50 ICBA 1975 - 2025

ICBA at 50

Remembering the stories and people of our first half-century

By ICBA President and CEO Chris Gardner, on the 50th anniversary of ICBA's founding in 2025.

The construction industry is under pressure.

Global trade tensions. A housing crisis. Shortage of people. An aging population. Rising costs. An economy in decline. Political uncertainty.

For many, it's a perfect storm. For ICBA, it's an opportunity to lead.

Marking its 50th anniversary in 2025 – and recently named North American Trade Association of the Year for an unprecedented fourth time – ICBA is rewriting the playbook for what a modern business association can be. We've never been more focused, more energized, or more determined to grow with purpose and to deliver value for our members.

It's the story of how one independent organization evolved from a grassroots B.C. movement into Canada's largest and most dynamic construction association, and one of the largest business organizations in the country.

It started in 1975, when 169 open shop contractors gathered in Trail, B.C., to fight for their right to bid on government-funded work. Until then, the privilege was only available to unionized businesses. ICBA's founders and early supporters knew that freezing out contractors and their teams simply because they used a different labour model wasn't fair, and they weren't going to back down. The proposition was simple: you can't build a stronger construction industry if the starting point is excluding most of the people working in it. Their principled stand and ultimate success changed the trajectory of construction in B.C. – and set the tone for ICBA the next 50 years.

We've always been a champion for free enterprise – for the entrepreneurs, the risk takers and the contractors whose skill, hard work and initiative supports families and builds businesses and communities. And since day one, ICBA has never asked for or received government funding, because independence and initiative is central to everything we believe in. The ability to have candid and sometimes uncomfortable conversations with policy makers at all levels of government matters.

In early 2017, I joined ICBA as president. The future was unclear, but one thing was certain: in its history, ICBA had never once gone to government and said, "We have a great idea, we just need a government handout to make it happen." So, in charting a path forward, we rely on the very things that drive the business and growth of our members – ingenuity, resourcefulness and good old fashioned hard work. If we lost sight of our purpose and could not provide products and services for our members that were relevant to their companies and added value, like them, we too would be out of business.

To succeed, we needed to grow purposefully, and we needed to ensure that everything we did mattered to our members – what we say, what we offer, what we do – everything had to be ground in our core purpose. The construction industry moves fast; new technology, new ways of designing what we build, new supply chain logistics, and new ways of performing the work. Our members move fast to meet the needs of their customers, and we need to be just as nimble to meet the needs of our members.

We built a business based on growing with purpose and with one goal in mind: deliver real, tangible value to our members. And when it comes to being a voice for our members, we are fearless about speaking clearly and consistently about the opportunities and challenges that define construction and the men and women who wake up every day, go to job sites and offices, all to build everything around us.

The result? From our humble beginnings in Trail some 50 years ago, we have grown across B.C., expanded into Alberta, and have a business footprint that extends across Canada to the Maritimes.

Whether it's our apprentice sponsorship programs, our group health benefits business, our award-winning mental health program for people working in construction, our public policy research and advocacy, or hosting some of the most exciting events in the industry, ICBA is grounded in serving construction contractors and their teams.

One of the central challenges of our time is how to build more, build faster, and build affordability. Because if construction can do that, we all win. Everything we do is built around this simple truth: when construction succeeds, B.C., Alberta and Canada succeed.

Our first 50 years have not been easy. It's taken vision, discipline, and a relentless focus on execution. But the payoff is clear: a stronger, more independent ICBA that helps build the future our industry needs.

As we look ahead to the next 50 years, our mission is unchanged: stand with our members, fight for free enterprise, lead with purpose, and in all of this, be relevant.

The following is a series of blog posts posted to ICBA's news site, telling some of our favourite stories of the association's first 50 years. The interviews and other original research on which the ICBA50 series is based were conducted by writer Kevin Hanson. We appreciate Kevin's work capturing the people, events, and milestones that shaped ICBA's first half-century.

ICBA50 #1
Intimidation and Anarchy

All Ewald Rempel wanted to do was go to work. But the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd of angry, jeering union members surrounding his pickup truck had very different ideas. The mob violently rocked the Rempel Bros. Concrete vehicle, with Ewald inside gripping the steering wheel with remarkable calm. They chanted, shouted, and called him a leach and a parasite. They slashed his tires and scored the sides of the vehicle with keys. They threw foul and smelly human waste at his truck.

Ewald's sin? As the Abbotsford business owner described it later that week to CBC TV: "I want to work and make a living and make a good living for my employees."

It was just another day on the job site for British Columbia's open shop contractors in March of 1984. Pennyfarthing was a condo development near the famed Granville Island market, and located close to all the big Vancouver media outlets, making the dispute front page news every day. The Battle of False Creek was on.

A larger lumber delivery truck, owned by Chilliwack's Kerkhoff & Sons Construction, was also blocked that day. Company founder Bill Kerkhoff was the lead contractor on Pennyfarthing and would eventually have to go to court to get an in junction to allow his workers to have unimpeded access to the site. The judge slapped the unions with a $30,000 fine as well.

But back in March 1984, the mob exploded: more anger, more abusive language, more raised middle fingers. TV cameras captured it all, but the lawbreakers showed no sign of caring – their rage carried the day. Tires were deflated, while someone opened and poured something into the truck's gas tank. "I don't think you can stop these members right now," building trades union boss Roy Gauthier said. "They're mad – they're frustrated about what's happened."

Some of the unionists had clearly lost all sense of reason. In a townhall-style discussion broadcast on TV, one of Gauthier's members hurled this accusation at Ewald Rempel: "You mean to say because I belong to a union now – I'm an electrician – I have to suffer class war? I have to have this man divide me from my fellow citizens so that he can make a profit? So that he can send my kids and female members of my family to the streets for prostitution purposes?"

The building trades maintained their blockade of this large worksite in Vancouver's usually peaceful False Creek neighbourhood for three weeks, with images of the lawlessness, intimidation and occasional violence dominating the evening newscasts and morning headlines. The B.C. trades union bosses and their allies knew this was a turning point in B.C. labour history, and they were pulling out all the stops to hold back the open shop progress.

(At the time in B.C., almost all construction outside of single family residential was done by the trades unions. Today, 85% of work is done by the open shop – a complete reversal that illustrates the stunning success of free enterprise, ICBA, and open shop over the past half-century.)

Ewald and Ethel Rempel, ICBA life members

The matter was finally brought to an end when the Chief Justice of the British Columbia Supreme Court ruled the Building Trades Council was in contempt of court. Calling the situation a "tragic matter", the Chief Justice said building trades officers had created an "explosively dangerous" situation, in which "unlawful intimidation and anarchy now prevails." He said the events at Pennyfarthing could not be called a demonstration or a protest and were instead "unacceptable to all right-thinking citizens."
Kerkhoff and Rempel (both future Life Members of ICBA

– the highest honour the association can bestow) had followed the law – and had been met with lawlessness. By any rational measure, they had properly earned the opportunity to build the next phase of Pennyfarthing. But the building trades unions had no regard for such an outcome. For many British Columbians watching it unfold, it no doubt made for an unsettling revelation. Pennyfarthing laid bare the depths of the animosity the province's building trades unions had for their emerging open shop competitors. It showed the lengths those same unions and their members and supporters would go to demonize their competitors, and impede their pursuit of the growing range of projects that were no longer restricted to union-only bidding.

For Kerkhoff, Rempel, and the other open shop contractors – those who had secured work at Pennyfarthing and the many more who were watching anxiously from around the province – the Battle of False Creek was merely a further escalation of their individual struggles of the past decade or more. But they were not deterred. They were on a highly principled, against-the-odds, and ultimately spectacularly successful mission to re-make the construction industry in British Columbia. And Pennyfarthing came to mark the beginning of the definitive end of the inequality of opportunity and lack of free choice, which the previous union monopoly had unavoidably created.

Today, the Pennyfarthing condos are an unobtrusive part of the backdrop to Vancouver's scenic seawall near Granville Island. In March 1984, it was the site of a battle that changed the course of B.C.'s construction industry.

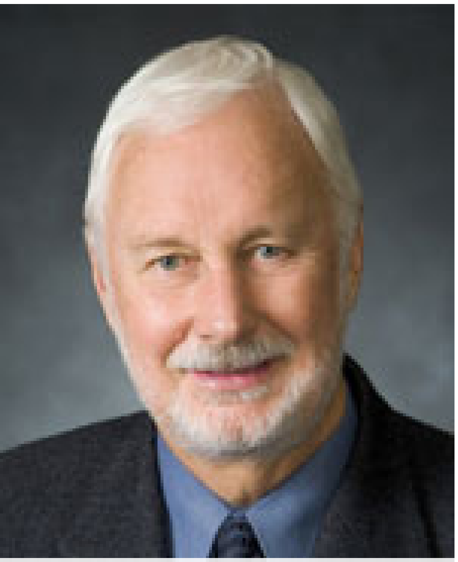
Bill Kerkhoff, ICBA life member

ICBA50 #2
Order in the Court!

Downtown Kamloops. A Kamloops provincial politician.

Not usually a place – or a person – you see burned in effigy. But the early 1980s were a wild time, and the building trades unions were too often aggressive and brutal. And they decided Claude Richmond, a radio station manager turned MLA, had gone too far when his Social Credit government awarded a contract to build a new local courthouse to Kerkhoff & Sons Construction.

"They got a big crane and parked it up on Columbia Street where the courthouse was going to be built," Richmond recalled. "A huge crane, and they hung me in effigy with a plastic trumpet because I played the trumpet. And they burned it – they burned my effigy. They put a torch to it. I thought, 'I've got it made.'"



Claude Richmond

The irony? Richmond had nothing to do with the contract award. But his office was picketed, and he had a tense meeting with union leaders at the David Thompson Hotel, during which he says he made his own views on the matter clear. "For some reason, you people think that you have a divine right to build anything bigger than a house or a three-storey walk-up," he told them. "Well, I don't think that's the case. I think Mr. Kerkhoff has the expertise to build this thing."

Bill Kerkhoff, the most recognizable face of the open shop construction sector, absolutely had the expertise.

He was a veteran of years of efforts by the building trades unions and their supporters to disrupt his work and his livelihood, including a Kelowna high rise project he had just completed. He had been both celebrated by free enterprisers and vilified by the building trades union bosses. In naming his company their business of the year in 1984, B.C. Business said he had "unleashed forces that even this mildly spoken 34-year-old probably never suspected existed: forces of venom, hate, physical abuse, admiration, stoicism and bewilderment." Terming him a "reluctant hero," the magazine said he was "the most redoubtable warrior with which the union movement has had to contend in modern times."

But it was pure business that led him to pursue the courthouse contract. His company was shifting focus to public work at a time when the market for private construction was hurting, and when contractors faced higher risks on the private work that was available. "It was survival," Kerkhoff said. He had also successfully completed some smaller public sector work, although he'd been turned down on another large provincial contract a few months prior. The courthouse job felt like a longshot, but in late January 1983, the B.C. Building Corporation accepted Kerkhoff's low bid on the five-story, 150,000 square foot structure of $12.9 million, despite lobbying by both the building trades and unionized contractors. It was the largest and most sophisticated public contract yet to be go non-union, and well above a $5 million threshold that the unions claimed should mark their exclusive domain.

This major open shop inroad came at a potentially volatile time and place. The project's construction and the controversy surrounding it overlapped with a provincial

Kamloops Courthouse, built open shop

election in May – during which Bill Bennett's Social Credit government defied expectations and increased both its share of the popular vote and its seat count (setting the scene for its restraint program and a conflict with the broader labour movement later in the year).

Kamloops was also very much a blue collar and union town, although Richmond and Bud Smith – the Premier Bill Bennett staffer who later represented Kamloops as an MLA – said the local political dynamics were not entirely as one might assume.

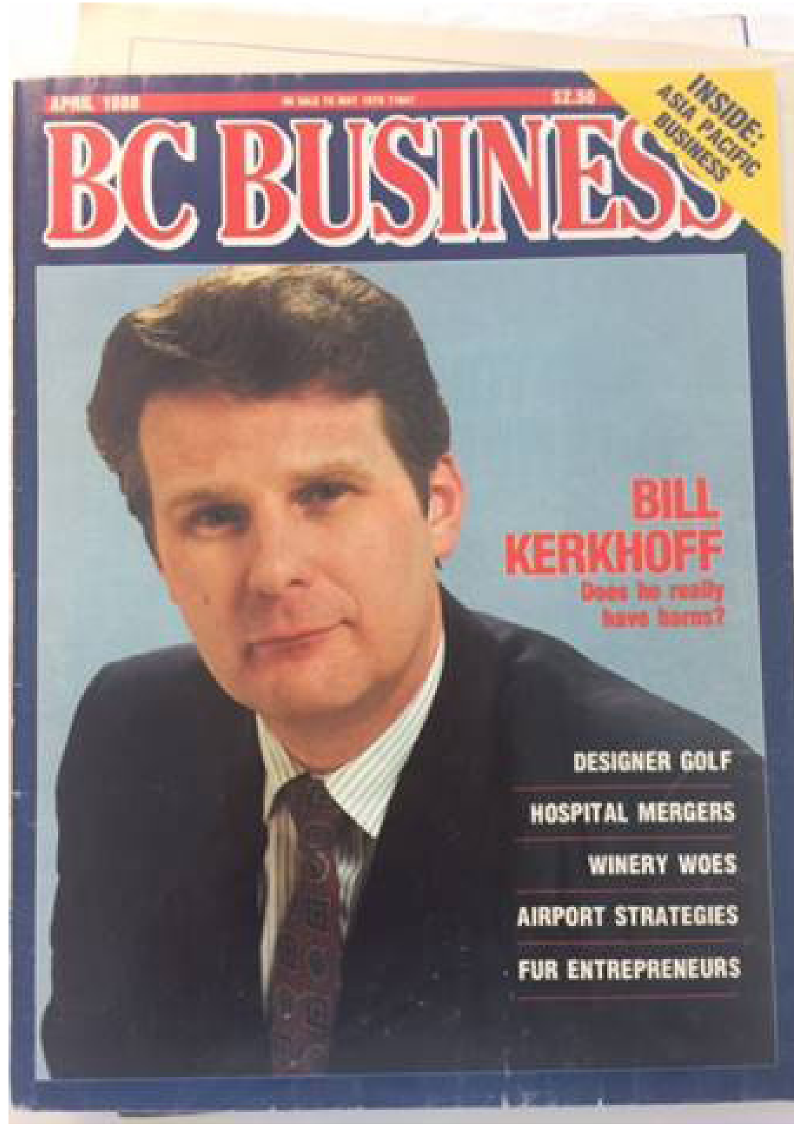
While unions opposed the Socred government, and its willingness to award projects open shop, those views were not universally shared among local rank-and-file union members. Getting Socreds elected in Kamloops would have been impossible otherwise.

"A lot of them supported Claude, [former Kamloops MLAs] Rafe Mair and Phil Gaglardi because they understood if you don't have projects, you don't have work," Smith said. Many, he adds, were also willing to "stick their union card in their shoe" and work on the courthouse project. "The dynamic is not a union/anti-union thing," said Smith. "It's a work and opportunity thing."

Local election results in 1983, when Richmond recalls being declared elected just 10 minutes after the polls closed, back up that assessment. And supporters did sometimes step up publicly, including a parade of logging trucks through Kamloops after the effigy incident. Richmond said this was put on by independent logging contractors, many of whom also picked up construction work in the off-season and objected to the closed shop concept. But while there may well have been broad, if often silent, support for open tendering, it didn't make it any less difficult for Kerkhoff to get the courthouse built. The controversy, as The Kamloops News put it, was "set to flare on several fronts".

The tender for the project was handled through the Bid Depository System – an onerous process by which general contractors had to list sub-contractors who met prescribed criteria, and a barrier to many smaller and emerging open shop contractors. "It was a real monster, a good-old-boys club," said Kerkhoff Project Manager Andy Krebs. The process resulted in a mix on Kerkhoff's original roster of 12 unionized and six open shop sub-trades. That was consistent with the open shop philosophy, but posed a risk that one or more unions might invoke a non-affiliation clause and refuse to work alongside non-union workers, as was still commonly done at the time. The stakes were high, since the B.C. Building Corporation had required Kerkhoff to take responsibility for added costs due to labour disruptions.

Kerkhoff initially asked the unionized subs to get guarantees from their unions that there would be no labour disruptions. "We're not prepared to give him the time of day," replied Building Trades Council President Roy Gauthier. Kerkhoff then asked for the more moderate safeguard of being able to replace subs who could not, or would not, perform their contracts, and when that too was refused he re-tendered and brought in non-union subs. Krebs put it in these common-sense terms: "It's pretty well known in the industry that we're non-union and so [the unions] knew what they were getting into when they bid for our contracts. Why did they bid for the work if they don't want to work alongside non-union workers?"



Bill Kerkhoff

The project was also the subject of a certification drive, and what the Labour Relations Board termed a "multitude of applications" and a "complex and protracted dispute" involving various employers and unions. A consent order in April certified the Carpenters and Labourers Unions as bargaining agent for employees of a Kerkhoff sub-contractor, although an application for a common-employer declaration relative to Kerkhoff Construction itself was withdrawn. But what they couldn't certify, the unions and their supporters would certainly try to disrupt.

Union pickets and pressure on suppliers made it impossible to source concrete for a 25-hour final pour from anywhere in the local region, said Project Superintendent Hermann Janzen. Rempel Bros. again came to the rescue by setting up an on-site mobile batch plant, although supplying it with sand and gravel was not easy.

A local gravel pit owner was willing to provide the materials but not bring them on site, so Janzen had him dump them in an undeveloped lot in a nearby industrial park, from where he retrieved them. “If the union can shut down a public road with humans, then I can shut it down with sand and gravel,” he reasoned. There was also vandalism on the site, including one alarming incident in which a fire burned a large hole in the on-site office trailer. A timing device and a large amount of diesel oil was found, but the fire was fortunately quickly extinguished.

But by October 1984, when the opening ceremony for the building was held, it was clear that the efforts to disrupt the project had been ineffective and that Kerkhoff had delivered beyond expectations. A reference letter from the architect speaks to the competence and quality workmanship demonstrated, saying it had “dispelled any initial apprehensions I may have had toward recommending the use of a non-union contractor on a project of this size.” Bud Smith noted that the courthouse had been built “three or four million under budget” and several months ahead of schedule. As even an observer sympathetic to the building trades would note: “After the Kamloops Courthouse, the building trades’ claim to have an exclusive preserve on construction know-how would always ring a little false.”

“I think we proved that a building of this size can be done by non-union contractors, especially after the union contractors said we didn’t have the competence to do it,” Kerkhoff himself said at the time. “If those people had been here today to see how wonderful this building is they wouldn’t be saying those things again.” The Kamloops Courthouse was a significant victory for open shop.

Interior of the Kamloops Courthouse

ICBA50 #3
'You Guys Should Organize'

It was an NDP cabinet minister who suggested British Columbia needed a province-wide open shop construction association.

You read that right: an NDP cabinet minister. And a union card holding one at that.

Bill King

Bill King was a former railroad worker who had been active in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and was involved in Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (the predecessor to the NDP) politics since his teenage years.

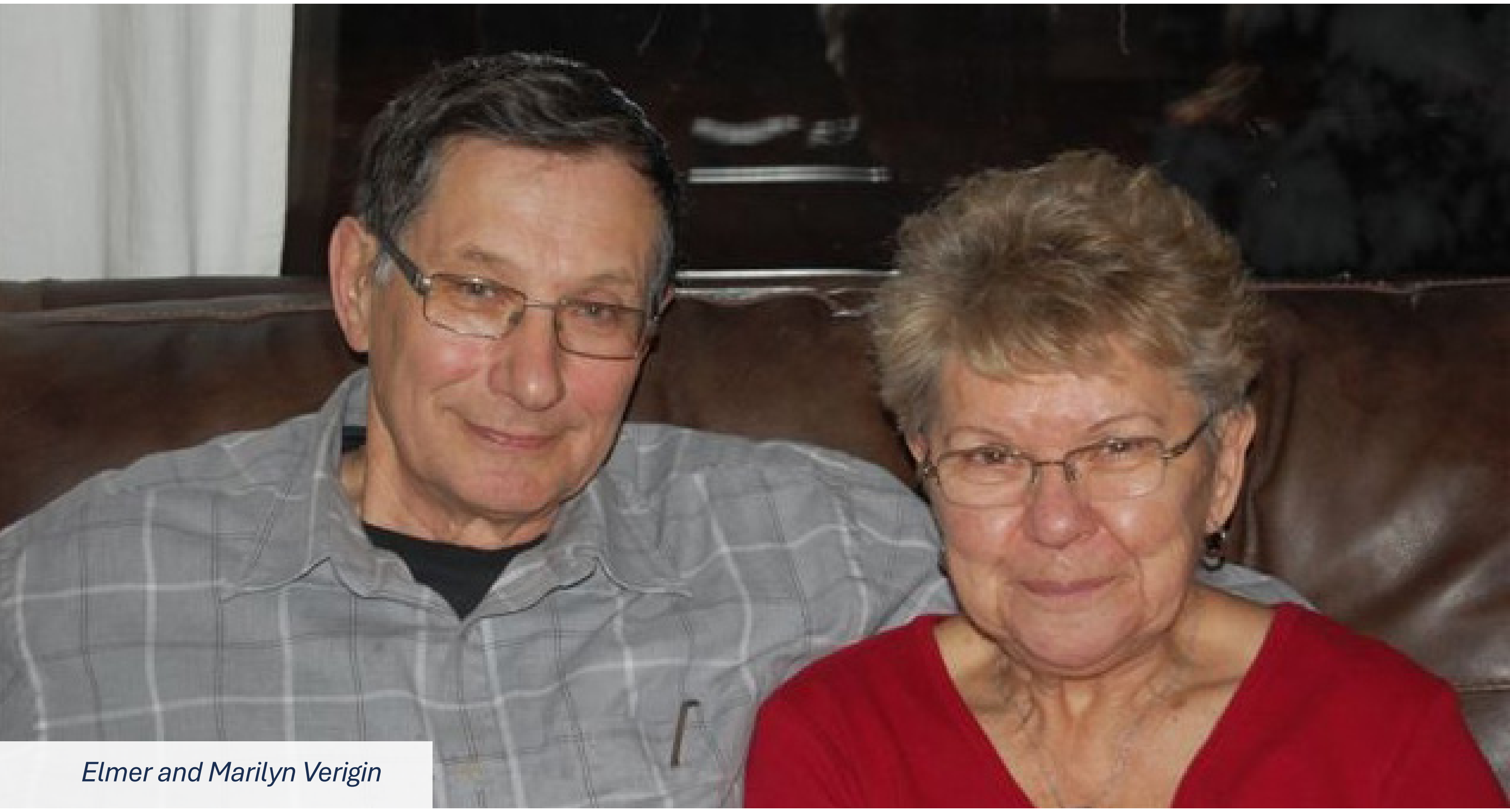
King was MLA for Shuswap-Revelstoke throughout the 1970s and served as Minister of Labour in Dave Barrett's NDP government. He even led the NDP opposition in 1976 when Dave Barrett briefly lost a seat in the Legislature.

The story of King's contribution to ICBA's formation begins in 1973, when a group of local contractors got together in the basement of the Crown Point Hotel in Trail to discuss the NDP's new Public Works Fair Employment Act, which required that all public works go to contractors with a building trades collective agreement.

"That was the first time that all of us realized that we could not tender any government job," says Elmer Verigin, the ICBA life member who helped pull the meeting together. "There was about 70 of us got together in Trail and we said, 'well, what are we going to do about this?'."

Their answer was to send a delegation to Victoria to meet with Minister King. In addition to Verigin, it included Norman Husband, Gordon Laarz, Joe Pagurut and Nick Plotnikoff. Most of them had never been across on the ferry to Vancouver Island before, Verigin says, and they had trouble finding the minister's office.

But once inside, they got a serious hearing. Verigin recounts the story: "We said there's a hundred and ten thousand tradespeople in the province that are certified by the government of British Columbia, and 33,000 belong to



Elmer and Marilyn Verigin

unions – and so 77,000 that we employ don't have any chance to bid on government work. Do you think that's fair? He says, 'hell no, that's not fair at all. But who the hell are you guys?'." The size of the open shop sector was a revelation to the Labour Minister, who told the delegation they needed to get organized.

That message was delivered over a two-and-a-half hour discussion, much to the surprise of reporters who were waiting when it ended. "We expected you guys to be kicked out of there in 15 minutes," Verigin recalls them saying. "[The minister] was impressed by our simplicity. We didn't have suits. We certainly weren't cultured in our discussion. We were just dealing here with a very specific thing."

Members of the Vancouver Island Right to Work Association (VIRTWA) – who the Kootenay contractors connected with while in Victoria – were equally surprised by the hearing the minister had given them. This group had been formed in 1971, and while it had struggled to maintain consistent momentum, it was an important precursor to ICBA.

"We, in Victoria, are proud to say that the initial spark for the ICBA came from us," the ICBA's first directory records. It goes on to say that, after the VIRTWA's formation, "Victoria union locals began to realize that picking on a united group of independent non-union contractors was quite different from their previous harassments on single, defenceless companies."

Jim Hartshorne was a VIRTWA executive member, and he and his employees had suffered that harassment as he expanded into multi-unit residential work.

Elmer and Marilyn Verigin

"It was a war I fought every single day," he said. Workers, he recalled, would be pressured to sign union cards with the threat of being shut out after certification was in place. "These guys were just employees, for goodness' sake, they're just trying to bring a cheque home and look after the kids."

The VIRTWA, he said, was instrumental in helping to lessen some of those pressures. "Everything we tried to do was to improve our lot as developers, builders and employees," Hartshorne said, "and then slowly we got involved with these other groups." In 1975, VIRTWA became known as the Vancouver Island Independent Contractors and Businessmen Association, a name it would bequeath to the province-wide association it was about to become part of.

Bill King had no idea what he had unleashed on B.C. construction and politics.

A few updates on the people mentioned here:

- **Bill King** passed away in 2020. Much was shared about his NDP political career and community service, but his role in sparking ICBA wasn't mentioned.
- **Jim Hartshorne** owns both the Victoria Shamrocks WLA franchise and the Victoria Grizzlies BCHL team. The Shamrocks' were the beloved favourite team of the late NDP Premier John Horgan.
- **Elmer Verigin** is often in touch with us at ICBA, and is a beloved life member of the association. He shares his memories on his blog.
- **Nick Plotnikoff** passed away in 2016. Elmer wrote: "Nick never lost contact with his Doukhobor roots. Those principles of his faith became part of his actions. Then there was the humorous side of Nick. He was part of a duet with another Creston Contractor, in their interpretation of Huey and Louey, Donald Duck's nephews. No matter how disparaging a situation would be, a 'break' would entail these two in a discussion in 'duck language'. Those of you who have not experienced this act have missed perhaps the best entertainment that even Red Skelton couldn't duplicate."

ICBA50 #4
How We Became #1 in Apprenticeships

Today, as we celebrate Open Shop Apprentices Week and host our third annual Red Seal graduation dinner, we look back at the formation of our apprenticeship program.

ICBA running its own apprenticeship program had been talked about as far back as 1977, but it was Philip Hochstein who finally got it off the ground in 1986.

Phil's pitch to members was easy: ICBA does the hard, bureaucratic work of getting apprentices through the government's system, and the member companies do what they do best – train young workers. The workers benefited too, with more opportunities and a network of companies they could transfer between without losing their apprenticeships.

Early association leaders such as Elmer Verigin and Christina Koechl – both of whom made large commitments to training in their own businesses – often reinforced for fellow ICBA members the need to take training seriously. "The responsibility for maintaining a skilled and efficient workforce rests on our shoulders for we have chosen not to rely on any particular union for our pool of labour," Koechl told delegates to ICBA's 1986 convention. There was nevertheless a lingering belief in the broader business community that the unionized side of the industry made a uniquely important contribution to apprenticeship. In its submission in the Concerned Contractors case in 1986, for example, the B.C. Business Council suggested that if the unionized construction sector withered away due to its competitive failings the whole viability of apprenticeship would be threatened.

The Business Council was dead wrong.

ICBA's apprentice program was a smash success. Within a decade, the share of B.C. apprentices sponsored by ICBA and open shop companies was nearly 75%. Today, it's more than 82%, and ICBA is the single largest sponsor of trades apprentices in B.C., with more than 2,500 in our network, and thousands more sponsored directly by open shop companies.

"The fact of the matter is the non-union sector was always training more people than the union sector, always," said Hochstein. Open shop training, he said, was simply never tracked or quantified, and since the unionized sector used to dominate apprenticeship boards and advisory committees, it was assumed its actual training role was bigger than it in fact was.

In the early 2000s, ICBA's role in apprenticeships had grown to the point that ICBA VP Gord Stewart was asked to help the new Industry Training Authority (ITA) refine the system. The building trades unions, having watched their market share of apprentices slip badly, badmouthed the ITA wherever and whenever they could.

Stewart was at an apprenticeship-related conference when a member of the Canadian Labour Congress had the podium and as Stewart put it, "created such a demonic straw man out of the ITA." It fell to Stewart, a member of the ITA's first board, to take the microphone and challenge the hostility and mischaracterizations. "The whole room absolutely exploded," he recalled, including shouts of "fascist" from a particularly exercised trade union representative who initially seemed intent on rushing towards Stewart for a physical confrontation.

Gord Stewart

That was an extreme reaction on the part of interests that saw themselves losing control over apprenticeship, and that resented the central role ICBA was playing in the process. As ICBA reported to its members: "special interest groups that have long dominated the industry training infrastructure and the regulatory framework have begun to fight like cornered cats to prevent the system from evolving;" and there were hysterical reactions “ranging from tiresome to ludicrous” at a series of packed stakeholder forums in early 2003.

