

# OPUNTIA

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Whole-numbered OPUNTIAs are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, x.3 issues are apazines, and x.5 issues are perzines.

## LIFE IN A BOOMTOWN.

by Dale Speirs

**New World Aborning.**

2007-10-10

While oil stays in the \$80 and higher range, and the loonie rises to par against the American dollar, life continues in boomtown Calgary, the petroleum capital of Canada. Every Calgarian subscribes to the peak oil theory, propounded by the late geologist M. King Hubbert. In 1956, Hubbert predicted that conventional oil production in continental USA would peak in the early 1970s. It actually happened in 1970. Alberta's conventional oil production peaked in 1978, and our current boom is based on the Athabasca Tar Sands and conventional natural gas. (Almost all conventional oil fields have a cap of natural gas, which is not extracted until after the oil in order to maintain pressure. When a drillhole is converted from oil to gas, it is an acknowledgment that the oil field is dead.) As conventional oil production peaks around the world, economic optimists who deny Hubbert have been doing some whistling past the graveyard.

Garbage pickup in Calgary residential neighbourhoods is now once every second week, instead of weekly. In any other city this would be due to a budget crisis, but here it is due to a shortage of garbage truck drivers.

Bus schedules are only approximate to the nearest fifteen minutes on weekdays and are once an hour on weekends. Calgary Transit

1000	0
900	45
800	30
700	15
600	0
500	

**2007 Nov 22**

Subject to conditions on back

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**Calgary Transit**

is short a couple hundred drivers, and the rest can only work so much overtime. For the first time in history, City Hall asked its labour unions to re-open their contracts before expiry so they could give City workers an extra 2% rise to keep them from leaving.

**Vote Early And Vote Often.**

Municipal elections are being held in Alberta on Monday, October 15. Most small towns are

lucky if they can get all the positions filled, many of which are by acclamation. Calgary had a few positions acclaimed at the aldermanic and school board levels. Incumbent mayor Dave Bronconnier has one serious challenger and the usual gang of fringe candidates, but is expected to win re-election easily. He has been a go-getter and is the first mayor in decades to be a leader rather than coast along reacting to events.

In my ward, the incumbent suddenly retired, hoping to stand as a Tory in the next provincial election, widely expected to be called early next year. Five candidates are jostling to replace him, but I am only considering two possibilities to vote for. One is a retired Parks Dept. employee, although I never knew him because we were in different branches of the department. The other I know from his past presidency of the Calgary Horticultural Society. The retiring incumbent owns a landscape maintenance firm, so it seems fairly certain that to be elected where I live, you must have green thumbs.

Calgary has a clean city council. There are no scandals brewing that anyone knows of, and municipal politics is free of corruption. The biggest dispute in the election is which way to expand the LRT commuter train system, and whether or not to put part of it underground.

And so to the polls. In my neighbourhood, it was at its traditional location, the Altadore Elementary School. The schoolchildren goggled excitedly at all those strange adults tramping in and out of the gymnasium where the booths were set up. The sun was shining and I even found a parking spot directly across from the school.

Bronconnier was re-elected in a landslide as expected, and my choice for aldermanic candidate was a distant also-ran. What was surprising was that in three other wards, the incumbents went down in defeat, one of them finishing in third place. Historically, incumbency is job security short of being caught molesting children or photographed by police taking a suitcase full of money from a real-estate developer.

In the Mixed Metaphors category (Grand Award) one of the successful aldermen said in her victory speech: "It's time for the new council to have all hands on deck ready to roll and take the bull by the horns". This brings to mind an image of politicians wearing roller blades on board a ship and chasing an escaped Texas Longhorn around the deck. She bears watching.

The polls closed at 20h00 and the local radio stations finished their coverage an hour later. The big news story of the day was

not the election but the fact that oil closed above US\$86 per barrel, a record high. Aldermen are dispensable, but Calgary stands or dies on the price of oil. Radio stations here report the market price of oil and natural gas just after the weather report. Some report the price of gold, but Alberta is not a major mining province so fewer people have an interest in it.

