

BC's Liberals promise a revolution, with health care one of the targets

British Columbians have given a stunning victory to their new premier, who promises huge change for the West Coast. And as the change begins, the implications are as big for health care as for the province itself.

Gordon Campbell and his Liberals received nearly 60% of the popular vote and won 77 of 79 seats in the spring election. In truth, Campbell did not win power as much as the governing New Democrats lost it. People who once took pride in the province were simply fed up after a decade of NDP rule. The provincial debt had doubled, GDP growth was in the dumpster, the billion-dollar ferries were in dry dock and businesses were leaving.

Campbell, a former mayor of Vancouver, warmed an opposition seat for 7 long years before moving to the premier's office. He isn't a Liberal in the conventional sense, and his Grits are a

far cry from the crowd found in Jean Chrétien's caucus in Ottawa. In the absence of any other substantive right-leaning party, the BC Liberals are a coalition of former Social Credit supporters and backers of the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives, with a few genuine Liberals thrown in for seasoning. Obviously, the premier can't afford to be too partisan or doctrinaire if he's to keep this diverse caucus united. (This also means that Campbell is not a right-leaning ideologue in the mould of Ontario's Mike Harris.)

A tough job lies ahead. He must restore faith in government in the face of the pervasive cynicism left over from the NDP's days in office. In BC, residents still seethe over then premier Glen Clark's "fudge-it budgets" that promised balanced books but delivered whopping deficits.

Within 24 hours of his swearing-in ceremony in June, Campbell cut income taxes by 25% and hinted that more cuts are coming. He says this will force his government to run deficits for at least a while, but he's determined to stimulate the economy, compete with Alberta for skilled workers and return BC to its past glory.

One area where he won't cut is health, which consumes \$9.3 billion annually, or 40% of the provincial budget. Campbell, who brings some medical genes to the job — his father, Charles (Chargo) Campbell, was an assistant dean of medicine at UBC — has already signalled the importance he places on the area by allocating 4 cabinet seats to it. Colin Hansen is health services minister, while former nurse Sindi Hawkins is

minister of health planning, Dr. Gulzar Cheema is minister of state for mental health and Katherine Whittred is responsible for long-term and home care.

Health care played a key role in the Campbell campaign. His party, which supports the Canada Health Act, decried the NDP's hospital bed cuts during the campaign. It is also keen to address a serious shortage of nurses and medical personnel. While BC's population grew by 50% during the last 20 years, for instance, the number of doctors graduating from UBC remained constant.

Strain on health resources routinely forces BC to transfer patients outside the province, and Campbell says he'll address resource shortages with new funding that he projects will become available as BC's economy improves.

During the campaign, the Liberals pledged to make the province "a place where health care professionals and caregivers know they are valued," but this may have been easier said than done. Before he even got a chance to scrutinize the province's books, Campbell was confronted by strikes and work stoppages by everyone from hospital pharmacists to nurses to lab and x-ray technicians and dietitians. All want big pay raises.

The much anticipated period of pain for both BC and its new premier clearly has begun, but at the moment no one knows how long it will last or what the outcome will be. — *Barbara Yaffe*, National Columnist, Vancouver Sun



Campbell: cleaning house

New York cracks down on cell-phone use in car

The first state-wide ban on the use of hand-held cell phones while driving has been approved by New York's State Assembly, and it may be the first of many. The new law calls for a \$100 fine for a first offence, \$200 for the second and \$500 for all subsequent ones. It does allow drivers to use "hands-off" cell phones and to make 911 calls.

Laws on phone use while driving have also been proposed in 40 other states, and bans are already in place in at least 23 countries, including Japan.

CMAJ recently called for the introduction of rules restricting cell-phone use while driving in Canada, describing the move as a "no-brainer" (164[11]:1557). Winnipeg MP Bill Blaikie subsequently used that editorial to raise the issue in the House of Commons and to introduce a motion calling for a New York-style ban in Canada. He acknowledged that such a law might be difficult to enforce. — *CMAJ*

Toxic info for smokers

The amount of copy on Canadians' cigarette packs just got denser. Ottawa has ordered companies to include amounts of benzene, hydrogen cyanide and formaldehyde contained in a cigarette's smoke on each package. They currently display only data for tar, nicotine and carbon dioxide. As well, makers of chewing tobacco and snuff must now display the amounts of 3 toxic substances — lead, nicotine and nitrosamines — on their packaging. — *CMAJ*