

Can Grace Lore Fix the Ministry for Children and Families?

It may be the toughest file in BC's government. The new minister says she's ready to meet the challenge.



Tracy Sherlock / Yesterday The Tye

Tracy Sherlock is a freelance journalist and journalism instructor based in Vancouver. She is the editorial lead for the Spotlight: Child Welfare project.



Grace Lore, centre left, with her partner, Rob, and their two children, Asher and Eve. Lore is new to leading BC's Ministry of Children and Family Development and is running for re-election in the high-profile riding of Victoria-Beacon Hill. Photo submitted.

Leading the Ministry of Children and Family Development can be a thankless task — it's one of the toughest jobs in government with the highest stakes — but Minister Grace Lore says it's among the best ministries to lead.

“What am I doing in this business, if not working for those kids and families?” Lore told The Tye in an interview the day before the election writ dropped.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development

(<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/organizational-structure/ministries-organizations/ministries/children-and-family-development>) is responsible for the well-being of children, youth and families in British Columbia. It oversees the child welfare system, which in B.C. has seen the high-profile deaths of many children (https://rcybc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Final-RCY-NR-July-16-2024_2.pdf) in recent years.

News about the children's ministry is rarely positive.

MCFD is one of B.C.'s most complained about public entities, including by Indigenous people, B.C. Ombudsperson Jay Chalke reported (https://bcombudsperson.ca/assets/media/OMB_AR_2023-2024_WEB.pdf) in September. More than 80 per cent of MCFD's child-welfare social workers say they can't do their jobs properly because they have too many children (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/social-workers-caseload-1.7272549>) to look after, B.C.'s representative for children and youth reported (<https://rcybc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/RCY-NoTimetoWait-July2024.pdf>) in July.

Victoria pediatrician Jennifer Balfour wrote (<https://www.timescolonist.com/opinion/comment-for-the-sake-of-children-this-ministry-needs-a-reset-8515257>) an opinion piece in the Times Colonist in March, after waiting hours on the phone to report a child well-being concern. She called for an overhaul of the ministry, including more staff and greater accountability about recommendations made in report after report.

"It was news to MCFD when I told them last week a certain young child hadn't been at school for three months. Nobody seemed to know," Balfour wrote.

"She was unseen by anyone, in the care of an unwell adult, and it took almost an hour and a half to get through to highlight how very, very concerning this is."

'Determined' and leading 'a very hard file'

Lore, 39, is in her first term in elected office as the BC NDP MLA for Victoria-Beacon Hill, the riding Carole James served from 2005 to 2020 as the first woman to lead an Opposition party in B.C. This is also the riding where BC Green Party Leader Sonia Furstenau (<https://thetyee.ca/News/2024/09/19/Sonia-Furstenau-Greens-Big-Opportunity/>) seeks a seat in the 2024 provincial election.

James, who served as a longtime Opposition critic for the Ministry of Children and Family Development, met Lore through an organization called Equal Voice that encourages women to run for office, just as James nudged Lore to do when she stepped down.

Lore's willingness to stand up for her community and her ability to connect with people are strengths, James said.

"'Determined' is a good way to describe Grace," James said. "I was so proud when Grace became minister, because I know she has both the heart and the brains to be able to take this file on.... It's a very hard file. All of us were grateful that Grace was going in there. But also [we] held our breath, because we know it's a tough file."

Come election day on Oct. 19, Lore will face off against Furstenau, who switched into the downtown Victoria riding from her previous constituency of Cowichan Valley, and Tim Thielmann, a lawyer and Conservative Party of BC candidate.

Lore and her husband, Rob, have a 10-year-old daughter, Eve, and an eight-year-old son, Asher. Her son was treated (https://www.facebook.com/GraceInVic/posts/839430970248412?ref=embed_post) for a brain tumour in 2021, just three months after Lore was elected and then appointed as parliamentary secretary for gender equity.

“I described it at the time that I was on a very sharp learning curve, both as an MLA and as a parliamentary secretary,” Lore said. “And then I fell off a cliff.”

Her son has now recovered, although he is still monitored by BC Children’s Hospital. The experience, as well as some ongoing mental health challenges he has had, has given her family a lot to reflect on.