“I was actually shocked about how much resistance there was to what to me seemed like pretty practical, simple kinds of changes,” said Jim Utley, who also sat on the ITA’s first board. But practical though the changes may have been, collectively they amounted to a re-design of the training system. The centuries-old institution of apprenticeship – still intrinsically linked in many people’s minds to traditional craft structures and union schools – was being tampered with. As Brian Clewes, ITA’s first CEO, put it: “There was great angst about what’s going to happen next from all the different partisan people – the union associations, business, colleges, apprentices. There was great uncertainty at that particular point because they knew change was coming.”

So it fell to the new Gordon Campbell BC Liberal Government, Stewart, Clewes and the ITA Board to fix the system after the NDP’s mismanagement of it during the 1990s.

Two features of the apprenticeship system were particularly problematic. The NDP, at the behest of their union allies, had designated 11 common trades as “compulsory” – meaning that only registered apprentices and ticketed tradespeople were allowed to do work within the scope of the trade. They also brought in a requirement for a one-to-one ratio of apprentices to journeypersons. In practice, these requirements limited entry into and supply of labour within these trades and created inefficiencies. Labourers and summer students, for example, were not allowed to do the less skilled tasks within the scope of a compulsory trade, and contractors often could not hire the number of apprentices that they could have effectively deployed and trained. “For our members, particularly in the compulsory trades, where you actually had to have ticketed workers or apprentices but you could only hire so many apprentices, it restricted your ability to grow your business,” said Stewart.

The requirements also led to some absurdities, particularly in the context of public contracts where all trades were treated as compulsory. During the massive repair effort in the wake of the leaky condo crisis, for example, people doing wall demolition as part of the envelope repair process had to have a trades ticket, Stewart says, so they took interior drywall training even though it had nothing to do with what was effectively an entirely new type of work that they were performing. “We were sending guys to school to learn something they don’t need to learn for something they don’t do,” he said.

The new ITA, under the Campbell BC Liberals, got back to basics. “The group we got together was really focused on value for taxpayer dollar,” said Stewart, “and on creating market-based approaches to apprenticeship training. We were going to align the training programs with what was actually going on in the workplace.” The ITA itself was up and running by early 2004, with Clewes at its helm at CEO. Stewart said it was an intentional decision to hire someone from outside government. “We got a guy in Brian who was a change agent, and smart and courageous and he worked really well with the board to implement the vision.”

Under ITA, compulsory trades and apprenticeship ratios were no more, with public and worker safety being addressed by other agencies with more relevant mandates. ITA itself was much leaner that its NDP-dominated predecessor, with a tighter focus on credentialing, and it operated under the direction of a predominantly employer board. New structures were created for industry engagement as part of the effort to better match training outcomes with market needs. Funding to colleges and other training providers was tied to the outcomes they produced, and there was a renewed emphasis on training flexibility and innovation. Despite strong resistance from apprenticeship traditionalists, more emphasis was placed on competency-based assessment and on development of modularized and specialized programs and credentials.

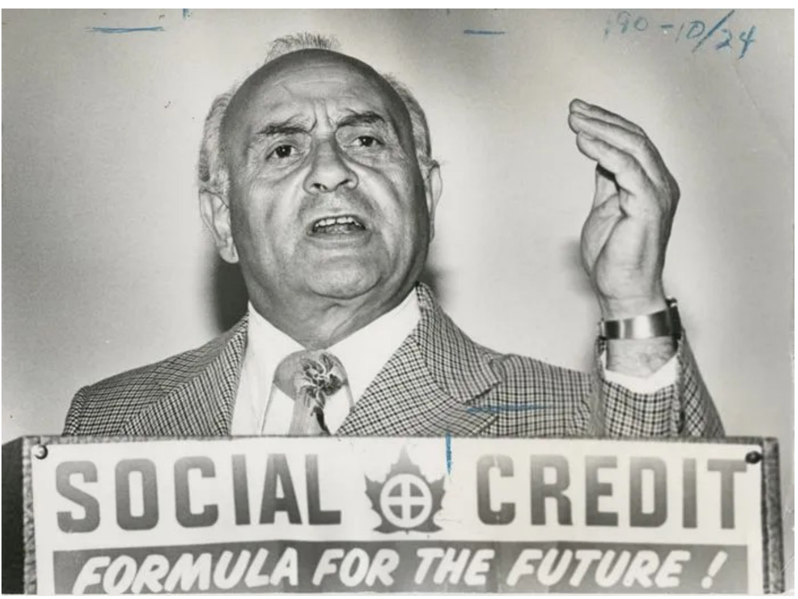
The new system was quick to produce strong results. In 2008/09 the number of registered training participants and the number of apprenticeship credentials awarded were both well over double what they’d been in 2003/04, while the number of registered sponsors was up by about 60 per cent. ICBA’s own number of apprentices over the first 10 years of ITA operations grew from 365 to nearly 1,400. (Today, it’s more than 2,500.)

However, in politics no victory is ever final. The BC NDP came back to power in 2017 and to placate their building trades allies, brought back compulsory trades and ratios. The policy battle continues, but there is no denying the success of the ICBA model: ICBA is far and away the top sponsor of apprentices in B.C., and the open shop trains 82% of all trades apprentices in the province.

ICBA50 #5
From Small Seeds, Big Things Grow

He may be the most famous politician who was never premier in B.C. history. Flyin' Phil Gaglardi was a Pentecostal minister who refined his speaking style in weekly radio sermons, and then took his hellfire and brimstone ways into B.C. politics, serving two decades as Kamloops' Social Credit MLA.

He was a legend in the mid 1970s, and, when 163 independent contractors formally met to found ICBA at the Terra Nova Motor Inn in Trail on April 26, 1975, it was Gaglardi who gave the keynote address. He spoke in revivalist tones: "There's no greater privilege and no greater price in this jewel that any individual could hold in the palm of his hand than the ability to be able to choose," he told delegates.



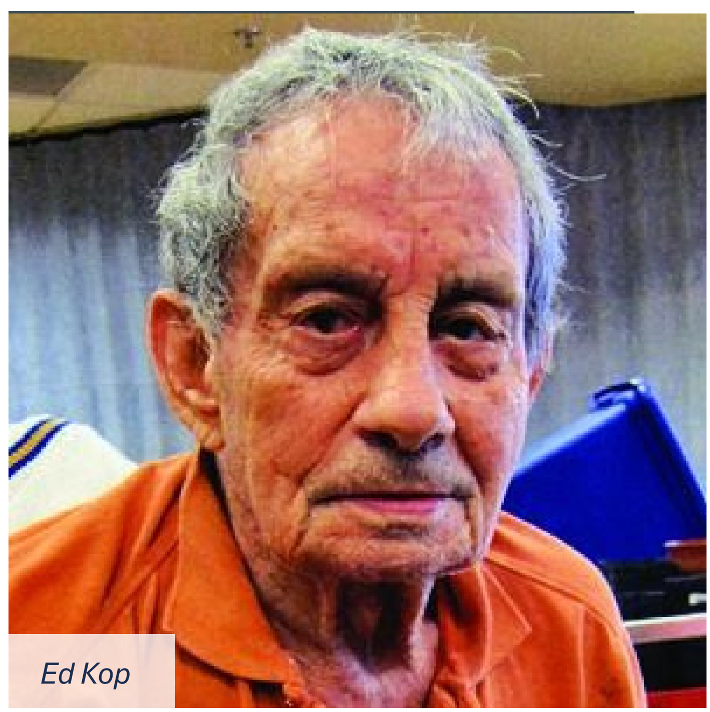
Phil Gaglardi

He went on to say he would "fight to the last drop of my blood" to defend an individual's right to be able to choose to either belong or not belong to a union. As an old preacher, the Biblical parable of the mustard seed must have come to mind ("The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."), as he couldn't help but prophesy: "This is the start of one of the most powerful organizations ever to be organized in the Province of British Columbia."

It was a memorable series of meetings. Elmer Verigin led a strong Kootenay contingent, and said participation far exceeded expectations. Ed Kop and others were there on behalf of the Vancouver Island group, with the Fraser Valley and Okanagan also well represented.

With open shop in its infancy in B.C., they looked south for some advice. Representatives of the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC), the organization representing open shop interests in the United States, spoke to ICBA's founding convention. Former ABC president John Lochary outlined issues and priorities that aligned very closely with the views of the Canadian contractors in the room. Encouragingly, he reported that his association has experienced phenomenal growth, and that in and around its home base of Baltimore, "ABC is doing now more than 80 per cent of all the work and the percentage is growing every day."

As would often be the case at ICBA events, protestors shadowed participants. Some 30 picketers gathered outside the Terra Nova, handing out pamphlets informing readers: "Union shops ensure a prosperous province. Open shops invite economic decline," and claiming that unions "are the most democratic forces for progress in Canada." The response within the convention room was good-natured. "I think that sounds very nice of all the great union organizers from Vancouver and every place else to sacrifice a beautiful day to come out and give us publicity," Verigin remarked.



Ed Kop

Trail's Terra Nova Motor Inn – the Birthplace of ICBA

The minds of delegates, however, were clearly fixed on the business at hand. Ed Kop urged action: "I just hope that this particular gathering will not go back home until we have decided to unite ourselves through a strong and very unified body of independent contractors, all believing and working for the same principles." One of the ABC representatives echoed that sentiment: "You need to get this thing rolling," Skip McComas told delegates. "You've got a great task ahead of you."

Delegates listened – and acted, committing themselves to: "Form an association of contractors and associates in British Columbia. These members would operate under the 'merit shop' concept in harmony with all labour and management."

A seven-person executive committee was appointed. In addition to Ed Kop as president and Elmer Verigin as vice-president it included: Len Lakes of Creston, Gordon Laarz of Trail, Delora McKinnon of Victoria, Wayne Newcomen of Cranbrook, and Al Roper of Creston. They were tasked with finding an administrator, with a provisional budget of $20,000 for an eight-month period; and with carrying out an action plan that included incorporation, a membership and dues structure, and setting up an office.

That Trail convention set the scene for strong momentum during ICBA's inaugural year. The executive met again at Victoria's Pandora Inn in June where it adopted a constitution and set membership fees and legislative priorities. It also hired Ralph Purdy on a four-month contract as executive vice-president and administrator. Purdy was a former secretary-manager of the Employers Association of Saskatchewan, and a passionate believer in the merits of open shop contracting. He had delivered an evening speech, titled "Dictocracy vs. Responsible (Private) Enterprise," at the founding convention.

The constitution of the Independent Contractors and Businessmen Association of B.C. was filed on August 6, 1975 (the name would morph to Independent Canadian Businessmen Association, and the "men" reference was subsequently dropped, before the current name was adopted in 1986). ICBA would be "the voice of the merit shop in construction and business" and would "assume the responsibility of making that voice heard," its constitution declared.

ICBA50 #6
The Suppliers

Ed and Ewald Rempel's brother Clarence, a homebuilder in the Fraser Valley in the late 1960s, couldn't get a reliable concrete supply. That led the three of them to set up Rempel Bros. Concrete, which became known for living up to its "service to the customer" motto.

But as what started out as a one-truck operation grew, it also attracted unwelcome attention from the Teamsters Union, and from unknown individuals who objected to its determination to remain non-union. Rempel Bros. grew into the largest non-union concrete company in the province, and that made it a major target for certification. Ed and Ewald

Ewald and Ethel Rempel, ICBA life members

soon became regular features on the evening news, as their union opponents did whatever they could to intimidate and run them out of business.

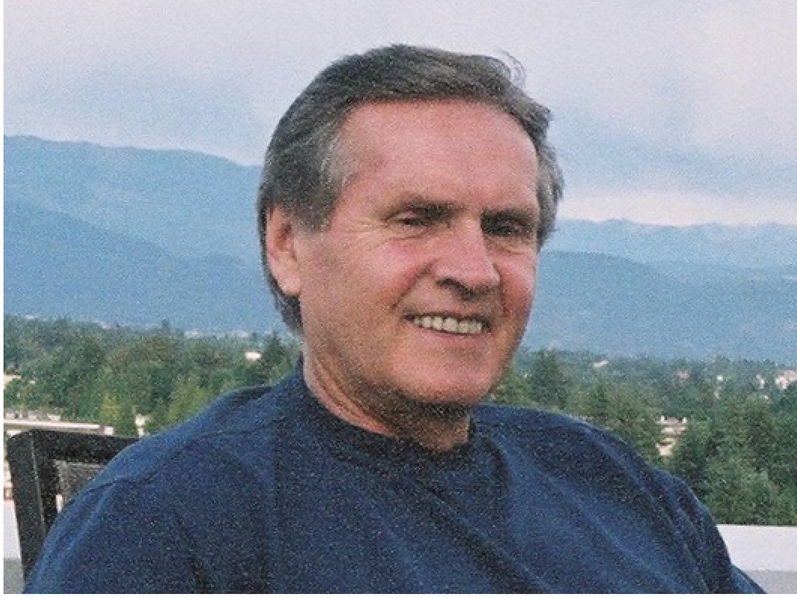
"They felt that if they could unionize Rempel Bros., they could get every little housebuilder, every little contractor that was doing small jobs, because they'd have to be in the union in order to buy concrete," remembered Ed's wife, Myrtle-Anne Rempel.

That role as a lynchpin of open shop contracting – often the only supplier ready, willing and able to provide a vital material to a besieged job site – would play out many times. And it earned the company and its founders the sustained gratitude and admiration of many.

"They were far and above, in my opinion, the key to this whole thing," said Ken Funk, another early-era ICBA member. "Had it been anyone else it wouldn't have gone through. Ewald Rempel was the most stubborn son of a bitch you ever met in your life. And boy I'll tell you, having a little bit of that quality myself, it's a great strength."

It's a quality Ewald, his wife Ethel, Ed and Myrtle-Anne, and everyone associated with the company would need to deal with both the aggressive certification efforts of the Teamsters and the business hurdles put in their path. Major unionized cement suppliers were successfully pressured not to sell to Rempel Bros., Myrtle-Anne says. Alternative suppliers were found in the U.S. and an arrangement was struck with a trucker – "kind of a renegade guy" – to get cement from there into B.C. She learned much later, however, that the trucker suffered multiple physical assaults for his role in helping supply their operations.

What Myrtle-Anne calls "scare tactics" also routinely spilled over into her home life. "At night, they would come up and down our driveway, flashing their lights. We would see the cars out there. Sometimes they'd get out of the cars and there'd be six big guys in our driveway, at our home," she recalled.



Ewald and Ethel Rempel, ICBA life members

On one occasion, her 16-year-old daughter was followed in her car from school and had to detour from the empty residence to a nearby Rempel Bros. plant before the trailing vehicle sped off. Such incidents led Myrtle-Anne's mother to become too fearful to babysit her grandchildren and led some of her friends to fear for their own safety if they continued to socialize with her. "The tension was so electric in the air," she said as she reflected back on the mid-1970s.

Ewald Rempel, who died in 1993, nevertheless had a measured assessment of the situation he faced, telling BC Business in 1985: "I recognize the good the unions have done. I'd be wrong if I said they're not needed. But they have to be responsible because they have a lot of power. That responsibility, in a lot of them, is lacking – especially the Teamsters." For her part, Myrtle-Anne summed it up in this way: "It was frightening, and yet we all felt we were doing the right thing."

Ed and Myrtle-Anne, and Ewald and Ethel, were all granted ICBA Life Membership for their commitment to the Association and open shop construction. Myrtle-Anne, an award-winning, world-renowned artist, even did a painting of ICBA's history and founders, and it hangs with pride in ICBA's meeting room. While Ed, Ewald and Ethel have all passed away, Myrtle-Anne is a fixture at ICBA events to this day.

The Rempel Bros. story is intertwined with ICBA's – watch for more in future ICBA50 features.

Myrtle-Anne Rempel, ICBA life member

ICBA50 #7
The General Contractor's First Tower

Bill Kerkhoff arrived in Canada as part of a Dutch immigrant family. Trained in carpentry, he played an important role even as a teenager in the launch of his family's Chilliwack-based home building business, which took out its first building permit in 1968.

The business grew and expanded into non-residential, and in 1980 entered entirely new territory – for itself and the open shop sector – when it won the bid for a high-rise residential tower in Kelowna. By this time the building trades knew Kerkhoff was a threat to their monopoly, and he was well-acquainted with the tactics they were likely to deploy against him in Kelowna. "It was a real battle from day one till the very last," he said.

Conscious of non-affiliation clauses, Kerkhoff avoided having union and non-union sub-contractors on site at the same time. But a unionized crew halted its three-quarters-complete installation of a highly specialized type of foundation, on the premise that while no non-union crews were there at the same time, they had prepared the site. The Labour Relations Board declined to remove the picket, leaving Kerkhoff with no option but to tear out the piles, and switch to an entirely different type of foundation for the building.

Picketing then prevented local drivers from delivering concrete for the large, continuous pour the project required. As on many other projects, this was overcome with help from

Bill Kerkhoff, ICBA life member

Kerkhoff's first Kelowna high-rise

Rempel Bros. Concrete. The cavalry-like arrival of its green-and-white trucks enabled Kerkhoff to supply his project from local batch plants. “They came in the evening before – a dozen trucks, all Rempel trucks and the next morning they started pouring. There must have been a hundred guys on the picket line and they were just furious,” he recalled.

Finally, the unions attempted to use their leverage over crane availability and operation. Every supplier of the particular type needed was unionized, so Kerkhoff resorted to buying his own – although that still left the challenge of assembling it. A crane company from Spokane was finally able to do it, but only after more wrangling with both unions and government officials over the presence of foreign workers. Disassembly of the crane was among the final challenges, and although an Edmonton contractor was found, he had to use the unorthodox method of taking the crane apart piece by piece from an A-frame installed on the building roof.

In the end, Kerkhoff got the project done, despite the hurdles put in his path, and within an already tight client timeline. Profitability, of course, suffered significantly. The experience was greatly frustrating, although he says it prepared him for similar challenges on larger and even more intensely opposed projects still to come. “You know, you’re in the middle of it and there’s no going back. So I always found the key is you’ve got to keep moving. You know, when you have problems, don’t stand still. That’s the nature of the business.”

That wouldn’t be the last Kelowna high-rise built by Kerkhoff Construction. Today, the Kelowna skyline is shaped by Kerkhoff buildings such as One Water Street and 1151 Sunset.

Kerkhoff, an ICBA Life Member, would go on to build Hatzic Elementary, Pennyfarthing, the Kamloops Courthouse, the SkyTrain Bridge, the Coquihalla Highway’s Great Bear Snow Shed and 18 bridges, 20 Expo 86 buildings, and much, much more. He is an icon in B.C. construction.

Today, his son Leonard runs Kerkhoff Construction and is the chair of the ICBA Board of Directors.

(From left): ICBA President Chris Gardner, Bill Kerkhoff, retired ICBA President Philip Hochstein — on the 22nd floor of a Kerkhoff tower under construction in Kelowna

ICBA50 #8
The Independent Businessman, Len Remple

ICBA has a long history as a construction association, but we have never been exclusively that. We support entrepreneurs, free enterprisers, suppliers, resource development companies and much more.

For decades, independent businesspeople in other fields, navigating the difficulties of operating non-union, often found great value in membership or working with ICBA.
Len Remple was one of those entrepreneurs. He arrived in Surrey in 1973, after pioneering commercial garbage collection services in Winnipeg. Drawn to the coastal climate by the health benefits it had for his daughter, he needed to rebuild his business. In Winnipeg, the Teamsters had unsuccessfully tried to organize it, but caused no particular difficulties afterwards. "But I sure learned a different lesson when I came to the west coast," he said.

The troubles began with a tense visit from a union representative on Remple's first day in his newly rented office. "We just never really fell in love with each other," he said. But it was when he began to win contracts for residential garbage collection that he felt the full wrath a non-union businessman could face.

His first contract was awarded at Surrey City Hall: "The chambers were full of people carrying baseball bats and two-by-fours, and they were not relieved of them," Remple said. "When it was awarded, there was a real uproar. And very quickly, I don't know how many RCMP came in to restore order, and then four of them escorted me out to my car." A similar scene repeated itself at the City of North Vancouver when he won that contract – with the added twist that a vehicle nearly identical to his was badly damaged in the parking lot, after he took the precaution of parking his several blocks away.

Some of the ugliest incidents took place during a lengthy municipal workers strike in 1981, during which Remple's crews continued to work. One day his foreman appeared with plywood to cover a large window in Remple's office, explaining there had been a telephone threat. On another a friend showed up at the Remple home with the loan of powerful fire extinguishers for each room. These weren't idle fears, as an incident at a temporary dump site Remple had arranged to use demonstrated. He was removing a chain that had been used to block access to the site, when he was hit over the head with what he believes may have been a two-by-four. Rempel fell and was concussed, and needed help to roll out of the way of an approaching vehicle. "There were three newspapers and three TV stations that had cameras there, but all the cameras malfunctioned when I went to the RCMP to lay charges," he said, noting how afraid average people were to stand up to the unions.

Violence touched his family too. Len's wife Judy says they endured vandalism at their home, and she herself became a likely unintentional target on a day when she was driving her husband's car with an out-of-town guest as a passenger. "I had taken her to Bellingham and on our way back she started to yell because this car was coming closer and closer and I just got pushed right off the road," Judy recalled. "And my friend, she couldn't believe it, that this was going on in B.C. And how do you explain it?" It all took its toll on the Remples. "Always there was anxiety," Judy said. "Anxiety for the men and anxiety for the men's wives and the men's children, because they were being threatened."

Len Remple, ICBA Life Member

There was also support, sometimes from unexpected sources. During the strike, Remple began to receive anonymous phone calls, which he at first thought were a hoax or set-up. But the unidentified voice was well versed in the law – able to tell Remple, for example, exactly what Criminal Code provisions to cite to convince a reluctant Surrey chief of police to provide escorts to the landfill.

"When I confronted the police chief with that, he had some pretty profane words to use to me," Remple said. "But he did order our trucks to be escorted."

The sound advice continued, with Remple having no idea who it was coming from. "I would ask him each time, why have you chosen to help me? And he kept saying the same thing: right is right and wrong is wrong."

Some time later, that same anonymous voice extended an invitation for Len and Judy to a social event at the caller's residence. They were to find out their counsel had been coming from Les Bewley, a then-retired provincial court judge who later became a columnist and commentator.

In 2017, Len wrote ICBA a letter encouraging us to keep fighting for open shop and freedom. These were his closing words:

> The open shop concept is a treasure to be protected, fostered, encouraged, expanded and guarded vigilantly. Remember always: those who oppose the open shop concept will never genuinely accept it as a permanent part of our economy. The open shop concept is a constant gift to labour and therefore is a threat to unionization. ICBA must remain on guard and avoid the danger of complacency...
>
> I recognize it is difficult to infuse a second-generation passion for a cause that we are now enjoying, but that is exactly my hope for ICBA members.
>
> Be vigilant, NOT COMPLACENT. What has been gained can be lost at the whim of politicians. Open shop is like the statue of liberty, it is for all persons a benefit.

Len Remple was named an ICBA Life Member for his service to the association and B.C. He passed away in 2022, at the age of 91.

ICBA50 #9
Elmer Verigin, ICBA Booster

Very few individuals had as big an impact on ICBA as our second president, Elmer Verigin. He is the ultimate ICBA booster, someone who did the hard work in the early years to build our association.

Many ICBA founders started in the business with a different company, usually union. They worked for someone else, were good on the tools, and eventually decided to go out and try their hand at running their own business. As longtime ICBA supporter Don Weitzel explains: "They would start building a couple of spec homes or a gas station or whatever, a small contract. And then would find themselves stifled because they couldn't bid for anything bigger."

Elmer Verigin – who played a key role in organizing ICBA's founding convention and went on to serve as its second president – was one of those risktakers. Trained as an engineer, he turned down advancement opportunities in the pulp industry to join his brothers in a house-framing business in the Kootenays, which slowly but surely moved into larger projects. At the time the NDP's Public Works Fair Employment Act became law, the business had begun doing some public work. "It wasn't of any consequence, but the fact that we couldn't bid on it [anymore] was a big thing," he says. "It was our future, because even though we're a small contractor, we aspire to be a big contractor someday."

Elmer and Marilyn Verigin

As Verigin and other open shop contractors pursued their aspirations, they found construction clients who were eager for better value than unionized contractors could provide. Open shop contractors had more competitive labour costs and – at least as importantly – more efficient and productive work practices. Much of that advantage resulted from being able to deploy people without the constraint of "jurisdictional rules" that prescribe which union's members can do what. As former ICBA President Philip Hochstein puts it: "The sector used skilled people and compensated them competitively, it just didn't have all the union bullshit that came along with a collective agreement."

As ICBA's second president, Verigin travelled the province to recruit new members. One memorable trip had him on a small plane, flying from the Kootenays to Vancouver when snow forced a detour near Merritt. Verigin and ICBA executive member Karl Monk were headed to an association meeting. When the pilot asked for help sighting a railroad track to orient himself, Verigin realized the group was "in a little bit of trouble." They managed to find their way to the Fraser Valley but the pilot then realized gas was running low.

"I'd been calm, cool and collected," Verigin says. "Unions couldn't scare me, but being up here in this god-damn air was just something I couldn't control." He was pressed into navigator service to find a landing strip, and after a careening touchdown at Boston Bar they were re-fueled and airborne again. There was some further anxiety when the pilot's runway approach required urgent intervention by Vancouver air traffic control.

Once on the ground, Verigin recalls saying to Monk: "My mother taught me six psalms, you know in Russian, and I never learned them. I never learned. But I recited them twice today, all six of them." That particular pilot was a stand-in for Verigin's fellow ICBA executive member Fin Levick, and he wasn't asked to help with transport to ICBA meetings again. But despite the drama of the flight, it was just another day in the long, hard process of building ICBA into a cohesive and viable business association.

In the coming weeks of our ICBA50 for 50 series, Elmer's name will surface again and again as a key ICBA builder.

But in 2021, more than 45 years after founding the association, Elmer sent us this story – reminding us how ICBA's values and opportunity help everyday people:

Elmer Verigin

Today, I had a special moment.

This flashy pickup truck stopped and hailed me on my morning walk. Being hearing challenged, I had to walk over to understand what he was saying.

“My name is Jason and I was part of the first Carpentry Apprenticeship class (15 total) that were afforded the opportunity to take Carpentry Apprenticeship as a grade 12 class at J. Lloyd Crowe High School in 2003,” he explained.

This class worked with ICBA and then were hired to build 5 cabins and a Camp Services Building at Whatshan. The Whatshan Lake Retreat was then privileged to offer 2 Journeyman Carpenters and retired Superintendents to provide on site supervision and instruction.

“So did you achieve your Red Seal Journeyman status?” I was excited in my question to Jason.

“Yes, and as you see I am now have my own Building Contractor business out of Montrose,” he was proud to explain.

He carried on with, “I was driving by and recognized you. I just wanted to provide you with my gratitude in offering such an opportunity to students like myself and now we have a career.”

I was overwhelmed with emotion. It is not often that one gets an opportunity to meet people this way.

“Are you busy?” I finally was able to speak.

“Yes, very busy!” he responded.

Just another day in my life — or was it?

ICBA50 #10
Building Bonds (& Fundraising) at Conventions

ICBA's second annual convention took place at the not-yet-fully-complete Sandman Inn in Vancouver, over two days in September 1976, with 125 people there. The venue was selected to celebrate the controversial role of open shop contractors in building it. This Georgia Street project was Rempel Bros. Concrete's first venture into a large non-residential job in Vancouver, and in a foreshadowing of more intense pushback to come on future projects, it had drawn union pickets.

This convention received reports from six committees and the executive vice-president, on topics that included potential involvement in training and establishment of a group benefits program.

"There was so much goodwill and good feeling and optimism and camaraderie," said Ken Funk. "There was a lot of good feelings out of that whole thing, a lot of solidarity, 'yeah we can do it, we can do it'."

One of the final orders of business was to elect Elmer Verigin as ICBA's second president, and Ed Rempel as vice-president. They assumed leadership of an organization that – while very leanly resourced and sometimes falling short on the niceties of parliamentary procedure – was showing staying power.

A tradition began at this 1976 convention of holding annual auctions. Significant sums were often paid for a somewhat motley collection of auction items, and this revenue helped clear debts and keep the association financially afloat in its lean years. "Somebody from Victoria brought a picture of a black-and-white crow on a lawn and that damn thing sold for $300," says Verigin.

One of the legacies of these auctions is a gold-plated brick that came from the Sandman Inn construction project, where that second convention was held. The "convention brick" was auctioned off every year up until the late 1980s for sums of up to $850. Other auction items were of even more dubious origin and value.

Christina Koechl recalls auctioning off one of Verigin's shoes at a convention in Kamloops. "I didn't realise that Elmer didn't bring a second pair of shoes, and for two days the poor guy was walking around without a left shoe because I was hell bent we're gonna auction this one off and get big money for it," she says.

This led to retaliation in the form of a more intimate item of Christina's clothing ending up on the auction block, although a quick $600 bid from Ewald Rempel preserved decorum. Fin Levick's beard became an auction item one year, and he still possesses a number of his own auction purchases. "I've got a bathtub up in my courtyard, it's a good fibreglass bathtub," he said. "But I've never been able to pawn it off on anybody, and I think that thing cost me $1,500. But it was so much fun."

"I guess it's just the human spirit," said Funk. "People of common purpose, people of common conviction and, you know, life isn't just about seriousness, life is also about having fun and laughing and just enjoying being together. Because it was such a heavy cause, you needed some comic relief."

For their contributions to ICBA, Elmer Verigin, Christina Koechl, Ed Rempel, Ewald Rempel, Ken Funk and Fin Levick were all awarded Life Membership over the years.

This quilt, featuring many of our founding companies and made for the 1980 convention, was used as a table cloth for several 1980s ICBA gatherings.

ICBA50 #11
Ralph Purdy, the Father of ICBA's Open Shop Movement

In ICBA's 50-year history, the organization has only had three presidents: Chris Gardner, Phil Hochstein, and Ralph Purdy.

