

Speaking Notes for  
Honourable George Abbott  
Minister of Community, Aboriginal and  
Women's Services

Keynote Address  
at the 2001 UBCM Annual Convention

Wednesday, September 26, 2001  
2 p.m.  
Vancouver Trade and Convention Centre

I have had the privilege of attending the UBCM annual convention many times. It's great to meet new people and renew old friendships in the municipal realm. As Minister, it's been good working with Jim Abram over the past few months, in his capacity as President of the UBCM. I know he's worked hard on your behalf.

My connections with UBCM go back over 20 years, first as a CSRD director, then regional chair, Sicamous councillor and MLA for Shuswap, and now as Minister of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services.

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce two of my colleagues who are also working on your behalf: the Honourable Lynn Stephens, Minister of State for Women's Equality; and the Honourable Ted Nebbeling, Minister of State for Community Charter, and the 2010 Olympic Bid.

Many of my colleagues in Cabinet and Caucus have experience in local politics. By my calculation, in this administration, we have 60 years of mayoral experience. And a whopping 119 years of local council experience. Twenty-three per cent of government MLAs have a local government background.

As you may know, in 1984, our Premier was elected to Vancouver City Council, and from 1986 to 1993, he served as Mayor of Vancouver for three successive terms. Additionally, Premier Campbell served with distinction as President of the UBCM.

Even our new lieutenant governor installed yesterday, Iona Campagnolo, has served as a municipal councillor for Prince Rupert.

So, I can say with confidence – and I hope you'll agree - that we know about local issues and challenges.

My objective as Minister is to work with you to find new opportunities for growth, and to find creative solutions to the issues that confront all of us in our efforts to build a better future for British Columbia's communities.

Coming into the provincial Cabinet, I could not be more grateful for my years of service at the local level. Being in local government taught me a lot about balancing budgets and resolving disputes. My experience in local government also convinced me that the relationship between local governments and the province must change.

My top priority is to build a new relationship with municipal governments and regional districts. A relationship that is open, fair and responsible.

From now on, you are going to have more autonomy and more power.

You will have more tools and resources to plan and manage your own affairs.

You will be able to make your own decisions within the framework of provincial interests, and solve your own disagreements without having to come 'hat in hand' to the province for approval.

But remember, with greater empowerment for local governments comes more responsibility.

Just as I want to establish a relationship with you that is open, fair and responsible, I expect that you will strive for the same relationship with your colleagues on municipal council, regional district boards, and your neighbours.

I believe that local issues should be resolved at the local level and we should not be the arbiter of last resort on local matters.

And on matters between local governments and the province, I believe that the more we understand each other, the better we will be able to achieve our mutual goals.

Partnership is going to be important.

My hope is that – most of the time – provincial and local interests will be the same and we can move forward together.

But, the reality is that we are going to disagree once in a while.

The principles of local autonomy and provincial competitiveness are often, but not always, complementary.

We believe the key to success in this province is restoring competitiveness and each level of government has a role to play.

What happens at the local level will have a major impact on restoring the economy of the province.

There will be challenges ahead, no doubt, but we will deal with them together.

I have said that I hope to forge a partnership with municipal governments, regional districts and the federal government.

Perhaps I can illustrate my approach by describing my own Ministry.

The ministry has a diverse range of responsibilities: from local government and the Community Charter, to transition houses, sports and recreation, the Provincial Fire Commissioner, aboriginal services, housing policy, leaky condos, and arts and culture.

This is a Ministry based on a new vision for British Columbia's communities.

For example, there are clear connections between municipalities and housing, between local governments and arts, culture and sports.

Many of these areas of responsibility have synergies that we intend to focus on to build communities.

For example, winning the 2010 Winter Olympic Bid is all about communities; it starts with youth participation in sports and it involves aboriginal participation in communities. It's about building support for the bid among the arts and culture communities.

And it's about British Columbia's best foot forward to the world.

In pursuing economic opportunities in communities, we are also focusing on increasing opportunities for women. Through this new ministry, we can make important connections to services for aboriginal women, and immigrant women who need English-language training to get jobs and contribute to the economy of the community and the province.

Additionally, this ministry is about investment and capacity building in disadvantaged communities: women abused by a spouse who need transition houses; multicultural services for new Canadians and, where needed, economic and social interventions for aboriginal people.

Our interest is in building capacity and removing barriers so all individuals can be full participants in their community.

And as communities prosper, so does the province.

I believe our new relationship fits well with the theme of this conference.

You have a new provincial government to work with and new opportunities for the future.

It's because of the hard work of the UBCM over the past ten years that we are ready to enter a new relationship.

You can look back on your achievements with pride, in setting a strong agenda for local governments in British Columbia.

The last decade saw a declining economy and lost opportunities.

You saw BC move from being one of the most prosperous provinces in Canada to being a borderline have-not province.

Our provincial debt load doubled.

Investment growth almost came to a standstill.

Disposable incomes fell by \$1,700 a year.

Many of our skilled workers and strongest businesses fled BC for better economic opportunities in other parts of Canada or the world.

British Columbia's decline has had an enormous affect on the economic and social well-being of all communities.

But this is a new government with a new attitude.

High taxes have been the biggest obstacle to job creation, growth and private sector investment.

That's why we have made dramatic cuts in personal income tax to get more of the people's money back into their own hands.

We are putting more than \$1.2 billion back into the hands of British Columbians this year – money that will be spent in local communities.

We are getting rid of unnecessary government-imposed costs. In other words, we are getting rid of cumbersome laws and regulations that get in the way of business.

