
OPINION-EDITORIAL

DEVELOPING TRADE THROUGH OUR NEIGHBOURS AND FRIENDS

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(November 21, 2005)

(726 words)

Over the past four years, British Columbians have worked hard to rebuild B.C.'s economy – and it's paying off. Last year, the economy grew by 3.9 per cent, the strongest growth of all Canadian provinces. We've seen more than 250,000 new jobs created since December 2001, and the unemployment rate in B.C. fell to a record low 5.1 per cent in October.

As we look to build on the progress we have all made, more and more we are looking to the west and opportunities opening up across the Pacific. With an unmatched geographic position as a natural trade gateway and a higher proportion of people with Asian heritage than anywhere else on the continent, B.C. has a unique opportunity to connect with Asian markets.

Just a few months after being elected premier in 2001, Premier Gordon Campbell travelled to Hong Kong, Shanghai and Tokyo to deliver a clear message: B.C. is open for business again. Since then, the Province has worked to strengthen our ties to China and other Asian markets. Recently, we've seen more and more evidence of how that work is generating renewed interest in B.C. from Asia-Pacific partners.

In September, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited B.C. and both he and Prime Minister Paul Martin gave a strong endorsement of B.C.'s potential as a gateway for China-Canada trade. Both the president and the prime minister also expressed their desire to see bilateral trade between the two countries double to \$30 billion annually – and B.C. will be at the heart of that growth.

In October, to mark the 10th anniversary of the twinning of B.C. and its sister province of Guangdong, Premier Campbell hosted the Governor of Guangdong and a strong business delegation interested in exploring partnerships in B.C. The governor joined the Chief Executive of Hong Kong and over 450 delegates and mayors from 21 cities in China at a special forum to discuss new business opportunities. The message was clear: China recognizes B.C.'s strengths and is ready to do business here.

B.C.'s potential as Canada's gateway to the Pacific is also garnering national attention and support. Western provinces have committed to working with B.C. to open up the West Coast in support of their trade needs. Recently, the federal government launched its Pacific Gateway Strategy with a \$590-million investment to open up infrastructure in support of expanded trade opportunities.

The challenge now for all of us is to make the most of the opportunities ahead. To help do that, Premier Campbell has appointed a new Asia-Pacific Trade Council that will look at the next steps B.C. can take to unleash its full potential as Canada's gateway. The council will look at how best to promote B.C.'s interests in China and other key markets.

It will look at how to maximize opportunities, such as China's expected granting of approved destination status for Canada. Already, 80 per cent of Chinese tourists coming to Canada visit B.C. Within five years, it is expected the number of Chinese visitors to our province will more than triple.

The Province is already acting to do its part in supporting B.C. businesses and ensuring the infrastructure and competitive business practices are in place to help them succeed. We know more must be done to maintain an advantage over competitors from the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States and other locations.

But it will ultimately be up to B.C. businesses to pursue the opportunities available to them. The Chinese-Canadian community in B.C. is a great resource for both potential partners in the Asia-Pacific and here in B.C. As a province, we must tap into the relationships and entrepreneurial leverage from this community to strengthen and expand the business, trade, cultural, social and educational connections. A campaign with the Chinese-Canadian community to generate both awareness of and linkage to China is welcome.

This is a time of exceptional opportunities for B.C. Our economy is on track, a renewed optimism is spreading across the province, and our partners across the Pacific are taking a renewed interest in a revitalized B.C. and all that we have to offer.

Let's welcome this opportunity and make the most of it; by recognizing the strengths and the diversity of our neighbours, our friends and our future business associates. It is these all-important networks and connections that will help us move forward and build a stronger British Columbia.