industry to upgrade roads and open up access to energy resources throughout the Heartlands.

Transportation

Consistent with our goal of opening up the province, we are also building on the transportation plan the Premier announced a year ago.

In keeping with the plan, we are investing a total of \$1.3 billion over the next three years to improve transportation infrastructure. \$836 million of that is dedicated specifically to projects in the Heartlands.

Our plan also includes benefits from the \$1 billion BC Rail Investment Partnership agreement.

The partnership delivers greater capacity, faster transit times and lower rates for interline shippers. It also eliminates the BC Rail debt, which was costing close to \$30 million a year in interest alone.

On top of that, the agreement supports a \$135 million Northern Development Initiative, headquartered in Prince George and mandated to leverage funds to make sure that every community — and the entire North — benefits from the partnership agreement.

The initiative will be in the North, of the North and for the North — shaped by Northern priorities, creating opportunities and generating new investment for the future. It will:

- support transportation improvements;
- maximize Olympic opportunities in the regions;
- enhance efforts to eradicate the pine beetle;
- help to make communities more sustainable; and
- foster growth in sectors such as forestry, energy, tourism, small business and mining.

The investment partnership also provides funding for a \$15 million BC Rail First Nations Benefits Trust, supporting the initiatives of 25 First Nations, all along the BC Rail corridor.

The trust will be run by First Nations people and used as they see fit to support economic development, educational advancement and cultural renewal.

And this is just one example of our government's approach to building stronger relationships with First Nations across British Columbia.

First Nations

We've made remarkable progress since 2001, with three agreements-in-principle signed and approved and two more pending — more progress towards BC treaties than we've seen in over a century.

We have also committed up to \$120 million for forestry revenue-sharing agreements over the next three years — including a new agreement with the province's largest First Nation, the Cowichan.

We've:

- extended direct invitations to 18 First Nations to apply for rights to millions of cubic metres of Crown timber;
- completed more than 90 resource development agreements;
- invested over \$20 million to create new opportunities for First Nations in oil and gas;
- moved ahead with unprecedented efforts to strengthen family ties, cultural awareness and childhood development among aboriginal children — and to return to aboriginal communities their rightful leadership role in child protection; and
- we have instituted a series of annual meetings between the cabinet and the First Nations Summit — to further support our efforts to build a new and better relationship.

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First Nations people are playing a growing role in everything from aquaculture to forestry to tourism ...

This government recognizes and values the unique contributions that First Nations make to our society, economy and way of life

We are moving forward to build a strong, new relationship based on reconciliation, mutual respect and economic participation

Across the province, First Nations people are playing a growing role in everything from aquaculture to forestry to tourism — creating jobs and opportunities and hope in communities that, for too long, governments ignored or overlooked.

Those days are over. This government recognizes and values the unique contributions that First Nations make to our society, economy and way of life — every single day.

I would like to say to the people of the First Nations: You are an integral part of our province. Your successes are our successes. And we want our relationship with First Nations people to reflect that reality.

With this budget, we are moving away from ad hoc support for First Nations' economic development initiatives. Instead, we are moving forward to build a strong, new relationship based on reconciliation, mutual respect and economic participation.

Through revenue sharing, land transfers, forest tenures, resource development and other agreements, we are working to help ensure that First Nations have the tools they need to bring out the best in their communities.

Because we can't bring out the best in British Columbia unless we bring out the best in everyone.

Bringing out the Best in Everyone

We've moved quickly and decisively to strengthen and revitalize our province, and our economy. But we haven't done it blindly. We've monitored our progress and made adjustments where needed to ensure the best outcomes for citizens.

For example, last year, after a mid-term service plan review, we increased the budget for the Ministry of Children and Family Development. We will continue to provide extra funding — above the base amounts in last year's plan — of more than \$120 million in 2004/05, and more than \$115 million in each of the following two years.

With this budget we are also increasing funding to the Ministry of Human Resources — recognizing changes in the make-up of the income assistance caseload.

Since we came to office, the number of people able to work who are on welfare has fallen by close to 60 per cent, as more and more employable people have found work.

Today, a large and growing share of those receiving income assistance are people with disabilities, and those who face persistent multiple barriers to employment.

These are people who cannot move quickly or easily into jobs. They receive a higher rate of income assistance, and we owe it to them to continue to work together to overcome their challenges.

To help ensure they get the support they need, we will increase the ministry's budget plan by \$80 million a year. Because every British Columbian deserves an opportunity to bring out the best of his or her potential.

And the best way to do that is by finding employment.

Improving the Investment Climate

BC has created more than 84,000 new jobs since December 2002, a little over a year ago. That's twice the national growth rate, and makes this province Canada's number-one job growth engine.

Today, I am announcing changes that will help us keep that lead position by making our investment climate even more attractive.

