

Mayor Gregor Robertson

Inauguration Address

December 8, 2008



Welcome. We're gathered today in the traditional territory of the Coast Salish people, and I want to begin by thanking them.

As we honour one tradition, we renew another: bringing the inauguration out of City Hall and into the community.

I want to thank the residents of South Vancouver for welcoming us all to the Sunset Community Centre. This is one of my favourite places in the city, beautifully designed by Vancouver architect Bing Thom. His design draws on our farming history, as well as our cultural diversity and the grid of our streets and avenues today. But it's also open: to the people, to the community, to the future. It's one of Vancouver's greenest buildings. I can't imagine a better place to begin this new chapter in our city's story.

Today has brought City Hall into the community... and for the next three years, we will bring the community back into City Hall.

Common purpose

We are coming together today to affirm a common purpose.

Vancouver's residents share something: a common yearning for a city that takes care of its people, empowers its citizens and inspires the world.

And as hard-fought as elections can be, I know that yearning is shared by all of us in public life.

In that spirit, I want to thank Mayor Sam Sullivan and the members of the outgoing council for their hard work and their service to our community. And I'd especially like to thank Councilor Peter Ladner for his dedication to our city.

Peter, may our bicycles cross paths for many years to come.

I also want to congratulate the new members of Vancouver's Park Board and School Board. A lot of attention is paid to City Council – but your work in many ways does at least as much to shape our city and guide its future.

And let me thank the women and men who serve the people of Vancouver as this city's employees. I want to speak to you directly for a moment: to say that I believe your work has been critical to the pride we have in our city.

Your skills and dedication are a big part of what makes our community so livable, so admired. Your energy and imagination will be vital to our continued success in the months and years ahead. Thank you for your commitment to Vancouver, I'm honoured to be working with you. Looking around, you'll probably notice just how diverse this assembly is.

I myself am wearing the traditional tartan of my ancestors, from the Highlands of Scotland. If that sparks a fashion craze for kilts in this city, well, I'll shoulder full responsibility.

The diversity here today is no accident. Our families made a conscious choice, and a conscious effort to come to Vancouver from every corner of the world. We've become one of the planet's most culturally diverse cities, and that means we have a remarkable array of intelligence, creativity and global connections.

As much as I value the wisdom and experience of my colleagues, we all know there is exponentially more in the homes and offices of our city... in the studios, shop floors and classrooms...in our boardrooms and small businesses ... in our galleries, hospitals and parks... there is rich, valuable wisdom and expertise in the people of Vancouver.

In the coming weeks and months, we will be asking every one of you to step up – to offer your ideas and knowledge – to tell us how you want to be involved – to share the mantle of leadership.

Because that's what citizenship means in the 21st century.

These are challenging times. And we can't afford not to make every possible use of the creativity, ideas and compassion of our people.

A choice for Vancouver

We're at an historic crossroads. One of enormous economic, environmental and social challenges. And the world's attention is turning toward us.

What will the world see in 2010?

- *Not a city retrenched and reeling from the economic storm... but a dynamic, creative economy generating new opportunities and opening new frontiers.*
- *Not a city complacent over the beauty of its natural setting... but a city united in its determination to lead the world in sustainability.*
- *Not a city of generic uniformity... but a city rich with artistic voices and the cultural wealth that flows from our diversity.*
- *Not a city that cowers in face of crime... but a city that confronts both criminals and the causes of crime with equal determination.*
- *Not a city that closes its eyes to suffering in its streets... but a city that adopts and embraces the boldest of goals because our humanity demands nothing less.*

Homelessness

I decided to run for the office of Mayor to end street homelessness in Vancouver. And I'm telling you today, that hasn't changed. It is your council's single most important priority in this term of office.

Homelessness flies in the face of everything I was taught about compassion and our duty to each other. Homelessness degrades every one of us, whether the place we call home is in an alley, a shelter, an apartment or a house. Homelessness is everything our aspiration for Vancouver isn't. It abandons our neighbours, it disempowers our people, and it does anything but inspire.

The Vancouver we hold in our hearts is not a city where people die of exposure. Not a city where a man named Darrell Mickasko, after being turned away from a full shelter, burns to death in a sleeping bag, trying to stay warm with his camping stove on a freezing night. If our vision of Vancouver is to become a reality, homelessness must end – and I tell you today that it will end.

Today we challenge ourselves to end street homelessness by 2015.

We can do that with a concerted effort, in three stages -- the short term, the medium term and the long term. First, most urgently, ensuring there are enough shelter beds so people don't have to sleep in the streets. And we increase outreach and services so Vancouver's homeless can get off the streets and rebuild their lives.

Second, we use city bylaws to protect and maintain the affordable rental housing we have now. And we push hard to ensure that treatment for addictions and mental illnesses is available to all those in need.

And third, the only long-term solution, we spur the creation of new affordable housing: leading development, unlocking vacant stock, using zoning and tax incentives, and accelerating investment from other levels of government.

I'm told that ending homelessness is an audacious goal. And that's true. But for someone who's sleeping under a bridge tonight, 2015 can't come soon enough.

