

**ADDRESS BY  
THE HONOURABLE GEORGE ABBOTT  
MINISTER OF COMMUNITY, ABORIGINAL AND WOMEN'S SERVICES**

Good afternoon everybody. It is a good and beautiful afternoon here in Whistler and I'd like to thank you all so very much for setting aside the gorgeous sunshine and views around Whistler to make this speech.

The first thing I want to say today and I'm very appreciative of the generous comments from Hans. The first thing I want to say and I think its really important to acknowledge is that I have benefited and my ministry has benefited and the provincial government has benefited from the very professional, very respectful, very warm relationship that we have developed over the past year with Hans Cunningham and the Executive of UBCM. I want to thank them very much for that.

I've now been attending UBCM conventions for over twenty years and it is great to look around the room and see many old friends, old acquaintances that I've developed over that time. Certainly the friendships that we create at these conventions are one of the great assets of attending the convention and of course we learn a lot about other communities – the problems they face and some of the solutions they have looked at in achieving those.

I as well want to congratulate UBCM on their 99<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention. I want to be around for the 100<sup>th</sup>, I'm sure it'll be a party. When you first held a convention as the Union of BC Municipalities it was in 1905. British Columbia was at a turning point in economic and social change. Richard McBride, and not many of you will remember him, at least not personally; Richard McBride was the Premier of British Columbia and Wilfred Laurier was the Prime Minister of Canada. That same year Alberta and Saskatchewan entered confederation. At that time the First World War was still on a distant horizon and the Wright brothers were just perfecting the first practical airplane.

It was a dynamic time for British Columbia. A time that called for innovation, resilience and hard work. And now almost a century later we're entering a new dynamic period in community and provincial development in British Columbia. I've been very fortunate to have met many of you personally. I've been impressed by your work, your resilience and your dedication to your communities. With the local elections due shortly I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge your hard work, your efforts on behalf of your communities. I know how hard you work. I spent seventeen years in local government before my election to provincial politics. I know about the long hours. I know about the pressures and I know about the commitment that is required in your service at the local government level. I want to say two words that we don't hear frequently enough in the English language and that is thank you. I want to thank you on behalf of the province of British Columbia for the time, energy and dedication that you provided for your communities.

The past year has been a challenging one for all of our communities at all levels whether its been locally, provincially or globally. Change is taking place and sometimes dramatically. Change can be stressful, difficult but out of that change comes new opportunities. Many communities and particularly rural communities are feeling the impact of change. Make no mistake change is necessary to ensure our communities are sustainable over the long term. With change comes innovation and the recognition that many of today's problems cannot be solved by a single person or a single government alone.

I am from a small rural community – Sicamous, population 3,100. As a resident as a former director and councillor I know first hand of the difficult challenges that fact us. How do we meet the challenges of rural communities in the face of increasing urbanization – an issue that affects not just British Columbia but all of North America. How do we deal with the significant restructuring in our resource industries. Perhaps most importantly how can we ensure that there are jobs and opportunities in smaller and rural communities so our kids can stay in their communities after they grow up. There are no easy answers to these questions. The challenges we face will not be going away.

The solutions I believe are rooted in the cooperation and in the partnerships that we forged between UBCM and the provincial government over the past fifteen months. That partnership is built on a strong economic plan. We're committed to revitalizing the provincial economy, to providing sound fiscal management and to putting students, patients and people first. Our plan in conjunction with the Community Charter will see communities that can act with flexibility to maximize their economic opportunities. We're working with local governments to find ways of addressing local challenges while building communities that are competitive. Not just on a provincial and national scale but on a global scale.

What have we done to support local governments right now while meeting our challenges head on? Well at UBCM's convention last September in Vancouver the Premier committed to fully protecting grants to local governments. We followed through on that commitment and we protected the budget for local government right through fiscal 2005. We did that in the context of tough, fiscal challenges requiring overall adjustments across government of between 25 and 30 per cent. This produced I can tell you a lot of sleepless nights and a lot of difficult choices on how to manage programs efficiently and in a fiscally responsible manner.

Despite the challenges we kept our word. We've protected over \$23 million dollars in Small Community Protection Grants. And believe me I've heard from a lot of small communities about just how important that is to you. We've protected the over \$2 million dollars in annual grants to regional districts and we protected the \$10 million dollars for municipalities for community safety. Public library funding was increased to \$8.6 million dollars and funding will continue to be protected over the next three years. One of the important functions of my ministry, government agents, are in many ways the face of the provincial governments in 58 communities throughout the province. We've maintained funding for all of those 58 operations. Indeed at our government agents now we've added some new technology – community access

terminals which provide government agents with an opportunity to better meet the needs of their communities.