First, we are expanding the International Financial Business Program to help bring jobs and growth to communities across BC.

The program was originally designed to boost Vancouver's financial services sector. Today, we are moving to allow a broader range of businesses to participate — and to allow them to locate anywhere in British Columbia.

We are also expanding the list of activities that qualify for tax refunds under the program. Effective September 1, 2004, corporations carrying on international financial activities will be eligible for refunds in areas including:

- treasury functions
- back-office operations
- TV and film distribution, and
- one-sided foreign exchange transactions.

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Every British Columbian deserves an opportunity to bring out the best of his or her potential

... we are expanding the International Financial Business Program to help bring jobs and growth to communities across BC

We are extending the Scientific Research and Experimental Development Tax Credit for a further five years

These changes will further improve our investment climate

Effective immediately, we are raising the threshold for the Home Owner Grant

The second change I'm announcing is consistent with a key recommendation from the Premier's Technology Council. We are extending the Scientific Research and Experimental Development Tax Credit for a further five years.

The credit provides an income tax incentive of 10 per cent of qualifying expenditures — fuelling growth in emerging sectors such as biotechnology, fuel cells and software development.

Since its inception, this credit has helped generate an increase of about \$700 million a year in qualifying research and development investment.

Extending the credit will build on this record — and further our goal of making British Columbia one of the top 10 high tech centres in the world.

These changes will further improve our investment climate.

So will the progress we're making with First Nations, which is bringing certainty back to our land base.

Investors want stability. That, increasingly, is what we have to offer in British Columbia.

And homeowners need stability as well.

Improving Tax Fairness

The real estate and housing boom we're seeing now shows immense confidence in our economy. It underlines the fact that people are moving here, and building their futures in BC, once again.

But higher housing prices also affect affordability. And a number of people — especially seniors on fixed incomes — are worried that they could lose some or all of the Home Owner Grant.

Today, we have good news for those British Columbians.

Effective immediately, we are raising the threshold for the grant from \$525,000 to \$585,000. That is the point at which the value of the grant starts to be reduced.

People who get the basic grant will still receive a benefit for homes valued up to \$632,000 — and seniors will receive at least a portion of the grant for homes valued up to \$659,500.

With these changes, 95 per cent of BC homeowners will still receive the full grant.

That adds stability — as does the stronger management we've demonstrated since 2001.

We have a balanced budget — and a law that requires us to keep it balanced, year after year.

Provincial costs are under control. Taxes are competitive.

And we have a strengthening economy, with growth across a wide range of sectors and communities.

Energy alone directly employs 35,000 people, helping to diversify the BC economy — not to mention growth in sectors from high technology to tourism to agriculture.

This diversification has helped us to weather the economic storms of the past few years. And we will continue to work with the people of British Columbia to realize our vision, generating jobs, growth and opportunities that continue to strengthen every single BC community.

No wonder people are moving here again.

No wonder business incorporations registered their biggest increase last year in almost a decade.

No wonder, in its latest survey, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business found that small business owners are more optimistic in BC than in any other province in the country.

And no wonder British Columbians' confidence is on the rise.

Our plan is working, people are working, the province's budget is balanced, and we're forecasting surpluses in each of the next three years.

There's no question; there is no doubt — BC is back.

Putting Patients and Students First

Now — as promised — we can make new investments in the programs and services people want and need.

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95 per cent of BC
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***We will continue to
work with the people
of British Columbia
to realize our vision***

***There's no question;
there is no doubt
— BC is back.***

Since the spring of 2001, BC has added \$2 billion to the health-care system

Today, more than 90 per cent of the nurses who train here stay here to practice

We've placed 180 doctors and 85 nurses in vacant positions, through our continuing strategy to recruit and retain health professionals

38,000 additional surgeries and other major medical procedures were performed in BC last year

Mr. Speaker, since our first day in office, we've put patients and students first.

We've protected health care and education funding. In fact, every year, we have worked to increase funding in these priority areas.

Health Care

Since the spring of 2001, BC has added \$2 billion to the healthcare system.

We are among the top three provinces with the highest healthcare funding per person.

But funding is only part of the picture.

We've also done the hard work of restructuring health care delivery and management — to make sure that more of every health care dollar goes directly into patient care.

We've streamlined the system, reducing the number of health authority bureaucracies from 52 to six — saving millions of dollars a year that now go into patient care.

We've implemented strategies to increase the number of doctors and nurses in the province — and they're working.

We've funded 1,800 new nursing training spaces since 2001. And today, more than 90 per cent of the nurses who train here stay here to practice, in spite of the intense competition for their talents from employers in the US, Europe and elsewhere.

We're training more doctors, too. By next year, we will have doubled the number of first-year spaces in our medical schools.

