

Minister Rick Thorpe
Speech to BC Business Council Skills Conference
April 28, 2006

Good morning. It's a real pleasure to be here.

As Jerry mentioned, my colleague Shirley Bond sends her regrets.

First of all, I'd like to begin by congratulating each of you that are here today because you are part of the reason for the success that British Columbians enjoy since 2001. All of your hard work and the hard work of your associates is paying off in the province of British Columbia.

British Columbia leads Canada in terms of job growth. Over 294,000 new jobs have been created since 2001. In fact, British Columbia leads the job growth rate in Canada, doubling that of Canada, at 3.8 per cent.

Unemployment, at 4.4 per cent, is the lowest in 30 years. This could not have been achieved without the commitment of you and those that you work with and all the dedicated people that are here today.

It's no secret that it's a great, great time to be in British Columbia. British Columbia continues to show unprecedented growth, no matter what sector and no matter what industry and no matter what part of the province. Retail sales, for the first time in the history of the province of British Columbia, topped \$50 billion mark in 2005. Our construction industry is booming with a growth rate of 9.4 per cent in 2005 and predicted to grow at 7.6 per cent in 2006. Film and television production in British Columbia increased is up 50 per cent from over 2004, to \$1.2 billion. Mining exploration has increased from \$29 million in 2001 to \$220 million last year. Oil and gas is growing at unprecedented levels in the province of British Columbia.

For the first time in the history of the province of British Columbia over two million people are employed in British Columbia. In fact, 2.2 million people are now employed in our province.

Today in British Columbia instead of people chasing for jobs, we have jobs chasing for people. Yes, we are now all managing success. What a chance; what an opportunity.

In 2005, Premier Gordon Campbell committed our government to establishing a permanent small business roundtable. As Minister of Small Business and Revenue, I have the pleasure of chairing the small business roundtable. The small business roundtable is a group of 24 individuals from throughout the regions of British Columbia, with business and other experiences, brought together so we can develop a partnership of small businesses and other businesses and educators from around the province, to travel the province and listen to British Columbians. Our goal is to make **British Columbia the most business-friendly jurisdiction in Canada.**

Over the last few months we've travelled to 18 different communities and have heard from hundreds of community stakeholders. Although their businesses are diverse, they all want to talk about the same thing: **making sure we have skilled workers.**

With more than one million jobs projected to have to be created over the next 12 years, it's important that all of us, all of us work together to fill those jobs with the right people who have the right skills at the right time.

We believe that government is striving very hard to do its part. We are investing in programs to increase the size of our skilled workforce, to provide skills training, and to match training skills to market needs.

In fact, our 2006 budget takes action to address the skills shortage with a \$400-million total investment. This includes \$90 million over the next three years to develop a new system of tax credits. This program will be designed from inputs from industry representatives and other advisers throughout the province of British Columbia to make sure that it works for British Columbia. This budget also includes \$39 million additional funding for the industry training authority to expand and support apprenticeship training in the province of British Columbia.

You know, if there was a magic pill or a silver bullet, I'm sure by now someone would have administered it, but there's none. We all have to [wait].

I remember when we formed government, as some of you might know, Paul Taylor — who's now the president of ICBC — was the deputy minister of Finance. We had some financial challenges in the province. His advice to all of us, which I'll always remember: we got into these problems a million dollars at a time, and we're going to get out of these problems one million dollars at a time.

I think it's important for us all to realize — I'm sure you've had many experts and industry people that will talk to you — that we have to look at a variety of sources and ways to fill the opportunities and the challenges that we have as we manage success in British Columbia.

One of those, we believe, is the provincial nominee program. The provincial nominee program was introduced in 2001 to attract skilled workers to British Columbia. Since March of 2001 over 1,750 skilled and business immigrants plus their dependents have made British Columbia their home through this program. Last year alone, we attracted over 700 skilled workers and entrepreneurs to British Columbia. Our goal this year is to help at least 1,300 skilled and business immigrants call British Columbia their home. Our target over the next three years is just under 5,000. Together, with the support of you, here today, and the work of my colleague Minister Colin Hansen, I know we can not only achieve this goal, we can surpass this goal.

We also have to look, I believe very strongly, in connecting immigrants that are here today, that have been frustrated by long to work in the areas where they have specialized training. In 2005 our government invested \$14.5 million in B.C. Skills Connect for Immigrants program to address this concern. This program helps highly skilled immigrants to move faster into jobs matching their qualifications. Over the next three years it is anticipated that Skills Connect will help 5,000

immigrants find jobs to match their training and experience, which will in turn help us ensure that we have enough skilled workers.

