

NANAIMO

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Welfare reforms working

Announcing last week the rollback of the provincial sales tax (PST) back to seven per cent truly shows the "tough medicine" policies of your provincial government have been working.

Though not always popular, these difficult policies have definitely put B.C. back on the road to prosperity.

Nowhere is this more apparent than with welfare reform. Well over 80,000 people who formerly received income assistance from the province are now working or going to school.

When I ran for election in 2001, I was somewhat surprised by the number of people who spoke to me about welfare.

I heard widespread concern about abuse of the system and many people felt that assistance rates were too high and a disincentive to find work.

B.C. is now in the forefront of reforming income assistance programs. The reforms have been, I acknowledge, sometimes controversial. This is to be expected when significant change is made and a generation-long culture of entitlement is challenged.

The focus of B.C.'s reforms has been twofold: give employable people the skills to find employment, and provide improved benefits and programs for people with disabilities and other challenges.

The savings to the public purse have enabled us to pay more attention to those of our neighbours who clearly need additional and long-term help.

People with disabilities and other challenges are getting more attention, and it is my hope

that the Minister of Finance will be able to provide a part of our prospective budget surplus to increasing benefit rates.

Now income assistance recipients with disabilities are being assisted in finding work or volunteer positions, or being helped in obtaining skills that will allow them to participate more fully in society.

I know that some people felt that the scrutiny given to affirming that income assistance clients were correctly identified was improper. But, it is taxpayer's money that pays the benefits, and I think we have a right to

Current Issues

Mike Hunter

make that determination.

Right here in Nanaimo, the Nanaimo Youth Services Association (among many other providers) has had great success working with people who have had long-term barriers to entering the workforce.

So, the results to date are fewer people receiving assistance, more people working (and even at minimum wage they make more than income assistance benefits provide). More people with disabilities who need assistance are being identified, as the number of people able to work declines. So, your money is going to help those most in need. I think that's what you expect.