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Expo is a big joke

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February 26, 1986. Expo 86 president Jimmy Pattison sits perched on a tall stool in front of an angry crowd, angry because some of Vancouver's poor people are facing evictions from their homes to make way for Expo tourists with lots of money.

A side door opens and several people pelt raw eggs at the stage. One smacks Pattison's face and dribbles slowly down his cheek, as he speaks. Another lands on his beautifully tailored suit jacket.

Not far away a sign outside a nightclub reads "Girls Girls Girls — Expo 86 visitors welcome."

If all the toilet paper Expo expects visitors to use during the fair was layered one meter deep along the Trans Canada Highway, it would stretch all the way from the B.C. Place stadium to Expo to Squamish 50 miles away.

That's how much shit Expo is bringing to Vancouver.

According to Premier Bill Bennett's Social Credit government, Expo 86 is supposed to solve all of B.C. economic woes. It adheres to "mega project logic" so familiar to British Columbians and favoured by the Socreds. But many critics say that Socred logic is faulty and that Expo will be a waste of money, creating enormous social and economic problems.

Much has happened to Vancouver since Bennett announced it would host the world fair. Not all of it is good.

Construction workers put their jobs on the line in wild-cat strikes that didn't shy away from violence to protect union jobs threatened by Socred legislation. In a confrontation that lasted several months, the construction workers fought an unsuccessful battle against the government, the press, and Expo 86.

Some of the events have been ridiculous: like the American souvenir company which threatened to sue the Feds for using the Canada Pavilion logo on their

souvenirs. It seems Expo had sold those rights to the Yankee.

Or the changing guard at the top of Expo's corporation. Several of Expo's top managers have been regretfully "retired early". Expo did not take kindly to the press discovering the creative uses some of these executives had found for Expo money. Twenty-one major managerial changes have taken place since the corporation's formation.

Much of Expo is hilarious. Take for example the giant hockey stick nestled between two bridges and pointing the way to the Canada Pavilion. It's bigger than you've ever seen. The biggest in the world, in fact. Canada's great defence. They say it represents the great Canadian style. Do they mean slapstick?

Or how about the Shinto wedding contest. All you have to do is write Expo explaining why you want to be married by real Japanese Shinto priests on stage at Expo. Enclose a photo and you are one of six lucky couples who win the honor of getting hitched in front of 15 million strangers. (If you look right, that is.)

We have brilliant architecture. So brilliant each wall is at a different angle and rain pours in through every crack. Bring your umbrella.

At Expo, a civilian can fearlessly ride on a toy car shuttle, hastily rechristened after its namesake, the Challenger, became another casualty of America's "omnipotent" technology.

There would have been a fish-tank dance floor with hundreds of shimmering gold fish beneath the public's dancing toes, but the fish got canned (mildly tainted) before the shock of high heels pounding on their faces left them floundering. Another brave rescue by animal lovers everywhere.

There's more. Lots more. It's so exciting, Vancouverites are!

But in the Ukrainian Hall in downtown Vancouver, hotel residents are angry.

May Heginbotham is 87 years old and confined to her room with a painful leg condition. She has until March 19 to leave the room she has shared for the last three years with her 83-year old friend John Stefanizan. Their hotel is being renovated in time for Expo. Fifty people must find other lodgings.

At the Patricia, another resident hotel, 50 more people just received eviction notices. Some of them have lived there for 20 years. Now they have a week to move. One man, in desperation, jumped from his window to his death after hearing the news.

Although the residents pay \$220 per month, the hotel is planning to charge tourists \$65 per night for a single room during Expo, reveals a survey conducted by the Downtown Eastside Residents Association.

DERA is a citizen's action group which represents the people who live the dilapidated urban ghetto of the downtown eastside.

The DERA survey shows at least 30 hotels in the area are planning renovations that could displace more than 1,000 people. There are no rent controls to stop the hotels. The federal government did away with the controls.

When asked for his help to lobby the government for temporary rent controls during Expo, Pattison humbly claimed his sphere of influence is limited to the Expo grounds. However, he said he would be opposed to the evictions if the tenants have nowhere else to go. (Jimmy is such a good Christian. Fundamentalist actually.)

Expo began as a humble transportation fair to celebrate Vancouver's 100th birthday. It was supposed to cost \$79 million. Now it's an \$800 million monster with a \$400 million deficit.

But the Socreds aren't concerned because they claim the losses will be recouped through a lottery they've established (our dreams will pay for the government's gamble) and through the influx of tourist dollars.

Jimmy Pattison says we should have expected the deficit. In an interview with the Vancouver Sun, Pattison said there is no way to hold a world class fair for 5 1/2 months and "recap" all the costs." There's not much disagreement on that point.

Chuck Blackorby is an economist at the University of British Columbia. As a member of a left-wing political think tank, The Pacific Group for Policy Alternatives, he has studied past world fairs for the economic value.

"It is not possible to go through all the post World War II fairs and find one that profited," said Blackorby. New York, Spokane, Montreal, New Orleans, Tokyo, all closed with deficits, he says.

Blackorby argues that world expositions just aren't efficient means to rescue a failing economy.

And as a job creation scheme, it's pretty ineffectual, the economists say. Richard Allen, B.C. Central Credit Union chief economist, predicts a two per cent decrease in the unemployment rate during the fair. "But where do the workers go in October?" he said.

Larry Kuehn, chair of the Pacific Group, said employment rates during the New Orleans fair rose by two percentage points but then returned to pre-Expo figures right afterward. The same is expected for Vancouver.

The jobs at the fair are mainly low-skilled, low pay and non-union. Employees are guaranteed no more than four hours work each day (but must be prepared to work 16) at \$4 per hour. The jobs only last 5 1/2 months and applicants are asked their opinions on unions before being hired.

"Is that an efficient way to create jobs?" asks Blackorby. "I doubt it." It's not an efficient way to improve tourism either, says Blackorby. He says Expo will steal business away from the rest of the province.

"During the Los Angeles Olympics, business at Disneyland, Martha's Vineyard, and other southern California attractions was down by 30 to 40 per cent."

Blackorby says families on limited budgets will be forced to choose where to vacation in B.C. instead of spending money in a number of tourist centres.

Blackorby also doubts Vancouver will benefit from an increase in tourism in the future. "Ever heard of anyone going to San Antonio (Texas) or Spokane (Washington)?"

For something that is supposed to do so much for this province, Expo sure has a lot of side effects, says Steven Leary, a vocal Expo critic and DERA worker. A major one is traffic.

The theme of Expo is transportation and communication, yet the Expo 86 committee has not conducted any traffic studies, says Leary.

"The traffic planning is nil. Now there are estimates that they will be 11,000 parking spaces short. We've got 17 hour rush-hours, which means emergency vehicles won't be able to get through the neighbourhood."

The shiny new showcase of advanced transportation technology — the skytrain will do little to overcome the traffic problems, says Leary. He doesn't believe the system, which can move 8,000 people per hour, can possibly cope with the hundred thousand the Expo committee expects each day.

The first casualty is Create a Real Available Beach (CRAB), a waterfront park which was finally created after residents occupied the area in tents for an entire summer. The city is building a gigantic 1500-car parking lot, right next to the little park, for Expo visitors.

Expo just doesn't make sense as an economic renewal plan says Blackorby and his colleagues. They would rather see the money spent upgrading social services, on reforestation or salmon enhancement, projects they think have more effective long-term benefits.

Expo was never intended to solve economic problems says Wendy Frost, founder of People First 86, an anti Expo group.

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