

Premier Gordon Campbell
Address to the Coalition of B.C. Businesses
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I thought today I might take some time to talk about small business in British Columbia generally and the tasks we have to set for ourselves. They're not just tasks for a government to undertake. They're tasks for the small business community across this province – a chance to share in solutions they know will work in communities throughout British Columbia.

Ninety-eight per cent of all businesses in this province are small and medium-sized businesses. You are the drivers of the economy, and no elected representative will ever stand up and tell you anything different. Yet we still seem to have difficulty breaking through a lot of the institutional inertia that often holds small business back and gets in the way of creativity and innovation.

You started working on that 10 years ago. You started because you had an agenda: you had some public policy objectives that you thought were an important part of the public discussion.

Our government wants small business to flourish. We want private enterprise to be something that British Columbians are proud of. We want to encourage investment. We want to encourage innovation. We want to make our economy one of the most open economies on the continent. And to do that, we need your help.

We need your help because we know that government is a servant. Government should not be thought of as controller in an open, democratic society. It should be thought of as a servant. Our caucus and our government are committed to reaching and striving to attain those objectives.

So, 18 months ago we took on a number of immediate and important changes. We reduced your income tax rates 25 per cent across the board, and a recent CFIB [Canadian Federation of Independent Business] survey found that 76 per cent of their members said that tax cut had a positive impact on their business.

Some people in British Columbia say we should not have done that. They're saying they think government should take more money out of your pocket and give it to them.

But let's ask this question. How many of you want to give more money to the government so we can manage it as well as we manage all the other dollars we take? No one wants to give more money to the government. Our critics want to dig deeper into your pocket and spend more of your dollars.

Now, we don't want that in British Columbia for this one very good reason: we think that when people work hard in this province, they deserve to get ahead. When they work hard and they commit and they invest and they take risks and they succeed, we want to celebrate that success, not take it away.

If we want to carry on, we have to continue with the sense of boldness and commitment we had 18 months ago. That's why it is important for you to add your voices to the public dialogue and debate – because, if you are not heard, it's easy for people to be swept away from the solutions you know are essential.

Did the tax cuts work? Has the commitment to investment worked? Well, so far we've seen that our job growth has gone up by 87,000 people. If you liberate small business, if you liberate entrepreneurs, if you ask people in the tourism industry, in the automobile industry, in the retailing industry to pursue their goals and their objectives and you get out of the way so they can succeed, then you start to create jobs.

Housing starts are up 44 per cent this year compared with two years ago. Retail sales are up 13 per cent. New motor vehicle sales are up 16 per cent compared with 2000. All of those are good indicators. And I'm pleased to see that small business people from across this province recognize that we have tried to put in place a framework that allows them to flourish.

When we raised the threshold for small business income tax by 50 per cent to \$300,000, over 66 per cent of the membership of the CFIB felt that was a positive step. Eighty-four per cent of small businesses want us to stay the course to balance the budget in 2004-05, and we will.

We know there are other steps that must be taken. We need that same energy and creativity you showed us before.

We need to get WCB under control. We know that. We have taken some small steps down that road to accountability, to servicing employees that are hurt or injured at work, to make sure we have a viable public institution. But there's a long way to go.

Last year WCB faced a \$287-million deficit and cost increases of 14 per cent. We knew that if we didn't make changes, and we know if we don't continue with those changes, WCB will continue to run out of control.

When you have a system that in some way seems closed off to the public and to common sense, it doesn't work for injured employees, or for employers that are paying the bill, or for an economy. So we've made some changes already.

For example, it is no longer more beneficial for a worker who's been injured at work to stay off work than it is to return to their job. We want to provide workers with the support, care, and encouragement they need to get back into a productive working

position as quickly as possible. We know that's best for the economy. We know it's best for them. And we know it's best for their families.

Graham Bruce has made a number of significant changes, but they are steps down a road to success.

