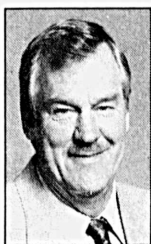


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OPINION

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EDITORIALS

School budget clock ticking

Next week will be trial by fire for School District 57's board, administration and staff. They have to find \$2.7 million in spending cuts so they can balance the district's operating budget on or before Tuesday.

Board members and the administration have actively sought input from employees, students and the public on how to deal with the budget shortfall. Reaction to these communications efforts was muted.

Whether because of apathy, disbelief or some misunderstanding of the magnitude of the problem, Prince George and area residents didn't follow the lead of Lower Mainland parents and stage protests, storm school board meetings or try to shout down or bully trustees into protecting what they saw as essential.

That doesn't mean, however, that we won't see fireworks in the next few days.

All over the district, from casual help and classroom assistants to high-level administration, people fear for their jobs, and the unions that represent some of them are prepared to argue loudly for job security.

Groups of parents and teachers who fear specialized programs such as French Immersion, Montessori and other programs are also ready to defend their concerns.

And then there's the school closure issue. Schools at Dunster, Upper Fraser, Dome Creek, McLeod Lake and Bear Lake may be shut down, with students bused to Prince George.

The process of trying to decide which school or schools will be closed is bound to pit communities against each other.

In the life of a school trustee, such times are stressful, to put it mildly.

Their challenge is to try to do the right thing for education in the district.

They have to pick their way through the minefield of concerns by residents of small communities, employee groups, special-interest factions and others to cut spending with the least possible impact on the district's long-term ability to provide educational services.

Our challenge is to understand that the board must run the school system with a budget that is set by the provincial Education Ministry, and direct our questions and concerns there.

Let's not shoot the messenger; let's remember where the message came from.

Roy Nagel

QUOTABLE

"I mentioned that the last pieces are the hardest to put into place. It was a bit like the negotiations."

— Canadian Ambassador Anthony Vincent, on the 2,500-piece jigsaw puzzle he gave to hostages in Lima before Peruvian troops freed them in a lightning strike.

"Somehow, Canadian beer in America has a slight skunkification."

— Comedian Mike Myers, in Toronto discussing his new movie and the things he misses about his native land.

"I'll be chained to a desk."

— Stock trader Ted England, after the Toronto Stock Exchange replaced its lively trading floor with a computerized system.

"Today I'm very pleased to say the light is bright green. It's almost blue it's so green. But if it turns amber, we'll have to make allowances for that."

— Federal Fisheries Minister Fred Mifflin announces expansion of the northern shrimp quota.



Promise of spring collides with skepticism of election

OTTAWA — It is a wise man who calls a spring election. It is the least cynical season.

It is early to be on the land, but already the seeding is under way. In this, the politician is no different than the farmer: over-eager, rushing the season, hands soft from winter work.

A pre-election spring is a grand time to wander the country. Once election madness descends, every conversation becomes an interview, every gathering is scripted, and every doorstep, factory, field and forest is reduced to a potential photo backdrop.

For the moment, though, the country is relaxed, vivid and filled with surprise.

There is time enough once the writ drops for polls and policy. Even a 36-day campaign, mercifully shortened from the train-age minimum of 47, is more marathon than sprint. For the moment, though, it is still possible to look beyond the labels — Bureaucrat. Politician. Voter. — and catch a glimpse of People.

In Sydney, N.S., for all its spiralling unemployment, there is still such a thing as rush hour. Serenading drivers this evening, by the cenotaph off King's Road, is Murray MacKenzie, 33, a bagpiper by trade and inclination.

They love the pipes on Cape Breton island, which is a comfort to MacKenzie. He is in the military reserve, a member of the Nova Scotia Highlanders, and many nights and weekends he has paid work fulfilling the ceremonial obligations of a soldier and a piper.

He is bemused that something as archaic as the pipes sustains him, where a university degree and computer literacy have not. It gives an appreciation of the old ways and a healthy suspicion of the pat political prescriptions for wrenching Cape Breton into the 21st century.

Up the coast is North Sydney, where people say the island's official unemployment rate of 27.4 per cent is a sad underestimation.

A reporter enters the Canada Employment Centre there expecting the worst: an island of despair in a sea of despond, ruled by a sour federal bureaucrat.

Then one meets Alice Almond, whose business card — manager, Canada Employment Centre — is the only bureaucratic thing in sight.

The colors are warm, the office is wide open and stuffed with computers. Clients and staff deal on a first-name basis. The atmosphere is that of a well-run business on deadline.

Almond, not for the first time, has thrown convention out the window. She had doubts in these desperate times. "We were training

THE NATION

Ken MacQueen



them," she says of her clients, "but were-the jobs there?"

Her question triggered a rethink about two years ago. A resource centre was created, combining staff from her employment centre, from provincial social services and even the local school board. Businesses were brought on side and volunteers were recruited.

The thinking is to get students before they become clients, get clients before they slide onto welfare, and get those on the dole back in the chase. By combining budgets and twisting arms, the centre has more staff, more equipment and more imagination than is generally allowed in the federal bureaucracy.

It is a fool who packs his stereotypes when he travels.

TODAY IN HISTORY

April 25, 1997

Gov. Gen. Lord Elgin signed the Rebellion Losses Bill 148 years ago today — in 1849. The bill gave compensation to residents of Lower Canada (Quebec) whose property had been damaged in the rebellions of 1837. The legislation was known as the "rebel rewarding bill" because in the confusion over which side caused the damage, some rebels, as well as those loyal to the government, were compensated. Opposition to the bill was vehement. Elgin was attacked by an English-speaking mob and the Parliament Buildings in Montreal were burned down.