However, finding employees is only one piece of the puzzle. Regulatory bodies must recognize the international credentials British Columbians hold — which is why we developed the international qualifications program in 2001. On April 19, the Ministry of Economic Development supported a forum of British Columbia's regulatory bodies to explore ways to improve access for skilled immigrants with foreign credentials. Some of those who participated were: the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of British Columbia, the Certified General Accountants of British Columbia, the College of Pharmacists of British Columbia, and Capacity BC – Roundtable of Internationally Trained Professionals

I know that my colleague Economic Development Minister Colin Hansen is looking forward to working closely with these and other organizations to reduce the time it takes to become licensed, accredited, and to make things happen.

These initiatives will help to close the gap, the employment gap.

Another way to close the gap is to access British Columbians who are already joining the workforce right now.

British Columbia's aboriginal population of over 170,000 are a great example of British Columbians who are ready and eager to contribute to our growing economy, but, like all workers, they need the right skills and training to succeed in these opportunities. That is exactly what the British Columbia aboriginal workforce strategy is designed to do.

The memorandum-of-understanding for this strategy will be signed by May 10, between British Columbia, aboriginal human resource development agreement holders, and the First Nations education coordinators committee. It lays the groundwork for us to work in partnership to increase employment for aboriginal people in British Columbia.

Much of that will be achieved through creating on-the-ground partnerships between employers and organizations like the Business Council of British Columbia and its members.

Another example is the Business and Entrepreneurship Skills Training, or BEST programs, for aboriginal youth. It's a series of workshops designed to support young aboriginal entrepreneurs in identifying and creating self-employment opportunities in their communities and other regions of British Columbia. Communities benefiting, so far, from this program include: Massett, Port Hardy, Alert Bay, Cranbrook, Vernon, Fort St. John, and Merritt.

We've also expanded mining and mineral exploration training for youth from aboriginal communities by investing more than \$2 million.

Youth from around British Columbia are busy planning their careers and getting ready to enter the workforce. We all want them to have access to every option and every opportunity that is available. There's something out there right now for everyone.

One traditional option has always been for youth to study at post-secondary institutions. Premier Gordon Campbell and our government has committed to adding 25,000 new spaces to our post-secondary institutions by the year 2010.

We know our knowledge-based economy requires a workforce that is highly educated and highly trained. Under the leadership of Premier Gordon Campbell, we have set our sights on making British Columbia the best-educated, most literate place in North America.

Our seat expansion is one way of us all working to reach that goal. By the end of this year, we will achieve over 50 per cent of our new spaces, our commitment of 25,000 seats. Health care, oil and gas, tourism and hospitality are but a few of the sectors that are benefiting from these programs and these spaces.

In fact, with respect to health care our government is leading the nation in training more doctors and nurses. Last year we added almost 100 spaces for doctors in our medical training program. By the end of this year more than 6,500 nurses will have graduated in British Columbia since 2001.

This could not have been happened without the help of many of you in this room. Thank you for your contributions to the future health of British Columbians.

Another option for our youth to pursue is a career in the trades. In 2006 we invested \$5 million in trades training. This includes: \$3 million for trades training equipment, \$1.4 million for a trades awareness program for students in grade 6 to grade 9, and \$850,000 for a mobile trades training unit for rural and aboriginal communities in northern British Columbia.

The investments we are making in trades training will go a long way to support the more than 6,000 high school students who are enrolled in various trades programs across British Columbia today.

In October of 2004 our government joined with the Industry Training Authority (ITA) to announce an accelerated credit enrolment industry program or [as we refer to it], ACE IT. ACE IT is a key part of our strategy to get more youth involved in industry training. This voluntary program allows students to [apply the work experience] to their high school graduation, as well as credits towards an apprenticeship or industry training program. I would see it as a win-win. The goal is to encourage more of our young people to register in industry training programs while still in high school, so they can see firsthand how trades are an excellent career opportunity.

By the end of February 2006 there were 1,794 ACE IT participants in 33 school districts in the province of British Columbia. We now have requests from more than 41 school districts to start in September 2006. We're expecting to see continued growth, as the ITA will fund all eligible applications from interested school districts, to the ACE IT program.

The most recent program introduced to promote trades to youth is the Youth Exploring Skills to Industry Training or, we call it, YES 2 IT.

