

## **Strong economic growth provides enormous opportunities for skilled workers**

By Kevin Evans (May 1/05)

British Columbia's economy is firing on all cylinders. We are leading the country in job creation and housing starts, retail sales are up, and economic forecasts expect our province to grow faster than the rest of the country in the years ahead.

The economic growth that B.C. is experiencing is in large part because of an improved investment climate in British Columbia. We have among the lowest personal and business tax rates in Canada. Red tape has been reduced significantly, and labour laws have become more balanced. An improved business climate has made B.C. an attractive jurisdiction in which to invest and start a business.

For small businesses in the province, the economic gains we have made in a short period of time present a new set of challenges. B.C. is in the unique position of having job opportunities outpacing our skilled workers. Part of this problem goes back to the 1990s when B.C. lost many skilled workers to other provinces, notably Alberta and Ontario. Whether in technology, construction or retail, to name just a few, B.C.'s economic growth has created enormous opportunities for skilled workers in the province.

Of course, B.C. has an enormous competitive advantage over other jurisdictions when it comes to attracting and retaining skilled workers. B.C. is truly the most beautiful place in the world and people want to live and work here. We are also helped by B.C.'s low personal tax rates, which help employers keep workers in B.C. and attract others to move here.

To manage the labour supply issue, the government has taken some sound initial steps to ensure that we can meet this challenge. Of great importance is the establishment of the Industry Training Authority (ITA), a provincial agency dedicated to providing British Columbians with the skills they need to take advantage of the opportunities ahead. The ITA is taking steps to increase the number of people in industry training by 30 per cent over the next three years.

According to a recent report from the ITA, there are now 20,050 active apprentices in B.C., up 37 per cent from 2004. Total trainees, including both active apprentices and more than 10,000 students enrolled in entry-level trades training programs, now total more than 30,050 British Columbians, an increase of 21 per cent over 2004.

Another key policy initiative to help manage the labour supply issue is post-secondary education. The provincial government is adding 25,000 new post-secondary education spaces by 2010. This is the largest single increase in post-secondary spaces in provincial history; a significant sign that British Columbians are preparing for the opportunities ahead.

Clearly, we are making progress. Steps taken to date in skills training and post-secondary education will help our province manage this challenge and thrive in the years ahead. But more needs to be done. Moving forward, government and business need to engage British Columbians in the development of a comprehensive long-term strategy that reflects the needs of the province's various regions and work sectors.

BC's bright economic future presents new sets of challenges. We will be successful in meeting the labour supply challenge by applying the same focus, creativity and dedication to sound policy that is responsible for the economic renewal that is securing our children's future.