



BRITISH
COLUMBIA

SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

Her Honour the Honourable Janet Austin, OBC
Lieutenant Governor
at the Opening of the
Fifth Session, Forty-second Parliament
of the
Province of British Columbia
February 20, 2024

OPENING

Good afternoon, Mr. Speaker, Premier, and Honourable Members.

I am pleased to deliver The Speech from the Throne, laying out your government's plan to build a stronger B.C. that works better for people – now, and into the future.

I would like to start by acknowledging the Lekwungen peoples, the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations, upon whose territories we are gathered today.

Thank you to Elder Butch Dick of the Songhees Nation and Elder Mary Ann Thomas of the Esquimalt Nation for starting us off in a good way.

I also want to thank Rabbi Harry Brechner of Congregation Emanu-El for offering prayers and reflection.

This building, long a symbol of colonialism, now has messages written in the Lekwungen language permanently inscribed on its stone perimeter.

These words – about ancestors, warriors, and children – symbolize a new era.

One of meaningful reconciliation, where we work together to preserve Indigenous languages and acknowledge the true history of these lands.

As Hereditary Chief Edward Thomas Sr. of the Esquimalt Nation said during the unveiling:

“It’s a long time coming.”

Words and symbols like this are undoubtedly important.

But actions must follow.

That’s why your government remains committed to implementing the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*—which was endorsed unanimously by this legislature.

This work is about partnership and co-operation, which underpins everything we do here.

Most importantly, it’s about a better future for everyone who calls this land home.

IN MEMORIAM

As has become recent tradition, we begin by remembering some of those we have lost in the past year.

We mourn the remarkable Gloria Cranmer Webster, who dedicated her life to the preservation and celebration of Indigenous culture.

We also mourn her younger brother, Tlakwagila Bill Cranmer, as we do other Indigenous leaders including Sm’oogyet Satsan Mel Bevan, Charles Williams, Liza Wolf, Stephanie Patterson, Rick Gilbert, Byron Joseph, Natasha Grace Wilson and former Cowichan Tribes Chief Squxulenuhw William “Chip” Seymour.

We mourn Gordon Gibson Jr. and Patty Sahota, who once served in this legislature, as we do former members of Parliament Stephen Owen and Pat Carney.

In the arts, we mourn carver Temosen Charles Elliott and photographer Diane Evans, as we do entertainers Bill Hosie, Chad Allan, Jayson Hoover, and actor Carl Weathers, who frequently filmed in Vancouver and played linebacker for the BC Lions.

From the world of sports, we mourn rower Dean Crawford and sportswriter Jack Keating.

From media, we mourn broadcasters Red Robinson, Deborra Hope, Kuljeet Kaila, and Ted Farr, as we do columnist Bob Stall.

We mourn labour leader Ray Haynes, environmentalist Kevin Bell, conservationist John Nightingale, communications executive Phil Lind, inventor Phil Nuytten; judge Selwyn Romilly; disability advocate George Lawson, and CEO of Sher-E Punjab and longtime philanthropist Ajit Singh Badh.

From medicine, we mourn: Registered Nurse Evanna Brennan, Dr. Jiri Frolich, and Dr. Gurdev Singh Gill.

We mourn Ben Mizrachi, a medic from Vancouver who was tending to the wounded at a music festival in Israel when murdered by Hamas terrorists. May his memory be a blessing.

We mourn those who answered the nation's call, including Reuben Sinclair, who on his passing was Canada's oldest military veteran.

We mourn Sgt. Michael Leo and RCMP Const. Rick O'Brien.

We mourn firefighters who lost their lives during this summer's record wildfires: Devyn Gale, Zak Muise, Kenneth Patrick, Blain Sonnenberg, Jaxon Billyboy-Bowe, and Damian Dyson, as we do Langford assistant fire chief Lance Caven.

We also mourn – and reflect on – the loss of so many British Columbians from toxic, unregulated drugs.