It may be 50 years ago, but ICBA Board member Christina Koechl clearly remembers the hot summer afternoon when Ralph Purdy first walked into her office in Surrey, sat across from her in the large single room, and asked for her support in launching ICBA. "I can still see him with his straw hat entering," she said – a straw hat that she was later given as a momento of her friendship with him.

Ralph Purdy

"He was a soft spoken man who came across very sincere," Koechl said. "He had this ideology that things could improve, could be made better, but it needed numbers in order to get there. And he was right. He valued our support and validated our support. And that's why we felt, yes, it makes more sense to have other people, other contractors band together and become one voice and form an association."

The fondness and deep respect with which she spoke of Ralph Purdy – ICBA's founding executive vice president – is common among the early members who worked with him and came to know him. They describe him as someone who had a quiet presence but nevertheless spoke authoritatively, and who brought a broad vision to the association. He was well versed on the labour code and related matters, but is most commonly remembered and described simply as a man of principle.

"He was totally convinced that he could change this situation here in B.C. because it was the right thing to do," said Bill Kerkhoff.

"It's really hard to put into words the impact that he had," added Ken Funk. "He was the founder of a movement for sure."

Born in Iowa, Purdy became a Canadian in childhood, and received what formal education he had in rural schools in the Melfort, Saskatchewan area. He served in the Canadian Air Force during World War II, and spent many years working in public relations, publishing and advertising management, including serving as editor of various prairie newspapers.

Although still Saskatchewan-based, he had had some association with the Vancouver Island Right to Work Association in the early 1970s. And it was Journal of Commerce coverage of a speech he gave in that capacity that first put him on Elmer Verigin's radar screen – leading to an invitation to him to provide an evening keynote at the ICBA's founding convention, and to his hiring shortly thereafter.

Ralph speaking at an early ICBA meeting.

Purdy was a strong proponent of "right to work," believing individual employees should never be compelled to join, or financially contribute, to a union. This terminology was widely embraced by members in the early days of ICBA, and was also a hot topic of debate at the Social Credit Party convention of 1977. But the term came to be seen as both provocative and ill-fitting with Canadian labour relations realities. Over time, ICBA framed its core objective instead as "open shop" construction, meaning simply that bidding and job sites should be open to contractors irrespective of whether they are union or non-union, and also irrespective of which particular union they may be signed-up with.

More fundamentally, Purdy's many writings, speeches and media appearances reflect deeply held beliefs in the central importance of individual autonomy, and of free enterprise and small business in particular. He was a strong proponent of the fair treatment of employees and of profit sharing. And he had great disdain for what he frequently saw as the heavy hand of both big government and big labour. As Verigin put it in the eulogy he delivered at Purdy's funeral: "This man believed in the supreme dignity of mankind and man's individual freedom from all kinds of oppression."

He was a fearless and optimistic defender of the open shop sector, frequently doing so in the challenging format of open line radio. (Host Bill Williams noted during a 1983 show with Purdy that the call lines had been jammed from the moment they sat down.) "He was able to articulate so well what we knew were the values and ideals of most people," said Ed Rempel in a note to Ruth Purdy shortly after her husband's death in 1992, at 84 years of age.

At the 1977 convention, Purdy spoke of insidious threats to freedom of action: "Too many of us have lost the will to depend on our own talents and skills. We have been drugged and hypnotized into becoming 'dependent' instead of 'independent'. And, let me make it perfectly clear that being 'independent' doesn't mean you have to become a heartless, self-centered individual without compassion for your fellow man. Just the reverse, it can mean that you are in an even better position to render help."

He was an ardent promoter of the advantages of open shop for construction, writing in a 1983 paper: "Qualified open shop firms can finish jobs on time and on budget. They aren't saddled with a host of feather-bedding clauses and forced to pay for many hours of unproductive time. Neither do they have to provide untold thousands of dollars unions spend on causes completely unrelated to collective bargaining and employee benefits."

And visionary as he was, he could also distill the principles he and ICBA promoted down to their practical essence. "It's just a question of getting down to logic and common sense," he told one radio host. "In our association we say that economic progress is achieved through cooperation not confrontation."

Purdy toiled long and hard for the association, and for very limited financial reward. This selflessness was on display immediately after the founding convention, when he declined the offer of share of the modest surplus the event had produced. Rather than accepting this monetary acknowledgement of his contribution to its success, he preferred the money be used for ICBA purposes.

In 1977, Purdy was well past the usual retirement age and earning a modest $18,000 annually, plus car and expense allowances – little better than half what the B.C. Federation of Labour was paying its senior staff member at about the same time. Money sometimes wasn't available to pay what was due, and Purdy sometimes used what he did receive to cover ICBA costs. Some of the special financial contributions early members made were specifically to ensure Purdy got at least some income.

Front row: Ralph and Ruth Purdy, at Ralph's retirement celebration.

In 1991, at a point when ICBA was on a stronger financial footing, Purdy's impact and personal sacrifice were recognized with a special $50,000 payment "for unpaid past service." Former chair Roy Moor urged board members at the time to bear in mind Purdy's "undying devotion to the association", his monumental efforts on its behalf, and the "embarrassing low wages he received when we just didn't have the funds." The payment was presented at a barbecue in Purdy's honour in Ladner.

The money no doubt made a considerable difference over what proved to be the final few months of Purdy's life, and for his widow Ruth. For the man himself, however, his legacy surely remained more important than any financial reward. Speaking at Purdy's funeral, Chairman Mark Gauvin said Purdy was both the founder of the open shop movement in British Columbia, and that he had nurtured it into the force it had become. "I shudder to think of our predicament today," Gauvin said, "had Ralph not agreed many years ago to come to the coast and give foundation and life to an idea that has become ICBA.

For their contributions to ICBA and open shop, both Ralph and Ruth Purdy were honoured with Life Membership, ICBA's highest honour.

ICBA50 #12
To Start, An Association of Associations

Today, ICBA employs more than 60 people, spread across offices in Surrey, Prince George and Calgary. Our team connects through technology to stay unified in our effort to build up the open shop construction industry.

But in the late 1970s, before smart phones and video calls and instant messaging, ICBA relied on in-person gatherings to build momentum. The association, with president Ralph Purdy leading administration and advocacy, operated initially from Purdy's apartment in Burnaby, and later from an office on 86 Avenue in Surrey

ICBA was originally very decentralized, but local chapters were the association's lifeblood in its early years. At the time of the third annual convention in Kelowna in 1977, chapters included: Creston, Fort St. John, Fraser Valley, Greater Vancouver, Kelowna, the Lower Mainland Equipment Owners, Penticton, Trail-Castlegar, and Vancouver Island.

Most chapters were purpose-built by local ICBA members, and community media and others took note as they proliferated. Fraser Valley was the seventh chapter to be formed in quick order after the founding convention. The Abbotsford, Sumas & Matsqui News introduced this new group to its readers as: "an organization of contractors and businessmen who believe in the preservation of the free enterprise system as the best means of maintaining equal opportunity and a stabilized economy."

Some chapters were pre-existing groups that affiliated with ICBA, such as the Northern Society of Oilfield Contractors. Its members unanimously decided to join ICBA after Ralph Purdy addressed their annual general meeting in May 1977. Former NSOC President Vic Brandl says oilfield contractors didn't typically face the union issues other ICBA members did, but that there was commonality on other issues such as employment standards. NSOC subsequently became less active and its affiliation with ICBA lapsed. But Brandl kept in touch with and sought help at various points from both Purdy and his successor Philip Hochstein.

"We certainly seemed to be on the same wavelength all the time," he said. NSOC's successor organization – Energy Services BC – would re-join the ICBA fold in 2017, with a few dozen companies from the Fort St. John area.

By November 1978, ICBA had 476 member companies. But ICBA relied completely on membership dues to fund activities (and Purdy's salary), and faced consistent financial challenges throughout its early years.

An urgent appeal to the chapters in March 1977 from Ken Funk, then chair of the Finance and Budget Committee, cites monthly deficits averaging well above $3,000, and outstanding dues of well above $10,000. "We just couldn't seem to collect the money and, you know, it was a young organization, really unproven in a lot of ways," Funk says. The situation didn't improve much over the next year, with one of his treasurer reports from 1978 opening with the succinct assessment: "Simply – we're broke!"

Bill Kerkhoff faced the same challenges during his term as treasurer. "I remember phoning these guys," he said. "Okay we need some money, send 150 bucks, send 200 bucks. Let's keep this thing going."

The association wrestled well into the 1980s with its dues structure – attempting to find a balance between sustainable financing and member affordability. It was often only through the generosity of individual members that operations carried on. A $10,000 advance from Rempel Bros. Concrete in 1975 "to eliminate bank over drafts until membership dues are received" was typical of such gestures. And even as late as 1984, 11 members released funds they had previously allowed the association to use as collateral to offset operating expenses, thus enabling it to clear its debts at that time.

Bill Kerkhoff, a driving force behind ICBA

Despite the financial challenges, the association and its leaders certainly did not lack for vision. An aspirational org chart, hand-drawn by Board chairman Elmer Verigin in early 1977, plotted out a doubling of the membership over the coming five years, the addition of multiple staff, and the possibility of parallel organizations in other provinces and nationally. Such ambitions would eventually come to pass, but for now the need to solidify and grow the still modest provincial organization would be challenge enough.

ICBA50 #13
Here Comes Ken Funk


Ken Funk, giving a speech in the late 1970s

As a construction association, we are often asked why our name includes “Businesses”. Isn’t the “Independent Contractors” descriptive enough?

But ICBA, from its very founding, has a rich history of both construction and members from other industries, who embrace our open shop and free enterprise values. Many of these were family-owned and operated ventures, perhaps best embodied by Ken Funk, one of our founders.

Ken’s company, Golden Valley Processors, was a food company. But when unions tried to dictate to Ken how his family business would construct its expanded facility: “My father instilled in me the value of freedom and opportunity and hard work and, you know, the values and principles. And nobody was going to tell me what I was going to do in a democracy in a free country.”

On the foundation of such deeply held values, Funk found other open shop pioneers and strong personal bonds were quickly forged.

Even when Funk finished his time on the ICBA Board of Directors in the early 1980s, those friendships with builders remained strong. His company was being targeted by a union certification drive, making for what he described as “the worst time of my business career bar none.” It culminated in a Labour Relations Board hearing in Vancouver – a new and stressful experience for him. On arriving in the hearing room, he unexpectedly found Ewald Rempel in the front row, there to lend moral support. “He knew we were vulnerable, he knew we were a non-union company and family,” said Funk. “And I think it was just – that’s just the kind of man he was. That spoke volumes to me, volumes.”

Funk was key in the early growth of ICBA, often flying with other board members to far-flung parts of B.C.

“We used to try to get a meeting every place we could. ‘We’re going to meet in Creston this month, we’re going to meet in Cranbrook that month, we’re going to meet in Kelowna that month,’” said Elmer Verigin. “We had this group of directors – you know, Ken Funk, Ed Rempel, Bill Kerkhoff – and they would get there... There was a time in Creston when the planes couldn’t fly in. These guys flew into the municipal airport in Trail, got a car somewhere, and drove over a mountain into Creston. They were an hour late but they got there.”

It was a major commitment, and involved sacrifices that impacted businesses and families. “I was away a lot,” Verigin says. “[My wife] Marilyn can vouch for that. But we were dedicated. We wanted to win. Everybody thought that we were going to lose, especially from the union contractor’s point of view.”

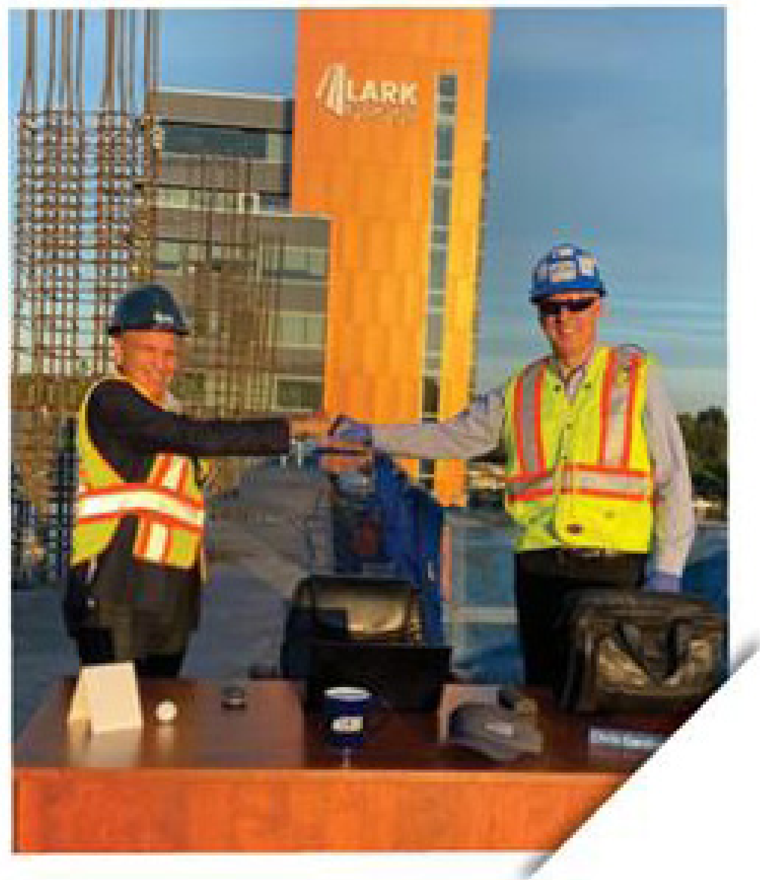
Membership growth was slower than hoped in the early days, and was a grassroots effort. “We just didn’t have the infrastructure to do it any other way. We didn’t have the money for sure,” said Funk.

Ken Funk, late 1970s

One of the barriers to membership growth – and sometimes the reason for membership loss – was the hesitancy many contractors felt about being targeted as a result of joining ICBA. “It was a challenge,” said Funk. “The thing of it is that, you know, there were people in the industry who were non-union who, you know, probably didn’t want to rock the boat, didn’t want to draw attention to themselves.”

Ken Funk was never one of those people who shied away from doing what was right. He stood tall for open shop and free enterprise, and was recognized as an ICBA Life Member for his contributions. On March 21, 2025, Ken attended our ICBA Gala, celebrating 50 years since helping found our association in 1975.

ICBA50 #14
Larry Fisher, Free Enterprise Icon



It's hard to express how much respect and gratitude ICBA has for the late Larry Fisher.

Larry was an absolute character and icon in our industry, and in the formation of ICBA. One of our earliest supporters and life members, Larry founded Lark Group and built our Surrey office – among many incredible projects (So many great Surrey landmarks were built by Larry and Lark: North Surrey Sport and Ice Complex, Excellent Ice, the City Centre buildings, Bill Reid Memorial, Laurel Place, the FVHRS Heritage Car Barn, Morgan Creek Golf Course, and much more).

When he formed Lark in 1972, he quickly became a strong and outspoken advocate for free enterprise – for the investment, jobs and opportunity that result from open and fair bidding on government tendered projects and on an economy founded on free markets.

Not one to stand on the sidelines, Larry's passion for getting things done and building B.C., led him to unapologetically support Social Credit and, later, the BC Liberal Party.

It's impossible to overstate how important Larry and Lark Group have been to open shop construction. Larry was one of the leaders who successfully pushed to open EXPO 86 to non-union construction companies. It was a simple proposition – if companies and their workers had the skill and experience to get the job done, why shouldn't they have an opportunity to work on taxpayer-funded projects? And he practiced what he preached: Lark sites have a healthy mix of open shop and building trades sub-contractors working on their projects. It was hard work and results that mattered to Larry.

His affection for ICBA never wavered, and he always looked back fondly at his work in the 1980s: "Convictions were so strong that we just believed in what we were doing and if you ran across a concrete wall, you'd step back, go sideways and find a hole in the wall and just keep marching on," he told ICBA in 2016.

When he passed away in 2023, ICBA President Chris Gardner shared this touching tribute:

> In 2019, ICBA wanted a long-term solution for its head office, and we were looking at sites in Burnaby (where we had been for more than 20 years) and Surrey, (where, in our early days, we had a single room office in a basement), so I called Larry. Lark Group was building City Centre 3 across from Surrey Memorial Hospital. And, two weeks before the COVID-19 lockdown, we signed an agreement to purchase the 8th floor of the new building. The timing was interesting to say the least, but like Larry, we never looked back.
>
> In the summer of that year, Larry called us with the idea for a photo opportunity that only he could have come up with. After workers poured the 8th floor of our building, he had a desk craned up and placed in the exact location where my new office was to be located. I will always cherish that amazing photo of he and I, in full PPE, proudly standing behind a desk in the open air, with the Lark Group CC1 building looming behind us.
>
> A couple of months ago, as he was fighting cancer, he called me. "Chris, I'm just on hold waiting for the results of my most recent tests, so I thought I would give you a call. I want to talk about what's happening in Victoria and Ottawa."
>
> That was Larry – ever driving, persistent, principled, and always fighting for what he believed in.

ICBA VP-Communications Jordan Bateman wrote the piece HERE about an unforgettable personal moment he had with Larry:

> Last April, Larry called and informed me that I'd be driving him to a political meet-and-greet downtown. He must have a nicer car than mine, I thought, but who says no to Larry Fisher?
>
> We passed several development sites along the way; Larry knew every company and subtrade working there. He chattered away, talking construction and politics.
>
> Just as we got onto the viaduct, he pulled out his cell phone, and told me it was time to call his mother. I confess I was surprised – Larry was in his 70s. She answered, and Larry put her on speaker, and he introduced me to her as a friend. And then the most remarkable thing happened.
>
> He started singing to her. I wish I could remember the song, but it was something from the 1940s, and he just sang it. She mumbled a bit and then jumped in, singing with him. When they were done, Larry told his mom he loved her, and he would call again tomorrow.
>
> "I get her to sing every day," he told me, tucking the phone away. "She remembers the old songs and it keeps her mind active."
>
> Then it was back to conversations about politics and business.
>
> B.C. is a better place for having Larry Fisher help build it. I'm a better person for having known him.

This week, we joined other members of the Lark team and Surrey community to remember Larry by renaming a street outside our office, "Larry Fisher Way." For years, ICBA has ideologically walked the Larry Fisher way – now we can physically walk the Larry Fisher Way too.

ICBA50 #15
Then and Now

It's hard to explain to today's construction professionals just how much of a hammerlock the building trades unions had on B.C. in the 1970s. Basically, only single-family homes were built by the open shop, with unionized contractors having a monopoly on public tenders.

This lack of competition made the union bosses ever more greedy and out-of-touch with what builders were facing. High costs and inefficiencies were baked into collective agreements, but extensive labour strife still prevailed, and labour legislation took a leftward turn. "B.C.'s 14 major trade unions and their employers were the dominant builders of apartments, banks, mills, factories, officer towers and retails stores around the province," as BC Business described it. "Wage demands in construction, as elsewhere, tended to be met, and the costs of each successive contract casually passed on to the public or private owner."

"In that time, they had 100 per cent of the industry, except for residential construction, and the building trades were all powerful," said Peter Gall, long-term legal counsel to ICBA and now an association life member. "And everybody accepted that was the only way to go."

At least three-quarters of all B.C. construction work through most of the 1970s was done union. Non-affiliation clauses in collective agreements reinforced that dominance by enabling building trades union members to refuse to work alongside non-union employees. These clauses gave the building trades unions strong leverage in what were typically "top down" organizing efforts, in which it was made clear to a contractor that access to work depended on signing an agreement. Non-affiliation clauses also made it more difficult for non-union contractors to find sub-trades. "Half our job was to find companies that would actually work for us," says early-era member Jim Hartshorne of Keycorp Developments.

From 1974 to 1976, unionized construction was further insulated from competition by the NDP's Public Works Fair Employment Act, which required that all public works go to contractors with a building trades collective agreement. This reinforced what some saw as a cozy relationship on the union side of the industry. "Their role [large general contractors] in all this has always been under-estimated," said former Social Credit MLA Bud Smith. "So if the rule was that you could only use union labour, then they got all the work, all the big jobs, without having to step up and say we've got a monopoly ourselves. They let the union do the dirty work for them and they got the benefit from it."

Peter Gall

In May 1972, construction projects totaling half billion dollars – a fifth of that year's projected volume – were idled by a labour dispute affecting nearly all of B.C.'s 35,000 unionized construction employees. 1974 saw some $400 million in projects struck after electrical workers walked off in May, to be followed by 10 other unions days later. Vancouver's Bentall Complex and Britannia Community Centre were among the major projects delayed by months as a result of that year's disruption.

Compounding all this was the industry's need to adapt to the new realities of the NDP-created Labour Code, whose processes, adjudicators and decisions were seen by many non-union contractors as weighted against their interests. The composition of the Labour Relations Board was among the first policy issues the nascent ICBA took on, when it called for appointees who could represent non-union views.

“From 1972 to 1975 [the NDP government’s term], I truly believe there was so much chaos and costs – and changes in codes and relationships that cost just millions and millions of dollars to the province and the people,” said early-era ICBA member Larry Fisher of the Lark Group.

Today, the script has totally flipped. It is ICBA members that perform most of the work in B.C., and 85% of all construction professionals are open shop. They build everything from the single family home to the largest infrastructure projects in the province. Only a forced, unfair monopoly (in the form of so-called “Community Benefits Agreements”) in a handful of projects – forced by the NDP – have kept the building trade unions afloat in recent years.

Today, the open shop also sponsors more than 82% of all trades apprentices in B.C., and wages and benefits are routinely better in the open shop. The building trades unions cling to an outdated model of holding down young workers, tightly controlling the number of people in the workforce, and refusing to go beyond their tiny sliver of the worksite – thus continuing to make them less competitive than ever.

In fewer words: the open shop is winning big in the marketplace.

Bud Smith

ICBA50 #16
Forging Friendships

You ask any of the founders about those early days in ICBA and they all say the same thing: this became a close-knit group. Almost family.

They had all joined for their own reasons, of course. Equality of opportunity was one of them. Remembered Elmer Verigin's wife, Marilyn: "I believe in fairness... so I believe in what Elmer started, in making sure that everybody gets a chance to work on any project. We were taught that by our parents, and we were trying to teach it to our kids." Bill Kerkhoff echoed the sentiment, when asked what united the ICBA's founders: "Fairness. Why do we not have the right to equal treatment as the union contractors?"

Free choice was also among the principles that inspired ICBA's founding. "Unions have had their place, and we respect those that want to have a union, but don't try to put it down my throat when my people don't want it," said Larry Fisher. "So it was just that free spirit really and the need – seeing what was happening in the construction industry, that there wasn't the ability to go out and do construction as an open shop person." Jim Hartshorne put it similarly: "If they could sell my guys that they could do a better job with joining the union, well that's fine. But don't beat them up or beat me up or stop my job or let me lay my guys off because they weren't in the union."

Early members quickly became very fond of one another and the support they received. "They're just salt of the earth people," reflected Fisher. "They had good principles, they believed in things and they were willing to fight for things that they believed in. So there was a camaraderie and a spirit there – there was nothing better."

A quilt put together for the 1980 convention

"In a way all of us at the time, we were of a special mould," said Axel Gringmuth. "There was something in us, you know, where we felt you have to fight, you have to be involved. It's your civic duty in a way and we will manage it and we will put in the effort."

That resolve was heightened by the collective strength ICBA helped its members gain. "They didn't like the fact that they didn't have a choice," said Myrtle-Anne Rempel. "And when people would attack them, they became stronger instead of giving in. And because there were like-minded people around them, they just felt they had a group that would be there for them."

Despite the scope of the challenges early members faced, it "wasn't all tears and fighting," as Gringmuth put it. Conventions and other ICBA meetings were also social affairs. "In the early days at the conventions there'd always be a guitar out and we'd be whooping and hollering and singing songs," recalled Don Weitzel.

For the Koechls, Rempels, Kerkhoffs, Remples and many others, the 1970s would test but never break the strength of their commitments to equal opportunity and free choice – for both themselves and their employees.

"Convictions were so strong that, you know, they just believed in what they were doing and if you ran across the concrete wall you'd step back, go sideways and find a hole in the wall and just keep marching on," said Fisher.

The Verigins

ICBA50 #17
How a Recession Actually Grew Open Shop

The early 1980s were grim economically. British Columbia was gripped by a severe, causing unemployment to nearly double and a multi-year decline in construction volumes. It was incredibly tough for company owners to stay afloat.

But the Building Trades Unions grossly misread the circumstances. Unionized contractors found themselves increasingly squeezed between clients who needed cost efficiencies more than ever, and unions that continued to insist on significant wage increases. Craft union wages and benefits jumped more than 12 per cent in 1983 alone. It was an increasingly impossible position for many unionized contractors.

As early as 1980, the Victoria Times reported that "use of non-union workers in the B.C. construction industry is increasing and industry officials say this will continue to grow as long as developers and contractors seek ways to reduce expenses."

Wilson M. Beck

The unions noticed, but didn't adapt. Construction Labour Relations Association President Chuck McVeigh called the trend "rampant", and even Building Trades Council President Roy Gauthier was willing to concede "unionism is suffering" at least outside the Lower Mainland. Tellingly though, Gauthier dismissed the warnings about growing non-union market share as a mere "tactical position" in the context of that year's bargaining.

ICBA members, on the other hand, saw that competition was fierce for sparse work and moved quickly to find ways to deliver better value for their project owners.

"The economic downturn affected the decisions that people were making regarding construction," said Wilson Beck of Wilson M. Beck Insurance, an ICBA Life Member. "And for every tender that came out, there was a list of bidders that were into the high teens."

ICBA member and former director Ron Karras worked in the unionized sector in the early 1980s, before establishing his own open shop formwork company in 1985, and recalls it as a difficult period. He remembers an Amalgamated Construction Association – the precursor to the Vancouver Regional Construction Association – hosting a Christmas lunch that featured two female mud-wrestlers – one representing unionized contractors and the other open shop. He didn't find it particularly funny. "It was making a joke out of our livelihood," he says. "The union guys, we were under the gun. We were losing jobs left, right and centre."

In retrospect, Philip Hochstein – who became ICBA executive vice president in the mid-1980s – believes the economic downturn may well have been instrumental in launching the open shop sector towards dominance. "The market was ready for a change to end a monopoly because the monopoly was abused," he said. Happily, though, the economic downturn proved to be a crisis that wasn't wasted. Open shop contractors saw the client demand and did what was needed to build up their capacity and portfolio of projects.

Wilson Beck's company was equally open to working with union and non-union construction clients, and therefore played an important role in this regard. "To me, there was no difference," he said. "They were businesspeople. They were trying to succeed in what they were doing. I was trying to succeed in what I was doing." He was also willing to invest the effort to help smaller and emerging contractors: "We took the time to spend with these guys saying, 'you don't qualify for surety now, you don't qualify to get a bond now, but this is what you have to do to be qualified.'"

Many non-union contractors had already made significant progress by the mid-1980s, albeit at an incremental pace. But circumstances were aligning that would create more dramatic change, and forever alter perceptions of what open shop contractors were capable of.

The construction market was about to tip heavily to open shop.

*Wilson Beck passed away in 2022. His son, Dave Beck, runs WMB Insurance Services and is a member of the ICBA Board of Directors.

ICBA50 #18
The Battle of False Creek

It's the kind of meeting that happens all the time – a general contractor heading to meet his developer client.

But not in the early 1980s. And not when the GC was Bill Kerkhoff of Kerkhoff Construction. And certainly not when reaching the client's office involved getting past a large and volatile trade union picket line, that had shut down work on the second phase of the Pennyfarthing condominium complex along Vancouver's False Creek.

"We shouldn't have gone in there, we were crazy," said Kerkhoff, 30 years later. His employee Andy Krebs was driving in his vehicle, but it was Kerkhoff's presence in the passenger seat that lit the fuse of the picketers' anger. "They saw me in the car," Kerkhoff recalled. "They were pounding on the car and all four tires were flat in like seconds." Krebs gunned the car, the picketers moved, and they were inside the site – although not out of peril. "When you get this mob attitude, it's scary, it really is," said Kerkhoff.

Bill Kerkhoff

The vehicle was badly damaged – in addition to the flat tires, it had the "shit kicked out of it" while breaking through the picket, Krebs said – but got them close enough to the developer's office to take shelter inside. "They were on our tail, we had to get out of there," Krebs said. "We ran out of that car into that building and went upstairs into the office." Once there, they called the police.

"And the cops said, 'what are you talking about? You just walk out of there,'" Krebs recalled. "I said, 'are you crazy?'". The police were eventually convinced to come, and Krebs says they cut the power to the building and took the two builders out a darkened stairwell and an emergency exit to where a police car was waiting. It was a pathway to safety, but they didn't manage to escape the picketers' notice – the union men kicked the cop car too.

Both men felt fear that day, but neither were shaken in their determination to see the job through to completion. This time, though, they were up against the largest, angriest and most-concerted effort on the part of the building trades unions and their supporters to halt open-shop progress – one that the entire B.C. labour movement threw its muscle behind. Construction work on the site gave way to an intense weeks-long standoff, punctuated by occasional confrontation and violence. It took multiple court and labour board orders and a scathing contempt finding before the unions reluctantly climbed down and allowed order to be restored.

Pennyfarthing became the most dramatic display of the lengths unionized construction interests were prepared to go to try to maintain their privileged access to major urban projects. The ultimate outcome, however, accelerated the already well-underway transformation of the B.C. construction industry.

