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Robert Matas: Residents likely to ask for explanation of conduct

VANCOUVER -- Gordon Campbell can expect some empathy when he returns home to British Columbia to face the consequences of being charged with drunk driving while on holidays in Hawaii.

But he should also be prepared for a stern scolding from several British Columbians. Many are looking for an explanation of why he was driving after he had been drinking; some are looking for his resignation.

"It's a serious issue any time a person makes a decision to drink and then get behind the wheel of a vehicle," Helen Hoeflicker, president of the Greater Vancouver chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, said in an interview last night.

Judgment is the first thing to go after having a drink, she said, then vision and vigilance.

"We [MADD] say no one should be in charge of a vehicle after even one drink," said Ms. Hoeflicker, whose 27-year-old daughter, Sherri, was killed by a drunk driver seven years ago.

Ms. Hoeflicker hesitated to comment on what Mr. Campbell should do. However, the provincial government should take a tougher approach to drunk driving, she said.

B.C. is the only province that does not have mandatory rehabilitation for drunk-driving convictions, she pointed out.

Retired politician Ian Waddell, who was in provincial politics for five years and in Ottawa for 14 years, said the incident is a serious matter for a person who has to show leadership. "But it could happen to anybody," he said.

Mr. Waddell did not expect the incident would have any political consequences for Mr. Campbell.

Mike Geoghegan, a government and media relations consultant in Victoria, agreed. He referred to several politicians who have weathered controversy over alcohol, including U.S. President George W. Bush and Alberta Premier Ralph Klein.

"It's a water-cooler issue," he said. "It will not have a significant impact on B.C. politics."

At Mahoney's Sports Bar and Grill in Vancouver, some patrons said they were surprised to hear that Mr. Campbell had been arrested. They wondered whether U.S. authorities were tougher on drunk driving than Canadian authorities.

"We were talking about it at the office just before I left," said Sharon McKay, a manager at a downtown office. "People were shocked when they heard the news. Then they just laughed hilariously."