And, province-wide, we've placed 180 doctors and 85 nurses in vacant positions, through our continuing strategy to recruit and retain health professionals.

38,000 additional surgeries and other major medical procedures were performed in BC last year. That's an increase of 4.5 per cent from the year before.

And we're seeing real improvements in patient care across the province — many of which result from more efficient use of resources.

For example, in the last year alone:

- the number of mental health beds in Prince George has doubled;
- a new, permanent MRI in Kelowna is providing scans for up to 20 patients a day;
- a community clinic in Nanaimo has tripled its capacity for kidney dialysis;
- an eye centre amalgamation in Chilliwack has opened up operating room resources for other surgical services at MSA Hospital and Chilliwack General;
- work is under way to double the size of the emergency room at Royal Inland Hospital in Kamloops; and
- all across BC, new and enhanced technologies are bringing patients and specialists together more efficiently.

With this budget, we will continue to build on our progress in health care — increasing annual funding an additional \$1 billion by 2006/07.

As well, we are expecting an additional \$130 million from the federal government in each of the next two years. Details of that funding are still being finalized, and will be added to the health care budget when they're certain.

We will put these dollars directly into measures to further improve patient care.

There are no additional funds for wages hikes for doctors or nurses. They have already received major increases in the past two years that make them among the highest-paid in Canada.

This time, the new money goes to patients.

It's their turn. It's only fair.

Mr. Speaker, one of the reasons we're able to balance the budget is that everyone, across BC, has done their part to keep costs under control. Today I want to acknowledge that, and thank them for their efforts.

Almost every ministry has tightened spending.

Government MLAs volunteered to take a five per cent pay cut as soon as we took office.

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We are investing more than \$70 million over three years to increase families' access to early learning and child-care programs

Even though the number of students in our schools is falling, we are boosting funding by \$313 million over three years

By 2004/05, funding per student will be \$530 higher than in 2000/01

Funding for the Premier's office is down this year.

And one of the largest public sector unions in the province — the BC Government and Service Employees Union — has agreed to do its part to keep costs under control.

Many other public sector workers have agreed as well, including 13 bargaining groups that have settled collective agreements in the university sector, four groups in colleges and institutes, and nine groups in Crown corporations.

Tens of thousands of people in the public sector have done their part, and we expect those at the bargaining table in the weeks and months ahead to do their part as well.

Their cooperation will help ensure we keep the budget balanced, and build on our growing reputation as a province with a sound, stable investment climate.

As we see continued growth, we can continue to invest more in services like health care and education.

Education

Mr. Speaker. We have an excellent education system, focused on supporting and improving student achievement.

To help our youngest British Columbians excel — to make sure they start school as ready to learn as possible — we are investing more than \$70 million over three years to increase families' access to early learning and child-care programs — through a continuing partnership with Ottawa.

We are also increasing per student funding for the K-12 education system — just as we have for the past three years.

Even though the number of students in our schools is falling, we are boosting funding by \$313 million over three years.

By 2004/05, funding per student will be \$530 higher than in 2000/01 — and the figure will rise by a further \$107 per student in the following year.

These investments will help schools build on the many successes we have seen in recent years.

These include:

- higher Grade 7 math scores
- improvements in Grade 4s' writing proficiency and in Grade 10s' reading skills
- higher marks on provincial exams, and
- a record-high graduation rate of 79 per cent last year.

These improvements are happening — not because of funding alone, but because — as in health care — we've refocused education, emphasizing student achievement, parent participation and choice.

We've also given districts increased autonomy to shape their schools to better meet the needs of local families. And they are.

For example, in Prince George, Dunster Elementary was struggling with declining enrollment — until they decided to turn it into a magnet school. It's now a school of fine arts, attracting youth from across the district, and giving them new opportunities to apply their talents and build their dreams.

This kind of success is happening province-wide, Mr. Speaker. It's happening in our cities, in our small towns, in high schools, elementary schools, middle schools and newly-minted magnet schools.

And, with this budget, we're taking steps to make schools safer, in the event of a major earthquake.

We're undertaking a province-wide review to assess and update the need for seismic upgrades — and to find the best ways of making those improvements. Funds will flow accordingly, based on needs and priorities.

We are currently allocating \$8 million a year to seismic upgrades for BC schools. This will be boosted by \$15 million a year for minor structural fixes and \$50 million a year for major capital expenditures in 2006/07.

Advanced Education

In addition, funding for advanced education will increase by \$105 million in the next three years — improving student access to higher education in communities across BC.

We've also given districts increased autonomy to shape their schools to better meet the needs of local families

We're taking steps to make schools safer

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We will create almost 12,000 new student spaces by 2007 — rising to more than 25,000 by 2010

We are also looking at new assistance programs ... to reward those students who work hard and complete their programs of study

This is about building for our future.

