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## **SPEECH FROM THE THRONE**

Her Honour the Honourable Janet Austin, OBC

Lieutenant Governor

at the Opening of the

First Session, Forty-second Parliament

of the

Province of British Columbia

December 7, 2020

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## OPENING

We begin by acknowledging the Lekwungen peoples, the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations, upon whose traditional lands we are gathered today.

We open the 42<sup>nd</sup> Parliament at a difficult moment, when the successes we collectively achieved in flattening the COVID-19 infections curve in the spring stand in contrast with the toll extracted by the wave we confront now.

It is a longstanding tradition to begin a new session by memorializing prominent British Columbians who have passed away since the last Speech from the Throne.

At this extraordinary time, it is appropriate to focus on the almost 500 British Columbians who have died from COVID-19.

We pause to mourn those who have passed – all of them taken from us by a virus that was unknown just one year ago.

We acknowledge the grief the pandemic has caused all British Columbians, especially those who have lost someone they love.

And we recognize the compounding effect of the pandemic on the parallel health emergency that is the opioid crisis.

We mourn those we have lost to an increasingly toxic drug supply. They were our children, parents, sisters, brothers, and neighbours.

And their memory fuels our continued resolve to turn back the tide again – to save lives, get people treatment and end this terrible crisis.

While COVID-19 threatens people of all ages, our elders are especially at risk.

Seniors infected by COVID-19 are more likely to end up in the hospital and, sadly, much more likely to die from it than younger people.

Those whose health is most endangered by this global pandemic are the same people who have already been through their share of hard times.

They faced challenges they did not always choose. But they carried on with an eye toward a better future.

Now it falls to us to do the same. This moment calls on us all to show resiliency and look out for each other – as those who came before us did.

We did not choose the challenge of COVID-19, but we are meeting it.

Health-care providers have worked themselves to exhaustion and put themselves at risk to care for others.

So many other workers have kept our supply chains running and food on our shelves.

Teachers and educational support staff are keeping our classrooms and child care centres open so children can continue to learn, grow, and make connections with friends.

Most of all, ordinary British Columbians have made extraordinary efforts and sacrifices to keep their communities safe.

Overwhelmingly, British Columbians have united behind front-line caregivers and workers and continue to reject those who would divide us.

Already we can see the signs of better days ahead, as science and research lead the way with new treatments and vaccines.

As we gather here today, we recommit to putting our shoulders to the wheel and working together to make those better days a reality, as quickly as possible, for everyone.

Focusing now on beating the virus will allow British Columbia to move as quickly as possible to address our economic recovery.

By investing in people, strengthening communities, and supporting jobs and growth in a clean-energy future, we can build a recovery for everyone.

All will be guided by this government's core principles, including climate action and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

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## **PROTECTING PEOPLE'S HEALTH**

Nothing is more important than the health of your family.

While the scale of COVID-19 means we use numbers to understand its spread, behind those numbers are real people and real families.

Families grieving a parent or grandparent who died without their children by their bedside to comfort them.

Others unable to find solace in the rites, sacraments or ceremonies of mourning.

Even for those who recover, COVID-19 can mean weeks of pain, fear and uncertainty.

Your government's priority in the fight against COVID-19 has been, and will remain, protecting people's health. In the spring, government acted decisively.

In a matter of weeks, the Government of British Columbia:

- Worked with the federal government to quickly close the border with the United States;
- Addressed outbreaks in long-term care by limiting workers to one facility and providing supports for safer visits for families;
- Acted to provide appropriate care in Indigenous, rural and remote communities;
- Postponed non-urgent surgeries to prepare for the initial surge of hospitalizations;
- Secured the large amounts of personal protective equipment our frontline workers need to keep our health system safe; and
- Worked with public-health officials to implement a strategic testing and contact-tracing strategy to limit outbreaks as they emerged.

In early fall, your government rolled out additional plans, including:

- Hiring 7,000 new front-line health-care workers, including health-care aides, to help ensure seniors get the high-quality care they need and deserve; and
- Hiring approximately 1,000 people to work as contact tracers to help stop further spread in the community;

The steps taken so far have saved lives. However, as we face the latest wave of COVID-19, we must do even more.

In the months ahead, your government will build on the measures already in place. Some programs will be extended or expanded, and new ones launched.

First and foremost, we will continue to support people, communities and businesses to implement whatever public-health protections are necessary to address outbreaks.

Preparations are underway for when a vaccine is available.

The focus will be distributing it to British Columbians quickly and safely, beginning with those most at risk.

A new Hospital at Home initiative is ramping up across the province that allows patients to receive medical services in their own homes, helping to reduce congestion in hospitals.

