

**Congress on Aging and Seniors Issues
Premier Gordon Campbell
October 28, 2005**

Check Against Delivery

Let me start today by saying how pleased I am that we got such an excellent turnout for this event. This is the first congress on aging and seniors issues that we've hosted in the province of British Columbia. We're joined by a number of cabinet ministers, and I would like to introduce them.

On my right, Rich Coleman, who is the Minister for Forestry and Range and Minister Responsible for Housing. Housing is a very important issue as we look to the future of shaping our communities, our neighbourhoods, our cities and the province.

Also, to my immediate left, Ida Chong, who is the minister responsible for services to seniors in the province of British Columbia. Ida has had extensive experience around the province talking with seniors groups and agencies and will be a very important lead minister with regard to this.

Also with us today is Olga Ilich, Minister of Sport and Arts in the province; she's very interested in recreation and moving us forward and having an active, lively and vital province. She recognizes how important volunteers are in the province and, really, is one of the champions of not just volunteers, but also recognizes how much seniors are contributing to the volunteer sector in British Columbia today.

George Abbott is the Minister of Health for the province of British Columbia, and will join us later.

On my immediate right is the leader of this endeavour, Dr. Patricia Baird. Dr. Baird is a distinguished physician, an officer of the Order of Canada, an advisor to the World Health Organization, and the most important job she has right now is she as chair of the Premier's Council on Aging and Seniors' Issues.

A critical component for me in terms of the leadership that Dr. Baird offers is her understanding of how much the world has changed. She understands the enormous contribution seniors are making across the spectrum of our lives in economic and cultural activities. And what I'm asking her and the Premier's council to do is to change the way we're thinking about how we deal with the issues of aging across the province.

Today we also have representatives and leaders from the Union of B.C. Municipalities, who are directly impacted by the changing needs of people as they get older.

One favourite example of those changing needs is the fact that the fastest-growing pastimes in North America today are bird watching, gardening and golf. Now, when I was growing up, the fastest-growing pastimes were football and ice hockey. But things change. Our demands change. Our needs change. Our desires change.

Throughout her career Dr. Baird has been willing to look beyond the conventional wisdom and beyond the status quo to the core and the root of what we're dealing with and put solutions forward for the long term. So I'm very pleased that Dr. Baird has taken on this leadership role, and I hope we'll all give her a hand.

Dr. Baird would be the first to tell you that the Council on Aging and Seniors' Issues is a group of people with a broad range of experience. I would like to introduce them briefly. Mr. Wilbur Campbell joins us. He's the grandfather of seven and a board member on the Institution of Indigenous Government.

Also Mr. Lawrence Fagan, a management consultant with 30 years' experience working in long-term care.

Also Judith Grant, a former member of the Canadian Gerontology Association and an expert on private home care services.

Mr. Mohinder Grewal is with us. He's a member of the Richmond Seniors' Advisory Committee.

There's Mildred Martin, president of the - I'm going to say this right, Mildred -Nak'azdli Elders' Society, a teacher of language and traditional values and first nations culture. Mildred is recognized across First Nations in British Columbia for the contribution that she's made.

Dr. David Sinclair, recognized for his work on behalf of seniors housing and veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Dr. William Webber, a retired dean of medicine at the University of British Columbia. He's active in numerous community boards and royal commissions on health.

Here's Diane Bloor, secretary-treasurer of the North Peace Senior Housing Society, working on behalf of seniors groups in northern British Columbia.

Mario Caravetta, long recognized by the Salvation Army for his work with seniors.

Elsie Gerdes, who is the newly elected president of the B.C. Old Age Pensioners Organization.

Ms. Shirley Gratton, who has been a staunch advocate for seniors and was the winner of the Prince George Citizen of the Year Ward in 2004-05.

Ms. Jill Hightower, who is a research consultant and an educator on issues of aging and elder abuse.

Dr. David Lai, of the Order of Canada, who also is a researcher at the University of Victoria's Centre on Aging.

Graham Reid, a retired lawyer, a business executive and a director for the Society for Learning in Retirement.

Dr. Floyd Trotter a specialist in geriatric practice, active with the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association.

Mr. Donald Winch, a member of the Royal Canadian Legion and experienced in veterans' housing issues.

And Ms. Mary Jordan, director of the B.C. Centre for Disease Control. Unfortunately, Mary can't be with us today, but all the other members of the Premier's Council on Aging and Seniors Issues are joining us today at this congress, and I want to say thank you to all of them for their contribution.

