

## **Environmental and Economic Ideas to transform British Columbia**

A speech to the NDP Regional Conference, May 12, 2012

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I appreciate this opportunity to provide these thoughts about the future of our province in respect to environmental and economic sustainability, It is refreshing that you have thrown caution to the wind by inviting me to speak as we are now living in a McCarthy-like era where environmentalists like myself have been branded radicals and enemies of the Canada by the Harper regime.

I have been an NDPer since the 1970s when Dave Barrett was elected, which was the natural choice for me as a former Vietnam War resister from Berkeley who immigrated here in 1969. After forming a local environmental group for the Shuswap in 1989, I went on to work provincially throughout the 1990s both inside the NDP party with the Environment Committee and with the BC Environmental Network. Those were heady days and despite conflicts like Clayoquot Sound, the NDP, the environmental community and other key stakeholders worked together to make huge strides in the nineties. The Liberals have trashed much of the work we accomplished then and after three terms; the province is reeling from the impacts.

At the end of April, the Vancouver Sun launched a series called "BC 2035, A Guide to our Economic Future" with an editorial from their new editor, Harold Munro. In it he began with the classic sustainability analogy of the three-legged stool and the importance of keeping each leg; economic, social and environmental, strong. But this is a false analogy and is one that I hope the NDP does not utilize. It does not make sense because a stool needs a firm foundation to stand on and that foundation is the environment. We cannot have a healthy economy nor can we enjoy a healthy society if the environment is not healthy. As the famous First Nations saying goes, "we cannot eat money, once the earth has been poisoned."

Where to begin? The BC Liberals have done so much damage, that once the NDP returns to power, it will be difficult to solve many of the problems. The first step is to make sure the NDP becomes government. One way to ensure success would be to reframe the public image that the BC Liberals use to promote themselves as the Free-enterprise coalition. I become annoyed every time I hear that term used, for so many reasons. For one thing the BC Liberals are not on the side of free enterprise, they are on the side of big corporations. They should be called the **one-percent coalition**, as their policies have benefited the wealthy to the disadvantage of the rest of us.

Everyone in this room is only too aware of how the corporations have benefited, whether it was through the BC Rail decision, the give-away of our streams through the ruin of rivers projects, the handing over our forests to the major forestry corporations, the subsidies to oil and gas, and even the absurdity of forcing school districts to turn over their money to forest companies through the unfair allocations of carbon tax revenue.

Another reason the free-enterprise label repulses me is how it focuses on the contrast between what is now an out of date dichotomy between right and left. It is as if no one has noticed that capitalism long ago won out over communism. And, the only major assumed-to-be communist country left in the world is China, which also happens to be our second largest trading partner and where both provincial and federal leaders spend time flogging our resources. It is hypocritical for the conservatives to sell off our resources to a communist 'capitalist' country and promote China's ownership of a big stake in Canada while they try to scare B.C. voters with their socialist depiction of the NDP.

It is time to purge these worn out labels! We must not allow the media to brand us as left wing socialists opposed to free enterprise. Instead, we must become known as the party for the 99 percent, one that represents the majority of people that want a healthy environment, a healthy economy and a healthy society. That way we will effectively counter the BC Liberals who are primarily focused on increasing the profits for the one percent. Obama will be utilizing this strategy in the election this year, and so must we.

How can we re-brand the Liberals? We can expand on their HST disaster by educating the public about how cutting taxes is then offset by raising fees. And reducing taxes does not improve the economy through the long debunked trickle down theory. The public needs to understand that the reason they cut taxes is to decrease services so as to pave the way for privatization, which increases the profits for the corporations. Some of the most successful societies in the world have high taxes, such as the Scandinavian countries where post-secondary education is FREE.

Two of the guiding principles used by the BC Liberals when they gutted government oversight of the environment and forests were "results-based" and "professional reliance." Well the results have been mostly a failure and that is no wonder as all that we can rely on professionals to do is get the results that their employers demand. It has been the foxes looking after the preverbal henhouse for over decade and the public needs to know what has happened and what needs to be done to ensure that their land and resources are being sustainably managed.

Of all the damage that has occurred under the Liberals, perhaps the most serious and the most difficult to fix is what they have done to BC Hydro. The issues are far more than mismanagement, as there has been a deliberate effort to transfer the wealth and benefits from the B.C. public to private corporations, as the public is now faced with massive debts and continuous rate increases. All of the details are carefully documented in John Calvert's book, *Liquid Gold*. It is crucial that during the next election campaign the public is made aware of what has happened to BC Hydro. And when the NDP forms government, the first step should be a royal commission to investigate what should become the scandal of the century. Then, somehow, efforts will be needed to fix the problems and certainly Calvert could help provide some direction.

