

# Open Shop Goes National

BY PHILIP HOCHSTEIN

For the past three decades, the open shop has been a mostly provincial affair.

Here in B.C. the Independent Contractors and Businesses Association (ICBA) has focused its advocacy efforts on Victoria and provincial finances and employment rules and regulations. The same holds true in the seven other provinces with open shop construction associations.

But it's something that hasn't happened on a regular basis in Ottawa. The existing construction institutions and lobby groups are heavily dominated by the old-line building trade unions. But no more.

That's why Merit Canada — the umbrella group for Canada's eight open shop associations — has planted a permanent presence in the nation's capital. The goal is getting the open shop message to politicians and decision makers — that all qualified people and companies should be able to bid on work and projects regardless of their union affiliation. It's a matter of making sure the open shop sector has access to the construction pie.

When we fight for the open shop ideals, we're fighting for the Canadian taxpayer to get the

best possible value from their tax dollars invested in construction. The open shop also believes in growing the Canadian economy. Bad regulations and high taxes are a drag on the economy. Everything a government does to lower taxes and increase productivity makes the economy stronger. And if the economy grows, construction grows. That's about growing the construction pie — so there is more work for everyone.

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All of this is why our provincial associations decided that 2011 was the year to take our umbrella association to the next level by getting a foothold in Ottawa.

We did that by opening a Merit Canada office just a few blocks from Parliament Hill, and

hiring Terrance Oakey as our first full-time president to deliver the open shop message to decision makers.

Oakey has spent the past decade in the public and private sectors providing government relations and strategic communications council to national and international clients. Most recently he was vice president of federal government affairs with the Retail Council of Canada.

Merit Canada is already seeing results — and getting noticed by Ottawa's powers that be. When Human Resources and Skills Development Minister Diane Finley announced the Harper Government's new approach to coordinating information for job seekers across a spectrum of industries, Merit Canada was front and centre.

We made a commitment at that time to work with Ottawa to develop a new system to collect and share critical market intelligence and information that will give our industry and job seekers the information they need to plan for the future.

We're especially proud here in B.C. that all of this is happening with a long-time ICBA member helping set direction. As chair of Merit

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Canada, Jim Laurence is helping to guide the organization as it builds the national voice for the open shop. The former ICBA board chair and president and chief operation officer of Carillion Pacific Constructors has seen what happened here in B.C. over the past 35 years. It's something that can happen nationally.

Open shop went from doing 15 per cent of the construction in B.C. in the 1980s to doing close to 85 per cent today.

What we're starting this year with Merit Canada is something that will benefit taxpayers and the entire construction sector in years to come. One day when we look back, we will say this is

when we began the march to victory for open, transparent tendering and began saying good-bye to building-trades-only construction deals. **CB**

**Philip Hochstein is president of the Independent Contractors and Businesses Association of B.C.**

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