Last year there were 17,000 appeals filed at WCB. The average time for a decision on those appeals was 35 months. Now, think of that for a minute – almost three years for an appeal to go through. We have now passed legislation that will cut that time by more than half, so the maximum amount of time for an appeal is 15 months.

That means it doesn't cost as much as it used to. But equally important, it means the worker has finality and certainty about their situation. The employer knows what the situation is as quickly as possible. And that certainty creates a much healthier situation on both sides of that table.

But there's more to be done. Within the next couple of weeks, we're going to appoint a new WCB board. That WCB board is going to be committed to openness, to accountability, and to providing the service employers and employees alike deserve in this province. They are going to need your help.

As well as WCB, we have to continue our work on employment standards. This is one of the most important parts of creating an environment in which employers and employees are working together, where they see the future and the success of their enterprise as mutually beneficial.

We have to provide more flexibility into the workplace. We're not suggesting there won't be standards that must be met. But we have to create a framework that allows employers and employees together to work.

We're going to have to learn how to build that flexibility while recognizing that the most valuable asset any business has in this province is the people that work for it. You train them, you teach them, you nurture them, and you give them support. But you and I know, no matter what business you're in, that if you don't have people who are happy and healthy and at work and productive, your business doesn't do very well.

I know all of you value and trust your employees, and we want to make sure there is an opportunity for your employees and you to work together, to succeed. And that's what the Employment Standards Act has got to do.

We've got to be open enough to recognize that the tourism industry is different than the heavy construction industry. We have to be flexible enough to understand that seasonal employment is different than year-round employment.

I've just come back from Kamloops where I was talking with a ski hill operator. His employees want to work a lot in the winter when they can get a paycheque because they

know in the summer there isn't the same work and they're going to be laid off. They'd like to build an annual income if they can. We have to at least provide the opportunity for that to happen.

We've taken some steps to do that. We've provided for the two-hour shift, which creates flexibility for employers and employees alike. We've changed the rules with regard to statutory holiday regulations. We've reduced the amount of time that you have to keep records from five years to two years. We've started to reduce red tape.

When we were elected, we said we were going to eliminate one-third of the 404,000 regulations on business. Four hundred and four thousand means we have about 130,000 to get rid of. So far, in 18 months, we've cut 17,000. There's a lot ahead of us. And the challenge for you is to tell us what is not making any sense.

We have a Minister of State for Deregulation. Every single cabinet minister knows deregulation is one of our initiatives. So we need you and your organizations to identify those regulations that are overlapping.

Kevin Falcon is there. If you think there are things that are costing you money for no public benefit, if you think there are things that are getting in the way of providing for public safety or even logical public policy, you should come and tell Kevin Falcon.

We have taken some steps to restore workers' rights. We have given workers back the right to the secret ballot. We have given them back the right to their pensions. But we have to do more.

We have to give them the right to know what's taking place with their union dues. We have to give them the right to know what's taking place in their enterprise. We have to give everyone the right to talk with one another, to communicate with one another, to work with one another.

Those changes in the Labour Code must be done in co-operation with workers, because our job is not to decide whether someone should be a trade unionist or not a trade unionist. Our job is to provide a level playing field where workers can decide for themselves what's best for them.

We have to restore a training model in this province that works on behalf of workers. We have to have a training model that works for individuals, not for institutions.

Just a few years ago in the Kootenays, there was a challenge with the changes that were taking place in our mining industry. We lost one out of every two jobs in our mining industry in the 1990s. So clearly, there were people that needed training. The training institution decided those people should be trained to get truck-driving licences. The problem is there were tons of truck drivers in the area. There was no need for that skill.

What about if we did this instead? If we said to a person: “What do you want to learn? What are your talents? What are the abilities that you'd like to develop? Where do you think the opportunities are for you?”

Why does the government have to tell you what you might want to do? Why don't we think of a way we can be flexible and open enough to let individuals decide and choose the training they want to meet their needs so we can build an economy that works for people, as opposed to an economy that we think we can control with institutions?