**Deck Us All With Boston Charlie.**

2007-11-23

Oil has been staying in the \$90 plus range the past few weeks, and the money is flowing like water down Calgary streets. There is no god but Mammon, and Hubbert is his prophet.

I popped into a Zellers department store to pick up a few things. A sign on the door said that due to the ongoing staff shortage, the Christmas season hours would be 10h00 to 15h00 on weekends. Other Calgary stores which can barely keep sufficient staff for the regular part of the year, are likewise gearing up for Christmas by cutting back service.

Zellers also had an hiring ad on the doors for cashiers at \$12 an hour plus benefits. The higher wages also mean higher costs for any labour-intensive operation, although dry goods seem to be priced the same as ever or lower thanks to the high Canadian dollar. Breakfast at a fast-food outlet anywhere in Calgary (toast, eggs and bacon, beverage) now costs \$7+.

I later stopped off at a 7-Eleven convenience store. The new posted hours were 06h00 to 20h00, again due to staff shortage. They are advertising for help at \$11 per hour plus benefits plus retention bonus. Like Zellers, there was a lineup at the till because only one cashier was on duty. Calgary is big enough that 7-Eleven actually does have some 24-hour stores, but a few are now barely open twelve hours a day.

Although I have worked at Parks depots all over the city during the past 27 years, I am currently at the same depot I first started at in 1980. The difference was that in those days there were at least a dozen staff on duty per depot over the Christmas holidays, not including as many again who were off work on vacation time. Now there are two people on the Monday to Thursday shift, and just myself on Friday to Sunday. Every other depot is the same. And we haven't yet started our winter vacations. Parks is short of staff like everyone else.

**Walla Walla, Wash. And Kalamazoo.** 2007-12-08

I always take the entire month of December off as my vacation, on the grounds that short vacations don't allow one to forget the job and relax. The first week of December is usually taken up by Christmas parties, the most popular time for such events since so many people leave on vacation later in the month.

At one such party today, the hosts were Dwayne and Janice. He is a stamp dealer and had lying on the table a copy of the show catalogue for the Royal 2007 Royale national stamp show, held earlier this year in Toronto. Calgary hosted the Royal in 2006, and I produced the show catalogue for it. The 2007 catalogue bore such a similarity to my catalogue that for a split second I thought it was. There was no doubt that the 2007 catalogue was copied directly from mine. The photos, text, and other content were different, of course; there was no actual plagiarism. The layout of the catalogue was, however, identical, right down to the positioning of the articles, the font, and the placement of everything. I was not upset by this but took it as a compliment that Toronto philatelists admired my work so much that they used it as a template. Dwayne noticed me looking at the catalogue and told me that not only did they imitate it, they also copied the Royal 2006 Royale Web site. It will be interesting to see what the Royal 2008 Royale catalogue looks like from Sainte Foy, Québec. Imitation is indeed the sincerest form of flattery.

I chatted with Janice, who is a long-service cashier at a Safeway supermarket. She told me that the company had just finished a major, city-wide job hiring fair at all stores. They were only able to hire six new staff. That's city-wide, not per store. The local branch where I shop has now finished installing four lanes of self-service checkouts. They just need one clerk for the four lanes to keep customers honest about scanning their purchases.

I took the bus downtown to pick up my mail at my box number. As I exited the post office, I saw a Calgary Parking Authority surveillance van cruise past. The van had six cameras on its roof, three on each side at different angles to scan licence plates of parked cars and take an overview of the entire vehicle as further identification. It was also equipped with a GPS antenna which coordinates with the GPS devices in the parking meter pay stations. If a licence plate is identified for a vehicle that hasn't paid or has an expired meter, the van's on-board computer identifies the exact location of the vehicle, photographs it from three angles, and transmits the data to City Hall. There, another computer reads the licence plate in the scan, prints out a parking ticket with time-stamped photos as proof, and stuffs it into an envelope addressed to the car owner. The ticket is in the mail by quitting time.

