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Wed, December 5, 2007



Alberta's latest chickens have come home to roost. This time repairing schools in province adds up to double the trouble for cash

By RICK BELL

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Few will give a damn.

Just get the blinking stuff built, the majority will say. Who notices if billions, that's billions with a B, are blown? There's an election to win in the spring, as early as March.

And it's only money and this is Alberta, no haven for the fiscally conservative despite all the chatter to the contrary, the la-la land of easy come and easy go until the province hits the wall and it really is too late and folks are left to pull out bumper stickers bemoaning their short-sightedness and promising to learn for next time.



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But, for those among us who do care and who respect the public purse, and for historians who will vindicate those who called it right and were slimed for their logic, this gong show could have been so much different.

We are reminded again yesterday when the latest chickens come home to roost. Heck, we've got so many of these chickens we could supply the Colonel for the next century.

Well, this time, provincial Treasury Board arithmetic shows the government won't be setting aside \$200 million for 18 new schools, nine in Calgary. No, the new

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amount, is ... the drumroll please, so everybody can clean the wax out of their ears ... \$512.6 million.

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Girls and boys, that's way more than double. Of course, the reason for this hike of \$312.6 million is the fact costs are going through the roof and we must pay because ... wait for it, now ... the provincial Tories ignored all kinds of advice and put off most of the necessary building until all the U-Hauls were here and unpacking and the economy was hot, hot, hot.

Instead, the province paid down the debt much faster than their own plans laid out because debt became the great evil and, unlike the real world, there couldn't be a digit of debt on the books.

But now ... duh ... with the debt off the books and billions of bucks needing to be spent on all the bricks and mortar put on hold the provincial Tories scramble.

For cities and towns, the government hands out hard, cold cash because a guy like Bronco isn't taking an IOU. The south hospital, more than double the original cost, is being built out of the provincial chequing account. The province dithered on that deal for a very long time.



Some construction recently given the thumbs-up, such as at the university, must see their designs shrunk because, in a matter of months, their money doesn't buy as much. Yessir, announce building and watch the tab balloon.

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So what do the provincial Conservatives do? They decide to get private companies to finance and build public projects and then the taxpayers will pay the outfits back over time, just like a mortgage.

In other words, the Tories get us into this mess because they couldn't build enough of the needed stuff since most of the dough had to go to kill the evil debt as quickly as possible. And now to catch with the backlog in building they created the province says it has to go back into the very debt that just three years ago had to be avoided at all costs.



Premier Ed says his government is "looking at new ways of catching up" and doesn't even look red-faced.

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Kevin Taft, the Liberal leader, raises questions in the legislature on the latest mad mathematics.

But Dr. Daft apparently possesses no phone with long-distance capability so his words will not appear on this page, though we are sure they contain many smart-sounding syllables. No matter. Ray Martin, an NDP MLA from Edmonton, rides to the rescue and, since his party has been banging away on this drum, it just seems right.

SUNshine Girl



"They've created a mess. They're looking for a quick fix. Plain and simple," says Ray, who must be a carpenter because he hits so many nails on the head. Ray points to a report done for Canada's cities and towns showing this buy-now and pay-later building is no magic solution.

It is very quiet in the capital, with no one wanting their chestnuts roasted over the open fire. Education Minister Ron Liepert zips his lip. His department's hired mouthpiece says the Treasury Board numbers are not their numbers, washing her hands so strenuously it would have made Pontius Pilate blush.

Lloyd Snelgrove, the Treasury Board president, is reportedly too busy to answer questions, probably colouring in his own licence plate design to submit to himself, complete with GPS so he can always find his truck.

Let us evoke the ghost of Ralph, three Stampedes ago, bursting his britches over getting rid of the debt.

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Or, sadly, just a whole lot of very angry chickens.

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