While the environmental movement applauds the NDP for its strong stand opposing the Northern Gateway pipeline, concerns exist about its support for the liquefied natural gas plants. First of all, the gas development is no longer benign. Fracking has become a major environmental concern. Groundwater is getting poisoned. The amount of water needed is monumental. Fracking has been shown to cause an increase in the number of earthquakes. The need for electricity is growing exponentially and the exploration and development is causing habitat fragmentation. No wonder there is a moratorium on fracking in Quebec and other jurisdictions. It is imperative that there be an inquiry into fracking to ensure this controversial practice is only allowed where there are minimal impacts.

The power needs for the liquefied natural gas plants is also monumental. Apparently a Site C dam equivalent amount of power is needed to run just one plant. The way BC Hydro is structured now with guaranteed low rates for industry means that residential users could get stuck with the bill for these energy needs to export natural gas. And most important, although exporting the gas brings higher revenue for the large corporations, it threatens the energy security for British Columbians. What good is it if we export most of our gas in the next few decades and, when we need the gas for our own energy needs, there will not be sufficient supplies left?

There is a solution now available for both the problems with BC Hydro and the problems we could face exporting natural gas. A company in the U.S. called Bloom Energy has invented a new power plant that uses a fuel cell that can be powered by natural gas or other types of fuel. It takes up very little space, is very efficient, and produces electricity for half the cost of any other method. And, it is already in use by some major corporations, including Google, FedEx and EBay. Another advantage is there is no power loss through transmission lines, as the plants are situated next to where the energy is used. Canada and B.C. has its collective head in the sand, as this source of power is the future and so far our governments continue to be stuck on exporting our natural gas and building expensive dams and small hydro projects that produce energy when it is not needed. Bloom energy could be used instead. If the liquid gas plant is approved it must produce its own power, instead of relying on new hydro dam power paid for by residential customers.

Next to BC Hydro and the oil and gas industry, the next largest issue of concern is what has happened to B.C.'s forests. Years of work went into the Forest Practices Code, but not long after the Liberals were elected the industry controlled government quickly tossed it out, shrank the forest service and handed forest management over to the companies. Then the climate change fuelled beetle epidemic hit and logging rates went through the roof. Now after a decade of mismanagement, continued overcutting, disastrous forest fires and raw log exports, so much has been thrown at the proverbial fan that government oversight has nearly ceased functioning.

Through it all, I often commented how, at the very least, the Liberals maintained the land use plans, which was one of the crowning achievements of the 1990s. And now in

desperation, there are plans afoot to basically burn the furniture by logging the protected riparian, old growth and scenic areas in order to keep the mills running a few months longer. The NDP must use common sense and take a firm stand to oppose this move to gut the land use plans in the Cariboo/Chilcotin. That way they would be in agreement with the position taken already by the professional foresters, the mayors of these logging towns, and the environmental community.

The NDP must develop a plan to revitalize our forests, one that helps workers, helps communities and improves protection of environmental values like fish and wildlife, clean water and carbon sinks. A new forestry act is necessary that will revive government oversight and once again provide ability for the public to have input into planning. It is essential that we reinvest in forestry with proper inventories, a revitalized reforestation program where it makes ecological sense to replant, reforms to the tenure system that ensure logging rights are connected to job creation, revival of smaller tenures that provide more jobs per cubic metre, and a value-added program that works to create more jobs per cubic metre logged. Land use plans need to be reviewed, as was the original intention; and in some areas, like Merritt that have yet to see land use planning, plans still need to be developed. Efforts are also needed to re-connect communities and young people to our forests and to nature, through outdoor education programs, summer camps, interpretive programs and work projects.

There is not time now to cover all the provincial issues that will need immediate attention after the 2013 election, so I will provide a list of priorities. The Jumbo Glacier Resort in the East Kootenays must be axed and one of the simplest ways would be to nix the expensive road construction that would cost the public many millions of dollars in upkeep and maintenance. Funding should be restored to the Ministry of Environment so staff can adequately protect habitat, prevent pollution and ensure there is proper compliance and enforcement. The environmental assessment process needs an overhaul, as it obviously is not working properly considering that it approved the destruction of Fish Lake.

Mineral tenure reform must ensure that environmental, community, First Nations and private land values are respected. We need better protection of water, including groundwater, wetlands and riparian areas. The need for effective endangered species legislation continues to be a priority. Revisions of the Local Government Act that took power away from local governments should be repealed so they have the ability once again to safeguard their communities from inappropriate development. And subsidies must end for the oil and gas sector, and the additional revenue could help fund projects that benefit the environment and the economy.

