



BRITISH COLUMBIA

SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

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Lieutenant-Governor

— *at the* —

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— *of the* —

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AS WE START A NEW SESSION OF OUR LEGISLATURE, it is important that we take time to remember the contributions of British Columbians we have lost since we last came together.

William Procter, British Columbia's last surviving veteran of World War I, passed away late last year – our nation's Year of the Veteran.

We join family and friends in mourning the loss of community leaders George Preston and Gil Blair, philanthropist Jack Bell, journalist Patrick Nagle, and golf legend Stan Leonard.

And we mourn the passing of Lawrence Wallace, a dedicated public servant who capably served British Columbians over the course of 30 years.

THE NEW BRITISH COLUMBIA

In two years, British Columbia will celebrate its 150th anniversary since its founding as a Colony. We will celebrate 150 years of progress and positive change. We will celebrate 150 years of hard work, vision, and personal sacrifice.

Planning and preparation for that milestone will begin across B.C. this year, to help all British Columbians make 2008 a birthday to remember.

This is our time to reflect on our history, our First Nations heritage, our rich cultural diversity, our achievements, and our future. This is our home – a place of promise whose story is one of unfolding human potential.

Underlying each chapter is one constant fact: our ability to capture the positive energy of transformative change.

That fact now calls us to action. It lies at the heart of your government's agenda.

Transformative change was the key to British Columbia's progress in the past four-and-a-half years.

It has been a remarkable transformation of economic revitalization, fiscal renewal, and social achievement.

The Conference Board now rates our health care system the best in Canada. We are leading the nation in creating new nurse and physician training, and new access to advanced education. We now have the lowest unemployment rate on record.

Optimism abounds. People are excited about B.C.'s future. Families, jobs, and investment are all moving back to B.C. Every region of the province is moving forward again with pride and confidence.

This great transformation reflects fundamental changes in energy, forestry, mining, tourism, technology, manufacturing, agriculture, transportation, education, and health.

It is the legacy of conscious decisions to improve health care, education, child care, employment assistance, and environmental stewardship – within taxpayers’ means. It is the product of new relationships with First Nations and collaborative new relationships with governments at every level.

Yet far more remains to be done to realize British Columbia’s full potential in this golden decade now underway.

To that end, your government has set five great goals. They will test the limits of our imaginations and oblige us to reach higher through transformative change.

HARNESSING CHANGE FOR BRITISH COLUMBIANS’ ADVANTAGE

To make the most of all the 21st century offers, we must understand the currents of change that will shape our lives. We must harness those forces to build positive momentum for all British Columbians.

This is your government’s abiding purpose – to lead and transform our province into a global powerhouse of innovation, inspiration, and wealth creation. To liberate its full potential for British Columbians.

The comfortable course of complacency is not a path for long-term prosperity. It is the dead-end route of inevitable decline.

Yet the fear of fundamental change is always a powerful presence where going back or doing nothing seem to be viable alternatives. Simply doing more of the same with more funding is not a path to progress. In a world that is changing faster than at any time in human history, it is a dangerous deception.

The status quo is not an option. Three waves of enormous and irrevocable power are sweeping across our social landscape. The Western world is rapidly aging. Knowledge and technology are driving a new global economy. And the Asia-Pacific is now the world's front-door to growth and opportunity.

These forces are transforming our planet. They demand us to rethink the assumptions of the last century, and to change with the times, to maintain and improve our quality of life.

In each instance, British Columbia is strategically well-positioned to move with the times to build a brighter future.

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL FORCE OF OUR AGING POPULATION

The Western world is getting older. People are living longer. Families are getting smaller.

These facts are well known, but over the last two decades, their ramifications have seldom been reflected in government decision-making. Too often short-term thinking and election cycles blind us

to generational needs. Together, we must strive to change that.

The findings of the Premier's Council on Aging and Seniors' Issues will provide new insights for our consideration and action. As our population ages, there will be ever-fewer taxpayers, supporting ever-more seniors with increasingly complex needs.

There will be fewer new workers to fuel our economy. Skilled workers will be even more in demand. Canada will look to address that imbalance through immigration and new use of knowledge and technology. Our country will increasingly open its arms to the Asia-Pacific as a primary new source of human capital and productivity.

