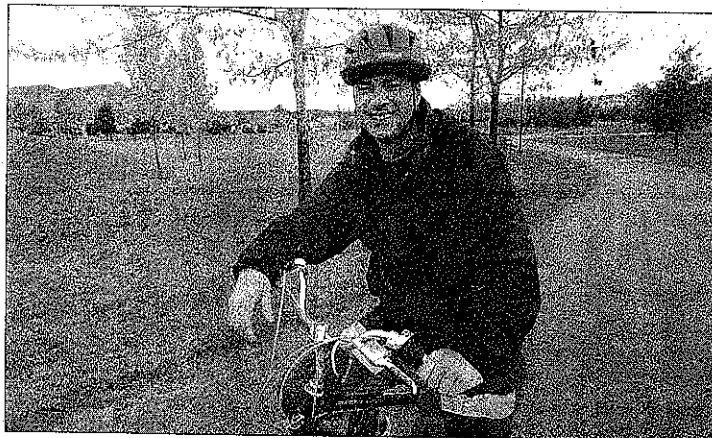
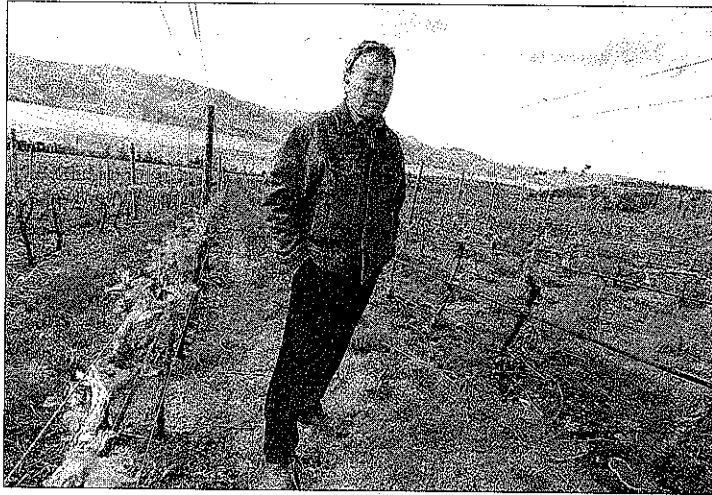


CLOSE-UP

New MLAs face learning curve



ADRIAN NIEOCZYM
STAFF REPORTER

To no one's surprise, voters in the Kelowna area returned three Liberal MLAs to Victoria. But despite sticking with the party that has governed B.C. for 13 years, the election still brought a measure of political change and renewal to the communities of Kelowna, Lake Country and West Kelowna.

With all three incumbent MLAs, Al Horning, Rick Thorpe and Sindy Hawkins now retired, the electorate here is sending three rookies to represent us within government.

However, even though Norm Letnick, Ben Stewart and Steve Thomson are fresh faces on the provincial political scene, they are already quite familiar in the local landscape.

Letnick, Stewart and Thomson won't officially start their new jobs until they are sworn in, which will likely happen in early June. But that doesn't mean they aren't turning their minds to the tasks ahead and trying to get a handle on what exactly it is that they've signed up for.

So the *Capital News* caught up with our freshly minted MLA-elects, to get their thoughts as they contemplate their new roles as our representatives in Victoria.

KELOWNA-LAKE COUNTRY

Norm Letnick comes to the provincial government having cut his

political teeth at city hall. He has served as a city councillor both in Banff and most recently here in Kelowna.

He figures being an MLA is going to be quite different.

"As a city councillor, you get elected as an individual, at least in Kelowna, then once you join you are expected to become part of a team and come up with a common vision for the city," he said, sitting on a bench in Rutland's Ben Lee Park, one of Letnick's favourite spots, just down the block from a four-plex housing unit his family owns and operates.

"With the job of an MLA, you're elected as a team member to start, so you already know what the platform is."

But even though the platform came with the party, Letnick says he wouldn't have run with the Liberals if he didn't believe in it.

He sees the essence of that platform as trying to achieve a balance between the desired level of government services and tax rates.

