

Prince Rupert's comeback could be a plus for Campbell

But resource town's economic success may not translate into Liberal votes



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PRINCE RUPERT -- There was a time not so long ago when everything in this small resource town seemed headed in the wrong direction.

In a series of cascading economic disasters over the past decade, the local pulp mill and sawmills closed, the salmon fishery declined, a fish-processing plant burned down and coal shipments through the port dropped off.

"We got hit by a perfect storm," Mayor Herb Pond said yesterday as he ran through the litany of problems. "It's been really hard on Prince Rupert families."

So hard that after the Skeena Cellulose pulp mill shut down in 2001, taking away 450 jobs, the trickle of families leaving town turned into a flood. In a few short years, the population dropped from 15,000 to the 13,000 it sits at now.

Storefronts became shuttered and homes sat on the realtor's list for months without any buyers showing interest.

But Mr. Pond couldn't stop smiling yesterday as he stood in a crowd and listened to Liberal Leader Gordon Campbell talk about the great future his town has as a trade gateway to the Asia Pacific.

Nodding in agreement Mr. Pond said Prince Rupert is back, and he gave a lot of the credit to the Liberal government, which has been pouring millions into northern transportation infrastructure.

In addition to upgrading highway and rail links to the remote coastal community, the government recently announced plans to build a major container port on Prince Rupert's waterfront.

"As the mayor I don't like to be partisan," Mr. Pond said. "But we have had more support from this particular Premier than we've seen in decades. He mentions us in the budget speech, he mentions us in the Throne Speech, he mentions us everywhere.

"And things are happening here now. The container-port announcement has been a catalyst for a whole raft of investment decisions. I mean, even here in the crowd today are investors from China. It's pretty exciting."

The 400 people crowded onto a sundeck overlooking Prince Rupert's harbour seemed to agree, as they cheered Mr. Campbell, whose election campaign moved for the first time into northern B.C.

Historically, the North Coast has largely been NDP territory, but it was swept into the Liberal camp in 2001 and the government hopes to hold on to it.

Prince Rupert, said Mr. Campbell, is a symbol of what his government has been trying to do for the whole province.

And he was buoyed yesterday by Statistics Canada data that he said shows B.C. has the fastest-growing provincial economy in Canada with a 3.9-per-cent rate of growth.

Mr. Campbell said \$150-million has been invested in highway improvements in the northwest, \$15-million is going into rail work and 500 short-term jobs are being created by the port expansion, with 2,500 long-term jobs projected.

He contrasted that with the economic slump that coincided with the NDP's 10 years in office, and said: "The question is do we want to go forward . . . or do we want to go back to a government that doesn't even mention Prince Rupert?"

Mr. Campbell pointed out that the NDP's election platform, released two weeks ago, doesn't contain references to Prince Rupert, the North Coast or Asia-Pacific trade.

Bill Belsey, the local Liberal candidate seeking re-election in the North Coast riding, had tipped the Liberal Leader to the NDP's failure to mention Prince Rupert in its platform.

And he was glad to see that oversight mentioned in Mr. Campbell's stump speech.

"People here don't want to be forgotten," he said. "We've been through some tough times, but we believe we have a great future."

Mr. Belsey, who worked as the manager of maintenance and engineering at the Skeena Cellulose mill until it closed, has lived in Prince Rupert for 25 years. Until the past few years, he said, the community was in an economic and emotional depression.

"Businesses were closing, people were leaving town. You talk to any family around here and you'll find that if their kids are grown, they are away somewhere else working or getting an education. For a long time it seemed there was no future. You had a hard time giving away a house a few years ago. But there's been a huge change lately. House prices have jumped 20 per cent in the last few months. People are optimistic. We've turned the corner and we're going to rebuild our community. You can really feel it."

A cruise-ship terminal opened last year, bringing in 40,000 tourists and last December a new regional college opened, offering local people an alternative to moving out of town to upgrade their academic or trade skills.

Outside Pegleg's Seaside Grill, a small restaurant near the harbour, Gerald Denning and Daisy Carter stopped during a lunch-hour walk to say they haven't decided whom to vote for yet, but they agreed with Mr. Campbell's assessment that Prince Rupert is on an upswing.

"People are pretty happy. Even real estate is going up," Mr. Denning said. "It was really bad for a while, but, yeah, people are pretty happy now," Ms. Carter said.

"I like a lot of the things Campbell is doing. The only thing I don't like is the oil and gas in the strait killing everything off," she said, making a reference to Mr. Campbell's policy of promoting offshore drilling.

"Things look good. I hope it all comes true, let's put it that way," she said.

Mr. Campbell's upbeat message may not translate into votes, however. At one point, he left the campaign bus, jogged down a steep bank and strode across mud flats to shake hands with three men who were digging butter clams. Under criticism lately for travelling in a campaign bubble and not meeting real British Columbians, Mr. Campbell wasn't above getting his shoes dirty yesterday to prove he is accessible.

"I just said, 'Hi guys, how ya doin?'" said Mr. Campbell, who headed back to the bush after a quick handshake.

George Price, Al Johnson and Dion Nyce, all in mud-splattered coveralls, seemed pleased to have encountered the Premier of B.C. on a remote beach. But Mr. Price said he wanted to hear what Mr. Campbell has to say about "hospital stuff," before deciding how to vote.

"They've been gutting beds," he complained. "It's very bad. A lot of people had to get shipped out."

The Liberals have closed many small-town hospitals, centralizing services as a cost-cutting move. In Prince Rupert and other affected towns, patients in need of any specialized treatment have to fly to either Prince George or Vancouver for specialized care.

As he seeks a second term, Mr. Campbell's strength has been his government's performance on the economy. But as his encounter with the clam diggers illustrates, service cuts are also part of the Liberal legacy. Just how that will play out in the May 17 election has yet to be seen.