Today, seniors account for one-in-seven British Columbians. By 2030, they will account for one-in-four. This obliges us to change.

Nowhere is that need more profound than in health care. As our population ages, the demand for health services grows exponentially.

It is not just that people are living longer and that we are challenged to provide more care and new options for independent living. The demand for health care is rapidly outstripping our ability to supply health professionals, equipment, and facilities.

New knowledge and new technology drive up drug costs and diagnostic costs, and create new demands for expensive new services and treatments.

Governments around the world are struggling to keep up with this reality. The profile of health needs is radically changing.

The increase in dementias is one such example. To increase efforts to help find a cure for these debilitating and destructive diseases, your government will strive to establish a national research collaborative, working together with the Pacific Alzheimer Research Foundation.

If we can impede and eliminate these dementias we will improve our citizens' quality of life and also reduce pressure on health budgets in the years ahead.

In Canada, we have known for many years that the escalation in health care costs is not sustainable.

The question for all British Columbians is this: Are we prepared to change to face up to that fact?

What are the fundamental changes we must make to improve our health and to protect our precious public health care system for the long-term?

Your government will initiate a province-wide conversation to tackle that question head-on. It will build on the transformative changes already undertaken to renew our health care system here in B.C.

We will seek the world's best advice on how to improve our health care system in British Columbians' long-term interests. A new, independent Foundation

for Health Care Innovation and Renewal will be established to help identify new ways of better serving our citizens' health needs through careful examination of successful health models now working around the world.

This month, the Premier and Health Minister will travel to Sweden, Norway, France, and the United Kingdom to learn first-hand how those jurisdictions are acting to transform their health care systems.

Your government will ensure that any changes it makes are consistent with the *Canada Health Act*. That Act holds out the promise of universal, accessible, comprehensive, portable, and publicly administered health care.

Yet after four decades of public health care, supported by over \$1.5 trillion dollars in public expenditures, those five principles remain largely undefined.

What does the principle of “universality” mean when some citizens have special access to services and surgical options that others do not have, for lack of extended or private insurance? Or when only a handful of provinces even offer catastrophic drug coverage?

What does the principle of “accessibility” really mean, in light of existing access to primary care, surgical care, or extended care across Canada?

What does “comprehensive” and “portable” mean to Canadians, given the wide discrepancy in insurable services across our country?

How should we define concepts like “reasonable access” to “medically necessary” services, so that the courts are not left to interpret them for us?

Does it really matter to patients where or how they obtain their surgical treatment if it is paid for with public funds?

Why are we so afraid to look at mixed health care delivery models, when other states in Europe and around the world have used them to produce better results for patients at a lower cost to taxpayers?

Why are we so quick to condemn any consideration of other systems as a slippery slope to an American-style system that none of us wants?

And why shouldn't we build our health care system on a foundation of sustainability? Are we really ensuring that the health care entitlements we enjoy as Canadians will be there for our children and future generations as our population ages?

These are just some of the tough questions that British Columbians – and all Canadians – should have the opportunity to consider.

Not through another Royal Commission. Not through another exercise in avoidance, designed to produce more of the same.

But through real dialogue.

Through open conversations and rational discussion aimed at improving and transforming our Canadian health care system.

The *Canada Health Act* needs to be updated. Not to make it weaker – but to make it stronger and consistent with its original vision and intent – to preserve public health care for all Canadians.

Your government will advance that goal in Ottawa and here in B.C. It will lead an extensive discussion with British Columbians to guide this Assembly in furthering fundamental health reform within this mandate.

British Columbia will define and enshrine in provincial law the five principles of the *Canada Health Act*, and it will add to those a sixth – the principle of sustainability.

British Columbians want better access, greater choice, increased flexibility, and new options under their public health care system. They want high quality health care that is fair and equitable to all British Columbians regardless of their incomes. And they want to know that their public health care system is going to be there for them and their families as they get older.

Canadians are well ahead of their political leaders on this issue. They are right to demand reform and improvements – and B.C. is leading the way.

