

# Clark adds welfare supplements; extends work search requirement

Dirk MEISSNER  
The Canadian Press

VICTORIA — Premier Christy Clark drew lukewarm praise Monday from anti-poverty groups and the Opposition New Democrats for increasing assistance to poor families and British Columbians receiving disability payments.

Clark said her \$5 million plan to supplement the incomes of vulnerable B.C. families and support the goals of disabled people looking for jobs is the first pillar in her Families First Agenda.

"We have a duty in this wealthy province to protect and care for B.C.'s most vulnerable citizens," said Clark at a news conference at the Neil Squire Society offices in Burnaby.

"I know that every family deserves the opportunity to grow and prosper and live in a safe community," she said.

Clark will introduce welfare system changes later this year that provide extra money to needy families to get their children ready for school and she's allowing people who receive disability assistance to earn up to \$800 per month without losing their benefits.

The program will give vulnerable families \$100 for every child between five and 11 for school start-up costs and \$175 for every child 12 and over, she said.

The assistance program would also include more and enhanced tax exemptions for families on welfare, a \$200 monthly earnings exemption to welfare recipients eligible for work and improved access to dental care for children.

Clark said the changes are designed to provide supports people need to get back into the workforce and improve the finances for vulnerable families.

"I believe, and this government believes, that people who can work want to be self-sufficient," she said. "They want to contribute to their community and we want to make sure that British Columbians can



CLARK

fully participate in our growing economy."

NDP social development critic Carole James said Clark's changes will help people, but she maintained that Clark is reinstating some benefits the Liberals dropped when first elected in 2001.

On Monday, Clark increased the disabled exemption to \$800 a month from \$500 a month and reinstated the earnings exemption for welfare recipients, who are now entitled to earn \$200 extra a month without penalty.

That leaves Saskatchewan now as the only province in Canada that does not include some form of earnings exemption for people on welfare.

James said Clark's move on the earnings exemption front is a "plus." "It connects people to the workplace," she said. "We, certainly, in the Opposition have been calling for it for years."

James said she was disappointed the government didn't introduce a widespread poverty reduction

strategy and was highly critical of Clark's plan to extend to five weeks from three weeks the work-search period for a potential welfare recipient.

James said people are usually financially desperate when they arrive at the welfare office, and to be told to look for a job for five weeks first doesn't make sense.

"It shows the premier doesn't understand how difficult it is for people at this time," she said. "I hate to think the premier is using this to score political points."

B.C. poverty reduction coalition spokeswoman Trish Garner said Clark's plan is welcome news, especially the return of earnings exemptions, but anti-poverty advocates were looking for an across-the-board increase in welfare rates.

"We're feeling pretty positive about the small changes they've made though, ultimately, of course, we would still like to see the end goal be raising the welfare rates to an adequate level," she said.

# B.C. post-secondary employees' unions mount court fight against Bill 18

The Canadian Press

VANCOUVER — Two unions representing post-secondary employees have launched a B.C. Supreme Court challenge of a government bill they call undemocratic.

The Federation of Post-Secondary Educators and the B.C. Government and Service Employees Union want parts of Bill 18 overturned, saying it bans union activists from serving on college, institute and university boards of governors.

Federation president Cindy Oliver said outside court Monday that Advanced Education Minister Naomi Yamamoto didn't consult the unions on legislation that passed in the spring.

She said the federation met with Yamamoto in December and asked what problem the change was intended to fix.

"She couldn't come up with a problem and we've never, in the 30 years that we've had that type of governance, come up with a problem."

Yamamoto wasn't available for an interview but said in a

statement that the changes allow boards to deal with conflict-of-interest situations if someone representing an institution as a board member also sits at a bargaining table as a union executive member.

However, Oliver said that anyone on a board of governors, whether it's a student, faculty or an administrator, could potentially be involved in conflict-of-interest issues and that guidelines already exist to deal with them.

Darryl Walker, president of the BCGEU, said the government may believe people who serve on boards as union activists have some impact in a bargaining process, a grievance or an arbitration.

But he said such individuals are responsible to excuse themselves from any involvement with such matters.

The unions said in court documents that two of their members were removed from their board of governors positions after Bill 18 passed and that they want them reinstated because their freedom of expression rights under the charter are being violated.

# Six-month occupation of treaty office ends peacefully but dispute continues

The Canadian Press

HAZELTON — A six-month blockade of the Gitksan Treaty Society office in Hazelton has ended peacefully, but the bitter dispute that deeply divides the community continues.

With police standing by Monday, auditors from Aboriginal and Northern Development Canada entered the office and secured computers, which will allow them to do an audit of the society's finances.

North District RCMP Const. Lesley Smith said the protesters left without incident.

"That's exactly what both parties were looking for was this resolution," she said.

The blockade in the northwest B.C. village began last December, shortly after a hereditary chief signed an agreement with Enbridge Inc. to support the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline from Alberta to the B.C. coast.

Hereditary Chief Norm Stephens said the Enbridge decision by a lone chief was the tipping point for people of the community in a years-old argument about whether the Gitksan Treaty Society represents the

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— Norm Stephens

Gitksan people.

"These people are running rampant, they're doing whatever they please, they're not consulting properly with the people, they're most certainly not consulting with the proper chiefs," Stephens said of the treaty society.

The Gitksan Treaty Society is spending millions of dollars but doesn't have a mandate from the community, he alleges.

Stephens said 92 per cent of the Gitksan people voted earlier this year that they shouldn't be represented by the treaty society, but the split for hereditary chiefs was about 50-50.

Of 62 chiefs, 27 signed a declaration saying the members of the Gitksan

Treaty Society have been fired.

"The onus is on the B.C. Treaty Commission, British Columbia and Canada to accept that these people do not speak for us," Stephens said in an interview. "They have to stop pushing forward the Gitksan Treaty Society as a representative for the Gitksan. They are not. We will never have the Gitksan Treaty Society represent us at all."

But the society's chief treaty negotiator, Bev Clifton Percival, said protesters agreed to the audit as an act of good faith and the society hopes that offer will start a conversation that could lead to solving differences in the community.

"We need to get to a table to talk about these issues."

She said false allegations have spread in the community about what's happening at the treaty table.

"It's like any society. You're invited to the meeting. If you choose not to attend the meeting, that's your choice," Percival said. "But I think you would be best informed if you did attend a meeting regularly and did listen to the information presented rather than surmising or creating your own agenda on what you think is going on."

# Shots-fired call results in ATV police pursuit, charges

The Canadian Press

SHAWNIGAN LAKE — Mounties in Shawnigan Lake have arrested two local men after a report of gunshots set off a police pursuit involving an all terrain vehicle.

Around 9:30 Friday night, officers were responding to the shots-fired call when two men on an ATV spotted the patrol car and fled.

Police chased the pair in their cruiser for about a kilometre before the men pulled over.

Police seized a shotgun, four rounds of ammunition and several cans of beer.

The 26-year-old driver of the ATV is facing numerous driving-related charges as well as a charge of flight from police.

RCMP are still looking into possible charges stemming from the shotgun and ammunition.

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