Pennyfarthing sits on the south shore of False Creek, a short distance from downtown Vancouver. As was the norm at the time, the first phase was done by a unionized contractor (whose controlling shareholder was also a joint venture partner in the development). But the developers were "aghast at the price" the unionized contractor submitted for the next phase, and Kerkhoff Construction came in with a lower bid. A deadlock on the management committee was broken by arbitration and the job was awarded to Kerkhoff Construction on February 7, 1984. Problems with the unions were fully expected. "They made it clear that downtown was going to be off-limits for us," Bill Kerkhoff said. But the intensity came as a surprise even to him, as it no doubt did to British Columbians generally.

On March 5, 1984, Kerkhoff crews were ready to get started, but were turned away by mass pickets, marking the beginning of a round-the-clock occupation of the site, as union workers massed outside, refusing to allow Kerkhoff employees in – illegally.

Violence flared as early as March 6, when use of a hose to move pickets back from the property line resulted in a rock thrown in the face of a non-union worker, who required hospitalization and plastic surgery. By March 8, Bill Kerkhoff had a court order limiting pickets to 12 people per entrance – to which the picketers responded the next day by ensuring only 12 of them wore signs, while another 50 or so milled about as "spectators". On March 12, the Labour Relations Board rejected a common-employer argument the Building Trades had made in an effort to invalidate the contract award, and also prohibited picketing. But despite the legal setbacks, the B.C. labour movement doubled down. The B.C. Federation of Labour declared the Pennyfarthing site "hot", and voted to support the mass pickets, as well as to pressure the B.C. Central Credit Union to withdraw project financing.


Pennyfarthing today

Monday, March 19 was the deadline for compliance with the Labour Relations Board's cease-and-desist order, but that was not what was on the mind of union leaders. On the Saturday before, Building Trades Council President Roy Gauthier exhorted a gathering of 2,000 members and supporters to "be down here Monday morning". A thousand or more of them answered the call, on a day when the on-site confrontation peaked (this was described in ICBA 50 #1 HERE). Hundreds of protestors began arriving at dawn, with representatives from virtually every union in the city.

The tone, as least as set by union leaders, was initially somewhat measured. "We'll obey the law but there will be passive resistance," Gauthier said, as he walked across the site. "There will be no violence, no provocation." Al McMurray, secretary-treasurer of the Building Trades Council, was a little more equivocal: "Generally speaking, we do not condone violence nor trespass, arson, thievery, anything like that. What we have here is a passive demonstration."

Those words were quickly eaten as the unions turned the temperature up.

Two vehicles attempted to enter the site, one belonging to Ewald Rempel of Rempel Bros. Concrete, a Kerkhoff sub-contractor, and one belonging to Kerkhoff Construction itself. They were surrounded by angry mobs of picketers, who aggressively confronted the occupants with taunts and abuse, and were eager to do damage. Rempel was pelted with a mix of "rotten meat, eggs and human waste," as reported by The Vancouver Sun, and had to be escorted to safety by the police.

Gauthier would later acknowledge that the crowd was beyond control: "I don't know what will turn those people off at this point in time." At the end of the volatile and troubling day – a powder keg situation as BCTV described it – the site remained besieged, and the contractors who had a legal right to be working on it had been repelled again.

Picketing also spilled over to other Kerkhoff construction projects during the Pennyfarthing dispute, at which times the determination and commitment of open shop employees was on full display. Some 50 picketers showed up at a Kerkhoff armoury project in Kamloops one day, aggressively blocking access and demanding identification from people wanting to cross. "Because you guys priced yourselves out of work doesn't mean that I'm not gonna go to work," one non-union employee told them from behind the wheel of his vehicle. "I'm gonna get in there I just don't know how." The picketers told another employee that they're there to help him, to which he replies simply, "No, I don't think you are." Bill Kerkhoff and his employees also endured a broken office window and obscene telephone calls. His project files still contain an anonymous note threatening that the rock through his window would soon by followed by a bomb in his home, although Kerkhoff said he never took such threats seriously.

"I still like to think we live in a reasonably civilized country," he says, "even though you question it."

ICBA50 #19
'We've Got to End This'

As union tempers and bullying boiled over at Pennyfarthing, the focus of attention shifted from the construction site to the courtroom – although not as quickly as the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court would have liked.

Lawyer Peter Gall (later named an ICBA Life Member) represented Kerkhoff Construction, and at this relatively early point in his career hadn't handled a contempt application before. And while the picketers' conduct clearly constituted contempt of court, Gall believed the principle of strictissimi juris applied. That would have meant proving specifically which individuals were involved, and he was working on compiling the necessary evidence.

Bill Kerkhoff

That's when he got a phone call from Allan MacEachern, with whom he happened to know, calling him in for an immediate meeting. McEachern was offended by the unions' flouting of his order, Gall said, and unimpressed by the young lawyer's cautious approach in this particular instance. "Are you crazy?" he recalled the Chief Justice asking him. "Get in here, we've got to end this."

The contempt application was heard on Thursday, March 22, and Justice McEachern's strongly-worded decision was delivered the next day. He began by noting that his order of March 8 had been "duly entered, served, and promptly disobeyed by hundreds of pickets who have unlawfully seized control of access to the site." He cited the "explosive incidents" that had occurred when Kerkhoff employees and contractors had attempted to enter, and said he had no doubt that a serious riot could have resulted had Kerkhoff "not surrendered its construction site to unlawfulness."

While there was insufficient evidence in relation to the Carpenters' Union, the Building Trades Council was found guilty of criminal contempt, due to "the very active and substantial role played by its officers in the many breaches of Court order." While saying he was mindful of the anger and determination of the picketers, McEachern warned that "no one should delude themselves into thinking that any artful or artificial devices will permit them to circumvent this prohibition [on continued picketing]."

Back at Pennyfarthing, picketers gathered around their radios at 10:30 a.m. to glumly hear the judgment. There was intense disappointment, along with a defiance on the part of some, who vowed to be there the next Monday despite the consequences. It set off a tense Friday afternoon and weekend of discussions and speculation about what was to come.

Gauthier and other leaders faced the possibility of large fines and even jail (sentencing had been deferred), and advised members to comply with the court order. Some picketers remained on site over the weekend, and Building Trades officers met with them in a nearby warehouse. "We've made that very clear to them, the consequences of being here," said Gauthier. A long "strategy meeting" at the Operating Engineers Hall in Burnaby on Monday morning ensured many members had somewhere to be other than Pennyfarthing itself, although the mood was bitter and considerable anger was directed at the union leadership. "I think we should have pulled the whole goddamn province down," said one unidentified attendee.

Bill Kerkhoff was understandably more upbeat in the immediate wake of the decision, telling the media, "we hope to be on the job Monday morning." And so they were. Kerkhoff crews first arrived at the site beginning at 4 a.m. on March 26, cut the locks off gates, dealt with the safety risk of loosened bolts on equipment, and – most symbolically – tossed down a union flag from on top of a crane.

"With the help of acetelyne torches, bolt cutters and a court order, the Kerkhoff Construction company cleared the way to wide-open non-union construction in British Columbia," reported CBC. While picketers had largely heeded the warning of the Chief Justice and were gone, some holdouts remained that first morning – their numbers eventually reaching at least 75 – making for a tense police-escorted entry as more Kerkhoff crews arrived. There was one more tire slashing and one more arrest. "It's hard to work under this kind of conditions, but we have to work and we will work," said Kerkhoff Project Manager Nick Eustace.

Fortunately, that didn't prove necessary, and work proceeded smoothly from this point. "Essentially we carried on and the project went off fine," Kerkhoff said. And as Peter Gall put it, "now the open shop sector is in the city".

The intensity of the conflict at Pennyfarthing would not be repeated – at least not in Vancouver or any other major urban centre in B.C. The stage was now set for today's reality, in which the large majority of the crews under Metro Vancouver cranes are open shop.

ICBA50 #20
Expo Part I

Expo 86 is widely regarded as a transformational event for Vancouver—the first time the region threw open its doors and introduced ourselves to the world.

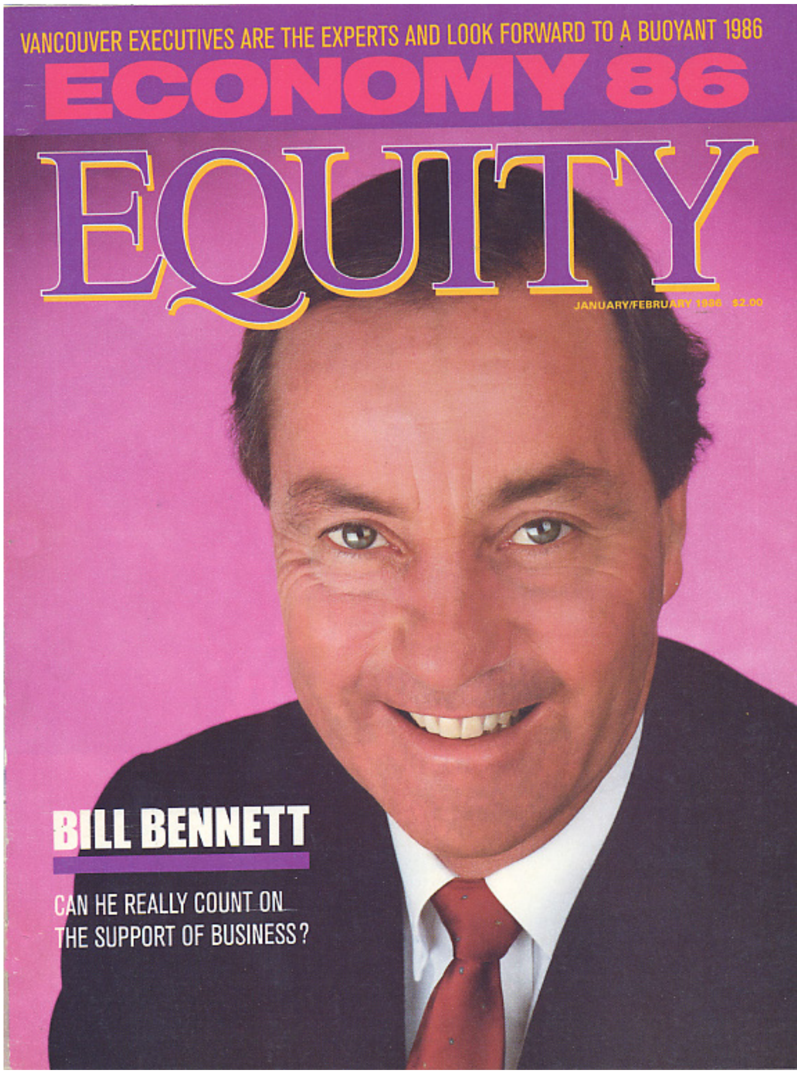
But for the B.C. construction industry, it was even more pivotal. It changed the trajectory of construction labour for decades to come. ICBA open shop advocacy – bolstered by Building Trades overreach and arrogance – won the day.

The directive came from Expo 86 Chairman Jimmy Pattison and may have originated with the premier himself: Show me you can do it. It was the summer of 1984, and time was already running short to get the world's fair site built. Intense negotiations had been underway since at least March regarding the respective roles for union and non-union contractors on this massive and high-profile project. But the Building Trades had taken an "all or nothing" stance, and a deal to avoid further labour disruptions seemed increasingly unlikely. Meanwhile the growing capacity and expertise of the open shop sector were well past the point where they could be ignored.

An ad hoc, ICBA-aligned committee had already been in extensive discussions with Pattison – a prominent businessman with a one-dollar-a-year mandate to make Expo 86 a success. But he needed a clear demonstration of the size and commitment of the open shop sector. Bill Kerkhoff remembers Pattison telling the group: "I want to see all these other guys. I'm going to rent a ballroom, and you guys fill it up." And he wanted it in less than a week, on Saturday, July 7, 1984.

"When we got the marching order, we got together our guys from ICBA," Kerkhoff said. "We knew guys all around the province, and we all got on the phone and we started soliciting: 'Listen, guys. This is crucial.'" The risk was high. "There wouldn't have been anything worse than to show up there and have a half-empty room," said Don Weitzel. But the response was strong and the room was packed – even if not everyone in it was ready to head down to the site and start swinging a hammer. "We stripped our office, we took everybody, even our secretarial staff and so on," Weitzel – a benefits broker – recalled. A total of 90 firms registered at the event, and the mood in the room was incredible. "I tell you – the energy," Larry Fisher said. "We could have powered the whole city for a year."

It had the desired effect. "That was a tipping point. It was an epiphany," said Weitzel. With a strong alternative clearly available, the Expo board's interest in reaching an agreement with the Building Trades quickly dissipated – along with any risk that non-unionized contractors would be squeezed out of the Expo opportunity. The sector had proved its abilities and its determination to be treated fairly – in Kamloops, at Pennyfarthing, and over the course of many other projects. And on July 7 it convincingly demonstrated it could build a significant portion of the project that would redefine global perceptions of Vancouver and British Columbia.



The cover headline of the July 8 Province captured the confidence and determination that ICBA and B.C.'s open shop contractors were feeling at that heady time. It read simply, "We'll Build Expo".

Expo 86 was first announced in the 1980 Throne Speech and originally intended to be a modest transportation fair on the year of Vancouver's centennial. But it evolved into a major global exposition, with 65 national and other pavilions on a nearly 70-hectare main site along the north and east shores of False Creek. Construction began in March of 1983, coinciding with a visit from Queen Elizabeth, who used the occasion to invite the world to Vancouver. It was a massive undertaking. British Columbia was suffering through an ongoing economic downtown, making the resulting jobs and economic stimulus highly welcome.

But the world accepted the invitation, and the fair was a resounding success, including remarkably cooperative weather during its five-month run. The original visitor projection number was 13.7 million, while actual visits hit 22.1 million. It left behind an infrastructure legacy that includes the SkyTrain, Canada Place, B.C. Place, Science World and the Coquihalla Highway. The site was sold afterwards to Hong Kong developer Li Ka-shing, sparking the transformation of a post-industrial wasteland into some of the city's most vibrant residential and mixed-use areas. Pattison proudly summed it up this way: "Expo was an international success financially and culturally. The media called it the finest world's fair on this continent since Expo 67 in Montreal. And it came in on time, under budget, and with no scams."

Expo set a relatively homogenous and sleepy metropolitan area, with a population of a little over a million, on the path to the global-city status it enjoys today. "There's pre-Expo B.C. and post-Expo B.C.," said Norman Spector, who served as deputy minister to Premier Bill Bennett in the lead-up to the fair. Bennett himself was certainly cognizant of the legacy he was helping to create, predicting just before its opening that: "When Expo closes, you will see a surge of construction on the site far bigger than the fair itself and will confirm Vancouver's reputation as one of Canada's most dynamic cities."

Before any of that could happen, though, the pavilions and other on-site facilities needed to get built. Just a few years prior, there would have been no question that a large, complex and publicly funded project of this kind would have been built building-trades only. And initially, it appeared that was the direction Expo would go as well. "In the beginning, Expo was to be a completely union-built fair," as one pro-union observer put it. "There seemed to be no alternative." Jimmy Pattison was of a similar view. At a meeting in October 1982, he told Building Trades President Roy Gauthier: "What we need is a no-strike agreement until the fair's built. And for that, we'll do a deal with the unions: it will be an all-union site." (Remarkably and presciently, Gauthier was un-encouraging on the prospects for such a deal.) But the province's open shop contractors were not prepared to let this opportunity pass them by – ICBA committed at its convention in November 1983 to press for open tendering at Expo – and this time around they had a resolute ally in the province's highest office.

Premier Bill Bennett was determined from the outset that Expo 86 would be inclusive. Claude Richmond recalls the direction he received when he was made minister responsible: "You have to remember one thing, Claude, Expo is a fair for all British Columbians," the premier told him. "And that's the only parameter he gave me," Richmond says – adding that he had no doubt that the notion of "all British Columbians" extended to opportunities to bid on Expo work. It was still a radical proposition at the time, but the strong Socred win in the 1983 election had changed the equation and, as Pattison put it, positioned the Bennett government to "play hardball".

Competitive, open-shop bidding fit well with the dramatic restraint program introduced after the 1983 election, and which had sparked major confrontation with the province's labour movement. It was also an opportunity to better manage Expo costs, and sat well with members of the public who saw union demands as out-of-step with the tough economic times (more than 200,000 were unemployed in B.C. in early 1984). The premier's resolve was also buttressed by the events at Pennyfarthing, which he was determined to avoid a repeat of, and by his general concern with B.C.'s volatile labour relations environment and its impact on the economy.

Premier Bennett, Spector believes, looked at the question of who should build Expo through both an economic and a political lens. As a small businessman, "he wouldn't understand this [union] price-fixing type of stuff," and he would have recognized the advantage of reducing the influence of a group that had mobilized against him.

"As I look back on it, I think he saw Expo as an opportunity to make some major progress," Spector says. Whatever his precise motivations were, the premier's role was instrumental in ensuring Expo was built open shop. Longtime Vancouver Sun legislative columnist Vaughn Palmer has a two-word answer when asked what determined that outcome: Bill Bennett. "I don't know if we've ever had anyone in the premier's office with Bill Bennett's will power," Palmer said.

ICBA50 #21
Expo Part II

In late 1983, the Building Trades were privately informed by an Expo executive that the fair was going to be built open shop, and low non-union bids began to be accepted on smaller contracts. By at least March 15, 1984, Premier Bill Bennett was openly declaring that: "B.C. is open, B.C. is an open site, ever since we became government. There was only discrimination against ordinary British Columbians during the [NDP-governed] years '72 to '75. That discriminatory legislation is gone."

Efforts to come to an agreement with the Building Trades to ensure labour peace nevertheless continued, and the premier raised the prospect of a ruined world's fair if it couldn't be secured, bringing things into much sharper focus through a televised address on March 29. Bennett set the context by saying the growth of the non-union sector was "an example of the market in action, a gale of competition in a previously insulated environment," adding later that "success will not come from a return to attitudes and practices that may have served us well at other times and under other conditions." He informed viewers all new Expo contracts had been frozen, and that he was giving Jimmy Pattison 10 days to provide his assessment of whether or not the fair could proceed. "But the bottom line," the premier reiterated, "is that there will be no discrimination in British Columbia based on union or non-union status. There must be opportunity for all to work and surely Expo will create enough work for all to share." With understatement, he added that cancellation of the fair would be "greatly disturbing."

Many saw this as a strong but necessary stance. "The government could not even consider blacklisting an entire body of non-union workers in the name of labour peace. It is to be hoped all sides can find a way to keep the project alive," the Globe and Mail editorialized. It was also effective politics, Bennett's advisors say. "Up the pressure," is how Norman Spector described the objective. "If Expo was cancelled, they [the unions] were going to have a bag of shit on their laps." Bud Smith, the premier's principal secretary at the time, said government polling confirmed strong public support for Expo, despite the critical viewpoints that were widely reflected in the media. "The public research was telling us that in spades," Smith said. "They wanted Expo and they didn't like people who seemed to be standing in the way."

On April 6, Pattison announced that no agreement had been reached, and on April 11, he was ready to make his recommendation to cabinet. Both Spector and Bob Plecas, another of Bennett's senior advisors, say the delivery of that recommendation was pre-arranged – although Don Jordan, who was working closely with Jimmy Pattison on the premier's behalf, had no advance knowledge of how the dramatic day would unfold. When Pattison arrived at the office at about 8 that morning, he told Jordan to accompany him, saying only "you'll see," when asked where they were going. The trip involved a flight to Victoria and ended with the two of them knocking on the door of the room where the cabinet was meeting. "Would you tell Premier Bennett that Jimmy Pattison is here, and I'd like to see him, I'd like to speak to cabinet," Jordan recalls Pattison saying to the sergeant-at-arms. Pattison emerged grim-faced 90 minutes later, to tell reporters what he'd told cabinet – that Expo "should be abandoned because of the possibility of labour disruption."

Bennett took care to hold out hope of salvaging the fair that day, despite the Pattison recommendation, and hinted at a legislated solution. Nevertheless, "a tidal wave of reaction rolled over the province," in response to the now very-real seeming threat of cancellation, and there was strong public support for the government's position. The premier consulted widely with a parade of stakeholders who he called into his office during this crucial period, including legendary labour leader Jack Munro. "And none, not a single one, said don't go ahead," Smith recalled. A mood of uncertainty gripped the Expo offices, where the "telephones were silent and workers subdued," but further developments were unfolding that would put Expo back on a track to completion.

The pivotal event took place on April 12, in Bud Smith's office in Victoria. The key participants were Norman Spector and Roy Gauthier, President of the Building Trades Council. Smith was also present for portions of this day-long effort to salvage some sort of deal. On the table was the offer that the Building Trades would be guaranteed the large bulk of the Expo work, provided they agreed to a minority portion going to non-union contractors. "Which, if you think about it," Smith said, "would have kept them in that game forever, being able to have some guarantee that public sector work is going to go union. It would have kept the precedent going." A cabinet meeting had been happening at the same time upstairs and at about 6 p.m., Smith said, the premier came downstairs. "Okay, you guys have had all day at this," he told the group. "This isn't complicated." Smith relates the exchange that followed:

"So Gauthier says in his best Scottish brogue, 'Mr. Premier, it'll be all or it'll be nothing.' Wrong guy to say that to. Bennett's eyes were like ice cubes. He says to him, 'Roy, in that case, it'll be nothing.' Then he turned on his heels, went up the spiral staircase – I went with him – went into the cabinet room, sat down at the end of the table and said, 'Colleagues, we've reached a consensus.'"

For Spector, the image that stays in his mind was the look on Gauthier's face: "It was white, looked like a ghost." Gauthier had good reason for his sudden alarm. At that moment, Smith says, "the union leadership destroyed for themselves the ability to have any semblance of a mandatory union presence on government work." The incident still stuns Smith: "To tell the premier that something will be all or nothing was actually mind-boggling to me. It was gobsmacking. And quite honestly, he [Gauthier] gave the choice. Either everything or nothing, and he got nothing." Smith considers it one of the most "colossal miscalculations" in the history of the B.C. labour movement. Claude Richmond agrees: "If he'd have known anything about Bill Bennett – and you should know who you're negotiating with – you know you don't back him into a corner, ever."

Bennett moved quickly and decisively. On April 13, he announced during a live televised press conference that Expo 86 would go on. "The government will be introducing legislation to ensure that no one, whatever their motivation, has the power to impede the operation of Expo 86," Bennett said. This legislative backstop was introduced on May 8. Likened by the NDP to a declaration of martial law, it sparked several one-day protest walkouts at the Expo site. The essence of it was the ability to divide the site into legally distinct zones, which effectively nullified union non-affiliation clauses. Negotiations regarding minimum wage levels for Expo construction continued, but Gauthier now had to conduct them with a "gun at his head" in the form of the ability (still un-proclaimed for the moment) to divide up the Expo site and remove the unions' key leverage, as described by Mickleburgh. Those efforts extended into the early summer but produced no acceptable agreement. One attempt was so close to success it was taken to a cabinet meeting at Cowichan Bay, but foundered when it was realized the intent to tie wages to an average rate of increase referred to as "CSP" had been miscommunicated as the higher consumer price index or "CPI". "Three little letters, CSP versus CPI, made a huge difference," said Don Jordan. Subsequent efforts to broker a deal by Graham Leslie, the deputy minister of labour, and Chuck McVeigh, head of the Construction Labour Relations Association, were similarly unsuccessful. In the wake of that final failure, the Building Trades threatened to campaign for an international boycott of Expo.

Meanwhile, the open shop sector was mobilizing. Various meetings took place between Expo and key contractors, albeit very discretely. Myrtle-Anne Rempel's husband Ed Rempel was among those involved. She recalls him being asked to come for a meeting with Jimmy Pattison, with the further suggestion that he get off the elevator two floors below and then take the stairs. "We didn't openly meet with anybody," Fisher said. But they were making headway: "You kept progressing and showing them that, 'yes, we've got that… yes, this is how we'll do it.' So it was a matter of building a relationship, collaborating and just steadily moving forward." Pattison and the Expo organization were coming to have a greater appreciation of what the open shop sector could bring to Expo. Wilson Beck, then chairman of the BC Construction Association, provided his input to Pattison on how that capacity could be accessed: "We started to talk about the tendering procedure that I think should have been in place, that was the norm. And if the contractors – whether they be union or non-union – qualified by the tender document to be able to bid that job, they should be given the opportunity to bid the job. It's a competitive thing." (Beck's courageous support for inclusion of the open shop sector in building Expo would later be recognized with ICBA lifetime member award.)

On May 30, Kerkhoff Construction became the first non-union contractor to win a major Expo bid. "We were not going to miss the opportunity to be part of that," Bill Kerkhoff said.

In early July, following another series of work stoppages – which were beginning to represent the sort of impediment that the premier had vowed he would not allow to happen – Expo President Michael Bartlett threatened to cancel contracts with unionized contractors. "There will be no second chances," he said. "This is no bluff. The minute we are faced with slowdowns or further work stoppages, then that contract is over." Shortly after he went as far as to warn that the entire Expo project could be built non-union if continued disruptions made that necessary.

At this point, the open shop sector staged a demonstration of strength at the Hotel Vancouver, drawing hundreds of supporters. "If the union trades don't want to work on the site, we're here today to show that we can do it non-union," Fisher told the rally. Later in July, he reported out to ICBA members and other non-union contractors, on behalf of the ICBA-affiliated committee that organized that event. Expo President Bartlett, Fisher wrote, "has clearly indicated that the time for any deals with the unions has now passed." The committee had provided extensive information to Expo regarding the size and capacities of the open shop sector, and there was now an understanding of "the tremendous resources of the non-union sector of B.C. construction." The case had been made and the ball was now in the court of individual contractors, whom Fisher encouraged to: "Apply for prequalification, submit your bids and get involved in the construction of one of the most important enterprises in the history of British Columbia".

At around the same time, the Vancouver Sun presented "The non-union Expo story" on the top of its front page. Non-union contractors, it said, had "become a force" thanks to the work of Fisher and others, and earned a spot at the table during any further wage negotiations. Most notably, they had "convinced the Expo board that the non-union sector could not only take a bigger chunk of Expo but if push came to shove could also build the entire project." Said Fisher: "We never looked upon Expo as a place for the non-union sector to develop. But with all the fanfare, that looks like it is going to be the outcome. If the Building Trades Council had been satisfied to take the 85 per cent of Expo they originally had and been happy, this would never have happened."

This collection of Expo buttons — including angry ones from union protests — is framed in ICBA's office.

ICBA50 #22
Expo Part III

On August 14, another major Expo 86 contract went non-union – this time to Marbella Pacific Construction, a newly formed joint venture involving Elmer Verigin of Trail and the Rempels of Abbotsford. This both entrenched the non-union presence, and acted as a catalyst for a final resolution of the labour tensions. When the Marbella crews arrived later in the month, the Building Trades invoked their non-affiliation clauses and walked out. The Labour Relations Board was then asked to determine whether Expo was a single construction site – in which case the non-affiliation clauses applied – or multiple sites. Gavin Hume argued the latter on behalf of Expo, but he was going to lose. The Expo site was clearly visible through the windows of the Board's main hearing room, and it was self-evident that it was a single site. "If they [the panelists] turned around and looked out the window, the best evidence was what was out there," says Hume.

But the common-site hearing was about to become irrelevant. On August 24, the Bill Bennett Government legislation enabling the division of the Expo site into legally distinct zones was proclaimed. Hume was given advance word of this by Jimmy Pattison, and informed the panel when it re-convened on August 25 – although he was told he inadvertently signaled something was up the day prior when he stopped his usual practice of taking detailed notes during the hearing. It's been speculated that the proclamation was driven by a successful union application for the production of Expo board minutes, and it did have the effect of preventing that. But more importantly, it was the "move that ended all discussion" on the union/non-union issue, and definitively turned Expo into an open site.

China's Expo 86 pavilion — built open shop

Their legitimacy now assured, open shop contractors rose to the challenge of completing complex tasks under close scrutiny. Elmer Verigin says his crew took on their most daunting job first – the Chinese pavilion. The challenges began with the novelty of floating pickets off Point Grey, although these proved ineffective at preventing barged materials from getting in. The actual erection of such a structure was new territory for his crew, and he says they approached it as an "operations research-type situation," deciding to assemble the structure on the ground and then lift it into place with multiple cranes. To lessen the potential for critical spectators, this was done on a weekend. There was some trial and error, but "Monday morning everybody came there and the whole Chinese pavilion was up," he says. A supervising engineer expressed concern over the lack of a pre-approved erection procedure, to which Verigin says his general manager replied: "We're going to raise the other one tomorrow. Maybe you can come here and watch how we do it, or we can take this one down if you like and you can watch how we put it back up again?" The pavilion stayed up.

Work largely proceeded smoothly from the time the zones were implemented. Jimmy Pattison described seeing the "odd skirmish" during his daily site visits but said that "the rank-and-file guys got along fine." So the possibility that the non-union sector might have to step up and completely displace unionized workers never materialized. Some will admit to skepticism today as to whether the non-union sector would actually have been able to do so – although Larry Fisher stood by the belief that it could have. "I mean we'd have been standing on our head a few times, but we would have definitely done it, yeah no question," he said. Pattison estimated that 70 per cent of the contracts awarded in the final few months of construction went non-union, but that overall 70 per cent of the fair was built union. But from at least from 1984 onward, unionized contractors faced open shop competition on the bids they won, and they did not have the benefit of a guaranteed portion of the work. There's tremendous pride among those who made the open

Italy's Expo 86 pavilion — built open shop

shop case, and those who earned the opportunity to help build the fair. "It was such an accomplishment, you know it was a beautiful display of construction, it was a beautiful display of architecture, and it was a fine show," said Fisher, who was among the regular fairgoers in the summer of 1986. "It was just magnificent." Added Axel Gringmuth: "In my life that was the most beautiful experience – I did the Italian Pavilion there and a lot of our other companies, other members did other things there. After that one [Expo] the province just exploded and you know our esteem went up."
There's also wide agreement that it was a decisive turning point for the open shop sector. "Expo is a continuing legacy. The province's non-union sector has been immeasurably strengthened. And concomitantly, the building trades are weaker," concluded pro-union reporter Rod Mickelburgh in his account of Expo. Said Wilson Beck: "Expo 86 was the turning point for the non-union general construction industry in B.C. It became very well known to… the buying public of construction, to the investing community, that these guys were professional, qualified contractors." It was not, however, a pre-ordained outcome.