Last night I spent some time dropping into a number of shelters to hear first hand about what is needed. I met some remarkable people at The Haven who are working hard to help those who are without a home. I saw again the overwhelming need that exists on our streets, and the dedication and passion of those who are there to serve. But I came away fearful for the many lives that are at stake as we enter another winter in Vancouver.

In the coming days my government at City Hall will announce emergency measures that will be taken to open shelters and to spur quicker action on the creation of housing.

Boldness

This isn't a time to be timid or tentative . This is a time for boldness . If ever there was a city that can set and reach and exceed courageous goals, it is Vancouver.

Visionary goals like making Vancouver the greenest city in the world. With the climate crisis escalating and the era of cheap energy fading, now is the time we must lead the planet in pioneering true urban sustainability.

It's time for bold goals like becoming an internationally-recognized Creative Capital, supporting artists, innovators and entrepreneurs – as well as the creative sectors that make up more than one third of our jobs.

We need leadership goals like using the 2010 Games not just as a passing opportunity to capture a little limelight and some tourist dollars, but to show ourselves and the world how a city can mobilize to tackle its toughest challenges - in our case, homelessness and the health crisis on our streets.

We must also use this unprecedented opportunity to showcase Vancouver as an emerging global powerhouse of the green and creative economy.

That's nothing to fear. Times of challenge and crisis reward the people who respond with compassion, determination and ingenuity.

We've done it before. We've embraced great challenges and made great progress.

Vancouver resisted the pressures to develop at all costs, and instead preserved Stanley Park, known the world over as one of the planet's greatest urban parks.

Vancouver said no to a freeway, and yes to the thriving community of Strathcona.

Vancouver businesses came together with government and created a visionary partnership – one that turned an industrial wasteland into the urban jewel we call Granville Island.

Vancouver transformed from a time of horrific race riots to electing the first Chinese city Councillor, Bill Yee, who has so graciously provided his services to swear in this Council today.

Vancouver remembers the shame of the Komagata Maru tragedy, and now celebrates Vaisakhi in huge numbers with our South Asian community.

Vancouver is just becoming aware of the tremendous growth and contribution of our Filipino community in Vancouver, and the positive impact that has on our city.

Vancouver is finally emerging from generations of neglecting respectful relations with our First Nations, and this year Ken Clement became the first aboriginal person elected in our young history. He'll be sworn in as a Vancouver School Board trustee tonight.

Vancouver's GLBT community has long been a world-leading force in the struggle for rights and freedoms, and this year our Pride parade drew 500,000 people to celebrate.

Vancouver's environmental activists started Greenpeace and catalyzed a global movement that has changed the way we view the world, hopefully in time to prevent an ecological meltdown.

There is lots more work to do on that front, and indeed with many of these advances our work is not yet complete.

We can achieve great things when we come together with common purpose – and when we share that inspiration with others.

All of Vancouver's progress has come through partnerships: within our neighbourhoods, with our neighbouring cities, with the province, with the federal government. I welcome the chance to work with every one of those partners, in areas that range from housing to the Olympics to creating green jobs.

We can achieve great things because we aren't afraid of innovation. We aren't ashamed to dream and seek out best ideas. That vision and spirit is what brought us here to the west coast of Canada.

But vision without planning and action means little. What's key is that we couple our ideas and dreams with pragmatism. That's the Vancouver way: audacity grounded in practicality, vision rooted in reality, creativity coupled with the entrepreneurial drive.

As your city government we will lead with a bold vision. We will set clear targets, measure success, and be accountable for our actions.

That accountability must extend to every aspect of City Hall. When the city uses your money, you have a right to know where it's being spent, and what it's being used for. When leaders fall short of that standard, public confidence is shaken.

Over the next three years, we will rebuild that confidence, and ensure transparency, accountability and public debate at City Hall.

Politicians do not always live up to that responsibility, I know. But I also know that there were literally thousands of people voting last November for the very first time.

My commitment to them, on behalf of every member of my team, is that I will not let you down on making City Hall more open and accountable.

Conclusion

There is a pride in this city. Not from complacency, or a sense of entitlement.

But a pride born of our immense good fortune to be here, in this place of such beauty, living in harmony with so many cultures. It's a pride that comes from the spirit of resourcefulness, imagination and kindness that marks Vancouver's people.

There was a moment last summer when I biked down that long hill from UBC to Spanish Banks. I was awestruck by the scene there.

It was sunset. Families of all different heritage, all sizes and configurations. Single parents. Teens. Grandparents. Younger kids playing on the beach and splashing in the water.

People so happy to be together, savouring the summer. The music, the sports, the barbeques and mouth-watering aromas of dinners from a dozen different cultures.

This, to me, was all Vancouver in a single park. And behind them, the sea, the ever-present ships heading to and from our port... the office towers and apartments rising on our skyline... and the mountains: our beautiful, impossible mountains.

These are moments we take for granted. Yet they are moments that are only possible because we are so gifted at coming together in common purpose, and drawing on the strength and wisdom of our people.

Today, we come together again in another beautiful part of this city, united by our love for this city. United by our vision and our passion for what Vancouver can be. United by our determination to make that vision real. That work begins today.

Thank you.

- Gregor Robertson