

Reprinted from the National Post, Saturday January 19, 2002

Mark Hume: B.C. civil service cuts inflict culture shock

(Vancouver) - The dramatic restructuring of government being undertaken by Gordon Campbell, the Premier of British Columbia, has as much to do with changing the culture of the civil service as it does with reducing expenditures.

Mr. Campbell sent shockwaves around the province this week when he announced that 11,700 jobs will be eliminated over the next three years as his Liberal government cuts programs by an average of 25%.

Private sector partnerships are expected in health services, building roads and bridges, funding research chairs at universities and generating or delivering power.

"We believe we can deliver services more effectively in partnership with the private sector," Mr. Campbell said as he announced his restructuring plan at a press conference staged the way a corporation might unveil new technology.

Patrick Smith, a professor of political science at Simon Fraser University, said Mr. Campbell has set out not just to reduce spending but to redesign the way government works in the province.

"It really does represent a radical shift in the way government is going to be done in B.C.," Mr. Smith said yesterday.

"The most significant change is not to the bottom line. It's about a different view of what government should do. And he clearly thinks government should do a lot less."

He said B.C.'s new form of government is not, however, that new.

"In fact, we're kind of late to the cycle," Mr. Smith said. "Klein did it, Harris did it -- and academics have been writing about this type of government going back to the 1950s."

Said one senior government manager as he contemplated the new organization yesterday: "The way I'm looking at it, it's an ideological change. They aren't going to save a lot of money in this, or if they are, I can't see it yet. They are just flipping it from public to private, the way they did with highways maintenance a few years ago. And in that case we ended up hiring the private sector to do the job. So where's the saving?"

Ralph Klein, the Premier of Alberta, and Mike Harris, the Premier of Ontario, led similar restructuring programs in their provinces in the 1990s.

Mr. Smith said that although British Columbia is facing a \$3.8-billion deficit and had to make cuts of some kind, Mr. Campbell's overhaul is ideologically driven, because there were other ways to balance the budget.

"This is about what kind of role the state should play," he said. "Let's face it. If you suggest to people that they could keep their hospitals open and their courts open if they gave back the \$1,000 or so they

saved in the tax cuts [introduced by the government last spring] -- I think most people would say, 'Yeah, that's not a bad deal.' But Mr. Campbell didn't consider that option.

"These guys have picked up this very strong ideological notion that there are things the government shouldn't do, and that's what's being pursued here."

Michael Geoghegan, a political consultant in Victoria, said the restructuring is about more than just reducing the size of government.

"It's a business model," he said. "It is about a more results-oriented civil service.

"The government has recognized that there needs to be a new culture developed in the civil service.... It's about creating a leaner, more dynamic civil service."

Mr. Geoghegan said the change was inevitable. During a decade of New Democratic rule, which ended last May when the Liberals won all but two seats in the legislature, British Columbia's economy stagnated.

"My clients, coming in from Alberta or Washington, would always say there was a different mindset in the civil service in B.C.," he said. "The attitude here was always: 'Why should we allow you to do this?' The Alberta attitude was dramatically different. It was: 'You want to come here and invest? Great, how can we help?' "

He said B.C.'s no-can-do attitude helped turn away investment as much as its tax structure did.

"B.C. had to get away from the classic, bureaucratic model, which is to obstruct everything," Mr. Geoghegan said. "In the short term, the job losses are terrible -- but unless that civil service culture changes, we're not going to get the recovery we need."

e-mail: mhume@van.nationalpost.com