To all who lost a loved one in the past year, we extend our sympathies and condolences. We acknowledge and share your grief.

THERE FOR YOU THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

It is fitting that as we open this final session of B.C.'s 42nd Parliament, communities around the province are celebrating the beginning of the Year of the Dragon.

According to legends, twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac were selected through a race.

The dragon, the only mythological animal, claimed fifth place.

When the Jade Emperor asked why he didn't win the race when he could fly, the dragon responded:

"First, I encountered a village suffering from drought – so I stopped to make rain. Then I saw a rabbit stranded on a log in the water and blew a puff of wind so the log would float to the riverbank."

In many ways, the story of the dragon is like the story of B.C. over the last few years.

Just look at how far we have come in a short period of time by looking out for each other.

When we first gathered here almost four years ago, only a handful of Members were able to attend safely in person.

Outside of these walls, many people's lives and livelihoods hung in the balance.

In the time since, we have faced the impacts of devastating climate emergencies and global upheaval.

While your government focused on keeping people healthy and the economy moving, British Columbians were busy working together to rebuild our province stronger than ever.

You got effective vaccines into grateful arms.

You rebuilt highways after flooding in record time.

You kept kids learning in classrooms and businesses operating during difficult circumstances.

Proving, once again, that here in B.C. our greatest natural resource is the people of this province.

By putting people first, we have built a strong foundation through tough times.

Today, our unemployment rate is one of the lowest in Canada.

In 2023, we added 74,000 new jobs – some of the strongest job growth in the country.

We were the first among provinces in year-over-year growth in average hourly wages last year.

In December, women's employment increased more than in any other province.

Further proof that increasing wages and reducing child care bills is good for families and good for business.

Take Reut, a young mom in Richmond with three kids.

Thanks to your government's latest fee reduction, she's saving \$1,000 a month and has been able to return to work as an engineer.

Since 2017, we have helped over 250,000 people get out of poverty through supports like job training.

Your government understands that people want to work and feel better off when they have a job and community connection.

That's why action will be taken this session to further break down barriers for those who can work, while your government continues to support those who cannot.

And we are seeing other reasons to be optimistic as well.

Since the pandemic, tourists are coming back to B.C. in droves.

And we can expect that to continue as B.C. hosts the 2024 Grey Cup, followed by the Invictus Games, and seven of the FIFA Men's World Cup games in Vancouver.

The film industry is booming again, too. After three years of disruption and labour disputes south of the border, Hollywood North is back.

Vancouver's tech sector is growing at one of the highest rates in North America.

And B.C. is home to the fastest-growing life sciences sector in Canada, with 2,000 companies employing almost 20,000 British Columbians.

PEOPLE ARE FACING BIG NEW CHALLENGES

While B.C.'s economy is strong and growing, your government is nowhere near satisfied.

Too many people are not feeling it yet. Too many are still struggling to get ahead.

After decades where our housing market was allowed to serve the interests of investors and speculators, even those who earn a decent middle-class income are finding it hard to afford a home.

People have a lot on their minds right now.

They are facing some big new challenges today.

High interest rates are causing considerable anxiety for anyone whose mortgage is coming up for renewal.

Inflation has made the cost of groceries and daily essentials increasingly expensive.

This has meant more people taking extra shifts or worrying about paying bills each month.

The world is changing, fast.

New technology has made our lives easier and more connected in many ways.

But it's also made it harder in others.

Parents are struggling to protect their kids from dangers that are now in the palms of their hand.

Working people are struggling to make a good living and be treated with fairness in the gig economy.

And people all over are struggling to find an affordable home because thousands have been diverted into short-term rentals, like Airbnbs.

While governments can't solve every problem or fix things overnight, your government makes a simple commitment to you:

It will have your back, so you are not facing these new challenges alone.

Because leaving people to fend for themselves does not work.

It did not work before. And it will not work now.

It would mean deep cuts that weaken the services we rely on.

