

Premier says Vanoc blew it: Campbell says closing show at the Winter Olympics full of stereotypes that don't reflect 'the new Canada'

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Canada's athletes may have shone at the Turin Olympics. But Premier Gordon Campbell doesn't think its Olympic organizers did so with their spectacle welcoming the world to Vancouver for the 2010 Games.

In a rare criticism from one of the Olympics' biggest boosters, Campbell said the eight-minute closing ceremony had too many hackneyed stereotypes about Canada.

The show, the first test of the 2010 Olympics marketing campaign that will present Vancouver to the world, also did too little to highlight B.C. and the social and economic diversity of the "new Canada," the premier said in an interview with The Vancouver Sun.

"To be candid, I've heard a lot of people who don't think it was an okay start," said Campbell.

Olympic organizers always face a delicate balancing act over how much of their advertising campaigns should be national or local in focus. That's fuelled the recent debate over the decision by Vancouver's organizers to choose an inukshuk as 2010's symbol rather than a more local icon, such as an orca or stylized aboriginal design that goes to the roots of the Pacific Northwest. Campbell has had little to say about that controversy.

But seeing ice fishing depicted at the performance in Turin, where the pastime was made a central focus of Canada's segment of the Olympic closing ceremony, seems to have rankled the premier.

"I thought there were lots of stereotypes that are not what the new Canada is," said Campbell. "Like ice fishing. Ice fishing is one of the parts of Canada. But it's not the only part. When you're inviting people, you don't have to tell them this is a cold place. I think there's lots we can do and we'll improve."

Campbell, whose government has budgeted \$600 million for the Olympics, said he plans to discuss the matter with John Furlong, chief executive officer of the Vancouver Organizing Committee, who he says is doing a good job. But he wonders why Vancouver organizers chose to focus so little on the 2010 Games' host, Vancouver, Whistler, and British Columbia. "I think that's a crucial part of the message," he said. "British Columbia is Canada. And Canada is B.C. And we shouldn't stray away from that."

That seems to be a challenge to Furlong's vision, which entails using the Olympics to create "a stronger Canada whose spirit is raised by its passion for sport, culture and sustainability." While the 2010 Olympics will be held in B.C., Furlong largely casts them as "Canada's Games" and sees the event as a chance to unify Canadians through sport. At Vanoc's Vancouver headquarters, Furlong leaves no doubt about his national priority, often asking employees: "What have you done for Canada today?"

This week he began a national tour to push that very message across the country. At the heart of the premier's critique, however, is a view that Vancouver and B.C. can be a modern metaphor for Canada, with national and global resonance.

"Vanoc's job is to do a great job for Canada," said Campbell. "Deciding that a great job for B.C is not a great job for Canada is simply wrong. B.C. has tonnes to offer Canada. We are Canada. That's all you have to understand."

After its opening show in Turin, which starred rocker Avril Lavigne and opera star Ben Heppner -- born in Murrayville, near Langley -- Vancouver Olympic organizers put out a release trumpeting it as "an unqualified success."

"I am enormously proud of the cultural performance our team produced for the closing ceremony," said Furlong. "Through a dynamic display of artistry and imagination, the world saw the diversity and wonder of Canada and our love of winter sport. I could not be happier with the performance."

When made aware of Premier Gordon Campbell's less generous critique, however, Vanoc's organizers were less self-congratulatory.

"We've heard from a lot of people who were not that pleased," said Terry Wright, senior vice-president responsible for ceremonies.

Although many viewers liked the show, Wright said he and the rest of the team at Vanoc have "learned some valuable lessons" about what happened in Turin.

"One of them is that we're going to need to be a little more explicit about what we're trying to achieve," Wright said.

He cited the reaction to the ice fisher, which has been criticized as perpetuating a cliché and archaic image of the country. The intention, he explained, was to use the character of the ice fisher as a parody on how Canada has been transformed over the years from a frontier land to a modern, urban country.

"We wanted to poke fun at our past and how we've transformed into the future," Wright said. "We didn't get that result. And clearly we won't want to take that chance again in the future."
"Maybe if there's one regret, we tried to do too much in the eight minutes. We didn't get our story told as well from a television perspective as we'd hoped."