Significant system reforms have been made to improve patient care – in regional health delivery, primary care, telehealth, ambulatory care, and assisted living.

B.C.'s income-sensitive Fair PharmaCare program is now widely recognized as the best in Canada. We are the only province with a zero deductible for drug coverage for low income earners not on income assistance. B.C. has Canada's best immunization program.

We are building, expanding, and upgrading hospitals all across the province, with new public-private partnerships. The new 300-bed Abbotsford Regional Hospital and Cancer Centre is on track to open in 2008.

The Vancouver General Hospital tower that sat empty for over a decade now has 459 additional beds for patients. The new 11-story Academic Ambulatory Care Centre will be opened this year, to provide new outpatient services, new physician training, and new research for health care.

A sweeping plan to dramatically expand and modernize the Surrey Memorial Hospital is underway. It includes a new state-of-the-art emergency care and urgent care facility; a new 148,000-square-foot outpatient hospital; new beds in Surrey Memorial; and a new perinatal care facility.

Major capital expansions have been made to hospitals in Prince George, Kamloops, Kelowna, Cranbrook, Terrace, Victoria, and Nanaimo.

Since health renewal began in 2001, your government has increased the number of dialysis stations by over 60 per cent in communities across the province. It has increased the number of MRI machines by nearly 90 per cent and added eight new CT scanners to communities across B.C.

Ambulances have now been equipped with cardiac defibrillators and paramedics have been given increased training.

An extra \$9.7 billion has been added to health care in B.C. since your government first came to office, for a total investment of \$57.4 billion in the last five years.

Much of that funding has gone to substantially increase compensation for doctors, nurses, and other health professionals. Half of every new dollar available in the next four years has been budgeted to provide health care providers and other public sector workers with new wage and benefit increases.

More still is being invested in training. New medical schools have been opened in Prince George and Victoria with expanded seats at UBC to double the number of doctors in training. Another new medical school will soon be added in Kelowna.

The number of nurse training spaces has been increased by 62 per cent – with nearly 6,700 new nurses in training and over 2,100 more nurses now serving patients. Our efforts to train, attract, and retain nurses are paying off, and a major new campaign will be launched this year.

For the first time ever, B.C. is now training nurse practitioners, with the first graduates now playing an important part in our health care system. The BC Nurseline now offers round-the-clock access to health services in 130 languages and it will be expanded again this year.

All of this is aimed at providing better access to health care for all British Columbians.

B.C. now has the best health services and best health outcomes in Canada – according to an independent factual assessment by the Conference Board of Canada.

Yet challenges remain.

B.C.'s patient satisfaction levels are nowhere near as high as they should be given B.C.'s outstanding health system – and we must ask ourselves, why?

Despite a 65 per cent increase in knee replacements and a 35 per cent increase in hip replacements, the surgical backlog for those procedures has grown.

To reduce that backlog, a \$60.5 million strategy has been announced. It includes a new Centre for

Surgical Innovation, to be opened this April. It includes an additional 35 per cent increase in hip and knee surgeries – in one year. There will be new funding for hip health research, and a new provincial surgical patient registry.

New investments will provide an additional 1,000 children with the procedures they need and are waiting to receive.

Innovation, research, and funding are keys to our strategy. We know that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

The best way to assure our children lead healthy lives is to give them a strong start in life.

Later this year, your government will launch a comprehensive Strong Start BC initiative that will speak to this in greater detail. It will outline concerted actions to provide early diagnosis for hearing, sight, and dental problems and open early learning centres in underutilized schools.

The new ActNow initiative will improve British Columbians' health through healthy living, physical fitness, and nutritious eating.

A comprehensive strategy will be developed with the Union of B.C. Municipalities to help communities build bicycle paths that are safe and enticing for cyclists. The new Gateway Program's \$50 million bicycle network is the largest single investment in bikeways in the history of the province.

To support amateur sport and promote physical fitness, the B.C. Lottery Corporation has launched a new game tied to the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. All proceeds of that game will be dedicated to amateur sport.

Your government will act now to integrate physical fitness and healthy eating habits throughout B.C.'s public schools. It is acting to get rid of junk food in schools, and will do more this year to put healthy food in school vending machines and cafeterias.