Red-light cameras and photo radar have been commonplace in Alberta for years. Every commercial and public building has closed-circuit cameras. Traffic cameras are now being modified to photograph speeders in intersections and automatically mail them tickets via the police computer. There are separate police vans with multiple roof-top cameras that cruise Calgary streets and shopping mall parking lots looking at licence plates, searching for stolen cars. The recovery rate is about one per day. If a

business or traffic security camera is nearby, the police check back on that camera to when the car was parked, hoping to identify the culprit.

From the post office, I took the LRT train up to the University of Calgary. It was a bright cold day and the clocks on the platform were striking thirteen as Big Brother watched us.

### **Swaller Dollar Cauliflower Alley-Garoo!**

The rise of the Canadian dollar has made it pleasant to order items from the USA and have the invoice at par. The loonie is at a thirty-year high against the American dollar.

I moved to Calgary in 1978 after graduating from the University of Alberta in Edmonton, so 2008 marks three decades in this city, the longest I have ever lived in one place. I was born in 1955 in the rural village of Eckville. To this day it does not have any traffic lights or surveillance vans, although Mrs. Rangan over at the café keeps a close eye on who goes into the hotel tavern and a sharp ear for gossip. In 1963 my parents bought a farm north of Red Deer, long since paved over and turned into an industrial warehouse district. Dad liked to refer to the city as Red Light because it was basically impossible to hit two green traffic lights in a row no matter which direction or speed you drove.

In 1955, men had not yet gone into space, but newborn baby Dale was closer in time to a Moon landing than he is now as a middle-aged man. In 1963, the USA was becoming bogged down in an unpopular foreign war. Iraq ain't nothin' but Vietnam mis-spelled. In 1978 the Calgary economy was booming from high oil prices and it seemed the party would go on forever. The lights went out in 1982. In 2008 the Calgary economy is booming from high oil prices and it seems that the party will go on forever. If the lights do go out in a few years, the security cameras and Mrs. Rangan will be there to record it.

**And A Happy New Year.**

2008-01-03

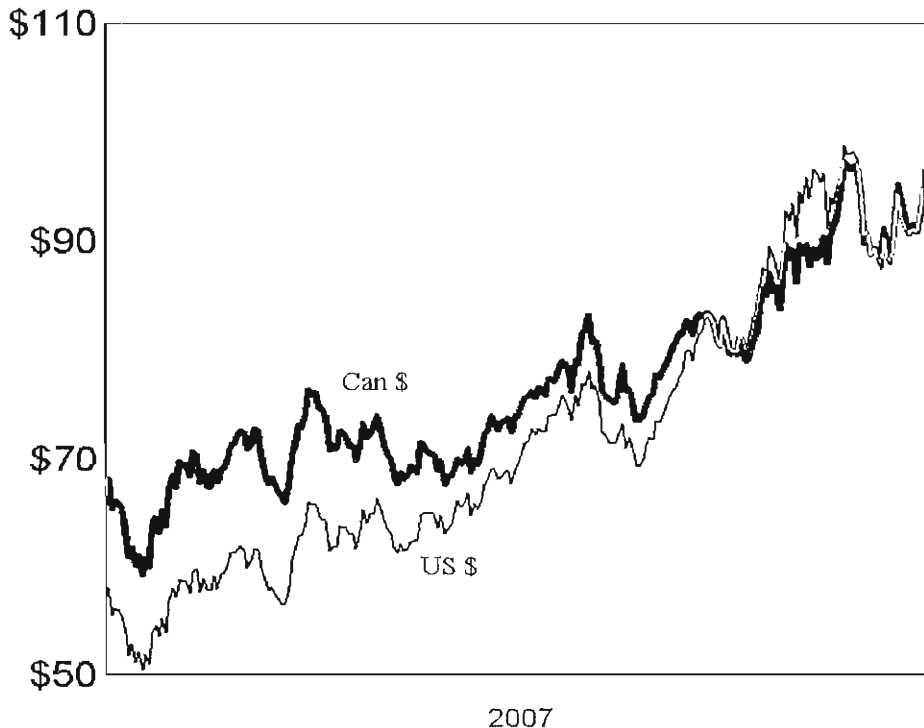
Yesterday, the first trading day of the new year, oil briefly touched \$100 per barrel before closing at \$99.62. Today all the Calgary newspapers (and the rest of Alberta) had screaming front-page headlines about \$100 oil, in huge 5-cm-high typefaces last used to announce the end of World War Two.