Central to the vision of my ministry and indeed central to the vision of this provincial government is the creation of safe, healthy and secure communities. Affordable housing is a critical element in building strong communities. We're working hard to foster an environment where a vibrant, thriving housing construction industry will meet the needs of all British Columbians. But we recognize as well that the market cannot meet all housing demands and that government has a responsibility to provide housing to its most vulnerable citizens. We're providing a range of housing options to British Columbians through partnerships with the private and non-profit sectors and with municipalities and our federal government. I'm proud to note that British Columbia was the first province to sign the Affordable Housing Agreement with the federal government bringing an additional \$88 million dollars to our housing partnerships. We're actively exploring the delivery of housing options as well for our most vulnerable citizens. For example through Supportive Living BC, low income and frail elderly will have a place to live while retaining their independence. Through this program that we're delivering in partnership with the Ministry of Health Services, a total of 3,500 living units will be made available in BC for seniors over the next four years. We're also increasing affordable housing from \$128 million this year to \$142 million by 2004, the largest provincial contribution to subsidized housing ever in the history of British Columbia. We need to assess both the market and the non-market sides of housing and we'll be working closely with municipalities and with the federal government to identify ways for appropriate tax and regulatory reform to enhance investment in affordable market rental housing.

To build safe, healthy and secure communities we all so want to make sure that British Columbians have safe drinking water from the source to their tap. This is a huge undertaking. Many of you are in the business of provision of water and you know it's a challenge. It's a huge undertaking. Although most water supply infrastructures are in good shape there are some areas that need to be addressed. Among them aging systems and demands of increasing population. It's very expensive, you know that all too well and we know that no one government can take care of it all thus we've been working very closely with local governments to deliver the Canada/B.C Infrastructure Program. An \$800 million, six year program in British Columbia with a minimum \$600 million of this earmarked for water and sewer projects. With the recent announcement of the Peachland project last week there are over 100 approved projects now in British Columbia with a combined provincial/federal contribution in excess of \$168 million dollars. We've got a tremendous range of projects announced over the past few months from a \$14,880 project in the Fraser Valley Regional District, a water project to a much larger \$35 million Kamloops water treatment plant. Particularly important as the Kamloops City council has worked so very hard for a number of years to address their water quality issues. We've also seen in the 100 announcements a number of innovative projects. For example, the community of Port Edward is working to implement water conservation initiatives through a \$1.98 million dollar grant. In Smithers a detention pond in the Willowvale wetlands is part of an innovative storm water management approach and will improve fish habitat. Work is underway on many projects and to name just a few, the water main replacement project in Anmore, the Rendle subdivision water supply in Sparwood and water main construction in Fort St. James. We look

forward in partnership with Minister Rick Thorpe to further infrastructure announcements in the weeks and months ahead.

With respect to consultation between our governments. Since taking office we've consulted extensively with local municipalities and government leaders. We want to increase the capacity of local economies by providing new legislative tools and continued financial support. We want to increase the capacity of local economies by providing new legislative tools and continued financial support. The Community Charter is but one example of our ongoing consultation with local government. We've received a tremendous amount of insightful and constructive input from you on the Charter. Over the past fourteen months the Premier, and Mr. Ted Nebbeling and I have worked hard to develop strong and positive relationships with local governments and the UBCM. Drawing on our quite considerable municipal and regional district experience both in urban and rural communities we understand the importance of local government. That it can make a difference in the day to day lives of people and their communities. As Minister responsible for local government I've met with over 70 individual local governments during the past year. Along with the Premier, Minister Nebbeling and other cabinet colleagues I've had the pleasure of attending local area association meetings across the province. We've had frank and open discussions on the government challenges and decisions that were difficult to make in order to address our difficult economic issues. And we've made progress. We continue to work with UBCM and local governments in a respectful and coordinated manner to identify and to mitigate differences that occasionally arise between us.

To meet current and future challenges we're building on the consultative process and working towards partnerships based on consistency and mutual respect. Under the Community Charter, local governments will have increased autonomy giving you the tools to do what you do best. Giving you the flexibility to think creatively and be innovative in answering the needs of your citizens and your businesses. Through the Community Charter there are opportunities for you to take hold of your future. There are new dispute resolution tools and new ways to establish partnerships and mutually beneficial relationships where participants can realize their objectives while maximizing the value of each taxpayer dollar that we expend.

In closing I want to say there are many important lessons that we can learn from our very beautiful host community at this convention of Whistler. Whistler, and I visited Whistler probably about 25 years ago and it's nothing obviously that we see today, Whistler is a great example of how vision in combination with initiatives and enterprise and energy can produce results. It should remind us that we can build a great province in the same way Whistler has built a great community. A province where hard work, energy and initiative are rewarded. A province where new investment is welcomed. A province where barriers are removed and new innovation is fostered.

In closing I want to address the theme of this convention. I think I have to do that as a skier. Sad to say I don't get to ski often at Whistler but I am a season ticket holder at Silverstar and I want to talk a little bit about that. There is no place I'd rather be apart from a Cabinet meeting on a Saturday afternoon in winter, particularly on a beautiful, sunny Okanagan than the top of the mountain at Silverstar. When I get to the top of Silverstar and look around, it's not a 360 view but its close to and I can look around and

I see mountains, gorgeous mountains, I see lakes, I see what appears to be endless forests. I can look down below and I can see farms and orchards and I can see the vibrant communities of Vernon, Lake Country, Kelowna with their vibrant businesses and emerging hi-tech sectors. All of that view as I look out there reminds me in a most forceful way about the tremendous resources and the tremendous opportunities that exist in British Columbia. We have a great opportunity my friends in achieving that opportunity together. Over the past year I think we've set the basis and I believe that working together we can make British Columbia once again the envy of Canada and once again the envy of the world.

Thank you very much.