A new agriculture plan will encourage B.C. farmers to come forward with proposals to put more of their produce and products in B.C. schools. The Action Schools program will be expanded to extend its benefits to even more students. And new standards will be set to ensure all students have a minimum level of physical activity in every school, without exception.

All of these measures will help lead a transformational shift in healthy living that is critical to sustaining the excellent health services we currently enjoy in British Columbia.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF NEW KNOWLEDGE AND CREATIVITY

The transformational force of knowledge and technology is reinventing our world. The new world is a truly global economy, driven by information, ideas, and discoveries.

It is a creative economy, where art and culture are the building blocks of innovation, invention, and understanding. Your government wants to unleash the talent, creativity, and skills of all who live here.

Education is the key to that endeavour.

Over the coming months, the Premier and Education Minister will visit every school district in B.C. They will meet with educators, parents, and students to seek their ideas for positive change in education.

Your government wants to hear from teachers in their staffrooms and from students in their classrooms. It ran on a pledge to communicate directly with all teachers in B.C. – and it will act to make that possible. It wants to listen and learn at the community level, at the new Learning Roundtable, and at a first-ever Teachers’ Congress, to be held later this year.

Although the education budget will go up again this year, we must ask ourselves how we can use that funding to best serve students.

The information your government has recently collected and published on class sizes gives us new data for discussion. It points to the need for legislative changes that will ensure all school districts live within the current class size limits established in law.

If there are variations that make sense for students, parents should have a say in those decisions. While superintendents should be required to approve those decisions, school boards must ultimately be accountable.

The issue of class composition is even more challenging and demands a rational discussion. What more can we do to help all students in every classroom?

How can we better help those with special needs, in public schools and independent schools alike?

Are there ways to better maximize the benefit of our capital investments in education?

What more can we do to ensure greater accountability to taxpayers? What is the appropriate mix of local autonomy and flexibility in decision-making?

How might we modernize our curriculum to ensure it offers relevant instruction for the modern world? What changes might be made to give our students a better understanding of our province's rich, colourful history and a fuller appreciation of our Aboriginal heritage and culture?

What new content should be taught about the importance of forestry, mining, energy, agriculture, and sustainable stewardship to our communities and our economy?

How can we foster a culture of excellence in teaching and learning that builds upon individual strengths and celebrates achievement?

All of these questions oblige us to open our minds to new possibilities for improving public education. We will not succeed in providing our children the best education if we fail to ask the critical questions and refuse to consider changes that will make our education system the best it can be.

We must aspire to make public education more relevant to students' needs and more accountable at every level. We must aspire to excellence in teaching and learning, through greater choice and flexibility, and new opportunities for parental involvement.

This is your government's vision for education and literacy.

It is an agenda of transformative change that looks at the new world through new eyes, with new intent to act.

The Internet offers incredible potential in that regard. This year, your government will initiate a new "virtual" school to provide B.C. students a new option for learning that is accessible from their local schools and within their homes.

Supported by Network BC, it will offer a full range of courses that will especially benefit students in rural communities. It will enable students to construct

high quality programs of instruction that are more relevant to their individual interests and that are open for learning at any time, at any pace, and from any place.

The virtual school will also provide free, on-line tutoring to help secondary school students successfully complete their studies. That tutoring service will be extended to earlier grades in coming years. Several jurisdictions have successfully developed cyber schools and British Columbia will not allow our students to be left behind.

All British Columbians will have equal opportunity to benefit from the knowledge economy.

In 2006, your government will fulfill its commitment to bridge the digital divide by bringing high-speed Internet access to 366 communities across B.C. that previously lacked broadband access. New steps will be taken to extend that access to First Nations communities, working in partnership with the federal government.

Your government will continue to encourage the full participation of parents in their children's education. Parents will be critical drivers as we transform education services across our province to meet the needs of their children.

This year, a new province-wide Parents' Education Network will be launched to provide parents with up-to-date information on programs and research

that can help their children excel in school. The Parents' Education Network will help parents answer questions and engage in discussions about the challenges, opportunities, and possible solutions they see in education.