It would drive up costs with added fees and fares, like the return of health-care premiums or tolls on roads and bridges.

And it would leave people at risk to all those who take unfair advantage and put profits ahead of people.

HELPING YOU BUILD A GOOD LIFE HERE IN B.C.

Everyone here in B.C. wants to be able to build a good life.

People just starting out in their adult lives want to be able to afford their rent and find good jobs and opportunities in the communities where they grew up.

Young families want to know that living in a decent home is within reach, and that child care is available and affordable.

Seniors want to know that after a lifetime of hard work, they will be cared for and be able to help their kids and grandkids.

That's why your government will continue to work tirelessly with you to take action on all the things that matter most to you.

DELIVERING MORE HOMES FOR PEOPLE, FASTER

For generations, there was an unspoken promise:

If you worked hard, got an education, and played by the rules, you could make a good middle-class living and be able to afford a decent home.

About three decades ago, that started to change.

In the name of austerity, governments at all levels stopped investing in affordable housing.

Wealthy speculators, foreign investors, and big developers rushed to fill the void.

For far too long, we also saw the proceeds of illegal activity parked in B.C.'s real estate market.

Housing costs went up and in recent years, the combination of inflation, interest rate hikes, and a lack of supply has only made the situation harder for people looking to buy or rent a home.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

This is a generational challenge, and we must meet the moment.

Doing nothing is not an option, and tinkering around the edges will not fix the problem.

That's why your government has taken strong action on all fronts to tackle the crisis head on.

Landmark changes made over the last year are helping to lay the foundation for a housing market that will work better for people.

Turning short-term rentals, like Airbnbs, into long-term homes.

Speeding up housing permit approvals.

Fixing zoning rules that block construction of middle-class homes in existing neighbourhoods.

Setting municipal targets for new housing construction.

Getting more homes built near public transit.

Building student housing at an unprecedented pace.

And protecting affordable rentals from being turned into luxury condos by big real estate corporations.

This month, the first purchase was made by the *Rental Protection Fund*, saving nearly 300 affordable co-op units in Coquitlam.

Thanks to tough legislation passed by this legislature, B.C. is now able to seize properties from organized criminals – because homes are for people, not money laundering.

While it will take time for people to feel the full benefits of these changes, we are starting to see early positive signs.

These changes are already helping people like Andrew, a forty-one-year-old, small-business owner in Vancouver.

Andrew is now renting a one-bedroom apartment he can afford, thanks to an influx of new inventory that hit the market after this legislature passed a law restricting short-term rentals.

In 2023, B.C. saw a record-setting 19,000 new rental homes registered – a 30 per cent increase from the year before.

Taken together, experts predict these changes will deliver hundreds of thousands of new homes in the next ten years.

This builds on the work your government has already done to support 78,000 homes that are either complete or on the way.

THE NEXT STEP IN B.C.'S HOUSING PLAN

Your government understands that for every Andrew, there are still thousands of other middle-income British Columbians who need help finding a home.

Breaking down barriers for home builders is part of the solution.

But governments getting out of the way completely is how we got into this crisis in the first place.

The market alone has not been able to deliver the homes working- and middle-class people need.

As a result, the people who are providing the services we all count on – like teachers, construction workers, and nurses – are being priced out of communities.

This is holding back our economy, weakening public services, and hurting all of us.

It was not always this way.

During the Second World War, the federal government built houses for workers so they could build warships in Esquimalt and bombers in Richmond.

At the end of the war, the demand for housing was even greater, as returning veterans looked to rebuild lives interrupted by military service.

Once again, the government stepped in.

The mass production used in the war effort was transferred to building homes for the growing middle-class.

Prefabricated homes with a choice of standard plans appeared in communities all across the country. They were offered to veterans at reasonable rents, and later for sale.

Known as *Victory Homes*, they offered secure, affordable housing for many families. Many of them are still standing.

The same spirit that animated our country then is what is needed in our province today.