Expo would not have unfolded as it did without the efforts of Fisher and others, and the active support they received from ICBA; and the outcome would certainly have been different without the resolve of Premier Bennett. Yet even at that, Expo work could still easily have remained overwhelmingly in union hands. "These guys dug in, they dug their own hole," said Gringmuth. "Bill Bennett had the spine to push back and that's what eventually changed the whole construction-business picture in the province."

Union hubris, in other words, made Expo a turning point. Vaughn Palmer says it may be understandable that the Building Trades acted as they did, since they hadn't previously had a lot of need to make concessions. But by Expo, times and leadership were different. "The Building Trades overplayed their hand and with the consequences that they still live with today," Palmer said. "They're just not the force they were."

ICBA50 #23
Phil Hochstein

In 1985, Ralph Purdy stepped down after nearly a decade at the helm of ICBA and the open shop movement in B.C. He was in his late 70s and in declining health.

"It has been a tough, uphill battle," Purdy told the Vancouver Sun in 1984, of his quest to advance the open shop sector. Purdy was, however, able to cite considerable achievements in his final convention report to members that October. Perhaps the most fundamental of which – harkening back to ICBA's foundation – was the provincial government's recognition "that non-union employers and their employees are no longer to be treated as second class citizens, and deserve the right to earn a living."

Philip Hochstein, when he joined ICBA

But proud though Purdy's record of achievement was, ICBA had yet to find a firm financial footing, and its future was very much in question. It was housed at this point rent-free within the offices of Martina Enterprises in Surrey, and Christina Koechl was especially active in sustaining its activities during an interim period when it had no employees. In the fall of 1985, there was a meeting of past presidents to decide on a path forward. Three options were on the table: fold it, merge it with another association, or make one last attempt at making it work. They chose the third option, and pinned considerable hope on an upcoming Labour Code seminar, which Philip Hochstein was contracted to help organize.

At first glance, Hochstein wasn't an obvious candidate to join ICBA. A history grad originally from Montreal, he came to B.C. in the late 1970s to pursue graduate studies in public administration at the University of Victoria. Consistent with a taste for underdog causes, he'd been a campaign worker on NDP campaigns in his home province, at a time when it was a near-complete wasteland for the party. And although his views had since shifted towards the free enterprise side of the ideological spectrum, he still had a distinctly hippy-like appearance. He had worked within government, and briefly for the Mechanical Contractors Association, where Hermann Koechl had become acquainted with him.

The seminar in North Vancouver – titled "Working and Prospering Under B.C. Labour Laws – became a make-or-break proposition for ICBA, and it proved to be a remarkable success. Christina Koechl had to re-book larger rooms three times. Participants got valuable information at a time when labour legislation was in flux, and when unionized contractors were increasingly seeking a way out.

Lawyer Peter Gall was a featured speaker, and suggested construction unions still had the potential to grow and prosper if they adopted sufficient flexibility. Union leaders were among the participants, although the event was protested and the Building Trades Council calling it "nothing short of industrial warmongering." With this initiative, Hochstein began to prove his worth to the organization and he was hired as Ralph Purdy's replacement. In retrospect, he says, he should have asked to look at the financial statements before accepting the job – which would have revealed an organization with barely enough cash on hand to cover his paycheque. But he took on the challenge, becoming the ICBA's senior executive and sole staff person.

"They were very principled, that's the thing that struck me," says Hochstein of the ICBA members. "They believed in this stuff and they believed it, not because it was an economic advantage or something in it for them, they just thought 'look this is wrong, my employees want nothing to do with that union, and I don't really want anything to do with the union, and yet for some reason that worked against me.'"

Hochstein delivered his first address to the membership as executive vice president (his title later changed to president) at a February 1986 convention in North Vancouver. Open shop contractors, he said, "are going to have to be smarter, work harder and run faster than the unions and their union competitors if the recent gains in open shop fortunes and the positive public attitude towards non-union business are to be maintained." He then outlined an ambitious program of association activities through which he envisioned ICBA assisting its members to do just that.

Hochstein delivered on the promise of stabilizing and professionalizing the association, of enhancing its value proposition for members, and of further increasing its profile and prominence. "After that the world changes and we never looked back," is how Axel Gringmuth described the impact of Hochstein's hiring. "He was an incredibly good organizer, and he also had the religion – he saw the injustices and he kept us going."

Over the first year or so of Hochstein's leadership, ICBA adopted its current name and shifted its focus more explicitly towards representation of the construction industry. He launched ICBA's apprenticeship indenturing program in 1986. Recognizing how dramatic the change within the industry had been in recent years, he began to formally market the open shop sector to prospective clients, through such tactics as marketing materials and annual architects' dinners. He also grew the membership and successfully fostered strong rosters of directors each year, who in turn made instrumental strategic contributions to the association's ongoing growth and development. In short, he helped ICBA transition from loose knit movement to a professional association.

ICBA50 #24
Replacing Union Fiction with Industry Fact

As union/non-union confrontations go, it was pretty tame. It was the mid-1980s and Knappett was one of the first open shop contractors to build highway bridges in B.C. A crew was working on a job on the Skeena River near Terrace when they were joined by a group identifying themselves as Carpenters union members. “There’s me and my carpenter standing at this bridge site and 30 [union] members piled their cars around us and start threatening us,” John Knappett recalls. “We more or less plainly disagreed with them and they stood and kicked the dirt for a while, and then realized that none of them were actually going to throw us in the river and they got in their cars and drove away.”

John Knappett

The lack of greater provocation and stronger confrontation was indicative, perhaps, of a union movement that no longer felt as emboldened as it used to. And the very presence of an open shop contractor on such a job was certainly indicative of a sector that was on the ascendancy, and continuing to find new market opportunities and to expand its expertise under improving economic conditions.

Through the second half of the 1980s, the B.C. economy bounced back from recession, although unemployment continued to average just a little over 10 per cent. By late in the decade, construction activity finally surpassed its 1981 level. Negotiations between the Building Trades and unionized contractors began to take greater account of competitiveness in what remained a very cost-conscious construction marketplace. There were wage freezes in 1984-1988, and the three-year agreement for 1988-1991 was the first concluded without a work stoppage. The Building Trades began to relax their use of non-affiliation clauses, recognizing that they were becoming self-defeating as more and more work was done open shop. They also faced a new competition in the form of the emergence and growth of alternative and unaffiliated unions such as the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC).

But the market share shift from the unionized to open shop sectors continued unabated, driven by lower costs, greater flexibility and growing expertise. “Non-union contractors have their union counterparts on the run in B.C.’s multimillion-dollar construction industry,” reported the Vancouver Sun in the summer of 1983. Chuck McVeigh of the Construction Labour Relations Association said non-union companies had tripled their business in the past year, while Roy Gauthier of the Building Trades Council acknowledged that more than half of unionized construction workers were out of work. Meanwhile, Bill Kerkhoff and another non-union contractor told the Sun that business had never been better. One survey found that a 33 per cent non-union market share in 1983 had risen to 54 per cent by 1985. Longer term trends were even more dramatic. By one estimate, only 10 per cent of framed construction (excluding single-family homes) had been done non-union in 1973, whereas by 1997 it was 90 per cent.

In 1986, ICBA released Replacing Fact with Fiction: A Report on the B.C. Construction Industry, providing the first detailed analysis of the rising open shop sector. These contractors were “no longer a small, inexperienced group.” Most had been in business five years or longer, and slightly less than half had completed projects valued at $500,000 or more. Large majorities, particularly among sub-trades, had employed apprentices in the previous year. Wages were found to be “not that far out of line with the rates paid in the unionized segment,” especially in non-residential. Bonding capacity was still a limitation among sub-trades, and relatively few contractors were offering health and welfare benefits. On the whole, though, the report reflected a sector whose stability and sophistication were growing concurrent with its market share.

“The open shop sector was a majority with a minority complex,” says Phil Hochstein, who helped develop the report. “In fact, they were always the majority, they just never realized it until ICBA started counting them all. And then you had to dispel the myths. We are responsible, we do pay properly, we have skilled labour, we can build things." Throughout the province at this time, open shop contractors were building their business relationships, dealing with the hurdles they continued to encounter, and establishing ever-broader capacities and credibility. Pile driving was an important sub-trade that Knappett needed for his bridge building contracts in northern B.C., for example, but the companies best positioned to do the work were under union pressure not to contract with him. His solution was to work with a small non-union company, even though this specific task was outside its usual scope. "But we helped them out, we showed them how to do it, and they rented some extra heavy equipment and we got through the projects," he says. That year, his company built five highway bridges and nine railway bridges.

Joel Nauss arrived in B.C. in 1987, with a mandate from the Matthews Group based in Ontario to set up an open shop operation. He became the first open shop contractor to work at the docks in North Vancouver, on a pulp storage warehouse, with "the longshoremen on one side and the teamsters on the other." He was called in at the outset of the work by a senior executive with the Port of Vancouver, who didn't recognize some of the sub-contractors he had lined up and didn't see any union affiliations. "He asked me how I was going to pull that off and I just said I'm going to do it," Nauss says. The hurdles were considerable on the project, and much of the dialogue with the unions highly confrontational, but he successfully resisted the pressure to "chase all the non-union contractors off the site." Nauss says he had strong support from the port.

"Behind the scenes a lot of people in senior management of these big institutions were getting tired of being beaten up by the unions all the time and paying too much for construction," Nauss says. And he had the support of his employees, without which he says open shop progress wouldn't have been possible. "The big part of our advantage was the workforce we could bring there," he says. "And the sub-trades did the same thing. So some of the non-union employees they made some sacrifices too, the hourly guys without a question. And they were chastised and bullied by the unions."

Collectively, Nauss says, the sector was clearly progressing. "It was like two steps forward and two steps back – over a course of years – and then it was two steps forward, and then it was just like one step at a time and we started to gain ground." And the open shop reputation was growing accordingly. "Once you work for the Port of Vancouver, you work for UBC, you work for YVR, you work for SFU, and you work for different municipalities, they have a hard time shutting you down… Because we were starting to build resumes of successfully completed jobs and we started gaining a toehold into the business."

ICBA50 #25
The Hour Bank

Philip Hochstein became well known over his 30 years leading ICBA for many of his public comments and advocacy stands. But it was an internal member service that really changed ICBA's fortunes, leading the organization out of its chronic funding challenges.

In the mid 1980s, Hochstein launched the "Hour Bank" group health and dental benefits plan, also known as the Construction Industry's Benefit Plan. Originally provided through an arrangement with a third party, and later brought in-house, the Hour Bank was both affordable and well-suited to construction realities, providing portability and contributions tied to hours works. It quickly proved popular, enabling more open shop contractors to provide benefits to their employees, and attracting new ICBA members.

"The health plan came just at the right time," Hochstein says, since it coincided with open shop growth, and was an effective replacement for a typical union service offering. At the same time, the plan – and a broader range of benefit services that ICBA began to build out – greatly increased non-dues revenue, establishing a stable funding model that remains in place today. The turnaround in the association's financial fortunes came as a welcome surprise to Christina Koechl when Hochstein conveyed it to her: "I said, 'look, we have like $30,000 in the bank. Maybe we should have another account?' She said, '$30,000?' She couldn't believe it. We usually had minus three. And it just sort of took off."

The Hour Bank just kept growing. In the early 1990s, ICBA research confirmed that availability of benefits was a major factor influencing the satisfaction of member employees. And NDP interventions – such as the threat of top-down, sector-based organizing of new workplaces – made it all the more important for open shop contractors to focus on the wellbeing of their workforces. Ongoing administrative and other improvements were made over the decade to the association's benefits program, and the scope and quality of available coverage was built out.

ICBA staffed up to take over the administration of its benefits plan directly in 1992, with the Hour Bank Plan remaining the core offering.

Today, the Hour Bank remains ICBA's most-used member service, with thousands of companies across the country. It's a model that has been replicated by ICBA-aligned associations in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia.

How the Hour Bank works — from a 2021 website

Perfect for construction, seasonal, and mobile workforces, the Hour Bank ensures coverage follows workers, even when hours or jobs change.

- Banked-hour tracking for eligibility and portability
- Ideal for contractors, trades, and field crews
- Different levels to match any price point
- Smooth transitions between Hour Bank and traditional plans
- Built-in EFAP, wellness, and critical illness coverage
- Fully administered by an expert Canadian team

Hour Bank delivers the flexibility crews need — and the dependability and predictability the office loves. It's simple to administer and saves companies both administrative time and money.

No wonder it's still the gold standard for construction companies, and ICBA's #1 service.

ICBA50 #26
Goin' National

ICBA started in Trail B.C. in 1975, but in the late 1980s, president Philip Hochstein started looking east for allies – and found one with the formation of Merit Alberta in 1986.

Stephen Kushner, who served as Merit Alberta's president for 28 years, says he and Hochstein first met as young leaders of fledgling and controversial associations, and "probably the only friends we had."

"We formed a natural alliance very early, supporting the values of open shop and trying to find a place for our members where they could compete and function and survive and prosper," remembers Kushner. "Clearly by the late 1980s, early 1990s, you had this dominance by the non-union open shop contractors in both provinces, and to the point where some of the players were the same."

In 1990, the two associations collaborated to organize the first national open shop conference, held at the Banff Springs Hotel that March. It attracted attention and controversy from the outset. Alberta Labour Minister Elaine McCoy came under strong pressure from the NDP and unions in Alberta to revoke her acceptance of an invitation to speak, and Hochstein says there was a lot of uncertainty as to whether she would show up. Immediately ahead of the conference, unions were promising that well over 1,000 protesters would be bussed to the event, and that there would be walk offs at construction job sites. It made for a dramatic lead up. "The RCMP was very involved, they were concerned about the picketing," says Kushner. "The hotel itself was concerned about the violence that could be done in their facility, and we were quite concerned about the safety of all of our delegates."

The protest materialized, although not on the scale promised. Minister McCoy came but was brought in a back entrance. "You are here to talk about contentious items, so contentious that my presence is controversial," she told the group. Hochstein – by now a prominent public figure in B.C. – had an even greater ability to provoke. An RCMP officer at one point asked, "Which one of you is Phil Hochstein?" and then suggested he stay away from the windows of the hotel. The Vancouver Sun's labour reporter, likely concerned with protecting her standing with union sources, insisted her interview with Hochstein was done at the back of a restaurant.

But the mood in the room and the success of the event weren't tainted by the hostility outside. "You had people coming together who had no knowledge of each other and it's like they were instant brothers," Kushner says. "They shared a similar outlook on the world, they shared a similar view of how the construction industry should operate, they were dealing with the same issues of union intimidation." The conference was also a good opportunity for building business relationships among contractors, and there were some union representatives who preferred to be on the inside listening rather than the outside protesting. Kushner says some of them came to the important realization that the shift to open shop wasn't a temporary result of economic circumstances, but that "these contractors were absolutely philosophically committed to the concept of operating on a non-union basis, to taking care of their employees, to letting their employees decide whether they were union or not."

For both Hochstein and Kushner, the success of the conference was an important professional milestone. "It had this tension in the air; it had this magic in the air," Kushner says. "It was absolutely, when I look back, one of the highlights of my career." Hochstein agrees: "I remember sitting with Stephen and with Bill [Stewart, of the Saskatchewan Merit association] in the back and saying 'well, that was quite something'. And it was. There was quite the feeling in the room."

Unions protest the first Open Shop national conference in Banff in 1990

The event became the basis for ongoing collaboration with the other open shop associations that gradually took root across Canada with the exception of Quebec – collaboration that would culminate many years later in the formation of a national umbrella organization.

ICBA and various provincial Merit organizations continued to work together where appropriate, and in 2008, they came together to form Merit Canada. Close to a decade after the first national open shop conference had been held there, representatives of what were now eight provincial open shop associations returned to Banff to formalize this new collective entity, building on a well-established practice of informal collaboration. “We have given up on the Canadian Construction Association,” said Hochstein at the time. “Our voice wasn’t heard and they are not interested in our issues or receptive to our needs.”

“Increasingly, we were getting into newer issues, like immigration policy, ability to bring in foreign workers and so forth,” says Kushner of the motivation for Merit Canada. “But we weren’t lobbying, we weren’t a permanent presence, we weren’t an ongoing presence. You know, MPs didn’t know who we were. And we were not able to affect anything meaningfully by the infrequent interventions that we were doing.” The Building Trades, in contrast, had a well-established lobbying presence in Ottawa.

Former ICBA Chair Jim Laurence served as a founding vice-chair of Merit Canada and says its formation was one of his passions. He cites union transparency with respect to use of dues as one of the key federal priorities he was happy to see the new organization pursue. Working with the Conservative government that was in power until 2015, Merit Canada got a bill passed to address this issue. Other achievements included the elimination of a dated federal fair wage policy, a Competition Bureau investigation of union job targeting funds, and securing a secret ballot vote in federally regulated sectors.

Merit Canada worked well for more than a decade, until Kushner’s successors decided to move Merit Alberta out of the organization, rebrand, and put their focus on group benefits instead of advocacy.

However, ICBA, ICBA Alberta, and four other provincial Merits (Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia) continue to work together today on federal advocacy files under the Merit Canada umbrella. The organization remains a key voice for open shop construction and free enterprise values.

Perfect for construction, seasonal, and mobile workforces, the Hour Bank ensures coverage follows workers, even when hours or jobs change.

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Stephen Kushner

ICBA50 #27
Labour (Code) Pains

One of the longest running advocacy files for ICBA has been fighting for fairness in the B.C. Labour Relations Code.

In 1982, Ralph Purdy appeared before the Labour Relations Board in Re Dover Corp. (Canada) Ltd. ICBA wasn't a party to the case, but Purdy made submissions on its behalf – a non-lawyer doing so alongside prominent members of the labour bar – and presented a petition signed by 186 independent businesspeople. The case involved an attempt by the International Union of Elevator Constructors to force employees of Richmond Elevator to become part of a multi-employer bargaining unit, even though it had failed in its attempt to organize them.

In a significant decision – in which Purdy no doubt took considerable satisfaction – the board dismissed the application, finding that it was "obliged to give consideration to the desires of employees who do not wish to bargain collectively, just as it is required to give weight to the desires of those who do."

Lawyer Don Jordan acted pro bono for employees of Richmond Elevator. He says the Code provision that the union relied on had always horrified him, and he focused on freedom of association arguments based on the brand new Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It was through this case that he got to know Purdy, and that he and his law partner, Peter Gall, first became associated with ICBA.

Purdy's presence on the list of appearances in Dover Corp. indicates the strong interest ICBA took from its earliest days in B.C.'s Labour Relations Code. That might seem counterintuitive, since the Code regulates collective bargaining relationships, which in the early 1980s most ICBA members studiously avoided becoming part of. But ICBA had recognized the huge impact the Code could have both on the rights of individual employees – as in the Dover case – and on the broader evolution of the construction sector.

The Labour Relations Code is a legacy of the Dave Barrett NDP government, and was unlike anything else in Canada when it was enacted in 1973. It removed labour disputes from the jurisdiction of the courts, altered the thresholds of support and procedures relating to unionization, and allowed for first contracts to be imposed.

It made British Columbia one of the most dynamic places to practice labour law. Peter Gall first came to the province at the encouragement of his teacher and mentor Paul Weiler, who was the first chair of the Labour Relations Board and highly influential in the early interpretation of the Code. "The labour field in the '70s was where all of the intellectual legal action was, particularly in B.C. with the brand new Labour Code," Gall says. "It was all about policy and developing policy and thinking through policy. And so young lawyers coming out of law school in those days, that's the field they gravitated to."

Peter Gall

While it was an NDP creation, commentators credit the Barrett Government and Labour Minister Bill King for at least trying to strike a balance. Neither were prepared to "simply toss the keys over to the trade union movement to determine how labour relations should be run in the province," as labour activists Geoff Meggs and Rod Mickleburgh wrote in their history of the era.

That assessment is borne out by the fact a rift opened up on this issue between the government on the one hand, and the party and the B.C. Federation of Labour on the other. The NDP convention in November 1973 passed a resolution critical of the Code, with a member of its executive stating bluntly: “We did not elect a government to sit as a referee between management and labour. We elected a government to legislate on the side of labour,” (as recorded in a book by Lorne Kavic). When the Socred Party returned to government in 1975, it too tried to take the stance of neutral referee, and largely left the Code intact while also asking Paul Weiler to remain as chair. The B.C. Fed had come around by this time and a consensus had developed, at least among big labour and big business interests, that the basic framework of the Code was sound.

The Labour Code was, however – and arguably remains – consistent with a broader premise in Canadian public policy that Weiler described: “a choice in favour of collective bargaining is more worthwhile than the decision to reject it.” For smaller and non-union contractors the Code was often a significant irritant. There was concern with lack of open-shop representation on the Board, and a sense that the playing field wasn’t level when unions targeted contractors with harassment and certification drives. As Weiler put it, with the Socreds in office, ICBA and its members “had much the same kind of great expectations as had the B.C. Federation of Labour in the early days of the NDP government.

In March 1977, for example, ICBA issued its “Penticton Petition”, calling for the appointment a judicial commission to investigate the Code since its passage, with a particular focus on the resulting “erosion of justice and impact on prices.” That call went unheeded, however, in the face of the widening sentiment that the Code was a sacred cow. Code-related issues nevertheless remained among the most frequent topics of discussion at ICBA meetings, and one of the most common reasons for requests for assistance from members.

The competitive challenge of operating under a Building Trades agreement continued to grow. The introductory remarks at an ICBA client dinner in the late 1980s described the changing landscape: “In the last few years, most of the old established companies have disappeared, for one reason or another, and have been replaced by a whole galaxy of new and rising stars,” the clients were told. “The real victim of the previous labour laws was the union employer, who did not have the legal freedom to take the steps necessary for his survival.”

Ron Karras lived this reality while he was employed in the unionized sector, and it was his motivation for setting up open-shop Micron Construction in 1985 – even though he faced significant union harassment after doing so. “Besides the burdens and costs unions were imposing on their labour packages, there were these jurisdictional things that were driving us crazy as we tried to be efficient,” he says, referring to the complexity of assigning work among members of different unions. Karras says that in more recent years he’s heard an acknowledgement, from people he knows within the union movement, that the hardline they took in the 1980s “drove us to open shop”, but such recognition of economic realities was slow to take root.

ICBA50 #28
Kiewit Goes Two-And-Out

In the 1980s B.C. labour environment, ICBA might well have taken a "pull up the drawbridge" attitude, and left the unionized contractors to their own devices, but it did not. "Making the family bigger was better for everybody really," says Phil Hochstein, in reference to a 1985 Labour Relations Board application ICBA supported.

Concerned Contractors Group was a bold attempt to convince the Board to re-consider how to deal with successorship and common employer applications. Its existing approach was premised on the bygone reality of an almost entirely unionized construction industry, argued Gall, and it threatened the survival of unionized contractors. He illustrated the fundamental change that had happened by noting that it was very rare "for any union company to obtain a contract of five million dollars or less in the public tender market and this dollar amount is rapidly moving upward."

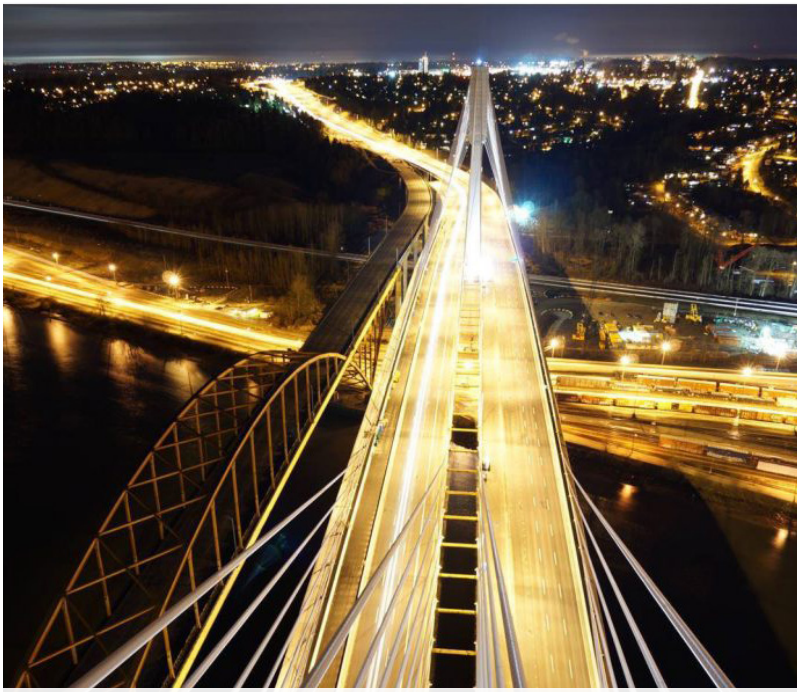
Among the specific asks was that the principals of a failed company should be able to start new ventures without being bound by the union obligations of their previous company. "No one was happy with that, even on our side," says Hochstein, "that someone could sign a collective agreement and be stuck with it for their entire career if it didn't make any more sense." But the argument was a bridge too far for the Labour Relations Board at that time. Gall says he and ICBA knew going in that the application wouldn't succeed, but says it was treated seriously by the Board and increased the pressure for further Code reform.

The Code had been regularly amended by both NDP and Socred governments, with particularly significant changes in 1984 and 1987. The 1984 amendments included provisions allowing for the division of the Expo site into legally distinct zones, thus enabling its construction to proceed open shop. They also allowed for cancellation of a collective agreement where there had been no employees in a bargaining unit for two years.

An even broader set of amendments in 1987, under Premier Bill Vander Zalm, put further constraints on successorship and common employer findings. The Code was also renamed the Industrial Relations Act, and an Industrial Relations Council replaced the Labour Relations Board. Don Jordan played a significant role in drafting these amendments, and says they were "largely intended to put more individual rights into the Code, period." They nevertheless encountered strong pushback from the labour movement and NDP Opposition, with more than 250,000 workers walking off the job in protest on June 1, 1987, and shutting down various public services.

Openings such as the one created by the "two years and out" rule were not something that was contemplated lightly, but did prove to be a viable pathway towards an open shop future for some.

Frank Margitan says Peter Kiewit Infrastructure realized it could no longer compete as a building trades contractor after seeing Kerkhoff Construction win bids for the Great Bear Snow Shed on the Coquihalla and the Skytrain extension bridge over the Fraser River. Kiewit crunched the numbers and realized the labour cost differential was an unsurmountable barrier. Appeals to the building trades, even at the international level in Washington, were ineffective.



Two decades after going open shop, Kiewit built the spectacular Port Mann Bridge

So Kiewit made the decision to stop work in B.C. for the required two-year period. "We still had an office here but we had no active construction work in the province," Margitan says. "But the gain after that was substantial because you know, you go and build these projects like Port Mann [Bridge], Sea-to-Sky [Highway], Pitt River [Bridge] – we would not have gotten those jobs on a building trade platform." Kiewit did, however, build these projects under collective agreements – but agreements that came out of a very different labour relations model that also emerged as a major factor in B.C. construction in the 1980s.

ICBA50 #29
The Industry Benefits from ICBA Benefits

ICBA established health and other benefits programs for its members within its first couple of years of operation. After a couple of false starts, ICBA entered into an arrangement with Wm. Mercer and Don Weitzel.

Benefits provided some modest but important supplemental income for ICBA, including a small percentage of insurance premiums. Within a couple of years, Weitzel, now retired, says half the membership was on the benefits plan, and "the couple of hundred dollars a month that the ICBA made off the insurance over-ride was enough to keep the wolf from the door."

But there was room to grow. Early in Philip Hochstein's tenure as president, ICBA launched the Hour Bank Plan – also known as the Construction Industry's Benefit Plan (CIBP) – which rapidly proved popular and remains the core benefits service offering to this day.

The Plan grew quickly and became a staple of ICBA member services, and by the early 2000s, ICBA increased its focus on the full potential of this already-important line of business. Bob Fairbank and Kurt Krampl – both of whom would later serve as ICBA chairs – headed a committee that was tasked with taking benefit services to the next level. Roughly three-quarters of ICBA members were part of the CIBP at this time, giving it a good critical mass and helping to ensure stable pricing, but there was a sense that more could be offered.

Fairbank and Krampl believed ICBA needed to enter into the benefits and insurance business more ambitiously and more directly. And in 2006 – the same year the CIBP hit the significant milestone of having more than 10 million hours submitted – ICBA did precisely that by purchasing an insurance brokerage to provide services to its members. "Philip saw that there was a really important link between the benefits and the members both psychologically and also financially," said Weitzel. "He wanted to take that in house, which I think was absolutely the right decision. If this is becoming the significant revenue generator for the organization, you want control of it."

Jim Laurence, ICBA chair in 2006/07, negotiated the deal. There was a construction boom at the time, he says, and that meant that the CIBP, with its direct tie to number of hours being worked, was performing well and generating a lot of revenue. "But there was always the threat – what happens if the economy takes a dive?" he says. The purchase of the brokerage provided diversification to guard against that risk, particularly due to the significant number of non-construction clients served by ICBA Benefits.

Jim Laurence

Perhaps even more importantly, ICBA Benefits proved to be the right vehicle through which to design and launch a wider range of other benefit and insurance products, many of them highly tailored to the specific requirements of the company's construction clients. It has therefore become a key part of the value proposition ICBA offers its members and contributed to remarkably strong renewal rates. "We were able to provide a variety of insurance-related services to our members, that they may not be able to get somewhere else, or not as competitively or with the same service," said Hochstein. "So it gave people even more reason to remain members of ICBA."