Also on this day in:

1959 — The St. Lawrence Seaway was opened for navigation.

1964 — The Toronto Maple Leafs won their third consecutive Stanley Cup with a score of 4-0 in the seventh game of the championship series against the Detroit Red Wings. They would only win one more — in 1967 — in the next 33 years.

Consider the stunning transformation of the Mont Tremblant resort, equidistant to Montreal and Ottawa, where the bilingualism is a fluid as the skiing. Throw out that image of Quebec, brooding, insular and bleeding opportunity.

Here, the rocky politics are buried under a base of money, style and powder snow. Hundreds of millions in investment pour in, an act of faith over politics by the same British Columbia company that made Whistler a world-class destination.

Cross the country to Innisfail, Alta., and two Reform supporters launch into a condemnation of official bilingualism.

In rural Alberta, reality is a growing trade with the Pacific Rim. Their son is in university, studying the languages of work: Japanese and Mandarin.

Redneck. Moderate. Right. Left. Nationalist. Federalist. Soccer Moms and Angry White Men. Such labels tend to limit rather than define once you hear a person out.

Voters are just people who have been roughed up some. Even boomers, that dreaded, dominant demographic, are scarred by two deep recessions a decade apart. And, no, they have not recovered.

Ask what the issue is, and odds are that a person in Cape Breton, with the highest unemployment rate, gives the same answer as one in Alberta, with the lowest. Jobs, they say, surprised at such a daft question.

Curiously, blessed parts of Ontario and points west are booming. Yet, when pollster Donna Dasko of Environics put the question recently, 74 per cent said the economy was still in recession.

Mentally, perhaps it is.

It is allowed, in this pre-election moment, to spare some sympathy for those seeking office. Their audience numbers among the best educated voters in the history of democracy.

Voters are skeptical, they are not ideological. You can't but pity those trying to craft a national campaign to satisfy so many moods and needs and regions. The wonder is that people rise up to try.

What's in it for Conservative Leader Jean Charest or NDP Leader Alexa McDonough?

Things change after an election call. We grow harder and less forgiving. It is not cynicism, not in the springtime. An election is applied skepticism: looking beyond the political sand-bagging, hoping for something real.

Distributed by the SouthamStar Network.

Bad old flat tax rears its ugly head again

by CATHERINE FORD
Southam Newspapers

CALGARY — The good news about Stockwell Day's musings on a flat tax is that Alberta's treasurer can't single-handedly touch the country's tax system.

The bad news is that he's thinking and talking about it.

Day's support for a flat tax system — even as he prepared to release the Alberta budget and millions of Canadians stare bleakly at next week's yearly income tax deadline — is obviously a trial balloon. (For an Alberta Tory politician, there is no safer place to be than secure in a majority government and publicly supporting a measure that both the federal Progressive Conservatives and the Reform party are touting.)

The notion of a flat tax isn't new, but it reappears every so often, favored by the right of the political spectrum. It isn't altruistic, although it wears that

cloak, and to listen to its supporters, from Michael Walker, head of the Fraser Institute, to Dick Arme, the powerful Republican majority house leader in the U.S., it is the need to give people relief from tax-inspired headaches and mind-boggling regulations that spurs them on to propose changes.

The most sophisticated of the proposals come from Arme, who has been riding this hobby horse for years. He calls such taxation fair, simple and progressive. "So fair it might even restore your faith in the government," he told a group of writers. "You could do your taxes on a postcard."

There's dubious value in the later, and an astounding assumption in the former and they both add up to part of the lie.

Every person would receive a deduction — about \$12,000 US for each adult and \$5,000 for each child. A family of four would have a tax deduction of \$34,000 and would pay 17 per

cent on all income above that. With few adjustments, this is the same proposal made two years ago by retiring Calgary Centre MP Jim Silye. While the Reform party's new campaign platform refers to two "flatter taxes" instead of a flat tax, various tax loopholes and deductions would be eliminated and the GST abolished.

It is impossible to remove the flat tax proposal from the politics of the right. It is tailor-made for the class of people who believe government social programs are nothing more than unfair taxes.

Yet it is Canada's progressive system of taxation that supplies the incentives for corporations and organizations to support charities (including political parties) and provide benefits to their workers, to invest in Canadian business, to create jobs, and to pay for research and development and provide the framework for medical care and the rest of the social safety net.

Separated from its political component, the flat-tax proposal is about the only subject on which the really poor and the really rich could agree. Both would benefit, although the rich would benefit more, needing less of a percentage of their income to supply the basics of life. As these two classes of people represent the statistically insignificant (although financially impressive) opposite ends of the economic Bell curve, it is curious why so many other Canadians are such fans.

The secret is obvious: supporters believe they, personally, would pay less in taxes. This is the big lie of flat taxation. This is the kind of interesting economics that drives realists — those people not driven by a political agenda — around the bend.

In its simplest form, a flat tax is just that — one dollar, one taxation rate; one flattened tax for everyone. No deductions, no loopholes, no tax incentives or tax breaks.

There's only one problem — that's all an illusion. Consider that would mean taxing all gambling and lottery winnings; taxing RRSPs and pension plans — every dollar in your pocket. It won't happen. There would be "exceptions" like business incentives, or the specious U.S. notion that investment income should be except from tax because it has already been taxed once.

Under a revenue neutral flat tax system, most of the middle class would pay more, not fewer taxes. Go out on the election campaign and try to sell that to the folks next door.

Like a vampire, it seems nothing short of a stake through its heart will kill the big lie of taxation.

As politics, pushing flat tax is a no-lose proposal. As an economic policy for the country, it's no win.

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