Parents want greater access to information in education. Your government committed to publish annual reports for all public schools on the key statistics relating to class size, class composition, and teacher hirings, terminations, disciplinary actions, and professional development. That commitment will be fully realized this year.

It will also act on its pledge to establish a teacher employment registry that is administered by the College of Teachers, to publicly report the names of teachers disciplined for misconduct involving emotional, physical, or sexual abuse.

New investments will be made to give all British Columbians new options and better access to higher learning. Your government is creating 25,000 new post-secondary spaces – the largest expansion in advanced education in 40 years.

Additional steps will be taken to allow new transferability of credits for students attending accredited private post-secondary institutes.

All of these measures will help British Columbians gain the education and skills they need to successfully compete in the new knowledge economy.

We will need more skilled workers in energy, construction and related trades, forestry, mining, agriculture, engineering, and technology. Filling all of those jobs requires us to expand training for British Columbians and to compete for more foreign-trained workers.

There is no place for parochialism or provincialism in the new world. Your government will work with other provinces and the federal government on a national action plan for skills development.

It will act this year to further expand the provincial nominee program. It will act to expedite the flow and credentialing of foreign-trained workers who are needed now to meet domestic demands.

The Industry Training Authority will expand its programs in trades training and apprenticeships. New initiatives will be launched to encourage employers to renew their efforts and investments in skills training.

The new global economy is ultimately driven not just by mastering what we have learned, but by the pursuit of new knowledge. As such, more will be invested this year in new research aimed at leading discoveries and commercializing their potential.

Your government will work with B.C.'s technology industry to pursue its vision for a comprehensive technology strategy. The BC Hub strategy will transform our approach to technology research,

commercialization, and capital expansion, with new efforts to integrate science, technology, and knowledge into our resource industries, agriculture industry, and manufacturing economy.

British Columbia is becoming world-renowned in life sciences and biotechnology. We led the world in fighting SARS and continue to lead in genome research. Both are critical tools as we prepare for the next global pandemic.

Genome British Columbia is producing groundbreaking discoveries that will benefit our natural resource industries, our environment, our agricultural industry, and the future health of our population.

Major new research investments will be made this year to support the work of Genome BC and to accelerate discovery in spinal cord research through the Rick Hansen Man in Motion Foundation.

Your government will work with the Canadian Cancer Society, B.C. and Yukon Division, to establish a research chair in primary prevention of cancer.

A new B.C. Foundation for Natural Resources and Engineering Research will also be launched this year. It will support advanced training, research and development, technology transfer, and commercialization in natural resources, engineering, and applied sciences.

This will help keep our resource sector competitive and sustainable in the face of challenges like the mountain pine beetle, while growing new sectors and fueling economic growth.

Alternative energy will form an integral part of your government's expanded energy vision. It is a critical part of your government's goal to improve air and water quality, and fisheries management.

That goal also obliges us to set new goals in conservation. The updated energy vision will include new conservation targets to help make British Columbia electricity self-sufficient within the decade ahead.

Your government will also provide the financial thrust to create a leading edge new digital media centre at Great Northern Way, through a collaborative partnership of UBC, SFU, BCIT, the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, and the private sector.

This will confirm B.C.'s global reputation as a leader in digital media and will further stimulate opportunities for growth in digital entertainment.

BUILDING ON THE TRANSFORMATIONAL FORCE OF CANADA'S PACIFIC GATEWAY

The world's re-orientation to the Asia-Pacific is one of the central transformational changes in our time. It is also British Columbia's most strategic competitive advantage.

In the new map of the world, British Columbia is poised at the centre, not at the periphery. Europe and America are looking to the Pacific for growth. Asia is looking across the Pacific to North America as the heart of the Western world.

And British Columbia stands right in the middle.

As China, India, Japan, Korea, and other Asian countries look abroad to invest, visit, and emigrate – your government wants them to look here first. British Columbia has enormous potential as the world’s crucial crossroad to Asian-Pacific commerce.

Several elements are essential to maximizing that opportunity.

The Pacific Gateway Strategy is about opening up our province to new trade, investment, and opportunity. It is about opening up our ports, airports, rail networks, and roads from all points east, to all points west.