Today, ICBA Benefits supports more than 300,000 Canadians with benefit plans and services. The main business lines include employee health benefits, retirement plans for both employees and owners, and a wide range of specialized and consulting services. ICBA Benefits also supplies group benefit programs to other associations.

The foundation of ICBA Benefit Services' success has been well-managed and well-priced products which – beginning with the CIBP back in the 1980s – are tailored to the specific needs of ICBA members and other clients. And while ICBA Benefit Services today is a stand-alone business with its own board, ICBA's guiding principles strongly influence how it does business. In 2017, for example, when one insurer instituted a temporary ban on funding for oil pipelines, ICBA Benefits scaled back the business it did with it – until the insurer changed its mind.

Staff are aware of the importance of benefit services – both in helping client companies in the competition for talent, and in the quality of life of individual employees. "The fact that insurance is very important on that employee spectrum for compensation, to us that just amplifies even more that we need to make sure that this plan is sustainable, that they get the right benefit programs, and that the administration and customer satisfaction is above normal," says ICBA Senior Vice President, Benefits, Leah Rennie. "We interact with their employees all the time and we problem solve for their employees. That rich interaction makes us all feel like family, and that's a big part of the feel of ICBA."

ICBA50 #30
The Dismal Decade

"Not again on this damn helicopter – we're not going to get anywhere."

It wasn't a lack of will. ICBA members are the definition of entrepreneurial grit. But as Axel Gringmuth – an ICBA chair in the 1990s – remembers it, that sinking feeling became routine. He and Philip Hochstein were constantly boarding Helijet flights to Victoria to meet with the NDP government, and time after time, it felt like running into a brick wall.

"These were necessary but not very productive interactions," Gringmuth recalled. The NDP wasn't interested in listening. For the better part of a decade, they were openly hostile to the open shop construction sector and made no secret of it.

When the NDP won just the second mandate in its history on October 17, 1991, it marked a major political realignment in B.C. The NDP's vote share barely changed, but the Socreds collapsed, and the Liberals, led by Gordon Wilson, jumped into official opposition. Rita Johnston, who had just taken over from the scandal-prone Bill Vander Zalm, became the last Socred premier.

Mike Harcourt, the former Vancouver mayor, took the helm for the NDP. His platform struck a moderate tone: an "open and balanced" government that would "work with all British Columbians to encourage initiative and share the opportunities and rewards," "put an end to secret deals and special favours for political friends," and even implement "an open tendering process for public contracts." He also promised to "work with business, management and labour to develop balanced and fair labour legislation."

Those words didn't last. Harcourt was just the first of four NDP premiers in the decade. And instead of ignoring those principles, his government flipped them completely on their head.

The NDP wasted no time tilting the playing field toward their Building Trades union allies. They rewrote the Labour Code, triggering alarms in small- and medium-sized businesses across B.C. They tried to stifle the competitive edge of open shop contractors: first by dictating wage rates, then by forcing winning bidders to sign a master collective agreement and hire through union hiring halls. They even made a run at sectoral bargaining across entire chunks of the construction industry.
And yet, they still couldn't stop the shift underway in construction. The open shop model was already proving its worth – leaner, more efficient, and more responsive. Even with the headwinds, construction values climbed in the early '90s.

But broader economic growth? That was another story.

Under the NDP, B.C. stumbled through what became known as the "dismal decade." The phrase "stay alive till '95" became "make it to the millennium" after the NDP's second win in 1996. We had the highest unemployment rate in Western Canada. Housing starts lagged. People were leaving the province. And the government added 400 new regulations a year like it was some sort of twisted badge of honour.

In response, ICBA kicked into overdrive. Board meetings that once wrapped in an hour suddenly needed three. Advocacy ramped up. ICBA became a sharp, unrelenting voice for fairness, worker choice, and taxpayer value. And others took notice. As lawyer Peter Gall later put it, ICBA became "not only the voice but the backbone of the industry."

We found allies. We pushed back hard. And while the decade was punishing for open shop contractors and entrepreneurs across B.C., it also lit the fire that transformed ICBA into one of B.C.'s most influential public policy organizations.

***It wasn't easy.
It wasn't fast.
But it was absolutely worth it.***

ICBA50 #31
Job Creators Find Their Voice

On December 15, 1992, the ballroom at the Hotel Vancouver was packed—more than 350 people, all entrepreneurs and small business owners, united by one thing: they'd had enough.

It felt a lot like another big moment at the same hotel a few years earlier, when B.C.'s open shop contractors showed off what they were capable of by stepping up to build Expo 86. But this time it wasn't just construction. This was broader: members of more than a dozen business associations had come together to form the Coalition of B.C. Businesses. It was a pivotal moment in both the evolution of the open shop movement and in shaping labour policy in B.C.

ICBA wasn't just in the room – we were at the centre of it. A major funder and a driving force behind the Coalition's creation, this was a big step. It marked our first formal push to build alliances beyond the construction sector. "It really helped the stature of ICBA," recalls Philip Hochstein. "We became part of the mainstream business community." It also gave small and medium-sized businesses across the province something they hadn't had before: a strong, unified voice. These were the people behind 90% of B.C.'s new jobs – and they were finally getting organized.

Geoffrey Howes, from the B.C. Restaurant and Food Services Association, was part of that push. "We were scared to death of the [Labour Code] changes that [Minister] Moe Sihota had talked about," he said. Small businesses, he added, had never really grasped how much influence they could wield together. "We always felt, you know, 'we're just a small business,'" Howes said. "But when you look at the stats of who creates the jobs, it isn't the B.C. Federation of Labour."

Marcia Smith, who handled communications for the Coalition, saw it the same way. "I like to think of the Coalition as kind of that little engine that could," she said. "They were this small group of people and they worked hard to get their members' voices heard in a way that maybe hadn't happened before for the small business sector."

That day at the Hotel Vancouver, Coalition members got a deep dive into Bill 84 – an NDP Labour Code overhaul that had business leaders deeply concerned. As Hochstein put it at the time: "How Harcourt and his cabinet choose to define 'fair and balanced' [when changing the Code] will set the tone for provincial labour relations."

Premier Harcourt didn't exactly inspire confidence out of the gate. In a 1991 speech to the B.C. Federation of Labour, he wrongly claimed the business community had agreed to fast-track the Labour Code changes – a statement he had to walk back almost immediately. But the process moved ahead anyway, led by a panel of government-appointed advisors.

ICBA weighed in with a detailed submission in the spring of 1992. Among the most important points? Keep secret ballot certification votes intact. The stage was set for more conflict to come.

ICBA50 #32
Standing Up for Small Businesses

By mid-1992, it was obvious: small and mid-sized businesses weren't being heard.

The B.C. Business Council – then representing mostly large, already-unionized employers – was quietly floating a tradeoff: they'd accept scrapping secret ballot union votes in exchange for preserving picketing restrictions. That might have worked for big corporations with collective agreements in place. But for the still largely non-union small business community, it was a disaster in the making.

"Labour law affects those who operate without a collective agreement as much as those who operate with one," Philip Hochstein reminded the Business Council.

Out of that frustration, the Coalition of B.C. Businesses was born in July. The idea came from Bob Plecas, a former senior Socred government official who had joined ICBA as an advisor after being pushed out by the NDP. As Hochstein remembers it: "You can't do it on your own, you need an arm – let's go build the arm."

The Coalition grew fast, focusing exclusively on labour and employment standards. That focus allowed it to carve out a powerful niche without stepping on the toes of its member groups. ICBA didn't need the spotlight. As Hochstein put it: "Get other people more important than me excited about my issue and then get out of the way and let them carry the message."

When the NDP tabled Bill 84 that October, the business community braced for impact.

There was one win: the bill didn't include sectoral bargaining – a tool specifically designed to force small businesses under pre-negotiated, one-size-fits-all union contracts. But the rest of it? Ugly. Bill 84 eliminated secret ballot certification votes and tilted the field even further toward top-down union organizing. For the many non-union members of the Coalition, this was a direct threat.

The Coalition went public – radio spots, community newspaper ads, and a clear message: the bill was "unfair, unbalanced and unrealistic." And it resonated. "The Coalition had the benefit of taking positions that were generally seen by the public as fair and reasonable," said Geoffrey Howes, giving them the edge over more transparently self-interested union messaging.

Big business, by contrast, stayed quiet – leading some to suggest Bill 84 was a reasonable compromise. But Vancouver Sun columnist Vaughn Palmer saw through it: "Most everything labour found offensive about Bill 19 [the Socred reforms of 1987] is stripped of its impact or banished altogether. With these amended rules, employers will find themselves back in a day when it was harder to prevent workers from organizing…"

And it wasn't the end of the story. NDP Labour Minister Moe Sihota admitted sectoral bargaining wasn't off the table – just not being introduced "at this time." B.C. Federation of Labour President Ken Georgetti called Bill 84 "a labour code we can build on." Coalition Chair Kathy Sanderson saw it differently: the bill was "a wide swing of the pendulum," and small business was being asked "to engage in a leap of faith."

But the leap never quite landed for the Building Trades. Even with the new rules, open shop contractors were offering steadier work and better compensation. And when the NDP came back later in their mandate to push the Labour Code even further, the Coalition was ready.

"That was the powerful thing with the Coalition," said Suromitra Sanatani, who would later become its chair. "All of a sudden you had small business speaking with one voice."

ICBA50 #33
Fighting Off The Unfair 'Fair Wage' Policy

By the fall of 1992, Labour Minister Moe Sihota was taking heat from all sides. He'd become, as one commentator put it, "a magnet for negative publicity." Another accused him of "hypocrisy, irresponsibility and dereliction of duty." And just as the firestorm over his Labour Code changes was picking up speed, Sihota found himself in a curious side scandal: he'd hired a non-union contractor to build his house.

Now, that choice wasn't all that surprising. Homebuilding had never been a stronghold for union labour. But it raised eyebrows given Sihota's public criticism of non-union contractors. Cue some gleeful media coverage and awkward questions in the legislature.

Sihota defended himself by pointing to his own government's recently introduced Fair Wage Policy, saying he was paying "fair wage" rates to his crew—and admitting his house was costing "a fair bit more" as a result.

That NDP Fair Wage Policy, rolled out in March 1992, was the government's not-so-subtle attempt to slow the momentum of open shop contractors on public projects. It initially applied to contracts worth over $1.5 million, but that floor was soon lowered to $250,000. The scope widened too, expanding to roads, highways, and later including new rules around apprentice ratios and trade qualifications.

Sihota's premise? That non-union contractors were winning bids by underpaying workers and pocketing the difference. If everyone had to pay the same (higher) wages, union firms might become competitive again.

It didn't work.

"The flexibility and productivity of open shop firms to win the work" still gave them the edge, ICBA told its members. By spring 1993, even Sihota had to admit the policy hadn't shifted much work away from open shop contractors. He promised more enforcement and fewer "loopholes."

But the real impact of the policy was on cost. It imposed what were essentially "super minimums" – wages well above market rates. And it compressed the wage spread between skills. Labourers were suddenly making nearly the same as skilled tradespeople. One example ICBA flagged: a construction labourer earning double their open market rate – just slightly less than a skilled cement mason.

ICBA took that message straight to the public. The first campaign ran in Victoria, where the Fair Wage Policy had added $1 million to the cost of the new Commonwealth Games pool. Then ICBA wrote to school boards across B.C., asking them to request exemptions. We pointed out the policy's cost was enough to build 1,660 more classrooms.

"So we won that battle. For sure we won the public relations battle," said Phil Hochstein.

The full cost picture came into focus in 1993, when a Vancouver Board of Trade report pegged the added expense at $30 million – about 6 to 7% more on public construction annually.

"This arbitrary policy is simply an NDP payoff to their friends in the union movement," said Hochstein, calling on the Auditor General to investigate.

ICBA followed with its own report, co-authored by professors from UBC and SFU. Their estimate? Over $100 million in direct annual costs. They also slammed the flimsy process behind the policy's development. "With unemployment in the construction industry at 16 per cent," Hochstein said, "ICBA would much rather see that money used to create jobs on new projects rather than pay more for the ones we're already getting."

ICBA challenged the policy in court – and won. But before the ruling could bite, the NDP entrenched the policy in law. What pushed them? Likely a demand from B.C. Federation of Labour president Ken Georgetti in April 1994. Three weeks later, legislation appeared. ICBA called the NDP on it – with a bit of flair. ICBA put $1,000 in a trust account, pledging to donate it to a charity of Georgetti's choice if the NDP didn't give him exactly what he asked for.

The cheque, of course, was never cashed.

"My impression is that Georgetti says jump and the NDP says 'how high?'" Hochstein told the press.

Ironically, while the NDP was propping up its Fair Wage Policy, the rest of North America was moving in the opposite direction. No major jurisdiction had brought in such a policy in more than 20 years. Meanwhile, cities like Richmond, Vancouver, and Surrey were scrapping theirs – Surrey citing nearly $900,000 in expected savings annually.

In the end, the provincial policy did little more than drive up the cost of public construction, without shifting market share back to the Building Trades Unions. If the government was going to change that, it would need to go even further in tilting the playing field against open shop.

And as ICBA would soon find out, that's exactly what they intended to do.

ICBA50 #34
Highway to Cost Overruns, Part I

At first, it looked like nothing more than a minor labour "wobble" – a one-day illegal Teamsters strike that briefly disrupted highway work near Ladysmith in March 1994. On its own, it didn't seem like much. But it cracked the surface of what had been a stable, low-conflict environment in B.C. roadbuilding for more than 25 years.

Around the same time, NDP Employment and Investment Minister Glen Clark sat down with the B.C. Roadbuilders and Heavy Construction Association. In what many read as a not-so-subtle threat, Clark raised the possibility of pulling back privatized road maintenance work unless the industry could "arrive at an understanding" with government about the just-announced Island Highway Project. His blunt message? "Let's cut the crap and get down to how you want to work with the government to solve these problems."

And just days later, the meaning behind "solving problems" became clear: a sweeping new NDP intervention into construction markets – this time through a project labour agreement. Government's main justification? That it would guarantee "no strikes or lockouts." The timing of the Ladysmith strike made that excuse look suspiciously convenient. In fact, one observer called the labour peace rationale "bordering on the preposterous." As Philip Hochstein said at the time, it was like "paying the Americans not to invade Canada again."

Dan Doyle, a 36-year veteran of the transportation ministry and assistant deputy minister back then, had a similar reaction: "The speech around it was all about stopping all the labour disputes we were having on contracts. We weren't having any labour disputes on contracts."

As controversy mounted, Hochstein pointed to more plausible motives: declining union market share and the need to refill union coffers ahead of the next election. "Everything else up till now was an effort to give the unions an advantage," he said. "But despite the advantage they couldn't win market share. So the NDP had to be more blatant. It just shows that the market wasn't prepared to accept those kinds of costs anymore."

Of course, the government still had to pretend open tendering mattered. "It had become difficult even for the NDP to put all public work out there union-only," recalled former ICBA Chair Joel Nauss. "Those days were over with, it just wasn't going to fly." So the NDP set up a workaround—a new company called Highway Constructors Ltd. (HCL).

It was a clever shell game. Union and non-union firms could both bid, but every worker on the $1.1 billion Island Highway would be employed by HCL under a master collective agreement signed with eight Building Trades unions. Bidders could name-hire just five of their own employees; after 30 days on the job, every worker had to become a union member. Employer contributions to union advancement funds were mandatory.

While government touted this as a way to "free" contractors from administering the agreement, there was a little detail they left out: those same contractors had no role in negotiating the agreement in the first place.

Scott Jacob, who led civil construction for JJM Construction on Vancouver Island in the 1990s, wasn't buying it. His team had a strong relationship with their CLAC-organized workforce. "I didn't have grievances before you came along," he said, "so thanks for showing up and introducing grievances and then fixing them for me." To Jacob, the motivation was obvious: "I think it was purely the NDP paying back their friends at the building trades. Purely."

While JJM and some other ICBA member companies worked to figure out how to navigate the mess, ICBA didn't hold back. ICBA called out the policy for what it was: a political payoff that stripped away worker choice and would drive costs through the roof. "At present, 70 per cent of the road building workforce doesn't belong to the unions that the government has made its deal with," Hochstein told reporters. He warned that project costs could spike by up to 30%, and that job opportunities would be limited to select union members.

He wasn't alone. The B.C. Construction Association called it a "backroom deal" that violated government's own tendering policies. Other business groups piled on too – though, unsurprisingly, unionized contractors backed the agreement.

In April, Hochstein hit the road, touring Island communities to raise awareness. He warned local suppliers of the "mind-boggling series of twists and turns" they'd face just trying to do business with highway contractors. ICBA also kept spotlighting the cost to taxpayers.

Despite government efforts to downplay the price tag, the numbers told a different story. "What I saw during all that time was just trying to narrow down who could do the work," said Doyle. "And what that did, of course, was raise prices everywhere – and that wasn't in the public interest."

The Vancouver Board of Trade put a number to it: $72.9 million in increased costs, thanks to inflated compensation and added red tape. The Island Highway Project ultimately ran significantly over budget – despite having its scope scaled back – delivering less infrastructure at a higher price.

And all to pay back the NDP's friends in the building trades.

ICBA50 #35
Highway to Cost Overruns, Part II

Scott Jacob saw it coming. He'd sensed something like HCL could emerge. But even so, he was floored when it actually happened.

"In the early hours after the HCL agreement was announced, it looked a whole lot like we [as an open shop contractor] were going to go from being front of the parade to a non-player in the Island Highway Project," he recalls. But Jacob was determined not to get sidelined. "It was awkward, it was troubling, it was not good for the taxpayer. But it was a game – it was simply the same roadbuilding game with a different set of rules. That's how I chose to see it. It was an expensive way to work, but if you built that into your bid, you could manage your way through."

It was his first experience with the tangle of jurisdictional rules that come with craft union agreements. A crane truck – typically a one-person job – could now require a teamster, an operating engineer, and a labourer. There was some practical wiggle room though, because HCL simply didn't have the capacity to dispatch workers quickly. "They didn't have the ability, the appetite or the hustle to get you what you needed when you needed it, even though they had an obligation to do so," Jacob says.

Crew composition was another hurdle. HCL's name-hire rules only allowed JJM Construction to place a small handful of its own employees on 20- to 50-person crews. Trusting million-dollar equipment to strangers from a hiring hall – people supervisors were sometimes meeting ten minutes before a shift – was a major concern. Jacob found some workarounds. Short-term or specialized jobs allowed more flexibility. And they strategically used the few employees they were allowed to bring in to help steady operations.

"But if any of this sounds like I enjoyed the HCL experience – I did not," he says. "I'm simply saying I found a way to work through it."

Then there was the master collective agreement's broken pay scale. It inflated wages for low-skilled work and capped earnings for higher-skilled operators. "You had people that had ridiculously elevated earnings for a short period of time, but guess what? Within days, weeks, months of HCL being done, they went back to being a $13-an-hour flagger. The only difference is they now had to sell their pickup truck or their ski boat."

The discrepancies in pay – HCL jobs vs. regular company jobs – along with mandatory union dues, led to some employee turnover. But it didn't lead to union certification. "I think [our employees] quickly realized they didn't need a union to help them build a positive, productive, caring relationship with JJM as an employer," Jacob says. "The union did nothing but get in the way of that."

Scott Jacob

ICBA kept tracking HCL and its impacts the entire time it operated. In 1997, ICBA flagged a particularly troubling detail: as much as $9.6 million in pension contributions made by HCL to union plans would likely never be paid out to the very workers they were made for.

"This was a terrible thing," said then-ICBA President Philip Hochstein. "These were union pension funds and this arrangement helped prop them up because you had a lot of contributors who weren't going to become beneficiaries."

Many HCL workers – between 45% and 75% of them – wouldn't rack up enough hours to qualify for a pension. Some even had to suspend or leave other retirement plans to take part in the Island Highway project. The agreement also locked out unions like the IWA and workers who lived more than 100 km from the job site.

Despite the model's clear flaws, the NDP doubled down – expanding HCL's reach to all provincially funded highway projects valued over $30,000. By the time it was finally shut down in August 2001, HCL was handling everything from Lower Mainland bridge improvements to transit expansions across the province.

There was no farewell tour. And no one close to it misses it.

"[HCL] didn't make the world a better place as they professed it would," says Jacob. "I would be willing to bet that, from the beginning of HCL to the end, there were no more women in construction in a meaningful way, there were no more Indigenous people in construction, and there were no more people with disabilities in construction. Just a miserable fail, at massive taxpayer expense and inconvenience to contractors."

Dan Doyle stayed opposed to HCL the entire time. He even declined a late-term NDP invitation to sit on its board, despite the professional risk. When the BC Liberals took office in 2001, Doyle finally got the chance to share the critique he'd "kept in his bottom drawer."

Ironically, Doyle ended up running HCL – but with one job: to shut it down. And as the Journal of Commerce put it, there was "no requiem for HCL." The Ministry of Transportation didn't even issue a press release.

Scott Jacob later founded Jacob Bros Construction and became ICBA Board chairman from 2022-2024.

Dan Doyle

ICBA50 #36
In NDP-land, One Size Fits All [Bargaining], Part 1 of 2

When Mike Harcourt stepped down as premier in November 1995 – taking responsibility for a bingo fundraising scandal he wasn't directly involved in – it opened the door to something much worse. Glen Clark, a cabinet minister with deep ties to the Building Trades unions, won the leadership and took over.

In the May 28, 1996, election, the NDP lost the popular vote and dropped seats. But thanks to vote-splitting on the right, they managed to cling to a majority. And just like that, ICBA and the open shop sector were staring down another hostile government – this time under a premier who was brasher, more combative, and unapologetically aligned with the union movement.

Clark was a former union organizer. More than a third of the money raised for his leadership campaign came from the Building Trades. And on day one, the message was clear. "I vividly remember the day they were trooping into the chambers," said Vancouver Sun columnist Vaughn Palmer. "And standing at the foot of the house shaking hands with every single one of them was Len Warden of the Building Trades and Ken Georgetti [of the B.C. Federation of Labour]."

"It was disappointing and frightening," recalled Joel Nauss, ICBA Chair in 1997-98. "[Clark] called us into his office and we weren't treated like British Columbians, we weren't treated like fellow citizens, we weren't treated like entrepreneurs… It was right in the gutter, right out of the gate as soon as we walked in the room."

Clark's combative approach, already evident during the Island Highway fiasco, would define his premiership. Labour Code reform was next – and the NDP's ambition was to go even further.

By mid-1997, that ambition became Bill 44.

On the surface, it was a short bill. But it packed a wallop. Bill 44 would have imposed sectoral bargaining across the construction industry – forcing companies into master collective agreements they hadn't negotiated, regardless of size, location, or circumstance.

Worse, the business community had been completely shut out of the process. Labour Minister Dan Cashore later admitted as much: "We already knew what business would say." A scheduled briefing for the Coalition of B.C. Businesses on June 10 was cancelled at the last minute – because union feedback had prompted more changes.

When the details leaked to the Vancouver Sun on June 14, Philip Hochstein didn't mince words. "If it is sectoral certification, it's bad news for the construction industry and the investment climate in B.C.," he warned, noting construction costs would skyrocket.

The bill was introduced June 25. Vaughn Palmer later wrote that it "would have given [the Building Trades] their biggest boost since the NDP granted them a near-monopoly of public construction in the early 1970s" and had been "delivered in an atmosphere of undisguised contempt for employers."

ICBA, the Coalition of B.C. Businesses, and now the broader business community fought back hard. On June 24, a coalition press conference announced province-wide protest plans. Coalition Chair Suromitra Sanatani wrote to Minister Cashore condemning the exclusionary process and the fundamental violation of free choice. Full-page newspaper ads showed Premier Clark driving B.C.'s economy off a cliff.

"We were going to do what we were going to do and just inflict pain," said Hochstein. "As much pain as we could."

Marcia Smith recalled the emotion at one Coalition meeting: "People were just angry. It was visceral and it wasn't contrived. It was people's personal reactions."

The anger united the Coalition. Even industries not directly impacted by Bill 44 saw the writing on the wall. "Nobody could trust the government," said Geoffrey Howes, "and we knew that speaking as a collective voice was the only way that we would effect change." Hochstein added: "Slowly but surely they came around to the idea that this was an attack on them as much as an attack on us."

It would take a Herculean effort to defeat this unfair law.

ICBA50 #37
In NDP-land, One Size Fits All [Bargaining], Part 2 of 2

By early July 1997, the NDP government, led by former union organizer Glen Clark, was on the back foot when it came to Bill 44 and Clark's effort to create sectoral bargaining across B.C. construction.

On July 9, Clark's deputy Doug McArthur met with the Coalition of B.C. Businesses, of which ICBA was a driving force. It was a fishing expedition – an attempt to find cracks in the opposition. He found none. In a letter afterward, Coalition Chair Suromitra Sanatani reiterated: "We remain 100 per cent opposed to sectoral certification in any form. Your government has chosen to select B.C.'s construction industry as the first target… Which sectors could be next on the firing line are now anybody's guess."

The Coalition didn't propose amendments. They wanted the whole thing scrapped.

Tensions rose. A business legislature lawn protest was a week away. "It was a little bit of brinkmanship," admitted Marcia Smith, another key Coalition leader, "because government was clearly unhappy at the thought that business would protest on the lawns of Legislature. When you're trying to attract investment and create jobs in a province you don't want to see the entire business community out there protesting and with such an iconic backdrop as your Legislature."

But there was anxiety on both sides. "I remember us freaking out and panicking about how many people were actually going to show up," Smith says. "It's one thing to organize a rally in downtown Vancouver when everyone has to walk out of their office doors and go down the street, it's a whole other thing to think that they were going to get on buses and go to Victoria for the day to do this." She remembers quiet relief around the Coalition table when the truce was struck and the protest became unnecessary. "It might not have been as spectacular as we were threatening."

"Government didn't want to see the entire business community protesting with the Legislature as the backdrop." But there was nervousness too. "We were freaking out about how many people would actually show up," she said. "Quiet relief" followed when the government blinked and offered a deal: cancel the protest, and Bill 44 would be withdrawn.

For a government that rarely backed down, withdrawing Bill 44 was a stunning reversal. Even Clark admitted the rollout had been bungled. "We should have talked to people more before we brought the legislation in." Minister Cashore was even more direct: "I did not manage the launch of this bill well."

ICBA President Philip Hochstein called it a political calculation: "The outcry wasn't worth it." The Vancouver Sun's Vaughn Palmer called it "a staggering and significant about-face. I think Clark was concerned that if he'd gone ahead with some of that stuff that there would have been a fairly obvious backlash in terms of investment in the province."

But the NDP wasn't done. In 1998, they tried again – this time with a scaled-down version: Bill 26, which imposed sectoral bargaining in just the industrial, commercial, and institutional (ICI) sub-sector of construction.

Victoria Times Colonist legislative columnist Les Leyne characterized it this way: "It's a pale, insipid version of last year's Bill 44, but it can still do a lot of damage."

ICBA and the Coalition once again rallied. Demonstrations were held at Canada Place in Vancouver and at the legislature in Victoria. Construction vehicles circled the buildings. Suited business leaders marched with placards. "Business doesn't usually do rallies," Sanatani said. "The B.C. Federation of Labour is way better at that."

"I don't believe that in the history of the Business Council anybody had had to get up and yell through the blowhorn on the streets of Vancouver before," says Smith. In the end, she believes participants had fun with it and also made an impression.

"It was such an unusual thing for the business community to do, to see all sorts of business people on the streets," says Smith. "They were out there with their suit jackets off, and I remember my colleague in her high heels and her really great skirt talking to the police. And that was a strange sight to see, businesspeople protesting on the streets."

Despite the effort, Bill 26 passed.

But it didn't work. "Passing a law and making it a reality are often two different things," ICBA noted in a 1999 member update on the bitter infighting among unionized contractor groups that followed enactment of Bill 26.

The Building Trades never secured a single collective agreement under the new system. The model collapsed under its own contradictions. When the BC Liberals took office in 2001, Bill 26's provisions were quietly repealed.

ICBA continued to push back on other NDP measures, including the punitive Bill 58 in 1999, which suspended pension benefits for union members who took non-union work.

But time was running out. Glen Clark's tenure collapsed in scandal, and even within ICBA, the mood began to shift. "Even if they win this one it isn't going to last long. We're going to win the next election," Nauss said at the time. What had once felt like battling a political Goliath now felt like swatting at a government in free fall. The era of NDP dominance was ending. And ICBA was ready for what came next.

ICBA50 #38
Open Shop Breaks into Vancouver Island

It was 1993, and a moment of truth for TNL Construction. ICBA member Jim Greatbanks was anxious. His company, part of a joint venture, had landed the contract to build a massive, high-pressure wood-fired boiler in Williams Lake – a complex, highly specialized project with enormous technical challenges.

What made the job even more remarkable: it was done without the Boilermakers Union.

Thousands of intricate welds had been completed and x-rayed. Now came the "squeeze" – pressurizing the boiler well beyond normal operating levels to check for leaks. Greatbanks remembers what the experts told him: "We'll probably have maybe a couple of dozen leaks – you always have leaks, you know." They expected three test squeezes before the boiler would be fully sealed.

But when the pressure went up, only three leaks showed on the first test. The second revealed none. "They said they'd never had one go that well before," said Greatbanks. "These guys, they'd built boilers all over the USA."

It was a powerful vindication of TNL's open shop approach. Early on, Greatbanks had met with the Boilermakers at the urging of the equipment supplier. But the union refused to come to the table with a reasonable price – and offered no guarantee they wouldn't try to raid TNL's crew, who had been certified to the Canadian Iron, Steel and Industrial Workers' Union (CISIWU), an unaffiliated, alternative union.

"You will never build that boiler without my help," the Boilermakers rep warned.

TNL proved him spectacularly wrong.

"Boiler making," Greatbanks said, "is just all the sub-components of other normal trades." Guided by their joint venture partner, TNL methodically worked through every step of the build. And succeeded.