That's why your government has launched *BC Builds*, the next step in the *Homes for People* plan.

BC Builds will leverage government-owned, public, and underused land, grant money, and low-cost financing to bring down construction costs and make more middle-class housing projects viable.

This is a model that has been used in cities around the world.

These homes will also be built faster with more efficient provincial and local government approvals.

And they will be income-tested, designed for the middle-class people who keep our communities working – so they can live close to where they work.

Think of homes connected to schools or on top of community centres and libraries.

Think of homes on underused land next to hospitals or empty parking lots transformed into homes for working- and middle-class families.

And your government will not stop there.

In this session, action will be taken to protect renters from bad-faith evictions and to help more first time homebuyers get on the ownership ladder.

BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT A GROWING B.C.

As we dramatically increase housing supply, so too must we build up the infrastructure and services to support this growth.

Through the billion-dollar *Growing Communities Fund*, and partnerships with other levels of government, that is exactly what we are doing here in British Columbia.

In Langley, construction has started on an expanded events centre that will add three new ice rinks and better support the needs of a booming population.

Just over a year ago, Prince Rupert had to issue a state of emergency, and crews worked through the holidays after a major line break threatened the community's water supply.

Today, your government is helping the city replace crucial sections of its aging water-distribution system to ensure people there have safe drinking water.

In the year ahead, significant work will continue to cut commute times for families and to keep our economy moving.

Construction is set to begin on the Surrey-Langley SkyTrain, the first rapid-transit project south of the Fraser River in 30 years and continue on the Broadway Subway project.

Taken together, these projects will increase our SkyTrain network by 27 per cent.

This will help thousands of people get to work and back home to their families sooner.

So too will continued improvements to Highway 1 through the Fraser Valley.

STRENGTHENING PUBLIC HEALTH CARE

Top of mind for many British Columbians right now is public health care.

Specifically, they want to know they can count on care to be there when they need it.

B.C. rose to the challenge in 2020 to make sure people were cared for and health-care workers in our hospitals were supported, but we face new challenges today.

Communities are growing, our population is getting older, and a large number of doctors and nurses are retiring.

We are not alone in this – our neighbours and countries around the world are also feeling the strain and competing for the same small pool of health-care professionals.

That's why your government has been taking action to improve access to care.

And it is starting to make a difference.

B.C. has eliminated the pandemic surgery backlog.

Recent changes have helped hundreds of thousands of people see a pharmacist to treat minor illnesses, so doctors and nurse practitioners can focus on sicker patients.

B.C. is building more hospitals, primary care clinics, cancer centres, and care homes closer to where you live through the largest health-care capital strategy in the province's history.

And our province will be home to the first new medical school in Western Canada in more than 50 years at Simon Fraser University's Surrey campus – which will have a focus on training the next generation of family doctors.

B.C. added more than 700 doctors and almost 6,300 new nurses over the last year.

We are leading the country with better and faster ways to prevent and detect cervical cancer.

Last month's launch of the first at-home self-screening program for HPV means ending deadly cervical cancer in British Columbia is now a very real possibility.

At thirty-six sites across B.C., our lung-cancer screening program is helping find cancer earlier so people can get treatment sooner.

More than 5,000 lung screening tests were done in the first year of the program alone.

This early detection is saving the lives of people like Shannon from North Vancouver whose cancer screening came back positive, even though she displayed no symptoms.

While progress is being made on many fronts, there is still a lot more to do.

This session, your government will continue the work it has started to attract, train, and retain the doctors and nurses we need.

It will make new investments to strengthen home and community, long-term care services for seniors.

And it will take new action to build on our ten-year cancer plan.

BETTER SUPPORT FOR MENTAL-HEALTH AND ADDICTIONS TREATMENT

Just as important as improving people's physical health is providing better support for mental-health and addictions treatment.

The latest coroner's update on the toxic drug crisis is a heartbreaking reminder that we need to keep using every tool in our toolbox.

