

Premier polishes his image as more budget cuts loom

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The B.C. Liberals have always known that Premier Gordon Campbell's tight-collared Howe Street image has been a political problem.

That's why they've occasionally tried to soften his hard edges with gimmicky repackaging jobs. Remember when they stuck him in a plaid shirt and had him strum a folk guitar?

There was always a phoney twang to it all. Dressing up a made-to-measure right-winger like Campbell in garage-band grunge was like putting Margaret Thatcher in a tube top and hot pants. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

But now, with an election just 15 months away, it looks like the premier's image consultants are at it again. Tuesday's throne speech, for example, announced the creation of the Premier's Advisory Panel on Literacy.

I have no doubt that Campbell's heart is in the right place -- he's a voracious reader.

But when you think how public-school libraries have been neglected under the Liberals, it's hard to view the new literacy panel as anything more than political sugar-coating to help the premier's image.

Consider: Provincial funding for teacher-librarians has been cut from one librarian per 400 students to one per 700 students in our school system.

"With funding pressures in schools, libraries are often the first thing to be cut," Michael Burris, executive director of the B.C. Library Association, told me yesterday.

"You have libraries in B.C. schools that are barely open and not staffed. The budget for books is often non-existent. The wheels are falling off all over the place."

Literacy panels may be good PR for the premier. Too bad genuine support for school libraries is so sorely lacking under the Liberals.

The repackaging of the premier doesn't end there. The throne speech also revealed Campbell will hold a series of roundtable discussions with "real" B.C. families later this year. The families will be chosen by a random lottery. The lucky winners will be invited to sit down with Campbell for a shameless photo-op -- uh, I mean "a discussion about their hopes and aspirations for the future."

"This is an opportunity to hear from people," Campbell explained. "To say, you know, 'What's happening with you?'"

Perhaps the premier should pose that question to the abused and neglected children about to be hit with another cruel budget cut.

Next week's budget is expected to slash funding for the most vulnerable kids and adults in B.C. by another \$70 million. That's despite the fact that the government's own internal documents have said those cuts carry "health and safety risks."

While those cuts are implemented, the premier will be doing his Dr. Phil routine.

How much will these roundtables cost B.C. taxpayers? I tried to find out yesterday. Not surprisingly, the information was not available.