

Which door you choose makes all the difference.

December 1994 Column — Country Life in B.C.

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Our last column left those of you who had stepped up and tried out the TIME-O-RAMA READER-RIDE standing in the year 2030 — standing out in the middle of what was once your farmland, to be precise, but now apparently “The Prettiest Darn Little Country Estate Community in all of Cascadia” (if billboards are to be believed).

The story was not a pretty one. As Yuppies discovered the valleys — “*probably all those Jolly Green Giant commercials they saw as kids*” your virtual guide had muttered to herself — in-migration conspired to place farming and residential growth on collision paths. Politicians — both in bondage to and impotent in the face of Paleolithic hierarchical structures within their own ministries — gave up and let the issue-managers run the show. Like the tail wagging the dog, the guys farthest away from the thinking end of the beast — not the hardworking eyes and ears in the regions but those at the other end of the bureaucratic anatomy — made decisions that shook the entire sector.

Well-meaning but naive city folks — under the guise of speaking out for farming — harped on about organics and happy hens. Commercial farmers, tired of holding the can for the future with land they couldn't afford to own anymore, bailed out.

The same food price increases that hit B.C. when local competition was removed quickly escalated to a global scale. Over the next twenty years, prices skyrocketed as transnationals shifted global food production from one lesser-developed region to another, leaving behind spoilt soils and newly-privatized regional water markets; markets from which they received huge profits during their final “o.k.-guys-we're-leaving-town-who-wants-to-buy-our-water-rights?” sale of water previously used for irrigation.

Fortunately, virtual life, unlike real life, has a fast rewind. Shaken, you dial yourself back to 1994, and once again are sitting safely back in the TIME-O-RAMA theatre.

The two doors appear before you once again on the giant screen. You know you should just put this column down and get on with the 101 things you still have to do before winter turns serious, but curiosity gets the better of you. You settle back for *one more trip* into the future. Twirling the dial in your armrest to 1999 (something close, this time, you think, the last ride was too scary) you pick door number two — the *green door*, of course... It slowly swings open.

Ah, what's this? It's night time. The sharp scent of new hay competes favourably with the gentle fragrance of the rich soil as it releases its heat to the night. Off on the distant hillsides, the lights of a sub-division twinkle. Your *virtual guide*, this time a portly little man in a large green hat, appears by your side.

“*Know where we are?*” he asks. “*But I thought all this had disappeared?*” you reply as you look around, remembering your last trip into the future. “*What a difference a door makes, eh?*” he winks, “*but let me tell you, it was real close...*”

Just when it seemed the darkest, it all began to turn around. In 1995, B.C. producers won a key debate — agriculture's right to government compensation for the half million acres of late summer-early fall irrigation potential created in Washington State under the Columbia Treaty. Why compensation? Because government actions artificially enhanced the market position of U.S. farmers; undermining the competitive position of B.C. agriculture.

Dubbed THE 6% SOLUTION, commodity groups put aside differences and stood united in their demand that 6 percent of the Columbia Treaty benefits (Canada's one half share of the second thirty years of downstream benefits — over \$5 billion by 2024, \$1.6 billion in 1994 dollars) be placed in a fund to facilitate the competitiveness of B.C. agriculture. Why 6 percent? Because 6 percent of the

water B.C. stores and releases under the Columbia Treaty is used for agricultural irrigation south of the border. Quid pro quo. \$90 million bucks.

That's how the SOLUTION FUND got started. Yearly interest on it's \$90 million initial capital base was used to level the playing field for B.C. farmers. In some cases, this meant amalgamating farm parcels. In others, it meant ensuring the preservation of agricultural land in high pressure regions by buying out (through covenants and over time) surface rights for agriculture in perpetuity. Some of the money funded research and development.

Having worked together so successfully on the 6% SOLUTION, all manner of other things suddenly seemed possible. And so, of course, they were.

In what first appeared as a random act of leadership fanned by the new wave of strong farm support, the agricultural minister of the day embarked on a bold new experiment: the deputy minister was sent back to the farm. Specifically, to live in the Fraser Valley for 6 months and the Okanagan for 6 months with one objective only: to listen to farmers, understand their concerns and report back on solutions. Out of this came the Ministry's *Out Standing in their Fields Program* — a year-long management sabbatical for Victoria bureaucrats that tested their ability to really earning a living from agriculture— in the boots of instead of on the backs of B.C. producers. Area farmers were paid to give them job-training. Only those deemed employable as farm labour at the end of the year were rehired by the ministry. All of a sudden, relevance happened.

Right to Farm legislation based on Best Farm Management Practices was quickly enacted. Changes to the Municipal Act were rushed through to ensure municipalities treated farming communities with respect. Regional agricultural potential was recognized and supported by a newly-enlightened, newly-restructured and non-hierarchical bureaucracy. Policy measures to ensure that farmers had long-term access to both land and water at a cost reflective of their agricultural values were enacted.

Buy B.C. finally took off. Townies proudly displayed bumper stickers that said "Do *you* know where *your* food was grown?" Equality of access to government programs was backstopped by creation of a user-friendly, one-stop-shop window for all programs. Competitiveness Tests (*How will this impact the competitiveness of area farmers?*) complete with mitigation/compensation procedures were required for all government programs/initiatives which could have an impact on agriculture.

"Just imagine..." chuckles your guide as he faces the future with a smile, a twinkling wink and a tip of his big green hat. "Just imagine..."

Background music up. Screen fade-out. Lights up. Exit doors open. Disembodied Voice-over: "*Your move. It's All Possible...*"