Your government is opening up the Port of Prince Rupert and opening up the North to capitalize on all the advantages our Pacific Gateway has to offer. It is transforming the future for Northern British Columbians and citizens in every region, through new investments in regional development and transportation infrastructure.

It is opening up our borders to the free flow of goods, services and people, through the new Gateway plan to build the Pitt River Bridge, twin the Port Mann, and build a new South Fraser Perimeter Road. These investments complement multi-billion dollar investments in rapid transit, bicycling networks, and transportation improvements that will also improve our environment.

To fully capitalize on British Columbia's strategic potential as Canada's Pacific province, we need to also reach out to the Asia-Pacific. Your government will work with the federal government, the Vancouver Airport Authority, and international airlines to open our airways with direct flights to India, China, and other Pacific nations.

It will intensify its efforts to open up new Asian markets in forestry, energy, mining, tourism, education, and manufacturing through trade missions and new on-site presence in key strategic locations.

New Dream Home China projects will be launched in Beijing and Guangzhou to build on the successful effort in Shanghai that is already opening new markets for B.C. forest products.

The Asia-Pacific Trade Council and the B.C. Competition Council will recommend ways to maximize British Columbia's competitiveness and productivity.

Your government will work closely with B.C.'s tourism associations to help British Columbia become the destination of choice for Asian tourists, as China opens its doors to foreign travel. We have incredible competitive advantages in cultural tourism, eco-tourism, agri-tourism, resort tourism, and Aboriginal tourism to capture the world's attention.

In the new creative economy, investment and workers around the Pacific Rim will choose to locate in places that understand their culture, speak their language, and meet their needs.

New investments in languages, research, art, culture, and urban revitalization are not just critical elements in building an enlightened society. They are competitive advantages we will use to attract talent and create jobs.

New Pacific Studies Programs will be developed and offered at key universities, colleges, and institutes across B.C.

New Internet access to government services and programs will be offered in multiple languages. Your government will act to expand training in Mandarin, Japanese, Punjabi, and Korean. It will develop new incentives for students to take these courses and carry them to successful completion.

The One World Scholarship will be introduced this year to help post-secondary students pursue their studies in other Pacific nations. A new Pacific Horizons for Youth program will be developed to support student travel exchanges with families across the Pacific.

New steps will be taken to support our arts community. A new Asia-Pacific Museum of Trade and Culture, a new national Centre of Northwest Aboriginal Art and Culture, and a World Women's History Museum will all be initiated.

The world we want for ourselves and our children is what the entire world wants and should find in British Columbia. We want sustainable, vibrant, creative communities and a province that lives in balance with all it has been blessed with by Nature.

The new Central Coast and North Coast land use plans cover an area twice the size of Belgium and a protected area three times the size of Prince Edward Island.

They represent an unprecedented collaboration between communities, First Nations, industries, environmental organizations, and government. At the heart of those plans is a new eco-system based management model that balances community stability and job creation with conservation.

The new Kitasoo Spirit Bear Conservancy will ensure important habitat for the precious Kermode bear is protected for evermore.

The Spirit Bear is a magnificent symbol for British Columbia.

It speaks to the majesty, uniqueness, and mystery of our province. It is a powerful presence and a thing of wonder that lives in a magical land of beauty, grace, and unbridled potential.

The B.C. Spirit Bear symbolizes the essence of the spirit of British Columbia. It evokes our unique Aboriginal heritage and First Nations' special relationship with this land and all who live upon it.

The B.C. Spirit Bear is such a compelling symbol and such an inspiration, that your government will act to make it our official provincial animal.

TRANSFORMING BRITISH COLUMBIANS' QUALITY OF LIFE

Our changing world is also challenging families and communities.

The transformation your government seeks has one purpose in mind: to help all British Columbians make the most of their potential, supported by loving families and safe communities.

In that regard, four key challenges are evident: the need to improve child and family services; the need to combat substance abuse and crime; the need to forge a New Relationship with First Nations; and the need to provide new options for housing.

Advances will be made on all of those priorities in the year ahead.