In January, as the MLA for Okanagan-Westside, I had the pleasure to help launch this program with my colleague the Minister of Education, Minister Bond, in Summerland, British Columbia. This program is geared towards students in grades 6-to-9. Students had the opportunity to view professionals in action as they built a new house — and even helped out. They even gave me a hammer — if you can believe it. Again, it's a partnership, a partnership between students, between homebuilders, between government, and between educators.

You know, we often talk about partnerships, but on that day in Summerland, as the students were there.... I just kind of close my eyes for a second; I can see them build that home on the lake, a beautiful sight.

It's partnerships like these that will give our students the necessary tools to enjoy the wealth of opportunities out there in British Columbia. Students are eager to learn new skills.

Right now, over 3,200 youth are participating in ITA programming - up 270 percent from when the ITA was established in 2004 and surpassing the goal of 3,000 for 2006/07. The Industry Training Authority's target is to have 4000 youth participants in ACE IT and YES 2 IT by 2007/08.

That doesn't include the over 1,000 students registered in Secondary School Apprenticeships (SSA) throughout British Columbia. The Secondary School Apprenticeships programs allows students to begin their apprenticeships at the age of 15, and receive 16 credits towards graduation for 480 hours of paid work experience - all while continuing their learning in the classroom.

More and more students are learning how important trades are.

This month our Government invested \$3 million in trades training equipment for secondary students and \$850,000 for a mobile trades training unit in Kamloops. This mobile training unit will accommodate up to 4 trades. Trades that are under consideration for the mobile unit include millwright, machinist, welder, pipefitter, and refrigeration and air conditioning mechanic.

We've also partnered with the BC Business Council to make the "Third Option Rocks" DVD available in every school district.

The Third Option Rocks is a comprehensive DVD-Movie highlighting the wide range of career options that do not require a university degree but do need some form of post-secondary education.

One of the things I keep hearing in my role as chair of the Small Business Roundtable is the need to introduce business, trades and entrepreneur programs into our schools. This DVD is a great tool for us to have for this purpose. The DVD includes an accompanying book which provides details of job forecasts, expected incomes, education or training required, plus links to other sources of information. Occupations highlighted as ones with significant growth include computer animators, carpenters and truck drivers.

The interactive DVD profiles 101 occupations and showcases 22 "Faces of Success," young residents from across British Columbia who have followed The Third Option route. This DVD is

an excellent resource for all British Columbians and on behalf of our government, I am pleased we could partner with the BC Business Council in its distribution.

As I mentioned earlier, our government enjoys a very effective partnership with the Industry Training Authority. The ACE IT and YES 2 IT programs are just two of the many programs the Industry Training Authority has introduced to ensure we have enough skilled labour.

With the help of this government, the ITA is already ahead of schedule to increase the number of industry trainees by 30 per cent in 2007. Today, British Columbia has more than 26,000 registered apprentices - up more than 77% since April 2004. And those numbers don't include the thousands of students enrolled in entry-level trades training across British Columbia. That's thousands more workers with the skills we'll need.

And thanks to you, these skilled workers will have the opportunities. You know what the market needs. You know what skills are necessary to get the job done. And, you know what it's going to take to ensure we can fill those one million job openings.

I'm pleased to say that the number of employers that have apprentices is increasing steadily and now stands at over 8,600. This is a big improvement from where we started in 2003 with 6,740.

So together, we're taking the right steps and moving in the right direction.

"Managing Success" requires all of us to work in partnership. Together, we have the opportunity to educate our youth about the various avenues available to them. We have the opportunity to enrich British Columbia culturally by attracting new skilled immigrants. And, we have the opportunity to strengthen our industries and the competitiveness of British Columbia by forming new partnerships and working together.

As a government, we're putting programs in place to increase the skilled labour market. By working together, British Columbia's economy can only grow stronger. I know together we'll be able to 'manage our success' and continue to be the best place on earth to live, work and invest.

This is a team effort – all of us working together. We're giving more students today a stepping stone to go to an employer and say 'I have a skill set here. I'm not just a high school student coming out with nothing to offer you. I have something that you can use right now.'

In closing, let me please convey on behalf of Premier Gordon Campbell and our government our thanks to the Business Council of British Columbia for holding this business-education partnership and the 2006 BC Business Council skills conference.

We are very excited about the future of British Columbia and, as we have seen in the past 5 years, when British Columbians work together in a partnership, success is the result. Thanks for your commitment to work in partnership and yes, the future of British Columbia continues to be very promising.

Have a great day.