Since this is a regional conference, regional issues deserve priority. In the Shuswap, the primary environmental issue since 2006 has been the health of the lake and the watershed, especially after two serious, large scale algae blooms. Threats to habitat and water quality have been increasing due to a diversity of impacts, including agricultural run-off, sewage effluent, houseboat greywater, foreshore development

and motorized recreation. Thankfully, all levels of government are now working together through SLIPP – the award-winning Shuswap Lakes Integrated Planning Process. However, even though comprehensive water quality monitoring is now taking place in the lakes and rivers and streams where concerns are highest, we are still years away from taking any actions to reduce the pollution from what likely are the most significant sources. Factory style dairy farms have moved into our valleys from the Fraser Valley where groundwater became polluted, and current legislation is not effective enough to adequately prevent the run-off from the massive amounts of manure these farms produce.

Foreshore development was getting out of control and you can easily see the impacts in Sicamous and Mara Lake. SLIPP is planning to produce a recreation study that should be able to identify an acceptable level of motorized boating, but that is still years away. Recently, another massive marina has been proposed to be located in prime salmon habitat adjacent to the mouth of the Eagle River just north of Sicamous. Not only will these nearly 300 boat slips potentially impact salmon rearing habitat, but the plan also calls for privatization of a key portion of public foreshore.

Another issue of great concern in the Shuswap and throughout the province is the increasing amount of damage to sensitive habitat from motorized recreational vehicles, including motorcycles, ATVs and mud-bogging trucks and jeeps. Despite years old promises from the BC Liberal government to bring in legislation, this province remains the only jurisdiction in North America without licensing for ATVs. We must have enforceable recreational vehicle use legislation. The BC Liberals have gutted the ability for government staff to ensure there is compliance and enforcement. Consequently, British Columbia has become the backcountry-motorized playground for Albertans who come here year round to sled in the winter and tear up the hillsides and sensitive wetlands in the summer, because in their province there are rules and enforcement.

Of course, most of you should be aware of the major environmental issue of concern in Kamloops, the massive Ajax mine proposed to be situated within the city limits. While the party has been reluctant to take a side on this controversial issue, it is critical that the NDP take a strong position to protect the health of Kamloops residents. Perhaps the biggest threat from the mine is the impact of the dust from the massive tailings pile projected to be taller than the Seattle space needle. So far, the mining company has refused to release the contents of the tailings and there is a legitimate concern that it will contain arsenic and other poisons that could seriously compromise the health of residents.

As well, there are concerns about water use, damage to groundwater, noise, and vibrations from blasting. Sustainability means we must not jeopardize our health or environment for the sake of the almighty dollar, and in this case most of these dollars would flow to shareholders outside of Canada. I think the NDP should demand that the details of the contents of the tailings need to be released and that the position

should be that the mine should not be approved if it poses measurable risks to health and safety.

In order to clinch the next year's election, the NDP needs to present a plan that shows how it can provide both a healthy environment and a healthy economy. We must not be portrayed as the party opposed to job creation, just because we do not support the tar pipeline that actually poses threats to many, many times more British Columbian jobs than any it would produce. The key concept concerning the economy is that we no longer need to depend on shipping out raw resources.

We need to re-focus on the attributes that this province has to attract both visitors and new residents. Our vast provincial park system is one of the topmost achievements of the 1990s NDP government and yet under the BC Liberals the parks have languished. We spend less per hectare of parkland than any other jurisdiction in Canada even though studies show that for every dollar invested into parks, ten dollars goes back into the economy. A promise of investing into our parks would create good jobs for young graduates who struggle to find work and would improve tourism and boost local economies.

Over the past decade, most government money has flowed into the lower mainland for the Olympics, roads and bridges, and even a half-billion dollar new coliseum roof that mostly benefits a private company. Imagine the benefits that a half-billion dollars would have made to our parks or our schools? While there are many voters in the lower mainland, the rest of the province certainly needs more attention.

Most economists and politicians seem to ignore the rapidly changing demographics and the role that the retiring boomer generation has as an economic driver. The population in Salmon Arm increased significantly in the last census and yet the number of public school students has fallen sharply. This means that interior communities like Salmon Arm are growing due to an influx of retirees. Why are they coming here? This migration is occurring because of the fabulous lifestyle, including opportunities for outdoor recreation, and culture plus lower living costs. Would it not make sense to help fund infrastructure to support this trend? Such as by providing funding that supports trail building, greenways, cultural activities and other other projects that help to maintain a healthy environment and build strong communities.

| That way government would be supporting a segment of the economy that is growing.

In conclusion, we can and we will win the next election and our success will be ensured if we can promise a future where British Columbia's magnificent environment is better protected so as to ensure a healthier economy. The major challenge will be to reverse the impacts from over a decade of mismanagement of both the environment and the economy by a political party whose main focus has been to enrich the corporations at the expense of all British Columbians. We can do it, especially if we all work together as a team; environmentalists, workers, youth, academics and seniors to build a better society based on equity, justice, fairness, and true ecological and economic sustainability principles.