This year is the 150th anniversary of the petroleum industry in North America, using drilled wells as the definition. Oil seeps, including the Athabasca Tar Sands, had long been known and used by aboriginal tribes throughout the Americas. The first drilled well was in 1858 near Oil Springs, Ontario. To this day, Ontario still produces small quantities of oil. No doubt in that part of the province they too were celebrating \$100 oil. The following

year a well was drilled in Pennsylvania which became the first American well. Although Alberta had minor oil wells pre-WWI, it wasn't until the Leduc #1 well came in during 1947 that we became an oil province. The Leduc field is pretty much dry now.



## Oil prices - 2007

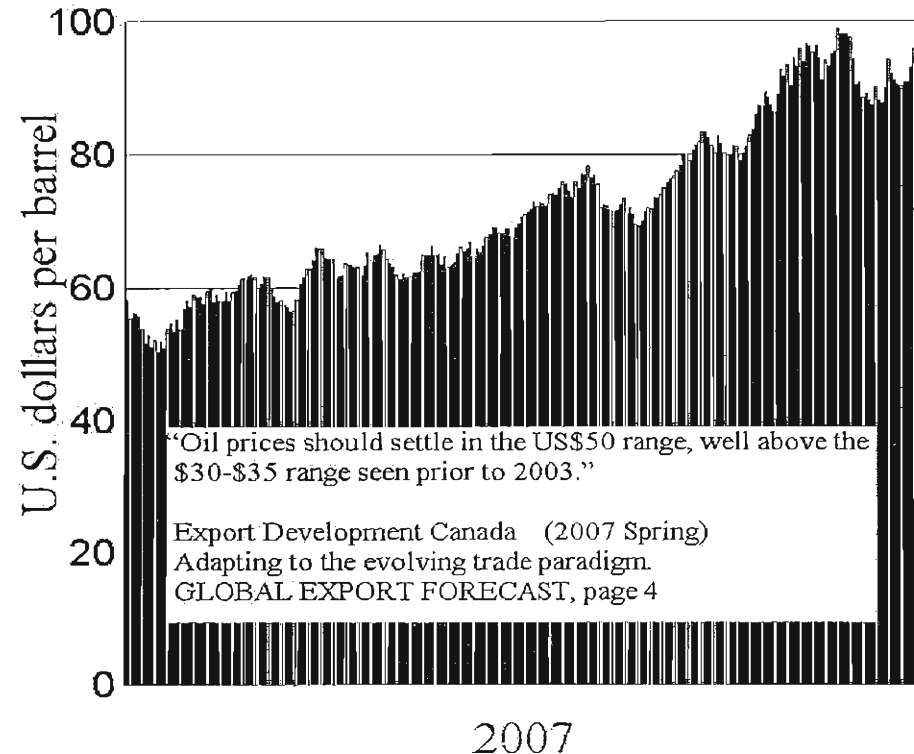


Meanwhile, back at the Athabasca Tar Sands, British Petroleum have announced they are buying into one of the projects. Several years ago they were advertising themselves as “Beyond Petroleum” and touting their greenness. Now, after a fatal refinery explosion and a ruptured pipeline, attributed to cost-cutting and lack of safety, BP have admitted that they are indeed a petroleum company. There is joy in Heaven for the sinner who repenteth and accepts Hubbert as our Lord and King. Because BP was late in buying into the Tar Sands, they will be paying a premium. No one in the petroleum industry has sympathy for BP, which for years lectured the rest of the industry on how to be environmentally-friendly and run a safe operation. The Germans have an excellent word for it: schadenfreude, the taking of joy in other people’s misfortunes.





