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## **Olympics will bring gold to B.C. future**

**By Michael Geoghegan**

It isn't much fun being a provincial government nowadays. British Columbia is in a particularly unfortunate position. Thanks to our benign climate, we are the destination of choice for aging boomers and retired couples -- so the fastest-growing segment of our population are those aged 80 and above.

The big problem is that the average 18-year-old costs our public health-care system \$800 a year, while the average 80-year-old costs our system \$21,000 a year. That means that our health care system is eating up more and more of the provincial budget.

By 2007, a full 50 per cent of every provincial tax dollar spent in B.C. will be on health care and, if current trends continue, by 2021, health-care spending will consume the entire provincial budget. That means no money for education, for highway maintenance, or even a ministry of finance to collect taxes!

So what is a government to do? The only long-term solution is to open up the border and get as many young people as possible moving here. But we need to make sure the people coming here have skills and there are jobs waiting for them.

That means we need to promote B.C. to the world, and one of the most cost-effective ways to do that is through staging a high-profile international event. Expo 86 was a success, but since that time, under the NDP, B.C. attempted to tax and regulate its way to prosperity. The result was flat economic growth at a time when the rest of North America was booming.

Even though the NDP was soundly defeated two years ago it takes time for markets to catch on. Just as the Mike Harcourt government was initially able to benefit from the economic growth rate it inherited from the Socreds, the Campbell government is handicapped by the anemic economic growth rate it inherited from the NDP.

Although former premier Glen Clark's infamous "three, count 'em, three new aluminum smelters" never did materialize, he did give his blessing to the Olympic bid committee that formed under the inspired leadership of Vancouver real estate developer Jack Poole.

To the delight of almost all British Columbians and Canadians, on July 2 this year, the International Olympic Committee selected Vancouver-Whistler as the host of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games.

Constructing the Olympic facilities, and associated projects such as the expanded Vancouver Trade and Convention Centre, the RAV line and upgrading of the highway from North Vancouver to Lillooet will cost \$2.7 billion and generate 23,000 construction jobs between now and the 2010 Olympics.

The impact of these new facilities will create 130,000 person years of employment over the next 20 years.

The irony is that although thousands of new construction jobs will be created, it is going to be increasingly difficult to find local skilled tradespeople to fill those jobs.

That is because, for some reason, in this country we have decided that it is much better to burden our children with tens of thousands of dollars in debt and a university degree of dubious value in today's job market, than to see them prosper as skilled trades people, or self-employed business people in the increasingly lucrative skilled trades area.

So while teenagers stress out trying to gain the 90 per cent GPA that will gain them an admission to a B.C. university, \$50,000 to \$100,000 a year construction jobs will go begging.

As a society we actually don't need any more English literature majors serving us over-priced coffee at Starbucks. What we do need are skilled electricians, plumbers and carpenters who are able to build and maintain the facilities upon which our entire economy depends.

So again we come back to the issue of demographics and the need for us as a province and as a country to start aggressively recruiting more young people to come to B.C., not just to visit but also to work. As parents we also have an obligation to make sure we are encouraging our children to pursue careers that match their interests and abilities, and that may include a technical rather than academic post-secondary education.

So in 2010, let's invite the world and let's make room for some of them to stay. After all, when I'm in my senior years I will need those young tax-paying immigrants to pick up my medical tab.

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