We must continue our work to reduce harm and stigma to keep people who are struggling alive.

And when someone makes the brave decision to break free from addiction, we must ensure they have access to treatment and recovery close to where they live.

That's why your government is working to build a more connected system of mental-health and addictions care.

Almost 3,600 publicly-funded treatment and recovery beds are open throughout the province, with more on the way.

This work is helping people like Richard who is two years sober and has his life back on track after receiving treatment at Discovery House in Penticton.

BUILDING A CLEANER ECONOMY THAT WORKS BETTER FOR PEOPLE

Here in B.C., we know that supporting people is key to building a strong economy.

When we lower childcare bills, we help parents enter or re-enter the workforce.

When we deliver more affordable homes, we make our communities more attractive for businesses.

When we increase the minimum wage, we raise the purchasing power of people who are more likely to spend that money locally.

When we connect every rural, remote, and First Nations community to high-speed internet – as your government has pledged to do by 2027 – we are helping connect people to jobs and opportunities.

And when we build up our highways, bridges and ports, we strengthen our supply chains and help get our products to market.

Good for people *is* good for business.

HELPING PEOPLE AND FAMILIES WITH COSTS

At a time when inflation has caused the price of daily essentials to rise sharply, helping people and families get costs down is key to building an economy that works for everyone.

In just the past year, your government has taken many steps to do just that.

New cost-of-living credits have been sent out, including a \$100 credit on BC Hydro bills.

An increase to the *BC Family Benefit* means families now qualify for hundreds of dollars more per year.

And an enhanced *Climate Action Tax Credit* is putting as much as \$900 back in the pockets of more than two million British Columbians.

Free contraception is helping people save hundreds of dollars a year, and thousands over their lifetime.

ICBC car insurance rates have been frozen after being cut on average by \$500 a year for drivers.

New investments in food security are helping people better access an increased supply of low-cost, local food.

And rates have been kept affordable for everyone who relies on *BC Ferries* to get to work, run errands, and visit loved ones.

These measures build on the work done over the last seven years to make life a little easier.

Eliminating MSP premiums, the largest middle-class tax cut in a generation.

Ending tolls on the Port Mann and Golden Ears bridges.

Making public transit free for kids twelve and under.

And stopping interest payments on student loans.

This session, your government will take new actions to help people with costs, while tackling the root causes that are making life so expensive – like housing affordability.

And it will do more to help small and growing businesses, many of whom are still finding their feet after the pandemic and are facing new challenges today.

LEVERAGING OUR NATURAL STRENGTHS

Foundational to our province, and the backbone of many local economies, are our natural resources.

From First Nations whose deep connection to the land and water here goes back millennia.

To communities of all kinds who depend on forestry, mining, and energy for jobs today.

We all share a stake in making sure a strong, sustainable natural-resource sector is a core part of B.C.'s future.

While climate change poses real challenges, B.C.'s natural resources put us in a unique position to excel in shifting economic times and maximize the benefits to people here.

Your government has a plan to leverage our natural strengths as a province to create good jobs and opportunities for everyone—in partnership with Indigenous Peoples, industry, and local communities.

To borrow a line from our country's favourite sport, B.C. must skate to where the puck will be, not to where it has already been.

By leveraging our strength in mining to meet global demand for clean technology, like battery cells.

By leveraging the strength of B.C.'s forests with a more reliable fibre supply, and by enabling more made-in-B.C. wood manufacturing.

And by leveraging our strength as a clean-energy superpower to help industries electrify and ensure B.C. is a global leader in the clean economy.

Specifically, BC Hydro will embark on an unprecedented level of construction over the next 10 years, building our electricity system to power a growing clean economy – and deliver affordable, reliable power for people.

Already, this plan is in action all around the province:

In the Northwest, Prince George is home to Canada's first stand-alone renewable diesel refinery and is a growing hub for clean hydrogen.

Soon, the Canfor Pulp Mill will be using clean hydrogen to help power its operations.