"Making sure that we have the funds necessary to provide the service levels that we can afford without putting a huge amount of debt burden on our children," he said.

"Most people want low taxes, but we get services for those taxes, so it's always a balancing act to make sure our economy is attractive for investment."

MLAs are required to split their

THE KELOWNA

area's new Liberal MLAs (from top) Ben Stewart, Steve Thomson and Norm Letnick.

SEAN CONNOR/CAPITAL NEWS

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CLOSE-UP

▼ CHANGING OF THE GUARD

New MLAs excited by what lies ahead

Thorpe says take the time to listen

Recently retired Liberal MLA stalwart Rick Thorpe has some advice for the Kelowna area's three rookie MLAs.

"Take your time and find your way around the legislature," he said, noting the new MLAs will meet lots of different people in Victoria who work in and around government.

"Listen a lot when you go down there."

Thorpe served 13 years as an MLA, including eight in government, most of which was spent as a cabinet minister.

"Remember where you are from and get back to your constituency as often as you possibly can," said Thorpe when asked if he had any tips for Norm Letnick, Ben Stewart and Steve Thomson.

Thorpe called his time as an MLA "a fantastic personal experience for me."

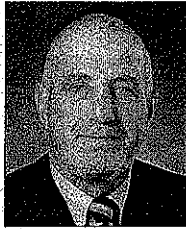
The hardest part of the job, he said, was being away from home so often.

The best part? "I was fortunate enough to be able to help people that needed help, whether it be a medical situation, whether it be a disability situation, whether it be a situation dealing with red tape in Victoria," he answered.

"Those kind of one-on-one issues that you work on with constituents, as far as Rick Thorpe is concerned, will always be the most rewarding thing."

Thorpe also encourages the new MLAs to be active participants in caucus meetings with their Liberal colleagues.

"I would suggest to newcomers that they listen and watch but at all times, be prepared to ask questions." Thorpe noted that caucus meetings are where MLAs engage in "very candid and frank discussions... you express your views in the confidence of caucus."



Rick Thorpe

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time between Victoria and their constituencies. When the legislature is in session, it sits four days a week. Unless MLAs have to be in the capital for other government business, they usually spend the other three days at home.

To prepare for his time away, Letnick, his wife Helene and their youngest daughter Naomi are going apartment hunting in Victoria.

While some MLAs share apartments in Victoria, Letnick intends to keep at least a little separation between home and work.

"I think spending 10, 12 hours a day with my colleagues is going to be enough," he said. "I'll need some sanity time in private."

Letnick would also like a little time to himself that he can devote to the PhD in health care economics he's working on at UBC Okanagan.

"I might get home at 7 or 8 o'clock at night. That gives me a couple of hours everyday to wind down and do some research and writing," he said.

Letnick is at the point in his studies where he is working on his thesis.

"It's going to be on appropriate and equitable funding of regional health authorities in British Columbia, so defini-

tely it has an applicable side to it," he said.

And Letnick figures that when he is home in Kelowna, he will be kept busy with people looking for his help in their interactions with government.

A big part of the job of an MLA, said Letnick, is assisting people deal with things like ICBC claims, MSP coverage or WorkSafeBC issues.

"Sometimes the pathways through the bureaucracy aren't as evident as they could be, especially for someone who is not familiar with the bureaucracy."

WESTSIDE-KELOWNA

Ben Stewart clearly enjoys being among the grape vines of Quails Gate Winery, a place he affectionately refers to as "my office for the last 30 years."

Walking by the rows, he identifies each variety and says when they were planted. He stops to chat with workers pruning the vines.

Still, despite the joy he feels here, Stewart is looking forward to stepping back from the family business he founded and oversaw as it grew from an operation with one full-time staff member to one with more than 100 employees.

"I think I might appreciate it even more," he said when asked if he thinks he will miss the winery when he is in Vic-

toria. "When I come here (now), I'm not a visitor, I'm here trying to make certain things are ready for our next customer... sometimes you don't always get a chance to appreciate what you've built."

Stewart says he is ready to shoulder the responsibilities of dealing with his constituents concerns and attention.