Your government will also move ahead with a health-care plan based on three main goals:

- Faster care, so patients will have shorter wait times for the care they need;
- Care closer to home, so more people will be able to receive care in their local community, or even at home;
- More personalized care, to make it simpler and less stressful for patients and their families to navigate the health-care system.

Your government will take action on faster care by:

- adding more MRI machines in high-demand areas to reduce wait times;
- training, recruiting and certifying more skilled health-care professionals; and
- bringing in new approaches to build on the success of our Surgical Renewal Plan and an increase in diagnostic procedures.

Government will ensure patients get care closer to home by delivering ten more community-based Urgent Primary Care Centres in more communities and building and modernizing hospitals.

And your government will develop more personalized health care by expanding primary care networks and refocusing on rural health care.

It will also work with health employers and unions to hire a workforce that better represents the communities it serves.

Keeping seniors safe and allowing them to live with the dignity and independence they deserve are top priorities for your government.

Government will continue to make the investments needed to deliver better care for seniors, and stability and safety for long term care workers.

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## **PROTECTING PEOPLE'S LIVELIHOODS**

When COVID-19 hit, B.C. was an economic leader in Canada.

Our province saw robust growth, rising wages, and unemployment at or near the lowest in Canada for two years running.

Balanced budgets and a triple-A credit rating put us in an enviable fiscal position.

Over the same time, government made significant investments to benefit British Columbian families, communities and businesses, and to help make life more affordable for people.

Building affordable housing helps more families find good places to live while helping businesses attract and retain talent.

Investments in child care give children a good start in life, while creating jobs and allowing more people to join the workforce.

Fixing roads and bridges shortens commute times and makes life safer, while creating jobs and helping B.C. businesses get their goods to market.

The same applies to the investments and the necessary public-health measures that keep people safe during a pandemic.

These actions do not restrict economic activity. They are the tools government can use to foster it.

In short, healthy people are necessary for a healthy economic recovery.

Your government acted quickly to support people during the pandemic:

- More than 600,000 workers received help from a \$1,000 Emergency Benefit;
- More than 86,000 renters got the peace of mind that came with temporary rent relief and protection from the threat of eviction;

- More than 200,000 people on disability and income assistance received crisis supplements;
- 80 per cent of BC families got more money in their pockets, thanks to a doubling of the enhanced climate action tax credit.

During this first phase, your government's interventions were focused on helping people observe health restrictions without fear of losing their incomes or homes.

Businesses received help through property tax cuts, deferred tax payments, and BC Hydro rate relief.

These measures have helped protect jobs and businesses. Amongst the large provinces in Canada, B.C. has the highest job recovery rate of pre-pandemic employment levels.

But, as with fighting the virus itself, now is the time to redouble our efforts.

This fall, your government released a robust Economic Recovery Plan.

Eligible businesses are already receiving direct support from the plan's various measures, including the small business recovery grant, the Increased Employment Incentive and the PST rebate on machinery and equipment.

These supports provide direct funding to hard-hit businesses, making it easier for them to invest in the people and capital needed to recover.

In the short term, government will support businesses, jobs and incomes, in several ways:

- Give most British Columbian households direct financial assistance – and help support economic activity during the recovery with the BC Recovery Benefit;
- Reward eligible businesses for hiring;
- Help thousands of people upskill or reskill and find in-demand jobs in the post-COVID-19 economy;
- Make it easier for companies to bet on themselves and increase productivity by rebating the PST on capital investments like machinery and equipment;
- Give renters a bit more financial breathing room.

Protecting incomes and businesses will help us realize a strong economic recovery.

Other actions will, too.

Your government will ramp up investments in transportation infrastructure, which will stimulate growth during the recovery period and benefit British Columbians through shorter commute times and greener transportation.

Expanding child care and early learning is another strong economic development policy.

By creating jobs and allowing more parents to go to work, it counts as strategic economic infrastructure every bit as much as roads and highways.

In the months ahead, your government will provide millions of dollars to child care providers to help them deliver COVID-19-safe care and millions more to school boards and health authorities for renovations to create more spaces.

This moment calls for action.

The way to get through this difficult time is by following the same approach we used during the first wave: by listening to the experts, supporting health-care workers on the front lines, and taking care of each other.

This government pledges to be there for British Columbians for the long haul.

Soon, members of the Legislative Assembly will be asked to vote for the appropriation of funds to make the plans outlined above a reality.

Representing British Columbians in the Legislature is a privilege and responsibility – never more so than at a moment like this.

To the members of the Legislature: may your commitment to the well-being of all British Columbians guide and inspire your work.

