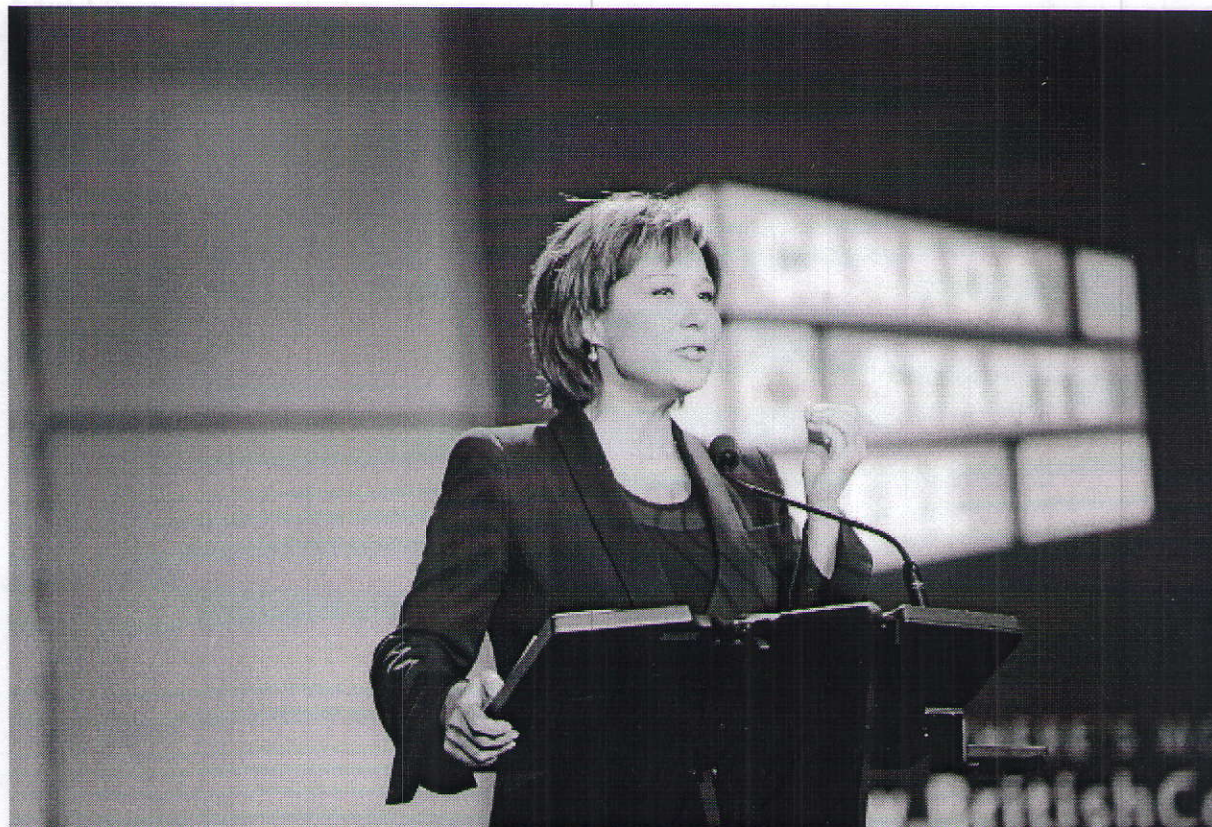


B.C. legislature to lay HST to rest, discuss budget as May election nears

British Columbia returns to the provincial sales tax on April 1

BY DIRK MEISSNER, THE CANADIAN PRESS FEBRUARY 10, 2013 11:03 AM



File photo: Premier Christy Clark's Liberal government returns to the legislature this week poised to lay to rest the three-year-plus HST nightmare before hitting the campaign trail seeking a fourth consecutive term in office.

Photograph by: NICK PROCAYLO, PNG

VICTORIA — Premier Christy Clark's Liberal government returns to the legislature this week poised to lay to rest the three-year-plus HST nightmare before hitting the campaign trail seeking a fourth consecutive term in office.

Legislation that finally kills the harmonized sales tax and returns British Columbia to the provincial sales tax on April 1 is set for introduction in the first week of what is expected to be a legislative session lasting five weeks at most.

British Columbians go to the polls on May 14, with April 16 being the official campaign start date.

But Tuesday's throne speech at the legislature is expected to set the political tone for the weeks leading to the campaign, with Liberals outlining their family-and-jobs-focused agenda, followed by their budget on Feb. 19.

"There's an element of that (politicking)," said Liberal House Leader Mike de Jong, who is also the finance minister. "This is an opportunity for the government via the throne speech, budget and legislation to lay out its vision."

He said the weeks set aside for the legislative session will see the Liberals introduce the PST legislation, followed by legislation to create a new seniors advocate position, approve a process to elect B.C.'s next senator and amend some of the rules and regulations surrounding the auditor general, which include introducing one eight-year term as opposed to the current six-year term, with eligibility for a second six-year reappointment.

"There are some other pieces that will reveal themselves both in the throne speech and the budget," said de Jong. "The government clearly has an agenda designed around jobs and families and there will be legislation associated with that."

He said he expects the legislature to sit until mid-March.

Last year, Clark appointed retiring Liberal MLA John Les to examine the likelihood of B.C. holding elections to find the candidate the province wants officially nominated for the Senate in Ottawa.

Opposition House Leader John Horgan said the New Democrats, who opposed the HST, will review the PST law and possibly suggest amendments, but at this point are likely to support it in the legislature.

But he did suggest the government's Senate initiative is in for a rough ride from the NDP.

"That may be interesting in rural Alberta, but there's not a lot of appetite for that in B.C.," said Horgan. "People are not clamouring in my office demanding to have a vote to send a name that might be selected for an undemocratic institution."

The expected legislation creating a senior's advocate position comes after the Liberal government promised to create the post following an in-depth Ombudsperson's review of seniors issues that included more than 175 recommendations.

Clark also promised last month to amend legislation surrounding the auditor general following the political turmoil resulting from an all-party committee's attempts to find a replacement for current Auditor General John Doyle.

The committee originally decided against reappointing Doyle to a second six-year term, but public outcry prompted Clark to suggest he be offered a two-year extension while the government amends the current law to offer one-time, eight-year terms.

Doyle, who has delivered several unflattering audits on Liberal programs, has since decided to take a job in Australia.

De Jong said it's important the PST transition law is debated and passed in a timely way.

The HST, which combines the five-per-cent federal goods and services tax with the seven-per-cent provincial sales tax, was introduced in July 2009.

It immediately became a lightning rod that saw a majority of British Columbians reject the tax in an August 2011 referendum.

During that period, former premier Gordon Campbell, who introduced the HST, stepped down from office despite winning three elections.

He was replaced in February 2011 by Clark, who said she supported the HST, but acknowledged the decision by voters to dump the tax.

Horgan said he expects the shortened session will see the Liberals focus much of their attention on attempts to improve their crumbling credibility on finance problems facing the province.

"My sense of the 19 days is it's going to be an attempt by the government to try and demonstrate to the public they do have a grasp on the finances," Horgan said.

De Jong said the budget he tables on Feb. 19 will be balanced, but it won't be filled with pre-election goodies.

"The money simply isn't there," he said.

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