"A lot of people fear elected office because of the fact of the scrutiny that it puts on you," he said.

"And I guess I'm willing to accept that scrutiny, but the reality is that I like dealing with people and frankly, I've been criticized an awful lot over the years I've been in business, and sometimes it's warranted and sometimes it's not, but the reality is I don't fear any of that."

"I look forward to dealing with some of the issues that are out there."

Stewart also said that he doesn't intend to stick to those areas of government, such as agriculture, where he is most familiar.

"I'm looking forward to the opportunity to not only help in sectors that I know well, but helping in sectors that I don't know so well, to get to know them, to get to understand their concerns and make certain that I'm a well rounded MLA that can work in a diverse

group of areas."

Stewart mentioned forestry and mining as two areas that he's interested in learning more about and possibly getting more involved with.

Stewart said his hope is to make it easier for his constituents to deal with the government.

"Government is so pervasive in how much it touches our lives in every which way, shape and form," he said, adding he wants to help "make government more of a partner, rather than an adversary."

Stewart knows he has a lot to learn about his new job, but he intends to lean on some of the more experienced hands in his caucus to give him guidance.

He pointed out that most members of the Liberal caucus who ran again were re-elected. "So they will be a wealth of knowledge," he said.

Stewart went on to say it will take some effort to wrap his mind around the immensity of government.

"I suspect that's probably the biggest challenge."

"Trying to overcome the learning curve of how big the bureaucracy is. It's a \$40-billion enterprise. I'm going from quite a different scale," he said.

The winery, in comparison, "it's small business, it's farming."

KELOWNA-MISSION

Steve Thomson grew up on the Kelowna farm his family has owned since 1896. As a young man he left to go to university and spent 17 years living in Victoria, where he mainly worked for agriculture organizations that dealt with the government.

"Agriculture is a very important part of the province and farmers and ranchers are stewards of a very important resource," he said, sipping a coffee inside the screened-in porch where he used to spend summer nights with his six siblings and the cousins who would visit to help on the farm.

When he was offered the opportunity in 1992 to return home and become general manager of the B.C. Fruit Growers Association, Thomson jumped at the chance.

"It was an easy decision," he said. "I wanted to come back, to sort of help with the future of the farm... this is a legacy piece of property."

Thomson's last job was as the executive director of the B.C. Agriculture Council, an agriculture industry advocacy group.

He says that while his prior experiences dealing with government will help him as an MLA, he still has lots to learn.

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CLOSE-UP

MLAs FROM A6

"I understand what's required to get things done in Victoria, hopefully," he said. "(But) it's one thing to be working around the edges, representing interests to government as opposed to being government, so it is a completely new role. It's going to be a big learning process."

One of the challenges Thomson foresees is dealing with the fact there will be issues people bring to him that he can't get resolved to their satisfaction.

"You know that you can't address every issue... but I think the commitment is to listen, to be open, to look at all issues and to be honest when you can't deal with them," he said. "Not to create false expectations. But the real commitment is to work hard on (constituents') behalf."

Thomson said he promised during the party nomination process, as well as during the election, that he would make himself available to his constituents.

"We plan on doing that," he said.

Thomson will be taking over Hawkins' constituency office on the corner of Ethel and Springfield.

Hawkins' former constituency assistant, Nan Pellatt, will continue on, now working for Thomson.

"She's got lots of experience, knows the files," he said. "She knows the process, so particularly as a new MLA, that's going to be invaluable."

While some MLAs find the travel demands and time away from home gruelling, Thomson figures he and his family are well prepared.

"It's not dissimilar to the schedule I was keep-

ing before," he said. "Because a lot of the work in the agriculture industry took me away from home because you're dealing with a lot of farm organizations all over the province."

Like the other two MLAs, Thomson will have to juggle the dual roles of representing his constituents in government and representing the government to his constituents.

"Your a representative of the riding, but you're also part of a provincial Liberal team, so you want to work as a good effective team member in helping move the agenda forward," said Thomson.

"I'm just really excited about getting in there, meeting with my fellow MLAs and colleagues and sorting out where you can contribute and getting to work."

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