

THE FREE PRESS OPINION

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"The theory of a free press is that the truth will emerge from free reporting and free discussion." Walter Lippman

Canadians need to share in the pain

When John Backhouse visited Victoria last week, no one was hiding the truth from the outgoing mayor: times are changing. Some might argue the mayor is retiring at an opportune time, right before the provincial government is set to "share the pain" of diminishing resources. And, to be honest, it's probably not a great time to be entering into municipal politics. But 24 people are confident they can manage the transition that Prince George faces.

They will need some political luck, fiscal toughness and all the help they can get. And that's where we come in.

It's not enough for Canadians to moan and groan about the tax burden that weighs so heavily on our shoulders, not when we all stand and up say 'cut, but just not here.'

Federal Finance Minister Paul Martin has started the trend of hacking away at the debt and allowing someone else to do the dirty work. He cuts transfer payments and the provincial governments across the country have to deal with it. He looks good; they close hospitals.

But now the provinces, and B.C. is no exception, are making sure the municipal governments take some of the heat. The province can't close hospitals or schools; so they cut the money that goes to the cities and towns in the form of unconditional grants. Premier Clark plans that attack, though no one knows for sure how much the grants will be sliced (guesses range from 50 to 25 per cent, which means Prince George would face a loss of \$1.5 million to \$750,000).

City councils, though, have no other level of government to dump on. They have to take the hit and either cut services or raises taxes. Or maybe both.

When the decisions are made, we have to be prepared to bite the bullet and accept the loss of services. After all, the feds and provinces are just doing what we asked. Right?

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Chamber concerns legit

Wayne Ward is not prone to flights of oratorical fancy and isn't one for needless, partisan shots. Rather, the president of the Chamber of Commerce has shown himself a dedicated booster of Prince George – not just economically, but also socially (remember the campaign for Baby Diego). So, when he comments on the actions of the provincial government, questioning the entire accountability process, it only makes sense to listen. And Mr. Ward, who skirts around taking direct shots at Premier Glen Clark, wonders why no one has to take responsibility for their actions.

"Our biggest concern, more than anything else, is there is no accountability and integrity in the system," he says.

The actions of the Clark government, in terms of the sudden budget deficit and the taking of Forest Renewal B.C. Funds, sets a

new precedent and Mr. Ward worries the line has been extended as to what politicians can do without penalty.



RUMOUR MILLS

Shane Mills

But his biggest beef is the way

the provincial government has gone in and taken the cash out of Forest Renewal B.C.'s bank account.

"What really bother us is that we were promised that it wouldn't be touched... and now it looks like it (milking the cash cow) will be a continual thing," says Mr. Ward.

At one level, Mr. Ward has sympathy for the provincial government and some of the tough choices it faces. In fact, he believes the restructuring of government the premier is talking about is needed.

The problem, though, is one of credibility. Mr. Clark has recognized that people don't have the same faith in him or his government and is working on getting it back.

His televised speech didn't work and lofty promises won't either.

For the premier to regain the trust of the public, he will have to deliver - all of his promises.

But complaining about unfair media coverage or partisan attacks from business groups won't help. Especially if the person doing the questioning, like Wayne Ward, has more credibility.