New efforts will be made to improve and modernize child protection services, and to learn from the independent reviews now underway.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development has faced many challenges over the years. Although its failings have been well-documented, its successes have attracted little notice. Your government applauds the work of all those who do so much to help protect children-at-risk, day in and day out.

Yet improvements in child protection can and must be made. Your government will act to advance that goal through the regionalization of Aboriginal child and family service delivery.

The new regional authority model for the delivery of child protection services is the product of years of consultation and expert advice. It is aimed at better serving Aboriginal children's needs and better supporting First Nations families in their communities.

The new delivery model will not be flawless. But it is aimed at improving children's lives and fostering a new relationship with First Nations.

Working closely with First Nations leaders and other governments across Canada, we can close the gaps that have disadvantaged Aboriginal children and families in the past. That is the point of the Kelowna Accord.

It is vital that Aboriginal people have the same economic and social opportunities as any of our citizens.

New incentives will be put in place to help Aboriginal students who have dropped out of school complete their studies. New steps will be taken to recruit qualified Aboriginal individuals to fill openings in the public sector. A new Aboriginal internship program will be established to provide opportunities for learning throughout the provincial and municipal public services.

The new relationship your government hopes to build is a true partnership of opportunity. It obliges us to build on Canada's First Nations heritage as a critical advantage in nation-building. It obliges us to forge a new relationship based on mutual respect, recognition, and Aboriginals' constitutional rights.

British Columbia is determined to lead Canada and walk the path together to lasting reconciliation.

The growing problem of substance abuse is another challenge that demands our urgent attention. Your government will act now to expand its efforts to prevent and reduce substance abuse.

Efforts to fight and treat the scourge of crystal meth will be backstopped by a major new public awareness campaign. New funding will be provided to support prevention and treatment programs at the community level.

Your government will continue to push for tough new minimum sentences under the Criminal Code for drug traffickers, as well as for immediate extradition of foreign traffickers. When drug traffickers ply their poison and prey upon the most vulnerable in our society, they know exactly what they are doing.

They are trading in human misery, dependency, and death. And it is up to all levels of government to do what they can to stamp that out.

New technology will be used to give police new tools in law enforcement and integrated policing strategies. New teams are now fighting cyber crime, sexual predators, and gang violence, and others are working together to solve homicides.

Those measures will be bolstered this session with amendments to strengthen and expand requirements for criminal record checks to better protect children.

The Coroner's Office will also be strengthened to help prevent avoidable deaths. Several steps have been taken to prevent violence against women – and more will be taken this year.

Community courts and Aboriginal courts offer the potential to take pressure off our traditional court system through innovative approaches that have worked well in other jurisdictions. These new courts for communities and First Nations will form part of your government's integrated strategy to improve public safety and combat property crime.

Working with Aboriginal leaders, your government will examine the potential for correctional facilities that better meet Aboriginal cultural needs while enhancing protection to all communities in our society.

Your government will act to strengthen families and communities in other ways.

It will change employment programs to help people on income assistance overcome their challenges in finding employment. Today's employable welfare recipients often face persistent and multiple barriers to employment that beg to be addressed. Your government will act to help them.

The problem of homelessness is growing. Homelessness leads to despair, which sadly leads to addiction, which too often leads to crime. The Premier's Task Force on Homelessness, Addictions and Mental Health has developed strategies to help.

Your government's \$263 million mental health strategy has helped as well. Yet there are far too many people living on our streets and far too many people waiting for housing.

This year, your government will act to address these needs with a ground-breaking new housing strategy aimed at helping those most in need, more quickly and effectively. The new housing program will give individuals greater choice and new flexibility. It will transform housing options to help people positively transform their lives.

CONCLUSION

In the last four-and-a-half years, British Columbians have seen how far they can come when they work together to reach a goal.

The changes made were not easy. But they have put us on a footing that few could have imagined only a few short years ago.

Our work is far from done. British Columbia's great transformation has just begun.

The strength of our province has always been the strength of its people – as leaders, builders, innovators, risk-takers, and pioneers of opportunity.

These are exciting times of monumental potential.

Let us reach for the great promise of British Columbia and fashion our golden decade together.