“My family is resourced and able and safe. So, I think mostly it’s thinking about what it would have been like to try to navigate all of that without the resources, safety and support my family had,” Lore said.

“I don’t think a parent has to go through anything particularly like what we went through to think about MCFD,” she said, illustrating the connections between her family’s struggles and the significance of her ministry. “And what it means when kids are in need of safety and love and families need support to stay together.”

Campaign stories you won’t read anywhere else

Sign up for The Run, our free election newsletter.

Your email	SUBSCRIBE
------------	------------------

Work that can’t wait

Lore was appointed children’s minister in January, when former minister Mitzi Dean was removed from the role following the death of a young boy (<https://thetyee.ca/News/2024/07/19/One-Boy-Death-Child-Welfare-BC/>) in care. Referred to as Colby to protect his privacy, the boy died after being abused, tortured and beaten by his caregivers. Social workers hadn’t checked on him for seven months.

When B.C. Representative for Children and Youth Jennifer Charlesworth investigated Colby’s death, Lore spoke at the release of the report. She promised a better system that would focus on support for families.

“Every single child in our province deserves safety, love and belonging,” Lore said at the time.

She committed to hiring an Indigenous child welfare director, a position that has now been filled.

On Sept. 30, the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, Jeremy Belyea (<https://earlylearning.ubc.ca/news-asc-profile-jeremy-belyea/>) , whose name has been changed to Jeremy Y'in Neduklhchulh Williams, will start his work to reduce the number of Indigenous children in care and keep children connected to their families and cultures.

Lore also promised to create a cross-government committee focused on vulnerable children, youth and families, a committee Lore says has already begun meeting.

“It’s kind of unprecedented to have deputy ministers pick something up so close to an election,” Lore said.

“But I think there’s a real sense across government, and for me as minister and in my ministry, that this can’t wait until November.”

First Nations resuming jurisdiction over child welfare

Since 2019, when the federal government passed Bill C-92 (<https://www.canada.ca/en/indigenous-services-canada/news/2019/06/an-act-respecting-first-nations-inuit-and-metis-children-youth-and-families-receives-royal-assent.html>) , An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families, and 2022, when the B.C. government signed Bill 38 (<https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/bills/billsprevious/3rd42nd:gov38-1>) , the Indigenous Self-Government in Child and Family Services Amendment Act, many First Nations have been resuming jurisdiction over child and family support systems.

Earlier this month, Lore signed a new accord with the First Nations Leadership Council — the Rising to the Challenge Accord (<https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2024CFD0010-001549>) , which recognizes and upholds that First Nations have the inherent right to self-determination, including jurisdiction over First Nations children and families.

“The well-being of First Nations children in B.C. continues to be an absolute crisis, with disproportionate numbers of our kids in care and experiencing far too much violence,” said Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, president of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, on the release of the accord. His wife, Joan Phillip, is the NDP candidate for Vancouver-Mount Pleasant.

“This accord represents a serious commitment by Minister Grace Lore and this provincial government to move forward together, recognizing the ongoing, heartbreaking impacts of colonialism on our children and families.”

Chief Don Tom, from the Tsartlip First Nation on Vancouver Island and vice-president of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, worked with Lore on the new accord. Tom said working with her was “a breath of fresh air.”

“[She is] a minister who has empathy, a minister who follows up, a minister who sees the bigger goal and who is a partner to First Nations in achieving jurisdiction in looking after our children and families on our own terms and having the resources available to do so,” Tom said in an interview.

“You can see how much she cares about the work she does. You can see how much she cares about the transformation and what she can bring in the work she is currently doing already.”

Lore has also signed community agreements with several First Nations defining how child welfare will be managed. Each agreement varies, based on what services each nation is ready to take over, and work on a funding model is underway, she said.

“We are doing some really, really important work, really heavy lifting, work that is overdue,” Lore said. “I’m reminded by all the nations that we’re working with and their leadership that these are starting lines, not finish lines. I am hopeful.”

‘We can’t work incrementally anymore’

Colin Tessier, executive director of Threshold Housing Society (<https://www.thresholdhousing.ca/>), a non-profit in Victoria that provides housing support for vulnerable youth aged 15 to 24, said Lore is in politics for the right reasons: her presence is informed by her care for the community.