This boiler job was just another step in what Greatbanks calls a steady "progression south" for TNL. Founded in the late 1980s, TNL's first job had been on the Fibreco Mill in Taylor. The numbers on that job didn't pencil out at union rates, so the owner went open shop. With no available mechanical piping contractor, Greatbanks took the plunge, left his job, and won the bid with a JV partner.

More projects followed: a mine in northern B.C., a mill and a gas plant in Chetwynd. But by then, TNL was facing real union resistance: walkouts, picketing, threats of violence. Even the communities around the jobs weren't immune from the tension. Yet each job got done.

When TNL – a Richmond-based, family-owned company – dared to win heavy industrial work on Vancouver Island, the Building Trades unions tried to draw the line. Open shop contractors, they claimed, had no place in that kind of work.

It was this attitude, said Greatbanks, "[that they had] a god-given right to this work and [we] had absolutely no business being there."

The Building Trades weren't just targeting TNL. They were attacking the very idea of choice in industrial construction. CISIWU representation? Didn't matter. TNL's track record? Irrelevant. The unions were determined to keep the status quo – non-affiliation clauses and all – even as they quietly abandoned those clauses in other parts of the construction industry.

The provincial government of the day wasn't offering much help either. As the dispute intensified, TNL was even denied access to basic public services.

It all set the stage for the largest labour clash in B.C. since Pennyfarthing and Expo.

But TNL didn't back down. Nor did their client. And in the end, the so-called "line in the sand" drawn by the Building Trades was swept away.

The open shop movement and ICBA held firm. And progress kept moving south.

ICBA50 #39
Port Alberni Part 1 of 2

In 1994, a $205 million investment by then-forestry giant MacMillan Bloedel at their Port Alberni mill sparked a firestorm – one that would become a defining clash between the old union-first construction world and the rising open shop movement.

The "Nexgen" upgrade was MacBlo's biggest-ever bet on new technology. With the mill losing money and global competition rising, MacBlo needed efficiency. So, they invited bids from the entire construction industry, including open shop contractors. "They're in the game," said MacBlo Vice-President Gary Johncox. "They're legitimate bidders and we plan to use them."

The Building Trades weren't having it.

The original contractor walked off after a non-Building Trades drywall sub came on site. So MacBlo re-awarded the admin building job to ICBA member TNL Construction. TNL, led by Jim Greatbanks, started work in days. Pickets started just as fast.

At first, Greatbanks thought it might blow over. But this wasn't just another protest – it was a last stand. "What used to be 80% union is now 80% open shop," explained Vancouver Sun labour reporter Valerie Casselton. "[The unions] said, 'we didn't take a stand then and we lost and we gotta take a stand right now,' and so they are determined that they are going to worry these clients to death over this."

Meanwhile, other tensions brewed. The Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) at the fully unionized mill claimed they'd been promised Building Trades exclusivity. MacBlo flatly denied that.

When picketing started, TNL secured a cease-and-desist from the Labour Board. It was ignored. Crowds ballooned – at one point, hundreds of protestors blocked access with everything from a derelict truck to porta-potties. TNL staff needed police escorts and buses just to get to work.

Greatbanks saw it firsthand when he rode in with his 18-year-old son, Tony, who was working on the project. As they slowly crept through a 40-yard picket gauntlet, Greatbanks realized how heavy this was wearing on his team. "It was getting to him," he admitted. "He was there every day."

The toll spilled into the small, tight-knit community. Port Alberni's economy revolved around the mill – nearly every family had a stake. "A complex and bitter labour dispute that pits neighbour against neighbour," wrote the Sun. "The wounds... could take generations to heal."

TNL's team stood strong. Only one carpenter left (understandably) after his wife received a vile phone call. Greatbanks himself kept a businesslike mindset – until he learned his son's phone calls were being monitored. "You have your opinion. I have mine. You think it's your work. I think it's my work. Let's sort it out one way or another, you know, but when you do things like that, that's going a step too far," he said.

The protests spread far beyond the mill gate. There were theatrics at MacBlo's downtown Vancouver office. IWA-Canada issued a "declaration of war," pledging boycotts and non-cooperation. The BC Fed joined in.

ICBA punched back.

"The enemy is within," said ICBA's Philip Hochstein. "The enemy is their old ways. Rather than try to bully the client and intimidate the worker and the contractor, [the Building Trades] should deal with the root problem, which is make themselves more competitive."

Public opinion began to shift. The turning point came on November 2 at the BC Ferries terminal. Greatbanks' crews were refused boarding, allegedly for safety reasons. So he told his drivers to each pull up to a ticket booth and wait, jamming the system. The Ferries president called him in a panic. "You shut down my ferry," he said. "No," replied Greatbanks. "I didn't shut down your ferry. All I want to do is buy a ticket, and get on it like anybody else in Canada, and I'm quite entitled to."

A court injunction followed. But worse was still to come.

ICBA50 #40
Port Alberni Part 2 of 2

Things were already tense at the Nexgen project in Port Alberni, but what happened next pushed B.C. labour relations into truly dark territory.

On Wednesday, November 23, 1994, all eyes were on the Labour Relations Board. A new ruling was coming down – one that addressed ongoing picketing by the Building Trades and a Communications, Energy and Paperworkers' Union strike at the mill, both blocking progress on the Nexgen job.

A CEP leader warned of "extreme consequences" if the ruling didn't go their way.

But it was Building Trades President Len Werden who really raised the temperature, promising "blood in the bloody street."

The next day, that prediction came true.

Just before noon on November 24, a small group of fewer than ten TNL reps – accompanied by a modest police escort – arrived at the picket line. Their mission was to serve the Labour Board decision ordering the picketers to stand down and allow TNL crews and subs to get back to work. They'd been told they'd need to attempt this more than once before a court injunction would even be considered.

What was supposed to be a paperwork hand-off escalated into something far uglier.

Roughly 300 picketers were at the gate. According to reports, they "erupted into a mob, kicking, punching and screaming" at the TNL team. The delegation was "pushed, tripped and pelted with rock-filled snowballs, eggs, hot coffee and other materials." The court orders they dropped as they fled were "stamped into the slush and mud by the crowd."

Several people were hurt. One person's jaw was broken. A CEP-member news cameraman was also among the injured.

"Members of the RCMP couldn't get control once it got going," said RCMP Sgt. Peter Montague. "All we could do was assist TNL to get out."

Union spokespeople tried to spin the attack as some kind of setup. But the public wasn't buying it.

"How long must it be before 'blood in the streets' is not touted by union leaders as an alternative to legal resolution of conflicts between labour and business?" asked a Vancouver Sun columnist. Vaughn Palmer added that "the response from the New Democrats was mainly the silence that implies consent."

Chief Justice William Esson, commenting later from the bench, wasn't buying the spontaneity argument either: It was "simply not credible" that the violence wasn't premeditated. There must have been a "considerable degree of calculation."

Even after the violence, union leaders doubled down. One week later, on November 30, the B.C. Federation of Labour held its convention in Vancouver. Some 900 people marched in protest of project owner MacMillan Bloedel.

"I'm here to tell MacMillan Bloedel that if they want to play in the kitchen, they better be ready to take the heat," roared Fed President Ken Georgetti.

But the tide had turned.

A Supreme Court injunction was issued, allowing TNL back on site and ordering the removal of the picketers. On December 7, 31 more arrests were made – adding to the 60-plus already logged. A squad of 40 riot officers waited on standby but never had to leave their bus.

By January, 64 people were found guilty of criminal contempt of court for trying to prevent TNL workers from doing their jobs.

Tension still hung in the air. A TNL worker told ICBA Newsline in March 1995 that a feeling of tension "still happens every morning when we come to work and every evening when we leave for home, but not as bad – you kind of get used to it."

Eventually, accountability came.

In 1997, TNL settled with the Building Trades Council for $1.5 million in damages. More importantly, they got a commitment: union interference in their business would stop. "An acknowledgement that they would never try doing this again," said Jim Greatbanks.

In 1999, two TNL supervisors won $340,000 in personal damages for the harassment they endured.

Still, Greatbanks doesn't sugarcoat it. Nexgen was brutal. "Companies that teetered, you know, that were kind of maybe in the union camp and maybe not, they wanted nothing to do with us," he admitted.

But even in the darkest moments, the ICBA community rallied. Greatbanks remembers one unsolicited cheque for $10,000. "We'd like to help you, we know you're going through hell," the note read. That money – sent by a fellow ICBA member – helped offset legal fees and unexpected costs.

Whatever toll it took, the outcome was undeniable: Port Alberni shattered the final barrier to open shop involvement in B.C.'s industrial construction market.

MacMillan Bloedel's VP of Engineering, writing to another major client in 1995, put it plainly: "Our experience with our Nexgen project and elsewhere has firmly convinced us that open shop is the fairest, most productive, and most competitive way to manage our contracted business."

Greatbanks simply called it what it was: "It was a watershed moment… that quite a lot of things subsequent to this got built non-union that probably wouldn't have."

ICBA50 #41
Phil-ing the Free Enterprise Void

In May 1998, Philip Hochstein walked into a Victoria hotel meeting room wearing a Mickey Mouse tie and carrying a submission that pulled no punches. The NDP government had appointed former premier Dave Barrett to head a commission into the province's leaky condo crisis – an issue affecting tens of thousands of homeowners. ICBA's response was blistering, questioning the "fairness, impartiality and competence" of the commission, and hinting that partisan politics were driving the whole affair.

But it wasn't the submission that made headlines – it was the tie.

"His tie said it all," wrote Les Leyne in the Victoria Times Colonist, interpreting it as a shot at Barrett's appointment as an "independent" commissioner. For Hochstein, it wasn't necessarily that calculated. The tie had been a recent gift from one of his daughters. "I think my lack of choice of ties had more to do with it," he laughs. Still, intentional or not, the Mickey Mouse symbolism lined up perfectly with ICBA's advocacy tone in the 1990s – fearless, direct, and unrelenting in its criticism of the NDP government.

The relationship between ICBA and the NDP was always going to be combative. Asked to participate in this history, former Premier Glen Clark said, "You always held strong views and I always knew your position. And that position was often at odds with mine. So it didn't influence my actions in any way."

With that kind of ideological divide – and deep tension between ICBA contractors and the NDP-allied Building Trades – it's hard to imagine the association ever being invited inside the policy tent. But as Hochstein makes clear, he wasn't trying to get in.

"I don't know how many people said that to me," he recalls, meaning those who urged him to be more cooperative. "And my answer to that is, well, you got the Forest Practices Code. Inside the tent worked pretty well for you, eh?" ICBA's board backed his hard-nosed approach every step of the way.

That unflinching posture built ICBA's credibility and reach. "I understand that within government, certainly at the bureaucratic level, they worried about what we would say," Hochstein explains. "And look, when you're the only one willing to shit on the government, you get a lot of press. It helped build our reputation with Gordon Campbell because we were the only group willing to say 'that's wrong.'"

Philip Hochstein

Marcia Smith, who worked alongside ICBA through the Coalition of B.C. Businesses in the 1990s, said the group's clarity and consistency gave it influence: "They have a voice that's different than other industry associations." ICBA's membership was united, unafraid to be "unabashedly partisan," and willing to push back. Even if policy wins were rare, ICBA had impact. Former ICBA Chair John Knappett believes that pressure forced the NDP to temper its approach: "We were organized enough and strong enough that we were able to provide an effective opposition. And because of that, the NDP's actions were relatively muted from what they probably would have liked to have done."

Hochstein's command of the issues, his media savvy, and his relentlessness made him a powerful advocate.

"What annoys Hochstein's opponents is his quick and intricate understanding of issues, as well as his ability to attract press," Business in Vancouver wrote in a 1996 profile.

Inside the industry, his standing was rock solid. "He always spoke the truth no matter the consequences," said former ICBA Chair Don White. "When Phil was going to open his mouth, everybody shut up. That's how profound he was and how respected he was – by the opposition, the government in power, and by members of the various associations."

Dave Robertson, then-president of the B.C. Construction Association, said Hochstein ensured ICBA's perspective was heard loud and clear: "He made sure that the ICBA perspective was out in front of the media and the province at every opportunity. He was a well-known media personality, probably the first to turn to on any construction-related issue."

Even those who often disagreed with him, like former Premier Mike Harcourt, respected the clarity: "I'd characterize Phil as being a very forceful communicator and he expressed his opinions frankly and pungently. And so I was clear on what his and the ICBA's position was. I never had any doubt about that. But we didn't do it disagreeably."

Suromitra Sanatani, who worked closely with Hochstein through the Coalition of B.C. Businesses, said ICBA's impact came from a clear focus on good policy—not just ideology or anti-unionism. "The combination of understanding the realities of your members and having a bigger picture was key, I think, to this interest in shaping public policy," she said.

Looking back, the 1990s were brutal for open shop contractors. The Labour Code was increasingly stacked against them. Unions were emboldened. Government was hostile. But strangely, those same pressures helped make ICBA what it is today.

The organization grew in stature and credibility. Members leaned heavily on ICBA for help navigating the political and regulatory chaos. Many new firms joined the open shop movement – and many of those became members or enrolled in the growing ICBA benefits plan. That revenue stream, along with stronger membership, gave ICBA financial stability for the first time.

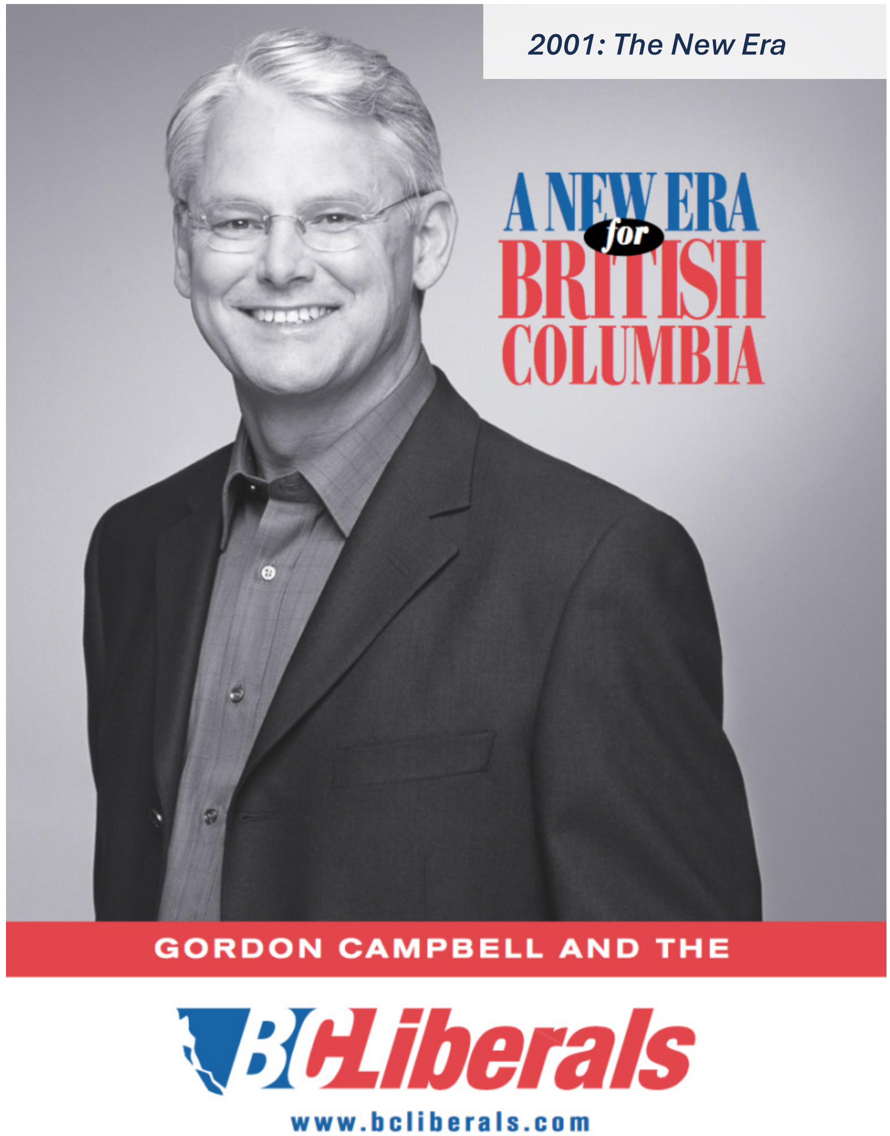
"The NDP era was really the making of the organization," Hochstein reflects. "Worst of times, best of times."

And solidarity only deepened. "It was that sort of mentality with all the guys," said Joel Nauss. "None of us said, 'Oh shit I don't want to do this, I'm going to go sign with the union, I don't want to be part of ICBA anymore.' There was none of that."

They stayed the course – and changed the course of construction in B.C.

ICBA50 #42
2001 Launches a New Era for B.C., and for ICBA

"I was never dressed down so severely as the first time I met Philip Hochstein," Gordon Campbell admits. It was the late 1980s, and Campbell was still Mayor of Vancouver, under fire from Hochstein over the city's involvement with union-backed VLC Properties. Not the smoothest start. But no hard feelings were held. The two would go on to build a strong relationship – one that left Hochstein nothing short of thrilled when Campbell became Premier in May 2001.



2001: The New Era

The NDP's grip on power was already slipping. By the late '90s, years of labour bias, economic blunders, and scandal had taken their toll. There were the fast ferries – "monuments to a decade of incompetence and waste," as CBC put it – the infamous "fudge-it budget," and then the image that stuck: police raiding Premier Glen Clark's home live on TV in March 1999. Clark resigned a few months later, though he was later acquitted.

Ujjal Dosanjh inherited a government in freefall. He tried to steady the ship, but the 2001 election wasn't close. Knowing what was coming, he warned voters they might wipe out the opposition entirely. "Heading to a slaughter," he later called it. In the end, just two NDP MLAs were elected—too few even for official party status. The B.C. Liberals, led by Campbell, had won in a landslide.

After the Socreds collapsed in the early 1990s, ICBA saw the writing on the wall and moved quickly to support the B.C. Liberals as the new standard-bearer for the free enterprise coalition. The relationship deepened through the 1996 election and solidified over the next five years – politically, financially, and through third-party advertising.

The bond was more than transactional – it was built on guts. "You reminded other business organizations of what they claimed to be for," Campbell told ICBA when he was inducted as a life member in 2017. His successor, Premier Christy Clark, was even more blunt: "Phil Hochstein and ICBA was the only person and the only business organization that had the guts to stand up and fight the NDP from outside the Legislature for the entire time."

When the Liberals released their "New Era" platform, it was clear ICBA had been heard. Twenty-one 90-day commitments. More than a quarter aimed directly at fixing what was broken for open shop contractors: secret ballot votes restored, sectoral bargaining outlawed, union-only tendering scrapped, Highway Constructors Ltd. axed, fixed-wage laws repealed, and union pension penalties on working retirees ended.

Kurt Krampl, ICBA Chair in 2010–11, says the relationship was something special. "Philosophically, Phil and Gordon were well-aligned. So you had that perfect storm of Campbell looking for partners, us being willing partners and willing to stand up for what the Liberals were doing, and it cemented a really tight relationship with government that probably will never be repeated. It was just the perfect scenario."

Even with that alignment, ICBA still pushed back when it needed to – especially early in the Liberals' second term, when the government's hunger for deregulation seemed to fade. But the working relationship remained strong, built on mutual respect and a shared understanding of what was at stake. Looking back, Campbell said the construction industry had long lacked a consistent voice – until ICBA stepped in. "ICBA had influence by virtue of being principled," he said. "And a unique ability and willingness to call BS when something was wrong or harmful."

Once the NDP was gone, things shifted fast. "The [business] climate was super positive and there was just a ton of work going on," said Bob Fairbank, ICBA Chair in 2008–09. From 2001 to 2006, construction surged. Even the 2008 credit crunch didn't knock the sector off its stride for long. By 2012, more cranes dotted the skyline than ever before, and construction jobs were back above their pre-crisis peak.

The days of union-only bidding were done. Open shop contractors were building everything: Olympic venues, the Canada Line, the Port Mann Bridge, towers, highways, and major resource projects. They weren't just in the mix – they were leading it.

And ICBA was growing too – bigger, bolder, and more sophisticated. It played a central role in overhauling the province's trades training system. It expanded member services. And it became more than just a voice for open shop builders. It became a serious force in shaping public policy across the board.

ICBA50 #43
A New Era Mega Project: The Vancouver Olympics

On February 6, 2003, Vancouver needed a shove. The city was days from a vote on the 2010 Olympic bid. A "No" would kill it, like Bern's bid. The IOC visit was set for early March, with the final decision just months away.

ICBA chose a simple message you could see from blocks away: light more than 20 tower cranes with "2010 Yes" signs. This wasn't fluff. Games venues were pegged at $620 million. Canada Line and Sea-to-Sky upgrades added $2.5 billion. Hotels and restaurants would expand. About 25,000 construction jobs were on the line.

Members moved fast. "The industry responded so well, so quickly," Philip Hochstein says. Clearbrook Iron built the signs. Ron Karras of Micron Formwork persuaded a skeptical WorkSafeBC that the plan was safe. Contractors got their clients onside. Launch day, ICBA chair Joe Lindgren stood in front of live TV and hit a ceremonial switch. The switch wasn't actually connected. "We had someone on a mic somewhere out of sight saying, 'light them, light them!'" Hochstein recalls. It could have gone sideways. It didn't.

The skyline lit up. The cranes became the banner for a broader push. One critic griped, "If they are so convinced they are right, why do they have to repeat it so much?" Voters answered: 64% said Yes. The IOC saw a city that could deliver. In July, Vancouver won in the second round and became Canada's third Olympic host.

The Games pushed a bigger, tougher Vancouver back into the global spotlight for the first time since Expo 86. The 17 days were packed and well run. As one retrospective put it: "Never have our city streets seen so much activity, nor has there been an Olympic city as lively as Vancouver. The atmosphere in the streets could be described as surreal and magical." The legacy was concrete: new and upgraded sports sites, transportation links, and a new neighbourhood at Southeast False Creek, born as the athletes' village.

ICBA didn't just clap from the stands. Weeks after Vancouver won the bid, we pulled together senior leaders from member companies to advise on labour supply, budgets, scheduling, bidding, and things that raise costs. As Hochstein said then, "To get an Olympics right, you have to get the construction right," with a focus on on-time, on-budget delivery.

Big projects attract pressure to give special deals to the Building Trades. ICBA stayed alert, because small wording changes can tilt the field and hike costs for taxpayers. In July 2004, media reported that VANOC head John Furlong was "receptive to the idea of a long-term labour agreement with unionized construction firms," which the Building Trades were pushing. ICBA pushed back. In May 2005, Hochstein called out the B.C. Federation of Labour for trying to trade threats for perks: "If the BC Federation of Labour is sincere about not disrupting construction job sites leading up to the Olympics, President Jim Sinclair should make that commitment today. He doesn't need a project labour agreement to do that. But instead, he's trying to wring concessions out of VANOC by raising the spectre of future labour unrest."

People closest to government say that scheme was never going to fly. Ken Dobell, former deputy to Premier Gordon Campbell and a VANOC member, says: "First of all, you're cutting a bunch of people out of the system, which you shouldn't do. Secondly, it's questionable whether that's even going to work any better. No, it certainly didn't carry the day, to the extent that I don't even remember that event [union pressure for a deal] as one of the big things." Dan Doyle, VANOC's executive vice-president for construction, is blunt: "Gordon Campbell would never have stood for it and none of his cabinet would have."

The pressure wasn't limited to the Games. Hochstein recalls a mid-2000s chat with the head of the Vancouver Airport Authority about a union deal to "assure" labour peace – the buy-fire-insurance-from-the-arsonist routine.

"We're always fighting that," Hochstein says. "That's always an educational challenge for us with clients, particularly with clients who come from other places where unions are more prevalent or they have more control over projects."

For the Olympics, the client held the line on equal opportunity and open bidding – and the city got the result it needed.

After the Olympics, the Campbell era quickly came to an end. On November 18, 2010, ICBA stood with the other major construction associations and Campbell at the Vancouver Convention Centre. ICBA and partners presented Campbell the first, and only, "Builder of the Decade" recognition for leading the biggest construction push in B.C. history. Nearly 900 people were there, including the full B.C. Liberal cabinet and caucus. The message was simple: the industry had been shrinking before Campbell; under him, it grew. Port Mann Bridge, Canada Line, Kicking Horse Canyon, Vancouver Convention Centre – billions in public infrastructure, and the stage set for billions more in private builds.

The tone was celebratory but also unsettled. Earlier that month, Campbell had announced he would step down, concluding the Harmonized Sales Tax (HST) fight had turned the public debate into a referendum on him and pulled focus from the work of government.
The HST landed in July 2009, weeks after an election where the party said it wasn't on the table. A harmonized value-added tax promised real economic gains and had support from ICBA and other business groups. Many British Columbians saw it as rushed and as a shift from businesses to households. Bill Vander Zalm rode the anger, drove a petition, and forced a referendum that killed the HST. Campbell's approval fell into single digits, and talk of a caucus revolt swirled.

In a sober statement the day Campbell resigned, Philip Hochstein said the premier was again putting the public ahead of himself: "Gordon Campbell's place in the history books is assured. When people look back at the accomplishments made by him and his government, he will be seen as one of the most accomplished political leaders in the history of our province and our country." Campbell's run was historic: a 2001 landslide, then wins in 2005 and 2009 – only the fourth B.C. premier ever to take three straight majorities.

From 2001-2011, ICBA backed Campbell's growth agenda with hard-hitting campaigns. In 2005, rollercoaster-themed ads urged voters not to let the NDP take the economy for another wild ride. In 2009, a sheepish NDP lawn sign carried the "wrong party, wrong leader, wrong time" message. In 2005, ICBA and other construction groups also organized a "B.C. Construction Industry Convoy" that circled the Legislature during the Throne Speech – an unusual and high-impact show of support.

Hochstein was direct about the stakes: "Family-owned construction businesses experienced the NDP-made economic devastation during the 1990s. We cannot afford to repeat history and must support forward-thinking governments who are focused on long-term opportunities for our children, and not just short-term opportunities for their friends."

The NDP mounted strong comebacks in both 2000s campaigns. Voters stuck with the B.C. Liberals, and the industry surged. Joe Lindgren, ICBA chair in 2002/03, captured the mood: "We were moving down the road. The economy was strong, there were jobs, we could get people to hire, you know, we believed that tomorrow was going to be better than today."

ICBA50 #44
Hochstein and Stewart Close a Legendary ICBA Run

Gord Stewart joined ICBA in 1999 as second-in-command and became a key builder over the next two decades. Originally from Ontario, he'd worked in B.C.'s forest sector before studying communications at Douglas College. A committed free enterpriser who followed politics closely, he already knew of Philip Hochstein and ICBA from the news. "He exuded to me a real sort of free enterprise, energetic kind of vibe in a world that I felt was overly governed, overly bureaucratic," Stewart says. Through Hochstein's wife at the time – a Douglas librarian and instructor – Stewart lined up an internship that turned into a summer job, including running ICBA's golf tournament. That fall, a staff opening appeared and Stewart paused full-time studies to become ICBA's fourth employee.

Stewart and Hochstein formed a tight, productive partnership. "They worked very well together and it's a testament to both of them," says former ICBA Chair Kurt Krampl. "Phil will push Gord and Gord will push Phil... They know how to work together but they've also remained friends." ICBA member Scott Jacob agrees: "I don't think I've ever worked with a duo that were as effective at working together, and as committed to the cause. I couldn't say enough. Two of the most intelligent, most strategic people I have ever worked with on any file."

Stewart oversaw ICBA's group benefit plans and was also instrumental in building its training and apprenticeship capacity, with the help of staff like Sabine Just.

It was no easy task to deliver those results in the apprenticeship world. Hochstein and Stewart worked closely with ICBA members to understand what they needed from the training system, and with offering solid input on that basis.

Stewart's bottom line: "It didn't become exactly what we wanted it to be, but it didn't go back to being what it was. It ended up somewhere in the middle."

On the ground, Stewart helped turn policy wins into practical training. ICBA Training expanded course offerings year-round, built out safety, supervisory, and project delivery programs, and leaned into flexible formats so employers could upskill people without pulling them off jobs for long stretches. The focus was simple: job-ready skills that matched what contractors needed.

Stewart also played a central role in growing ICBA Benefits into a key value driver for members. He pushed for straight-ahead service, faster onboarding, clear plan design, and support built for construction firms – from small crews to large contractors. That approach helped ICBA Benefits scale up while keeping plans competitive and easy to use.

Together, those efforts – training that fit the jobsite and benefits that helped firms recruit and retain – made the open shop more competitive during tight labour markets, and strengthened ICBA's platform to support members across B.C. and Alberta.

After 30 years at the helm of ICBA, Hochstein retired in 2016. Stewart chose that transition moment to depart as well, leaving to join one of ICBA's member companies. ICBA's board selected Chris Gardner as the new President and CEO (only its third in 40+ years), bringing in a fresh leader to carry the mission forward. Both Hochstein and Stewart were inducted as ICBA life members in 2017, recognizing an era-defining run.

In 2018, ICBA endowed nearly a million dollars to Simon Fraser University's Beedie School of Business to create a new Philip Hochstein Fellowship at the school. The gift provides resources to support the study of free trade, open markets and economic growth by researchers, academics and students.

"Philip's contributions to building B.C. are immeasurable. His vision, conviction and courage helped transform the construction industry and established ICBA as a powerful voice for jobs, investment and opportunity in this province," said Gardner at the announcement. "We have endowed the Philip Hochstein Fellowship to ensure Philip's legacy continues. We want to support future generations of business leaders and the opportunities that flow from a strong economy."

