



Budget priorities

A presentation to
The Select Standing Committee
on Finance and Government Services

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Introduction

I thank the honourable members of the committee for taking the time to consider our submission on priorities for the next provincial budget.

BC FORUM represents more than 7,000 retired workers and older workers who are still on the job. Our youngest member is 50 years old. Our oldest members are over 90.

We are a volunteer organization. We work together to negotiate group rates on extended health care and other services our families need. We find that by working together to support each other, we can achieve more than any of us can do alone.

It is in that spirit that we make this submission.

Where we are today

There is a malaise in B.C. politics. Voter turnout has dropped to new lows, weakening our democracy. Many people have lost faith that government has their interests at heart.

We believe much of this is directly tied to budget decisions. It is a reflection of how government spends our money, and who it collects it from.

In a civil society, the strong must support the weak, not take from them. We have a shared responsibility to each other.

Establishing that sense of balance and fairness for all citizens is a primary role of democratic government. Government is the way all British Columbians can work together to achieve the things we cannot achieve alone.

This principle is sadly absent from many government decisions.

Moving ahead: fair taxes

In your public consultation document, this committee asks, "Should government continue to reduce taxes?"

Our answer is no. Please don't. Please stop.

You are cutting the wrong taxes, and increasing the wrong fees.

You have given bonuses to billionaires, coddled wealthy corporations, punished pensioners and raided the wallets of workers.

You have skewed our tax system to give more thousands of dollars to those who already have all the yachts and mansions they need, and forced the rest of us to pay for it in higher fees and lost services.

So we ask you, please stop. Please don't make it worse. Please give us a fair, progressive tax system that puts people first – the principle that should guide every government decision.

Moving ahead: put people first

Thousands of B.C. children live in poverty. Day after day, they go to school and tell their teacher with downcast eyes, "I forgot my lunch again."

With a fair, progressive tax system, we can give those children hope for the future. We can begin to end the embarrassment of our magnificent province having the worst child poverty rate in Canada.

Government's priority should be to give hope and opportunity to B.C.'s children, their parents and grandparents. To do that, we need to reverse direction.

We need to stop giving to the strong and taking from the weak.

It is disturbing that when Jessica McDonald announced she was leaving her position as deputy minister to the premier, the government immediately seized the opportunity to give the man who replaced her an additional \$63,000 a year for the same job. That raise alone is far more than most hard-working British Columbians earn.

It is disgraceful to give huge salary increases to the highest paid government advisors and deputies, while parents work at the lowest-paid minimum wage jobs in Canada to support their children.

We have the highest cost of living and the lowest minimum wage in the country. You can fix that. You should. It would make life better for tens of thousands of people who are working hard and struggling to get by – including seniors who have had to take part-time jobs to supplement inadequate retirement incomes.

Moving ahead: choosing dignity over despair

There are so many areas where government decisions can make the difference between dignity and despair for ordinary people.

When government chooses to continually redistribute more wealth to the wealthy, everyone else suffers.

Ours is the only province in Canada where working families suffered a significant drop in their average income, while all around them the economy was supposedly booming. Even the good times weren't good for the middle-class in B.C.

More recently, we've seen the elimination of government grants to volunteer-driven non-profit societies that help seniors who are isolated and alone. Now they are really on their own.

In addition, thousands of seniors have been told they must pay out almost \$700 a month more as they await the end of their days in residential care.

These cost-cutting decisions involve amounts that are almost insignificant in relation to the size of the provincial budget.

They are also insignificant in relation to the size of the benefits and tax giveaways that continue to flow unabated to the richest of the rich.

But they are a huge burden on the frailest of the frail, an unprovoked and unnecessary attack on some of our most defenceless citizens.

They are also an insult to the principle that governments should work for all of us, not just a privileged few.

Moving ahead: respect for citizens

Let me conclude with a final example of how government needs to change course.

I do not object to paying higher taxes in return for services people need, including public health care for the sick, public education for our children and grandchildren, and protection of our rivers, streams, and natural heritage from unregulated exploitation and pollution.

Some things we pay for through taxes. Some we pay on our own. In many cases, paying for them through taxes is less expensive, provides better service, and is more fair to those who pay.

As a small example, BC FORUM negotiates group rates on services for our members. This includes services that government has eliminated, even as it continues to increase Medical Services Plan premiums. As a group, we get more for less than any of us can buy on our own. That's even more true for public services paid for through fair and progressive taxes, because government represents a much larger group.

So we do not object to paying more taxes to pay for services to people. We are far from alone in that. A recent survey in the Premier's own constituency found that 75 percent would support increasing taxes to pay for public services.

We do object to tax increases for which people get nothing in return, such as the plan to harmonize sales taxes, a plan the government disappointingly failed to tell us the truth about during this year's election.

The government now says the HST will save large corporations \$1.9 billion a year. It also says the HST will be revenue neutral for government.

In other words, the rest of us will be paying more to give another tax break to the few.

While we live, we'll all pay more.

Even when we die, our families will pay more for the funeral, and more for the lawyer who acts as the executor of our will.

We get nothing in return for this additional gift to the powerful, not even a thank you card.

This latest huge giveaway – along with all the gifts that have preceded it – is profoundly unfair to the citizens of B.C.

I ask you to halt the HST, and change direction.

I ask you to move B.C. towards a fair, progressive tax policy that recognizes the needs of the weak as well as the strong.

I ask you to put people first, and to seize that principle as the light that guides every government decision, and thereby help us move towards better days, more opportunities, and more respect for every citizen.

Conclusion

Almost a decade ago, Mr. Campbell proclaimed a new era for British Columbia.

It has turned out to be an era of selfishness. It has been an era where unregulated greed is venerated, and the public good is desecrated.

It has gone too far.

It is time now for budget decisions that reflect the traditional values of British Columbians – concern for others, compassion, and simple human decency towards our fellow men, women and children.

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