

# Bonanza or Bust

By Don Hill

I am going to get weird on you. A few months ago, you might recall my rant on language. I wrote, "Words only refer to themselves," a phrase that should fit well on a tee-shirt (I'm thinking of making a few up). Lawyers immediately get the dig because this is the world they live in—language constructs a territory called the law—nothing else *can* exist in the courtroom other than the law and the legal process to uphold it.

Mitigating circumstances for why a legal decree is broken, a 'common sense' defense, for instance, cannot be taken into account because "that is not why we are in court today," a legal chum of mine once declared. Insurance companies are particularly adept at scrutinizing the minutia of contract law before paying out large claims; it is not about avoidance; it is about conforming to the letter of the insurance agreement.

The same can be said for the economic system we currently live with: If it doesn't have a budget line, it does not exist. And yet any sensible person can look around in the real world and see that this kind of willful ignorance is, well... goofy thinking at best and, in some cases, downright dangerous.

The ongoing meltdown in the financial markets as we understand them is a reality check. Most prudent people realize, once presented with the details outside the frame of reference of the 'financial instruments' industry—notably the derivatives trade—that this was a calamity waiting to happen.

## BEWARE THE EXPERTS

I have deep suspicions about present-day notions of sustainability; the word itself is squishy, applied in just about every way imaginable by public relations agencies (which is cause enough for alarm).

A personal history gives me ample cause to be wary.

I grew up in Sudbury, possibly one of the most desecrated landscapes in this country. So much so, the mining city in northern Ontario was parodied as a 'moonscape,' the top spot on the earth for NASA astronauts to practice before their walk on the moon in 1969.

A hundred years of industrial blight and toxins blanketed my hometown, infecting the earth, the air, every waterway and, by extension, every human

being living in the shadow of the Nickel Capital of the World. You would think someone in authority would ask questions about the blooms of asthma and other respiratory ailments in the region. That nobody did for decades has more to do with the measures for so-called progress than actual negligence or dereliction of professional duty; the health of Sudbury's workers and their families was unaccounted for because none of the powers that be had an entry in their spreadsheets to do so. It sounds nuts... and so it is.

The word 'sustainable,' to my way of thinking, needs to be carefully thought through so that the failures of government oversight and economic accountability are not repeated. With noteworthy exceptions, we can ill afford an encore performance of the past century. The *process* for sustainability as now imagined is destined to fail unless there is a major change in how we report it on the books.

I want to point you toward a remarkable column by **Robert F. Kennedy Jr.** in this month's *Vanity Fair* magazine. The U.S.-based environmentalist, president of the Waterkeeper Alliance and no stranger to Alberta, argues that green technology and "the kind of entrepreneurial revolution we need" will stall and be thwarted by existing rules and subsidies and perks and no end of incentives that favour the present energy infrastructure in America (and by extension, Canada too). To paraphrase Kennedy Jr., it is precisely because the bureaucracy has no way to account for new ways of doing business, it can only do what it is supposed to do: enforce existing legislation with "a byzantine array of local rules [which will] impede access by innovators to national markets."

The Alberta government's position on climate change and "water for life," which is touted as a "top priority for Budget 2008" is a distraction. Do not get me wrong. I am not saying for a nanosecond

that the Progressive Conservatives should not go ahead with their financial plan. My primary concern is that a more promising stimulus—locked inside another budget announcement "for scientific research and experimental development"—does not go far enough.

## INVENTORS ARE WEIRD

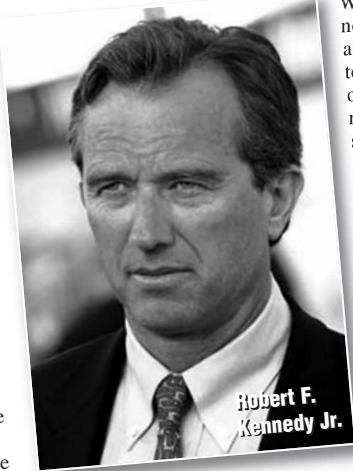
In my view, and history backs me up, the best way to tackle industrial-strength challenges is to rid yourself of existing methodology and do everything you can to discourage the people who say they can fix what they broke in the first place. The last thing you should do is reward mediocre thinking—the organizations that promise a better typewriter when the world wants word-processors (this actually occurred in the former Soviet Union).

The trajectory of innovation in the last century, and the one before that, points the way forward. The airplane, the automobile, alternating current electricity, telecommunications of every sort from the telephone to television and the personal computer... all of these miracles of invention sprang from the minds of people in unlikely places—entrepreneurs working off the grid—who learned to "think different," not by way of official government policy and incentives but, in many cases, in spite of them.

It may be hard to believe now but the inventors of powered flight, the **Wright brothers** "couldn't convince the [United States] government they had something of practical use." **Darrell Collins**, a historian at the Wright Brothers Memorial in Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina, added that European nations "were interested, but generally evasive when it came to making firm commitments." In fact, the United States government had to order its bureaucracy to investigate the utility of the Wright brothers' invention years after their flimsy flying machine left the ground. As one history of flight scholar put it, scientific expertise at the time, especially in France, proposed that bicycle mechanics had no right to fly.

Edmonton is an attractive place for forward-thinking people of every stripe and vocation. I just hope the folks in the legislature who make the rules will tell the people who enforce them that innovation does not necessarily square with existing legislation. And that the next best new 'sustainable' idea will likely look pretty weird.

Why should you expect otherwise? After all, we are Albertans. ✓



Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

## Edmontonian IN EXILE

By Janet Edmondson in Calgary

Here's one for the "tree-huggers"—or it would be, if there were any trees nearby to hug.

My friend **Bernice** lives in a new high-rise condo very close to the Stampede Grounds in downtown Calgary. Early last spring, she left some flattened cardboard packing crates leaning

against a wall on her 20th-floor balcony. When she returned from a vacation a few weeks later, she discovered that pigeons had made a nest behind the cardboard. Pigeons are a big problem in Calgary, as they are in most major cities. More than once, I have opened our condo balcony door to be startled by an iridescent flurry of railing bashing. Their exodus is short-lived; pigeons are persistent in their attempts to return and, presumably, nest.

Bernice's nest was something else. Two little eggs



gently laid in a bed made entirely of wire, wood, spikes, and that yellow plastic tape used to bind construction materials together. Apparently, these are the best substitutes for twigs and grass that urban pigeons can find. The nest is a work of art. No sharp edges poking the eggs, but a structure sturdy and comfy enough to deposit the next generation.

Bernice was faced with a difficult decision: Remove the nest and save herself hours of pigeon poop removal... or leave it alone and become the maternity ward of choice for future generations of pesky pigeons.

Ultimately, there are two fewer birds in the downtown core, and Bernice has a unique sculpture and a great story. ✓



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