ICBA50 #45
Chris Gardner Takes Over as ICBA President

Chris Gardner walked into ICBA in 2017 with the same energy that drives a crew mobilizing at dawn—clear plan, tight timeline, no nonsense. He became our third president at a moment when the industry was changing fast and the policy headwinds in B.C. were stiff. The brief was simple: make ICBA faster, sharper, and more useful to builders on the ground. Nearly nine years later, that's the story—an association that moves at the speed of construction and doesn't apologize for defending open competition, opportunity, and growth.

Part of what makes Chris so effective is where he came from. He grew up in Langley, studied political science at SFU, and earned a law degree from UBC—useful tools for a life spent translating policy into practical outcomes. Early in his career he worked in South Korea, practicing corporate law, before returning to the Lower Mainland and working for political campaigns and construction companies; all this gave him respect for speed and clarity, and a healthy allergy to red tape. He's not a theoretician; he's a builder's advocate who understands the file, the room, and the deadline.

From day one, he doubled down on ICBA's independence. We don't chase government grants; we chase results. That bias for impact shows up in the growth of our services and our footprint. Under Chris's leadership we expanded into Alberta and widened the lane for open-shop builders across Western Canada. That wasn't about logos in new places; it was about solving members' problems wherever they're bidding and building.

Chris Gardner being interviewed in 2017, via the phone, by a reporter.

Training is where his "outcomes-first" approach really pops. Our course catalogue stopped behaving like a dusty list and started acting like a living system—tight, modular programs that map directly to jobsite realities. When forepersons need leadership tools, estimators need sharper takeoffs, or PMs need contract-law refreshers, the content is there—in person, live online, or on-demand. It's why our leadership certificate program became a go-to for companies trying to turn great tradespeople into great supervisors without pulling them off the tools for weeks. That's Chris's thumbprint: build capacity that shows up as better crews, safer sites, and stronger margins.

He also pushed us to talk more honestly about mental health—and he did it with his own story. Chris has been open about losing his father to suicide when he was a child, and about the decades of "what ifs" that followed. That kind of truth cuts through the stigma that still keeps too many conversations underground. Our industry isn't spared from the crisis: in B.C., more than half of the employed people who've died of opioid overdoses in recent years worked in construction; WorkSafeBC logged a 25% rise in mental-health claims from 2017–2019; and research has reported suicide risk for construction workers many times the national average. Set against a post-pandemic wave of isolation, strain, and grief—and with most Canadians still uncomfortable raising these issues with their employer—Chris's message has been simple: this belongs in the safety meeting. His work on Wellness, and his courage in sharing his own story, led to Chris being named Ragan's 2022 Wellness Executive of the Year, a prestigious North American award.

ICBA Wellness was built for that reality and for real jobsites. We consulted contractors, workers, and clinicians and designed the program around construction's unique pressures—tight schedules, physical wear-and-tear, remote camps, and project cycles. It's holistic and practical: toolbox talks, supervisor guides, short videos, posters, and check-ins that help crews spot trouble early and act fast. We launched it in the teeth of COVID and made it free for ICBA members because the need was urgent and universal. When Chris tells that story publicly, he doesn't recite stats; he connects the dots between a steadier workforce, safer projects, and families who get their people home. That's leadership with a human core—and it's shifted safety culture across our membership from "hard hats and harnesses only" to "add mental wellness to the kit."

Benefits is another place where the Gardner playbook pays off. The industry is mobile and seasonal; plans have to flex with hour banks and project cycles. ICBA Benefits focuses on speed, clarity, and zero bad surprises—benefits that actually help companies recruit and retain, and supports that workers understand without a PhD in fine print. Pair that with our wellness work and you get something powerful: employers who can compete for talent, and teams who feel looked after. (You'll hear Chris talk about that everywhere—podcasts, panels, and shop-floor conversations—because he knows repetition drives change.)

On policy, he kept ICBA's voice clear and unapologetic. We argue for faster, more certain permitting; open, competitive procurement; and standards that add value instead of cost. We've built coalitions, produced research, and stuck our necks out when it mattered—including national conversations about investment, productivity, and competitiveness. When Ottawa overreaches or Victoria experiments with procurement models that shut most of the workforce out, we bring data and solutions, not just decibels. That's why Chris keeps getting tapped as one of B.C.'s most influential leaders—and why our arguments land with people who disagree with us on Monday and call us for advice on Friday.

Recognition isn't the point, but it's not nothing. SiteNews has named Chris one of construction's Most Influential People, highlighting his advocacy and the way he's broadened ICBA's impact, including our expansion into Alberta and our industry-leading focus on mental health. Business in Vancouver's BC500 and Vancouver Magazine's Power 50 have also recognized his influence multiple times, reflecting what a lot of people already know: when Chris shows up, the conversation gets sharper and the outcomes get better.

None of this happens without a team. ICBA has grown in people and capability—communications and research that punch above our weight; training that scales; benefits and wellness that work; events that connect dots across the industry. Chris would be the first to say the wins belong to members who put on boots and shoulder risk. Fair. But leadership sets the tempo. The tempo here is fast: identify the friction that's slowing builders down and remove it—policy, paperwork, or lack of skills—so projects get built and careers move forward.

If you want the one-line verdict on the Gardner era, it's this: clarity under pressure. In a province where it's too easy to complicate simple things, Chris has kept ICBA focused on the basics—compete fairly, build well, take care of your people, and tell the truth about what's working and what isn't. That's how you grow an association, and it's how you help build a province.

ICBA50 #46
Expanding Beyond the Lower Mainland

Here's how ICBA's "Greater-than-Greater-Vancouver" story has unfolded—and why it matters.

When we said ICBA would show up where builders actually work, we meant it. Over the past few years we've pushed hard into the Island, the Interior, the North, and—big milestone—set down real roots in Alberta. The goal's simple: bring our full kit (advocacy, training, benefits, wellness, events) to contractors beyond the Lower Mainland and make it easier for them to win work, build teams, and grow.

In the North, the turning point was bringing Energy Services BC into the ICBA family in 2016. That merger, centered in Fort St. John, gave us a stronger foothold across the Peace—and a direct line to the oil and gas service community that keeps so many Northern projects moving. It wasn't a paper exercise; it plugged us into dozens of companies and a regional conversation about LNG, pipelines, and critical minerals work that will define the next decade.

The North has also become home base for our regional push thanks to Prince George's Mike Davis—our not-so-secret weapon who's been telling the story of Northern opportunity with the credibility of someone who actually lives it. From media hits to shop-floor conversations, Mike's helped us knit together owners, contractors, and communities across a huge geography so they can find work and solve problems faster. And we've kept showing up at marquee Northern gatherings: our "Celebrate the North" reception at the BC Natural Resources Forum remains one of the hottest tickets in PG—because getting 500 decision-makers in one room moves needles for our members.

ICBA President Chris Gardner (left) congratulates ICBA Alberta President Mike Martens on the launch of ICBA Alberta in 2023.

On Vancouver Island, we went from "we should do more there" to a 350-person Meet the Generals in Victoria that quite literally launched new business relationships—and new ICBA members. The format is simple and effective: put generals, developers, and trades in the same room with real projects to discuss, and watch deals germinate. Feedback from sponsors and attendees was emphatic: do it again. We will. To make it stick, we added on-the-ground capacity—hiring Jordan Kersch as our Vancouver Island coordinator—so members have a direct line to ICBA support between events. (More to come there as we grow the Island roster.)

The Interior tells a different story—leaner operations, shrinking bid pipelines, national competitors parachuting into Kelowna—but the prescription is similar: convene, connect, and equip. Our regional listening tours surfaced exactly where contractors are feeling the pinch and where they're adapting (public-sector pivots, maintenance work, smarter materials). That intel is shaping our next steps, including exploring a Kelowna edition of Meet the Generals.

ICBA's Mike Davis and ESBC's Art Jarvis seal the merger of the two associations under the ICBA brand in 2016.

And then there's ICBA Alberta. We didn't tiptoe in. Under ICBA Alberta's founding president Mike Martens, we put real steel in ICBA Alberta's spine – building a superb team, buying an office in downtown Calgary, and creating programming that looks and feels like ICBA. We advocate with purpose, offer training that helps crews right now, and have benefits built for construction's hour-bank reality. The Alberta hour bank has grown faster than expected, client retention is exceptionally strong, and our brand of straight-talk advocacy has found its lane. Our BUILDEX Calgary Construction Leaders' Breakfast is now a calendar-setter, and more B.C. contractors are asking us to help them decode the Alberta market. That cross-border connective tissue is turning into real opportunity for members on both sides of the Rockies.

Why does all this matter? Because regional growth isn't a vanity metric—it's how we shorten the distance between a contractor's problem and our ability to help solve it. When LNG Phase 2, Cedar LNG, Ksi Lisims, or Interior infrastructure ramp up, our members won't be meeting us for the first time; we'll already be shoulder-to-shoulder, with relationships, training, and benefits running. And with ICBA Alberta rolling—complete with its own training slate, benefits support, and membership engine—we've created a two-province platform to help open-shop builders pursue work wherever the opportunity is.

This is what scaling looks like: show up locally, listen hard, convene the right people, and deliver the same ICBA value stack—advocacy, training, wellness, benefits—region by region. It's not about being everywhere; it's about being exactly where our members need us, with the right tools, at the right time.

ICBA50 #47
#Get2Yes – Building B.C. by Supporting Major Projects

When it comes to building a strong, resilient economy, there's no substitute for major projects. Dams, pipelines, ports, LNG terminals, highways – these projects inject billions into the economy, create tens of thousands of construction jobs, and leave behind infrastructure that serves future generations.

That's why ICBA has never hesitated to step up and speak out when it matters most.

In the face of coordinated activist campaigns, legal delays, political waffling, and regulatory gridlock in the late 2010s, ICBA launched its #Get2Yes movement – an advocacy effort to support major resource and infrastructure projects and to push governments to clear a path for investment and growth.

From the Site C dam to LNG Canada, from the Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion (TMX) to Coastal GasLink, ICBA has been a leading voice, rallying public support, pressuring governments, and reminding decision-makers that these projects matter to real people: construction workers, families, and small businesses across B.C.

When Site C was under review (again) in 2017, and NDP Premier John Horgan threatened to kill it, ICBA flooded Victoria with messages of support. Our public opinion polling, advertising, and direct advocacy helped reinforce a simple truth: cancelling the project would have cost thousands of jobs and stranded billions in investment. We even did a stunt at BC Hydro headquarters in Vancouver, and outside the Premier's office at the Legislature, stringing up thousands of pink slips with Horgan's face on it – showing how many construction jobs were under threat. Thankfully, the NDP government decided to move forward.

Similarly, LNG Canada became a symbol of how B.C. could responsibly develop its natural gas resources while creating thousands of high-paying, often remote-based construction jobs. ICBA didn't just support it quietly – we built campaigns, ran ads, and ensured that open shop workers and contractors had a voice in the debate.

Our #Get2Yes efforts have earned ICBA multiple Reed Awards from Campaigns & Elections, recognizing excellence in political campaigning and advocacy. One of the most memorable moments: our "Get Canada's Big Gas Moving" ad – a tongue-in-cheek response to anti-energy activists that captured attention across Canada and drove massive online engagement. That ad was seen more than 2 million times online, and was a North American champion, winning the Reed for Best Web Video – Overall, against all U.S.-based competitors. When ICBA accepted the trophies, the ceremony host actually broke format to call the Big Gas ad, "genius."

The ad also won ICBA Reed Awards for Best International Web Video (a category which includes all international campaigns outside the U.S.) and Best Canadian Web Video, and a CampaignTech Award for Funniest Web Video.

These campaigns weren't just clever – they were effective. By reaching audiences through traditional media, social platforms, and direct outreach, ICBA helped shift public opinion and encouraged government decision-makers to stand firm in the face of activist pressure.

Projects like Site C, TMX, Coastal GasLink, and LNG Canada are not just symbols – they are the backbone of the construction economy in B.C. Each project represents:

- Thousands of construction jobs, especially in rural and northern communities.
- Billions in private and public investment that ripple through local economies.
- Long-term economic and energy benefits for British Columbians.

Without them, B.C.'s economy would be smaller, less resilient, and less competitive.

The fight to build isn't over. New opportunities – mines, export terminals, energy transmission, and more – face the same delays and opposition. ICBA continues to lead the charge, pushing governments to fix the permitting system, respect Indigenous partnerships, and put economic growth back on the agenda.

#Get2Yes is more than a slogan. It's a call to action – and for 50 years, ICBA has answered that call

ICBA50 #48 How ICBA Benefits and Wellness Became a Cornerstone of Industry Stability

In the long history of ICBA, few developments have had as profound an impact on the lives of construction professionals and their families as the evolution of our benefits business and, more recently, our industry-leading wellness program. These efforts didn't begin as flashy initiatives. They began with a sober understanding of what construction workers face – instability, long hours, physical risk, and, too often, personal hardship carried silently.

Chris Gardner knew that reality long before he ever imagined leading ICBA. His father died by suicide when Chris was just a boy, in an era when there was nowhere to turn and no language for help. A tragedy like that never stops shaping a person. Decades later, when Chris helped launch ICBA's mental-health and wellness program, he told his father's story publicly for the first time. It set the tone for how ICBA would approach wellness: directly, honestly, and with a level of empathy that matched the weight of the issue.

Chris Gardner, President, ICBA

That personal experience intersected with the story of Corey Hirsch, who joined ICBA as Wellness Ambassador. Corey's own loss – the suicide of his girlfriend in 2018 – and his raw candour about his struggles with obsessive compulsive disorder and mental health opened doors across the province. Their shared commitment to ending stigma turned into a province-wide speaking tour, packed rooms in construction shops and boardrooms, and now a national conversation. Their message cut through the traditional stoicism of male-dominated industries: that too many men are suffering, and too many families are being left to carry the grief.

Even before wellness became a core part of ICBA's identity, the association was steadily building another pillar of worker support: benefits. Early in ICBA's history, contractors needed something that traditional insurers weren't built to deliver. Construction hours weren't predictable. Crew sizes changed job to job. Seasonal swings were dramatic. A conventional benefits model – built for nine-to-five office work – simply didn't fit.

The breakthrough came with the Construction Industry's Benefit Plan, better known as the Hour Bank Plan. Instead of tying coverage to a salary, the Hour Bank tied it to hours worked. It created stability where there previously had been none. Workers built up banked hours that carried them through slow patches or project transitions. Employers

Corey Hirsch, ICBA Wellness Ambassador gained predictable costs. And ICBA gained the foundation for a robust benefit service that addressed construction as it actually is – dynamic, seasonal, and mobile.

Demand grew quickly. By 2006, the Hour Bank had recorded more than 10 million hours and became a major financial and operational pillar for ICBA. That year, ICBA purchased an insurance brokerage, bringing benefits in-house and allowing the association to build a fully integrated benefits service. That decision proved transformative. Having direct control over the plan meant ICBA could customize benefits to the realities of open shop contractors and their workers rather than forcing them into rigid, corporate-style boxes.

Today, ICBA Benefits serves more than 300,000 Canadians – making it one of the largest independent providers of health, dental, retirement, and extended benefits in western Canada. The Hour Bank remains at the heart of the plan, but ICBA has added a wide range of options: health and dental plans, long-term disability, critical illness coverage, employer-funded Health Reimbursement Plans, and a suite of retirement and savings tools including comprehensive RRSP offerings. These retirement plans give workers portability and security – essential in a sector where project-based employment is the norm.

One of the unique strengths of ICBA Benefits has been its ability to support not just ICBA members, but the broader industry through partnerships with other associations. The Canadian Home Builders' Association, the Truck Loggers Association, the Mechanical Contractors Association of BC, the BC Road Builders and Heavy Construction Association, and other industry organizations have entrusted ICBA to provide benefits to their members. These partnerships expand access to high-quality plans that many smaller associations or companies couldn't deliver on their own – reinforcing ICBA's long-standing role as a hub for services that strengthen the construction ecosystem as a whole.

As the benefits business grew, ICBA began to see something troubling in the data: mental-health-related claims were rising sharply, and Employee Assistance Program usage was climbing year after year. That trend mirrored what contractors and workers were telling us – that the pressures of the industry, combined with the pandemic, addiction challenges, financial stress, and isolation, were taking a profound toll.

This brought the story back to Chris's childhood and Corey's loss – and toward creating something the industry had never seen before. ICBA Wellness was launched with an aim far broader than basic counselling referrals. It was built to reshape the culture of construction from the inside out. Toolbox talks on mental health became normal. Site posters and resources appeared where they had never been. Supervisors were given practical tools for recognizing warning signs. Workers saw respected advocates stand in front of them and talk openly about struggle, therapy, survival, and hope. More than 8,000 workers have gone through the program in its early years, and participation has continued to grow.

The work earned ICBA recognition: Chris Gardner received the prestigious 2022 Ragan Wellness Award for Wellness Executive of the Year, shortly after the program's launch, affirming both the urgency of the initiative and the industry's hunger for change. But the real measure of success is quieter – conversations happening in lunchrooms and on worksites that never would have happened a decade ago, workers asking for help rather than hiding their pain, and companies treating mental health as a core component of safety rather than a private matter to be buried.

Looking back over 50 years, ICBA's work on benefits and wellness stands as one of its most important legacies. Advocacy wins shape policy. Training builds skills. But benefits and wellness shape lives directly, offering workers and their families stability, security, and support in moments when they need it most.

The story of ICBA's first half-century is a story of building – not only the projects that define our skylines and infrastructure, but the systems that allow people to thrive in an industry that demands so much of them. As ICBA enters its next 50 years, the foundation built by the Hour Bank, by comprehensive benefits, by RRSP savings, and by a nationally recognized wellness initiative gives the construction sector something rare: a support structure as resilient as the people it serves.

ICBA50 #49
From Experience to ICBA Economics

From the beginning, ICBA's founders were sharp, practical builders who understood the economy the way contractors always have: by watching the bid lists, the cranes on the skyline, the payroll, and the pipeline of work. They knew when things were tightening, when red tape was choking projects, and when government decisions were quietly making life harder for the people who build British Columbia. What they didn't have was an in-house economics shop to turn those lived experiences into a steady stream of charts, forecasts, and formal analysis. For decades, ICBA advocacy was driven by smart instincts, close contact with members, and whatever public data could be scraped together.

Over time, the construction and resource economy became more complex. Housing markets in major metros started to behave very differently from smaller centres. Government budgets grew, even as private-sector investment lagged. Major projects became multi-billion-dollar, multi-jurisdictional undertakings, wrapped in regulation and litigation. The stakes rose, and so did the need for deeper, ongoing economic insight tailored to construction and free enterprise.

Launching ICBA Economics was the natural next step. It formalized something ICBA had always valued: understanding how macroeconomic trends, demographic shifts, interest rates, and government policy ripple through job sites, balance sheets, and paycheques. Instead of relying on occasional outside reports or ad-hoc number crunching, ICBA decided to build that capacity inside the organization, making economic analysis as much a part of its identity as training, benefits, and advocacy.

To do that properly, the association needed the right person to lead the work. In 2023, ICBA appointed Jock Finlayson as its first Chief Economist – a new role in the organization's nearly 50-year history, and a clear signal of where ICBA was headed. Jock brought decades of experience at the top tier of business and policy circles in British Columbia and Canada. He had advised governments and business leaders on tax, regulation, productivity, human capital, trade, and competitiveness. He had served on corporate and public boards, written widely on economic trends, and become a familiar voice in media whenever there were questions about where the economy was headed.

Bringing Jock into ICBA didn't just add a well-known name; it changed the way the organization built its arguments. As Chief Economist, he was tasked with tracking the forces that shape the construction and resource sectors: housing starts, labour markets, wage pressures, business investment, interest rates, fiscal policy, and the pace of major projects. He began to produce regular analysis explaining how these forces interact – why, for example, B.C.'s headline GDP numbers might look acceptable even as the private sector was clearly softening, or how delays and uncertainty around large projects hurt not just contractors, but the broader economy and government revenues.

ICBA Economics quickly became the banner for this work. Under that brand, ICBA started publishing regular Construction Monitors, budget reviews, and issue-specific papers that drilled into topics like housing supply, major projects, labour shortages, and the impact of regulation on growth. Instead of simply saying “construction matters,” ICBA could show, with data, that construction is a massive share of B.C.’s GDP, that it supports hundreds of thousands of jobs, and that every slowdown in building has knock-on effects for families, communities, and public finances.

This deeper analysis strengthened ICBA’s advocacy on multiple fronts. When ICBA spoke out on housing, it did so with charts showing the gap between new home construction and population growth. When the association criticized federal or provincial budgets for neglecting private-sector investment, it could point to trend lines in business capital spending, productivity, and comparative performance with other provinces. When it urged governments to streamline permitting and approvals for major projects, ICBA could quantify the billions in investment at risk and the number of jobs tied up in delays.

Media, policymakers, and industry partners took notice. Jock’s work began appearing regularly in newspapers, business magazines, and online outlets. His columns, interviews, and presentations brought a construction-centric lens to broader conversations about inflation, interest rates, labour markets, and economic competitiveness. For many readers and listeners, ICBA Economics became a trusted source explaining what national and global trends actually mean for builders on the ground in British Columbia and Alberta.

Inside ICBA, the presence of a Chief Economist began to subtly change the culture of advocacy. Letters to government, position papers, and submissions were increasingly built on a foundation of economic evidence: tables, graphs, historical context, and forward-looking assessments. Campaigns that were once driven primarily by member stories and common sense are now reinforced by carefully assembled data. The stories are still there – the contractor who can’t find enough skilled workers, the builder whose project has been stalled by endless approvals, the company squeezed by higher taxes and fees – but those stories sit alongside charts and numbers that make them impossible to dismiss as anecdotes.

For members, ICBA Economics has provided something they often lack the time or capacity to do themselves: step back from the day-to-day scramble and see the bigger picture. Through ICBA’s analysis, contractors can better understand why financing conditions feel tighter, why certain regions are hotter than others, how public-sector expansion can mask private-sector weakness, and where future demand is likely to come from. That kind of perspective doesn’t replace local knowledge, but it sharpens it.

Looking back over 50 years, the creation of ICBA Economics and the appointment of a Chief Economist stand out as a milestone in the association’s evolution. The founders were never short on intelligence or insight; they built ICBA on keen observation, hard-won experience, and a willingness to stand up for open shop contractors when it was far from fashionable. What they didn’t have was a dedicated economics unit with the tools and mandate to dig into the data full time.

Today, that gap has been filled. ICBA Economics represents the marriage of those original instincts with the kind of rigorous, ongoing analysis that modern advocacy demands. In an industry that lives by numbers – bids, budgets, schedules, margins – it is fitting that ICBA’s next chapter in advocacy is grounded in numbers too. As ICBA marks its 50th anniversary, the rise of ICBA Economics shows how far the organization has come: from a small group of builders fighting for a fair shot, to a national voice pairing real-world construction experience with the economic evidence needed to move governments, shape policy, and keep building opportunity.

ICBA50 #50
Growing With Open Shop

Here's the truth about construction right now: nothing is simple, and everything is urgent. Housing shortages, stubborn permitting delays, inflation that squeezes every bid, a wave of retirements cresting just as demand for skilled people surges – our industry is being asked to build more, faster, and for less, with fewer people. That kind of pressure either breaks you or forges you. At ICBA, it forged us into Canada's largest construction association.

Fifty years ago, on April 26, 1975, a small group B.C. contractors and entrepreneurs – open shop, independent, resourceful and determined – decided they were done being told to stand in the hallway while someone else got the contracts and carved up the work. They wanted opportunity and a level playing field, not special treatment. They wanted to compete. That impulse, born in a little hotel in Trail in 1975, still runs through everything we do. The open shop's rise in British Columbia didn't happen by accident; it happened because thousands of builders proved, project by project, that openness and competition creates opportunity and produces better value, safer sites, and faster delivery. Today, 85% of all construction workers in B.C. are employed by open shop companies. You can feel that shift on job sites, in the boardrooms of owners, and in the expectations of the public: more bidders, more ingenuity, more accountability. As the open shop grew, ICBA grew with it – with relevance and purpose.

When Chris Gardner became ICBA's third president in 2017, he inherited that stubborn streak – and doubled down on it. "Independence means everything to us," Gardner often says in his speeches. "In 50 years, we've never taken a dollar of government funding. Our credibility comes from telling the truth about what's working and what's not, and then providing the services our members actually need." It's hard to overstate how unusual that discipline is in an era when organizations too often chase grants before they drive results. The market is our report card. If what we offer helps contractors win work, train people, support their teams, and grow stronger businesses, we expand it. If it doesn't, we kill it and try something better.

That approach turned a plucky advocacy group into a modern, leading-edge business association – one that moves at the speed of construction, not the speed of government. It also mirrors the open shop story. Independent firms grew because they were wired to adapt; ICBA grew because we wired ourselves the same way. "We want to be the easiest 'yes' on a contractor's desk because of our ability to help solve our members' problems," Gardner says. "If you call us with a challenge on a Tuesday, your team should feel the difference by Friday."

Training is the clearest example of that mindset. Walk any busy site and you'll hear the same plea from superintendents and project managers: give me people who can read the spec, manage the schedule, and solve problems without creating five more. ICBA Training is our answer – a practical catalogue that shifts with the industry. Project management and construction law for folks trying to keep change orders from eating the margin. Estimating and cost control for sharpened bids. Leadership courses for people stepping into bigger roles. Digital tools and workflows because BIM and field mobility are no longer "nice-to-haves." And delivery that fits construction life – in person when that's best, live online when teams are spread thin, on-demand for the 9 p.m. "I need this now" crunch. The open shop needs upskilling at scale; so we built the pipeline for that.

Apprenticeship sponsorship is the companion piece. Everyone has a speech about the shortage of people; we prefer paperwork and phone calls – the unglamorous work that helps our members turn "we should hire an apprentice" into "we registered three this quarter." Small and mid-sized firms, the backbone of the open shop, don't have a spare administrator to shepherd hours and records. We take that on so owners and apprentices can focus on learning, earning, and progressing. Layer in mentoring and clear pathways, and something powerful happens: apprentices become tradespeople, tradespeople become leaders, and companies gain the capacity to say "yes" to more work. The compounding effect is real, and it's how an industry renews itself – one person, one credential, one promotion at a time. And we now sponsor more than 3,000 apprentices; in fact, no company, union or association sponsors more apprentices in B.C. than ICBA.

Construction is also a culture – proud, resilient, and, at times, private. Too private when it comes to mental health. ICBA Wellness exists to break that silence with practical tools that fit the job site: toolbox talks, supervisor guides, conversation starters that aren't preachy or corporate, and confidential supports that people can actually use. We center everything on this idea: a strong safety culture includes psychological safety. Burnout, addiction, and despair rob our industry of skilled people and families of loved ones. "If we can help one person take a step toward support, that's a huge win," Gardner says. "If we can help thousands, that changes our industry." We're pushing hard for the latter.

Benefits matter in that equation, too. Construction is mobile and cyclical; hour banks and seasonal rhythms are features, not bugs. ICBA Benefits was built for that reality, with plans contractors can use to recruit and keep talent, protect families, and promote wellness – without forcing a shop-floor business into an office-tower mold. The point is to remove friction. When benefits work in the background, owners can focus on bids and builds, and their teams can focus on work and life. “We obsess over the customer experience because these are our members – the heartbeat of our association,” Gardner says. “Speed, clarity, and solutions. No waiting for hours for a service rep, no bad surprises.”

Of course, all the training and benefits in the world won’t fix a broken permitting system or a procurement policy that excludes the majority of the workforce. This is where ICBA’s advocacy still looks a lot like our founding moment – undaunted and unapologetic. We push for faster approvals, predictable and practical codes and standards, competitive tendering, and modernized procurement that maximizes competition. We call out rules that drive up costs, stall projects, or reward incumbency over performance. And we back it up with solutions, research, and coalitions – because government moves when broad alliances of credible people agree on practical steps. “Our industry builds things,” Gardner says. “It’s time our policy and regulatory systems learned to build, not block.”

If you want to see how far the open shop has come, just scan the community. The companies building towers, hospitals, schools, roads, and homes across B.C. are overwhelmingly independent contractors playing at the highest level. Owners learned that open competition produces sharper pencils and better outcomes. Taxpayers learned that value isn’t a slogan – it’s the difference between a project delivered and a project delayed. Meanwhile ICBA grew from a B.C. upstart into Canada’s largest and most dynamic construction association, and pushed east into Alberta. We employ more than 60 people – a talented team fully dedicated to serving and supporting our members and clients. The parallel with the way open shop has grown isn’t accidental; it’s by design with our purpose in mind.

That growth also changed how we show up. We still take the tough meetings and make the tough cases, but we also build community. Events that bring ideas and people together. Research that gives our members and policymakers a clear view of what’s happening on the ground. Communications that cut through the noise and focus on outcomes. When the industry is this complex and the stakes are this high, being loud isn’t enough – you have to be relevant.

There’s a temptation, at an anniversary like ICBA 50, to wander through the museum of memories. We’re more interested in what comes next: demographics are shifting, technology is accelerating, capital is choosier. Communities expect more – and they should. Governments face fiscal constraints and should demand better value for every public dollar.

“Open shop is all about competition, fairness and performance,” Gardner says. “Fairness means everyone qualified gets a shot; performance means the best value wins. That’s how you build an industry, a community, and a country.”

That’s the thread that ties our history to our future. The handful of contractors that met in Trail 50 years ago, didn’t set out to start a movement; they set out to win fair access to opportunity and to work. In doing so, they unlocked a more dynamic, competitive, and innovative construction economy. Fifty years later, the open shop they championed is the centre of gravity in B.C., and the association they founded has grown into a modern partner that trains people, supports families, builds careers, and stands up for the conditions that let builders build.

At ICBA, we don’t know everything the future will throw at us, but we know who we are and how we help construction companies succeed. We are clear-eyed about the challenges, impatient for solutions, allergic to complacency, stubborn about independence, and relentless in service of the people who put on boots, pick up tools, manage risk, and get things built. That’s ICBA – growing as open shop grows and inspired by our members’ grit and ambition.