We will create almost 12,000 new student spaces by 2007 — rising to more than 25,000 by 2010. At that rate, we'll be adding new spaces twice as fast as population growth among 18-29 year olds.

These are vital improvements at a time when the majority of jobs require at least some higher education — and tens of thousands of jobs are sitting vacant every year because we don't have workers with the right skills to fill them.

This is a great investment. But, like all investments, it has a cost.

Some of that is covered by the budget increase I just mentioned. However, in order to start the work of adding new spaces this year, rather than three years down the road, we are also refocusing funds from the current student grant program.

Those funds will go directly to the cost of additional spaces, and to post-secondary institutions.

At the government level, access to student loans will be expanded to ensure that students who need support have the same level of funding.

We are also looking at new assistance programs, such as loan remissions and completion grants to reward those students who work hard and complete their programs of study. And we will be making further announcements in the weeks ahead regarding new access opportunities.

Building for the Future

Mr. Speaker.

This is about building for our future.

This is about a new generation of leaders — a new generation that will build on the work we're doing here today and ensure this province has what it takes to compete — and win — in tomorrow's world, and tomorrow's economy.

This is why it's so important to have a balanced budget.

Not to meet some arbitrary benchmark.

Not to be able to say: We did it.

It's important because, when we manage budgets carefully and properly — when we treat taxpayers' hard-earned dollars with the respect they deserve — we can afford to give our children greater opportunities; to give them an early chance to get ahead and stay ahead...

And we can invest in programs and services that make a real difference for real people every day.

I'm talking about people like Dave Smith and Veronica Healy.

They're just two of the nearly 87,000 British Columbians who've left welfare since this government took office. And, like thousands of others, they've found work and built new lives.

Dave had been struggling for many, many years when he was referred to a job placement agency.

With that support Dave moved, in his words, "from unemployment to full-time employment overnight." Dave says the job is more than just a paycheque. It's given him a whole new direction in his life.

Ms. Healy has a new direction, too. She applied for income assistance after finding the courage to leave an abusive relationship.

With counseling support from a job placement agency and funding to help her upgrade her skills, Veronica landed a job as a tour guide.

She says it's the career of her dreams — after years of adversity.

And, Mr. Speaker, this is exactly what we mean when we talk about bringing out the best in our province and in every single British Columbian.

Conclusion

British Columbians have faced — and overcome — enormous challenges since 2001.

We've proved that when we work together; when we have a clear plan and follow that plan — and don't shy away from the hard decisions — British Columbia has the drive, the spirit and the talent to be nothing short of the best place anywhere to live, work, invest, start a business, or raise a family.

When we treat taxpayers' hard-earned dollars with the respect they deserve — we can afford to give our children greater opportunities

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***We haven't come
all this way to turn
back now.***

***People are, once
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from other parts
of Canada***

In 2010, BC will host the world. And we have a choice about the face we present.

We can move ahead, as we have in recent years, with resolve and confidence — with dedication and purpose. Or we can go back to the old ways of poor planning, high taxation, overspending and downright hostility to business, to investors and to the taxpaying public.

Mr. Speaker. British Columbians have made their choice.

We haven't come all this way to turn back now.

The people of this province are rising to the challenges that life presents to all of us, each and every day. And they deserve the very same commitment from their government.

When we delivered our first budget, we made a commitment to the people of this province. We said: "This government will return British Columbia to its rightful place as a leader in Canada and around the world."

Today, Mr. Speaker, it is clear: We've made huge progress.

The business sector is growing again. British Columbians' take-home pay is rising again.

Our children are doing better in school. We're making real improvements in health care.

Thousands of people are leaving welfare and finding jobs in our growing economy.

And — perhaps most telling of all — people are, once again, moving to British Columbia from other parts of Canada, reversing the pattern that symbolized the worst of the 1990s.

Mr. Speaker, during that decade of decline, a lot of British Columbians felt that we had lost our spirit. We looked back at the boom years — at a time when this province was full of pride and optimism — and many felt our best years were behind us.

But times have changed.

We've laid a firm foundation of good fiscal management; a solid foundation for economic growth; and a strong foundation for sustainable social programs.

Now British Columbians can move forward together in the spirit of 2010; the spirit of strength and confidence that won us the Olympic bid and pulled us through a year of natural disasters.

With that spirit, we will work together as a province to bring out the best in our people and to show the world, in 2010, that British Columbia is, indeed, the best place anywhere to live, invest and build a future full of hope and promise.

The decade of decline is behind us, Mr. Speaker. This is the decade of opportunity.

And the people know, in the province of British Columbia —

Our best is yet to come.

We've laid a firm foundation of good fiscal management; a solid foundation for economic growth; and a strong foundation for sustainable social programs

The decade of decline is behind us ... This is the decade of opportunity.