For all of you who have come today, this is our first congress and I hope that you've had a chance to think about what you might learn from this. We hope to be provocative. We hope to share with you some ideas that will make a difference and maybe change the way we look at how we deal with these issues and aging generally in the province.

Our challenge is to meet the wave of aging that's taking place. Too often we look at aging as a problem. I can tell you that from my perspective I'm hoping to age for a long, long time, and I think many people join me in this. We want to be healthy, we want to be active, we want to contribute, and certainly, we want to do that well beyond that imaginary deadline of 65 years of age.

That's one of the things I'm asking you to try and think about as you deliberate today and also as the council works through the next the year on the whole range of issues that you're dealing with.

Seniors. They're our society, and aging does not make them less able to participate and less able to contribute. Some people have challenges, a lot of people don't, so we have to think of how we create and shape our neighbourhoods so they meet the changing needs of our demographics, the needs of our population.

The vast majority of our neighbourhoods were shaped in the late '40s and early '50s as we built what we called single-family residential neighbourhoods, based on 50-foot lots, on having a large enough back yard so your kids could go and run around play in the back yard and maybe play a little soccer. When we think of our neighbourhoods and how they work, how do we make sure they're responding to the needs of seniors? How do we make them feel safe for seniors? How do we design them for people who are getting older, who may not be quite as mobile as they used to be?

Maybe we should be designing neighbourhoods so housing for older people can be provide those services that our seniors might need or might want to participate in. Those

are challenges that are much bigger than the traditional framework we've been able to look at.

All of us want to be healthy as we get older, and there's an important message here. As legislators we can't go into the Legislature and sign a bill that says all seniors in British Columbia will now be healthy and if not they're going to get a fine. We have to decide we're going to be healthy. We have to decide we're going to exercise. We also have to decide the kind of future we all want as a society, and when we do that, and we each take responsibility for some of that, then we'll see big changes.

When we talk about seniors and aging issues, we tend to talk about the specific goals and objectives that we've laid out or programs to meet particular needs of particular segments.

What I hope we can do is think about how we can provide a better quality of life for everybody in the population.

Statistics currently show about one in eight British Columbians is over 65. In 25 years, about one in four British Columbians will be over 65. The number of people in the workforce providing the support for those people over 65 is shrinking. How do we manage that? How do we make sure we're doing the things we need to do for seniors, while not forgetting the younger part of our demographic, the people who are asking to be part of our broader community. Those are all challenges that we have to face. In the last little while we've been able to take some financial steps in the province that will make the lives of some seniors better. The increase in the seniors' supplement will make a difference in thousands of seniors' lives. But we have to make sure that we are careful and prudent in where we put those resources so we're maximizing the benefits and the quality of life of all seniors across the province.

You will hear today from people involved in education. Education is probably one of the most exciting things we can undertake, and that should go on. We always want to be learning. And we need to make sure that that's available for older people in our communities.

Housing, education, health care for all of British Columbia: How do we make sure that there's health care available for young families when they need it? How do we make sure the education system meets the needs of individual people and individual learners amongst the broader public?

One of the challenges that we should reflect on as we go through this is that there are different needs in urban centres than there are in rural centres. There are different needs among our first nations communities than there are in some of our non-first nations. As we look out and scan the horizon we have to ask if we can do it, how we can do it, how broadly we can approach it.

This always sounds funny to someone who's not a senior. We have an anti-falling strategy. If you're a kid, you run around, you're falling down all the time. You're picking

yourself up and you're getting on with your life. When you're a senior, and you fall down, it's not nearly as easy to pick yourself up. In some cases, damage is done when you fall.

They're the things we have to start reminding people about early on, and think about how we design things. I happen to love this room, for example. But it does create situations where people might fall.

Our real goal here is to see beyond the label of senior, to recognize that what we're really talking about is a changing society, a society which in some cases I hope will be richer, more vital, more complete. Think of seniors as a defining characteristic of our society, not as a problem but as an opportunity, as an opening up of new opportunities and experiences, new abilities to learn, new abilities to share the wisdom of the past and of the future. If we can do that I think we will have done a significant job.

There are lots of challenges we face, but I believe through the collective wisdom and collective understanding of the people and seniors across our province we have an opportunity to meet the challenges and the goals that we've set for ourselves.

We want seniors to know that they have the support of government. We want them to know that we've created a plan for healthy living that's second to none across the province. But we know we're not there yet. So the most important thing as you go through the exercises today is to take a little bit of time to imagine what you would like the province to look like and to feel like for BC's seniors. You can't do things overnight. Instead, we will have to take relentless steps to get to our goals and engage all of British Columbians in achieving that goal.

Thank you all for coming today.