And believe me, I know the time is short. It's easy for us to say, “Let's just wait another year.” I know one thing after 18 months: there are not very many headline solutions out there. There are not very many one-off solutions you can take off the shelf and say: “Good. We've solved the problem.”

It doesn't work that way. It doesn't work that way now, and it won't work that way in the future. We have to be willing to embrace the challenges and complexities we live with today and drive towards a society that rewards people for hard work, that gives them the tools they need to contribute, and that gives them the education they need to give as much as they can to the communities in which they live.

When I held small business round tables in 16 communities around the province last spring, the single most important issue people raised was training – not how you could deliver it, but the need for it, the need for the end result, the need for the people.

And what I'd like to remind everyone here is that every job in our province is a valuable job. Sometimes we think there are good jobs and there are bad jobs. There are jobs people want to have. There are jobs that give people paycheques.

It's not my choice whether the paycheque is coming from the forest industry or the tourism industry. I just want the forest industry, the retail industry, the automobile industry, the construction industry, and the home building industry to create opportunities so people have choices.

Wouldn't it be nice to have choices again in this province where people can say, “This is I what I want to do,” and we can say, “And there's a chance for you to do it right here in the province of British Columbia?” That's what we're trying to accomplish, and we can only accomplish it when we work together, when we hear a variety of voices, and when we look at the challenges we face as opportunities.

I look today at the world we live in, and I look at the province that we live in, and I can tell you I am excited about our future. Sure, there are some tough choices we have to make, and we're going to make them – but only after we look at the facts.

We can't ignore the fact that we are starting to have a training deficit in British Columbia. We know people are getting older, whether they're linemen for B.C. Hydro or tradespeople in the construction industry: we know that they're starting to retire. We have

to make sure we're training the people who can take their place with new ideas and with new energy.

We want young people in this province. We want them having a good time again. We want them excited about British Columbia again. And I know that if you're willing to work with me, we'll do just that. They'll be excited about their future, and they'll be excited about their province.

Let me tell you one other thing that I'm excited about, which is a huge opportunity for British Columbia. It's the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. This is an opportunity to create jobs. It's an opportunity to put British Columbia back on the map.

The opening for the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City had two billion people watching it. Do you know how many advertising dollars it would take to get two billion people to look at our province and our city and our country?

We have an opportunity to carry the Canadian flag on the international field. We have the opportunity to generate billions of dollars of investment. We have the opportunity to create over 200,000 new jobs in this province.

We have the opportunity to take small businesses and have them build into recognized international suppliers of goods. We have the opportunity to take our technology companies and apply them to the exciting opportunities at the Olympics. We have the opportunity to show people how you can create an economy that works. We have the opportunity to give the next generation of British Columbians something they will never forget.

I was six years old when the 1954 British Empire Games came to Vancouver. Roger Bannister ran against John Landy and ran the first four-minute mile. I still remember that.

I was a lot older when we had Expo 86, and make no mistake about it: Expo 86 was a huge benefit for all British Columbians. Who would give back the boost in tourism, in international recognition, and in development that we've seen as a result of Expo 86?

Who would give back the north shore of False Creek that we see today, compared with what we had in 1980? Who would give back Burrard Inlet and what we see today, compared with what we had in 1980? Who would give back the SkyTrain?

Who would give back all those great public projects that helped shape our region and bring British Columbia to the world? Who would give back that sense of pride when people came from all over the world and talked about what a great community we lived in and how lucky we were to live in British Columbia?

Why would we even think of giving back that opportunity for our kids? Why not take the 2010 Olympics and make them into something people will never forget? Why not take that 2010 Olympics and hold them up for our young people, and think of our young

people from across the province and across this country stepping up to get that gold medal?

Who would give up the opportunity to get the gold and to be the best? In British Columbia we are the best. With your help, we'll show the world.

Thank you very much.