“There was a lot of hope for the future when Grace was named for that post,” says Colin Tessier, executive director of Threshold Housing Society in Victoria. Photo submitted.

“I know there was a lot of hope for the future when Grace was named for that post. In many ways, the MCFD file is the most challenging in government. It’s incredibly complex,” Tessier said in an interview.

“But with Grace and her education, background, community experience and her ability to work across government silos and such, I think there is hope that there may be some bold action, which is what’s needed to move us forward.”

Tessier noted that he wasn't advocating for any particular party in the election in his position because Threshold Housing, as a non-profit society, is non-partisan. But he underlined the importance of decisive action on improving B.C.'s work with children in care.

"We can't work incrementally anymore in the context of the child welfare system. There's death and harm basically every day, and it needs bold leadership to actually move forward."

Lore, who studied gender and politics while completing her undergrad and PhD at the University of British Columbia and her master's degree at the London School of Economics, has advocated (<https://www.instagram.com/graceinvic/p/C67eWrXNkxx/>) for trans rights on social media.

Statistics Canada data shows there are more non-binary, trans and gender-diverse people living in Victoria than anywhere else in Canada, Lore said.

"As a local MLA, I take that responsibility very seriously. I think the stakes are high, in this election, as they are for Indigenous rights, for reconciliation, for jurisdiction," she said.

"We also know that 2SLGBTQ kids are overrepresented among kids in care and vulnerable kids, so that's important to me.

"Fundamentally, this is about kids' right to be who they are, to be safe, to be loved, to have a life full of joy, so that's the starting line and the bottom line for me."

The 'honour and responsibility of a lifetime'

Lore said she never planned for a life in politics.

Prior to running unsuccessfully for a city council seat in 2018, she was teaching political science at the University of Victoria and working with the Victoria Sexual Assault Centre and other anti-violence organizations.

Her partner, Rob, urged her to run for council when he heard her talking about housing and community building. She ran a "small, scrappy, grassroots campaign" and said it was challenging but worthwhile because she learned so much about the community.

"And then 2020 rolled around and I was encouraged and supported to take the nomination," she recalled. "And I jumped in."

She's an avid runner and has completed nine marathons, though she insists she's not a fast runner and prefers half-marathons.

Earlier in September, she completed the Vancouver Gran Fondo (<https://www.rbcgranfondo.com/whistler/the-ride/granfondo/>), a 122-kilometre bike race from Stanley Park to Whistler along the Sea-to-Sky corridor.

"A dear friend of mine, who I ran with all the time — we ran a few marathons together — was living with cancer for many years," Lore said.

“In February she asked us to do the bike race and do some fundraising, and we lost her in July.... Both my running and biking are sort of grounded in that friendship and loss, and one of the lessons she left me with was to always move because you can.”

Lore said physical activity is essential for her mental health, her energy, her brain power and her ability to parent young children while serving as MLA and a government minister.

“As I wrap up my time in this role, it certainly has been the honour and responsibility of a lifetime to do this work with the team that is the ministry, with the responsibility that it is to do some justice to stories like that of Colby,” Lore said.

“I think we moved a lot of things forward in legislation and that kids are being seen and supported, and in our relationship and collaboration with First Nations Leadership Council and jurisdiction.

“There is lots more to do.”

*Want to get even more of The Tyee's election coverage? **Sign up today for The Run***

([https://subscribe.thetyee.ca/run/?](https://subscribe.thetyee.ca/run/?utm_source=website&utm_medium=runelectionstory&utm_campaign=runelectionstory)

utm_source=website&utm_medium=runelectionstory&utm_campaign=runelectionstory) . *It's a free B.C. election newsletter full of smart voices unpacking key issues, fact-checking politicians and exposing disinformation to clarifying light. Go beyond the horse-race headlines and **subscribe now** ([https://subscribe.thetyee.ca/run/?](https://subscribe.thetyee.ca/run/?utm_source=website&utm_medium=runelectionstory&utm_campaign=runelectionstory)*

utm_source=website&utm_medium=runelectionstory&utm_campaign=runelectionstory) . 