

MASSIVE SCHEME FOR PATAGONIA

Alfonsin's second republic

By DAVE TODD
Southam News

BUENOS AIRES — It was laughed at as an impossible, empty dream when he announced it 13 months ago: one man's politically irrelevant folly.

But President Raul Alfonsin's bold plan to move the nation's capital to a pair of small Patagonian cities — Viedma and Carmen de Patagones — almost 1,000 kilometres south of Buenos Aires has suddenly become a wild card in one of the highest-stakes political gambles in Argentina's history.

After staring down a sequence of army uprisings in April — the gravest crisis Alfonsin has had to face since taking office in December 1983 from a brutal dictatorship — his determination to press ahead with the scheme to transfer the capital has hardened, domestic political analysts and foreign diplomats say.

Critics call the project insanely ambitious for a country of 30 million people already struggling under a foreign debt equivalent to \$70 billion Cdn, exceeded in the developing world only by the external debts of Brazil and Mexico.

While the Alfonsin government's official estimate is that the initial 10-year development phase for the new capital will cost \$6.2 billion, predictions by political parties opposed to it have set the final tab as high as \$20 billion.

But Alfonsin has instead stressed what he envisions as a historic opportunity to develop a vast empty quarter of the country. Of even greater importance, he says, is the need to bring about a fundamental change in the social psychology of Argentines, turning them away from "the hopeless decadence of a model of society that we know has no future."

Buenos Aires dominates the life of Argentina as few other capital cities of vast nations do, even Moscow.

In a country of 2.8 million square kilometres (28 per cent the size of Canada, with a 20 per cent larger population) 35 per cent of Argentines are crowded into Greater Buenos Aires, a city already the size of London and expected to have more than 12 million people by the turn of the century.

In comparative terms, it is as if metropolitan Toronto, Montreal, Quebec City, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary and Halifax were all rolled together into a single entity, leaving the remainder of Canada to wrest for itself what political, economic and cultural influence it could from the gravitational epicenter.

Patagonia, its 780,000 square kilometres stretching from the proposed new capital to the island of Tierra Del Fuego, holds less than three per cent of Argentina's population. Viedma-Carmen, after more than two centuries of

Argentine President Raul Alfonsin is determined to press ahead with a massive scheme to build a new capital city 1,000 kilometres south of Buenos Aires in windswept Patagonia. Critics call the project, which could cost up to \$15 billion, insanely ambitious. But Alfonsin sees it as a historic opportunity to develop a vast empty quarter of the nation and change the psychology of Argentines by turning them away from "the hopeless decadence of a model of society that we know has no future"

settlement, has a mere 50,000 people.

"The Mexicans are descended from the Aztecs; the Peruvians are descended from the Incas. The Argentines descended from boats," the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes once joked.

The truth is that between 1850 and 1910, Argentina's population rose from 1.2 million to 8 million people, almost entirely as a result of European immigration.

In 1880, Buenos Aires was designated by the constitution as the nation's capital and thereafter became an unchallenged magnet: developing into a great, if ingrown, world city but a virtual country in itself.

More insidiously, as Buenos Aires grew, the nation's fortunes declined catastrophically, catapulting it at the start of the Great Depression into a half-century of dictatorship and military-dominated "democracy" from which it has only emerged with Alfonsin's election.

Now, says Alfonsin, it is time for Argentines to show imagination and build "the second republic."

"Yes, it's time to move the capital. Because, more than a mere administrative change, this transfer will signify the elimination, in eloquent form, of the existence of two countries," Alfonsin told the national congress in a speech following the Easter military rebellion.

"It's hard for us to comprehend just how strongly he feels about this," said a political officer at one

foreign embassy who, while deeply skeptical of the Viedma project, confessed to admiration of Alfonsin's doggedness and motivation.

"It's a Copernican revolution, from the point of view of the change in the nation's center of equilibrium," says Alfonsin's close friend and constitutional strategist, Jorge Vanossi.

Don Newland, editor of the English-language daily, the Buenos Aires Herald, is unimpressed.

"How can anyone seriously look at the moving of the capital as an end in itself?"

"Thousands — perhaps several million according to some estimates — of Argentine children live in the streets. Avoidable floods ravage farmland and dwellings every year. People are going hungry," says Newland.

Incredibly, in a country with the world's highest per capita meat consumption — 100 kilograms a year — the government provides food packages to one-eighth of the population. Buenos Aires' 10 million people have two public pediatric hospitals. In many districts, there is a 10-year waiting for new telephone service.

For all of its huge foreign debt, largely racked up during the military dictatorship from 1976-1983 when the country's annual growth rate averaged just 0.1 per cent, there has been remarkably little public sector investment since the 1960s.

Meanwhile, the Peronist-dominated trade union movement, which has a vital interest in preserving its Buenos Aires, where half of the country's industrial workers are, also opposes the capital's transfer.

They, like most opponents of Alfonsin's dominant Radical Party, are calling for the government to concentrate on long-overdue damage repairs to the country's crumbling and neglected social services and utilities — and incentives for new economic development — rather than embark on a grandiose venture into the hinterland.

Build your shining city some other time, say Alfonsin's opponents.

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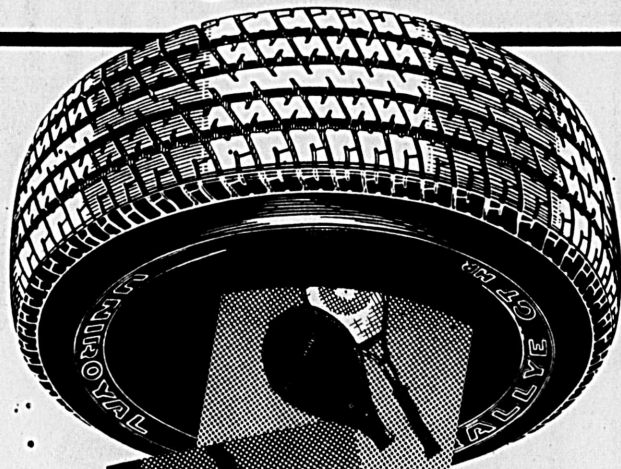
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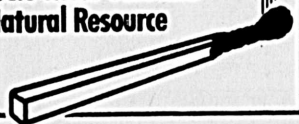
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Woodward's CORRECTION

In Woodward's Summer White Sale Flyer selling May 20 to June 21, Page 3, Item C, copy on the photo should read Texmade 'Innocence' twin sheet set, Sale 39.99; Page 11, Item A, "Embassy" sheers, panel size 115"x81" price should read Sale 29.99, not 24.99 as stated; Item B, 'Holly' kitchen curtains and Item C, 'Cape Cod' kitchen curtains, photos are transposed; Page 13, Item G, expandable closet bar is pictured in photo N, not Photo G as shown. In Woodward's Summer White Sale flyer insert, Page 3, Wonderbra #700 lycra brief dollar savings should read Save 2.51 - 2.71 not 2.51 - 7.51 as stated; Page 7, Item A, the Pentax Zoom 70 camera is not an SLR camera as stated.

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