Further to the west is the future site of Cedar LNG in Kitimat, which your government has approved.

It will be the largest First Nations-majority-owned energy project in the country and one of the cleanest liquefied natural gas facilities in the world.

In Maple Ridge, the new E-One Moli facility will create hundreds of good, local jobs for people.

And it will establish B.C. as a leading producer of the battery components we need to power a clean energy future.

At the same time, we can't continue the old way of doing things.

The future is in partnerships with First Nations and sustainable development, whether it's forestry, mining, or energy.

B.C. companies are leading the way – embracing reconciliation and the opportunities that come with it.

Like the recent deal between four members of the Nanwakolas Council and Western Forest Products, an agreement that represents an important step forward for First Nations participation in the forest economy.

A sustainable energy future will ensure cleaner air for future generations and industries they can rely on for good jobs.

PROTECTING OUR ENVIRONMENT WHILE GROWING OUR ECONOMY

Your government's plan to grow a strong economy while protecting the environment is working.

With the goal of protecting 30 per cent of our land and water by 2030, historic action is being taken in partnership with First Nations, the federal government, and local communities.

This will help us conserve both the natural beauty around us – which is also a critical source of fresh food, clean drinking water, and our best line of defence against the impacts of climate change.

Our net greenhouse gas emissions are down 5 per cent from six years ago when our continent-leading *CleanBC* plan was first launched.

In that same period British Columbia has achieved the highest average GDP growth among large provinces.

This shows that supporting people, advancing reconciliation, protecting the environment, and growing the economy go hand-in-hand.

The cost of inaction on climate change is simply too high.

It is our homes and our communities in the path of wildfires.

It is our crops and our farms at risk of flooding or drought.

It is our kids and grandkids who stand to lose the nature that surrounds us.

The climate crisis is here, we have seen it all around us these last few years.

And we are expecting another tough drought and wildfire season this summer.

Last year, your government launched an expert taskforce on emergencies.

The goal was to determine how we can better support those on the front lines and help apply the lessons we have learned in preparation for the next emergency.

This year, your government is turning recommendations into action and working side by side with communities and partners to help ensure that people are better protected from wildfires with more full-time, year-round staff and resources.

And it will continue work to prevent the devastating effects of flooding we saw after the catastrophic atmospheric river in 2021.

Just last week, new funding was announced to upgrade the Barrowtown pumpstation in Abbotsford and protect farmers in the Sumas Prairies, and communities in the Fraser Valley.

Your government will also take new actions this session to reduce carbon pollution from big industrial emitters, which is driving climate change in the first place.

TRAINING PEOPLE FOR THE JOBS OF TODAY AND TOMORROW

A key challenge in the years ahead is to make sure everyone in B.C. can seize the tremendous opportunities ahead of us.

Over the next ten years, B.C. will need to fill almost a million job openings – many in the emerging clean economy.

Seventy-five per cent of these jobs will require workers to have some kind of post-secondary education and training.

That's why your government launched the *Future Ready Action Plan* – to equip people for success in our changing economy and to close the skills gap employers are facing.

As your government works to make training and education more accessible and affordable in B.C., it is also bringing in new safeguards to make sure our international education programs are training people for the skills we need.

These new measures will help protect international students against bad actors, while making sure B.C. continues to attract talented students.

This session, your government will also take new steps to recognize and better support First Nations-mandated post-secondary institutes as a key pillar of B.C.'s advanced education system.

ENSURING OUR COMMUNITIES ARE SAFE AND STRONG

Every person in every community wants and deserves to feel safe.

But the incidents of crime, violence and hate seen here and across North America are worrying.

That is why your government has been tackling these challenges, and we are seeing some real results.

With stricter bail rules and prosecutors working with police and probation officers, repeat offenders are being kept off our streets.

Two hundred and fifty-six new RCMP police officers are being hired to help bolster specialized units and rural police forces.