We are also committed to sound fiscal management – something this province has been sorely lacking for the past 10 years.

Let no one doubt that the provincial government has the resolve to take decisive actions that will lead to long-term prosperity and opportunity.

We have hard choices to make but we are prepared to make them because we are going to get this province back on track financially.

It is our responsibility to provide British Columbians with programs and services that are affordable, well-managed and effective.

We are completing a Core Services Review of all government programs that will DEFINE the business of government and set priorities.

We will stop doing things that are ineffective or wasteful. We will end duplication. We will get government out of areas where it does not belong.

We will focus on what really works.

By taking strong, decisive actions, we believe that Canadians and businesses across the country and around the world will take notice of the new opportunities opening up across British Columbia.

We're sending the message that British Columbia is open for business.

That's a message that is good for all local governments across BC.

As communities prosper, we can do more to ensure we have strong health and educational services, a revitalized infrastructure and more effective local services.

The UBCM's new "BC Communities Agenda" closely links community building and community governance.

You are looking at ways to ensure that your communities are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable today and for the future.

We share these goals.

Like you, we want to build communities. We want to renew local-provincial relationships and balance community interests.

Let me give you some examples:

We consider the Community Charter a very high priority. So important, that Premier Campbell appointed a Minister of State for Community Charter.

Last month I was in London, Ontario for the annual meeting of provincial/territorial ministers responsible for local government. It was absolutely clear that British Columbia is moving ahead of other provinces in giving municipalities more autonomy.

We have come a long way and it's largely a credit to the UBCM.

The creation of the Community Charter Council with representation from both the UBCM and the province demonstrates our commitment to doing things in partnership with local governments.

When the Community Charter is proclaimed, municipalities will have broader powers, more financial flexibility and more opportunities to create their own futures.

As we build on this new relationship, we face many compelling challenges.

One of those challenges is leaky condos.

My ministry is working very hard to address the leaky condo issue. I met with the federal housing minister recently to address the federal/provincial partnership.

To this point, the province is supporting leaky condo owners with \$179 million in assistance through a combination of PST relief grants and a no-interest loan program.

I've asked the federal government to bring additional financial resources to the table to strengthen the federal/provincial partnership.

However, even if we're successful, the results will no doubt seem inadequate to the condo owners most severely affected by this crisis.

We are carefully reviewing the BC Supreme Court's decision on Delta and its implications for other municipalities. We understand it's going to be appealed, and we're monitoring that case closely.

We can expect the legal positions of all levels of government to be challenged in the courts in the months and years ahead.

As you know, the Premier recently set up a Caucus task force to look in depth at the issues contributing to the leaky condo situation, and I am looking forward to receiving their input in the coming months.

Affordable housing is another challenge we all recognize is the pressing need for affordable housing for seniors and for people with mental or physical disabilities. But the difficulty of addressing that challenge cannot be underestimated.

Local governments, non-profit organizations, federal and provincial governments have all made substantial investments in this area. We acknowledge and celebrate that.

We also need to acknowledge the huge challenge we face in sustaining this.

This year the province invested \$126 million for social housing and we are able to add more than 1,160 affordable housing units across British Columbia.

Based on this new commitment and commitments made over the last few years, even if we do not build one more unit, by fiscal year 2004/05 the cost of this program will have grown to more than \$160 million.

The growth in that expenditure line, as you will appreciate, is not sustainable in this, or any, fiscal environment.

There is no doubt that there is a need for affordable housing.

Towards that end, our government has introduced vital tax reforms that will stimulate the construction industry and the building of more affordable housing.

We're also looking to greater involvement from our partners: local governments, non-profits and the housing industry.

Furthermore, we are in negotiations with the federal government to increase their contribution in this area on a new federal housing supply program. We hope we will be successful, but for the program to get off the ground, others will have to come to the table.

Affordable housing can be built on this kind of collaboration.

We have taken some bold steps to eliminate unnecessary regulations relating to affordable housing, by repealing the Housing Construction (Elderly Citizens) Act. This removed barriers so that housing societies can redevelop or remortgage their properties in order to create more affordable housing.

We intend to take additional steps to eliminate unnecessary red tape.

Your role in affordable housing is significant, and we'll work more closely with you to look at new ways to meet this challenge.

Finally, I'd like to update you on the Canada-BC Infrastructure Program.

As you know, this \$800 million program is aimed at helping local governments meet their infrastructure needs in an environmentally sustainable way.

We are giving top priority to water and sewer infrastructure in this six-year program.

We believe that these services are essential not only to health and our quality of life, but to restoring economic competitiveness to our communities.

So far, we have received about 600 applications worth \$2.1 billion.

The need for renewed infrastructure is clear. Equally as clear, hard choices must be made since, unfortunately, we cannot fully meet every request.

We have forwarded our first Ministry recommendations to the joint federal/provincial/UBCM management committee for decision.

We will be in touch with applicants by year's end.

In closing, I have no doubt that we will face many challenges in the future.  
But we are at a watershed in British Columbia's history.

Today, I pledge to you the beginning of a new relationship between the province and local governments – a partnership of mutual respect.

I applaud you for the work that you do.

You have chosen to give your time and energy to make sure your communities offer the highest quality of life possible for all your residents.

And I know that you do not always get the thanks and recognition you deserve.

I look forward to working with you in the future, and to finding new and better ways for my Ministry to listen to, respond to, and support you and your communities in the future.

Thank-you for making my first UBCM as Minister so productive, constructive and rewarding.

I look forward to working with you in the coming months and years.