In Vancouver, car thefts are down by 18 per cent and the number of unprovoked stranger assaults has decreased by 75 per cent between the first half of 2021 and 2023.

Your government is also addressing the core issues that bring people into conflict with the law and their neighbours.

It is working with partners on the ground to move people from unsafe encampments into homes.

It is helping people in crisis get compassionate care from people who know what they are going through.

And it is helping more Indigenous people access culturally safe legal supports and services with five new Indigenous Justice Centres now in operation.

Action is also being taken to support the survivors of crime.

Services to support survivors of sexual assault that were cut in 2002 have been restored, and new policing standards are now in place.

While reports of many crimes are decreasing, we know there has been a rise in antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Asian hate, and other incidents of racism.

That's why this session your government will build on the work being done to make B.C. a more welcoming and inclusive place by introducing new anti-racism legislation.

And that's why your government is working with the Jewish community to make Holocaust education mandatory for high school students.

Because combatting this kind of hate begins with learning from the darkest parts of our history, so the same horrors are never repeated.

KEEPING KIDS SAFE AND HEALTHY

Keeping our kids safe and healthy is another top priority for your government.

While a small minority of people in our province claim that teachers and school librarians are a danger to our kids, your government understands the real threats.

Many of you are now aware of Carson, a twelve-year-old boy from Prince George.

Carson died by suicide last year after being extorted with private images he shared with somebody pretending to be someone else.

His parents, Ryan and Nicola, have been bravely sharing Carson's story to raise awareness and prevent this tragedy from happening to other families.

This builds on the advocacy of Carol Todd, who has continued to shed light on the issues of bullying, cyber-bullying, and online safety since losing her daughter Amanda Todd.

Your government is committed to making sure that Carson and Amanda's legacies will protect kids in the future.

That's why a new suite of concrete actions was launched last month to protect young people from online threats, restrict cellphones in schools, and hold big social media corporations to account.

This is part of a larger effort to keep kids safe and healthy.

An effort which includes adding more support for mental-health centres, launching an anti-vaping strategy, improving literacy screening, building new schools, and expanding nutrition programs.

In Surrey and White Rock schools alone, more than 8,000 kids in need are getting daily, nutritious meals thanks to *Feeding Futures* – the largest investment in school food programs in the province’s history.

This spring, your government will take additional steps to keep kids safe and improve learning conditions for students.

New legislation will be tabled to protect schools and kids from disruptive protests.

While everyone has a right to freedom of expression, including peaceful protest, we will not tolerate attempts to disrupt children learning in the classroom.

During the pandemic, when hospitals and health-care workers became the target of aggressive protests, your government took action so doctors and nurses could get to work, and patients could access care.

And as schools increasingly become the target for protests, your government will take similar action to ensure classrooms are not disrupted and kids can feel safe at school.



A STRONGER B.C., TOGETHER

We are in a time where significant turmoil surrounds us.

Wars in Europe and the Middle East are creating tensions around the world and here at home.

Democratic norms and principles are being tested everywhere.

Global economic uncertainty has families and businesses alike worried.

As we begin this final session, we all face some big questions:

Will we be a province where the people whose stories I have shared today – like Reut, Andrew, Shannon, and Richard – are left to face tough challenges alone?

Or will we continue to be a place where people take care of each other and build a better future?

Your government is committed to rejecting division and working to bring people together to solve problems.

Because here in B.C., our best days are still ahead of us.

If we work together, this will be a place where everyone can build a good life – whether you live in a city, a town, a rural or First Nations community.

Where the wages of working people go up, but the cost of a decent home does not.

Where we have more family doctors and shorter wait times in emergency rooms.

Where our economy grows not in spite of climate action, but because of it.

Where our kids are safe in their communities, schools, and online.

Where everyone belongs, everyone can get ahead, and no one gets left behind.

That is the vision your government is working hard every day to deliver.

A stronger B.C. – one that works better for people.

Thank you.