## Oil prices - 2007



G.K. Chesterton, in the opening paragraph of his 1904 novel *THE NAPOLEON OF NOTTING HILL*, writes about a game called ‘Cheat the Prophet’:

“The players listen very carefully and respectfully to all that the clever men have to say about what is to happen in the next generation. The players then wait until all the clever men are dead, and bury them nicely. They then go and do something else. That is all. For a race of simple tastes, however, it is great fun.”

## Game Over -- You Win

Peak oil	Cantarell	Leduc #1	Ghawar
0	26	26	26
0	52	52	52
0	78	78	78
0	104	104	104

OK



### Let The Games Begin.

2008-02-04

Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach has called a provincial election for March 3. The Tories have been in power since 1971, but as a result of the ongoing petroleum boom, the province has been flooded with large numbers of migrants from eastern Canada. They are not necessarily going to vote Tory. During the last provincial election, Calgary actually elected several Liberals. There is also concern that a new right-wing party, the Wildrose Alliance, may split the vote with the Tories. For the next month, Albertans will be plagued by politicians shouting "Vote for me!"

Normally my riding is a boring one, but this time I lucked out. The Tory candidate is Arthur Kent, formerly a television war correspondent and anchorman on the national networks. During the first Iraq war he was known as the Scud Stud. Not that I'll vote for him, but the news media are paying more attention to my riding now.

-10-

### Speaking Of Politicians ...

2008-02-07

With great fanfare, the City of Calgary announced its first automated public toilet (APT), opened today in a park on the Red Mile, a strip of sports bars running along 17 Avenue South from the hockey arena. The \$210,000 toilet is self-cleaning. After each use the seat retracts into a wall where it is scrubbed by water jets. To prevent transients from camping out in it, there is a heat-sensing device which gives a warning at the 9-minute mark, then opens the door at 10 minutes ready or not. The toilet is being tested in the winter (currently -25°C) to see if it is suitable for installation in other parks. Given the labour shortage in Calgary, it is supposed to save on janitorial costs, but one wonders how much the technician will charge to keep it in good running order. The local politicians were quite excited by this, and several alderman proudly posed in it, fortunately not with their pants down around their ankles. Us Parks workers already have a betting pool running on how long it will last.

It has been announced that the APT will be closed all day for modifications to the toilet paper dispenser. I didn't want to know the details.

Meanwhile, back at the futures market, oil closed today at \$100.74. It is the first time in history that it had closed past this benchmark, although it had touched it in intra-day trading earlier this year. There was a Texas oil refinery that blew up on the weekend (fortunately for BP not one of theirs) but the main reason for the price spike was that oil and gold are now hedges against the American dollar. Analysts agreed that investors were fleeing the dollar and putting their money into oil as a safe haven, rather than oil prices increasing because of a serious shortage. Every time the American Federal Reserve lowers interest rates, more investors run for the exits.

Meanwhile, back at the commodities market, the price of wheat has also been soaring, albeit with less publicity. It has doubled in the last year, from \$216 per tonne to \$510. I enjoy a bacon-and-egg bagel with a glass of milk at a local bagel shop every morning, the price of which jumped to \$6.05 today. Perhaps I should sell my oil stocks and invest in bagels. The price of wheat has soared because of crop failure in Australia and elsewhere, but unlike oil, the situation will eventually correct itself as farmers

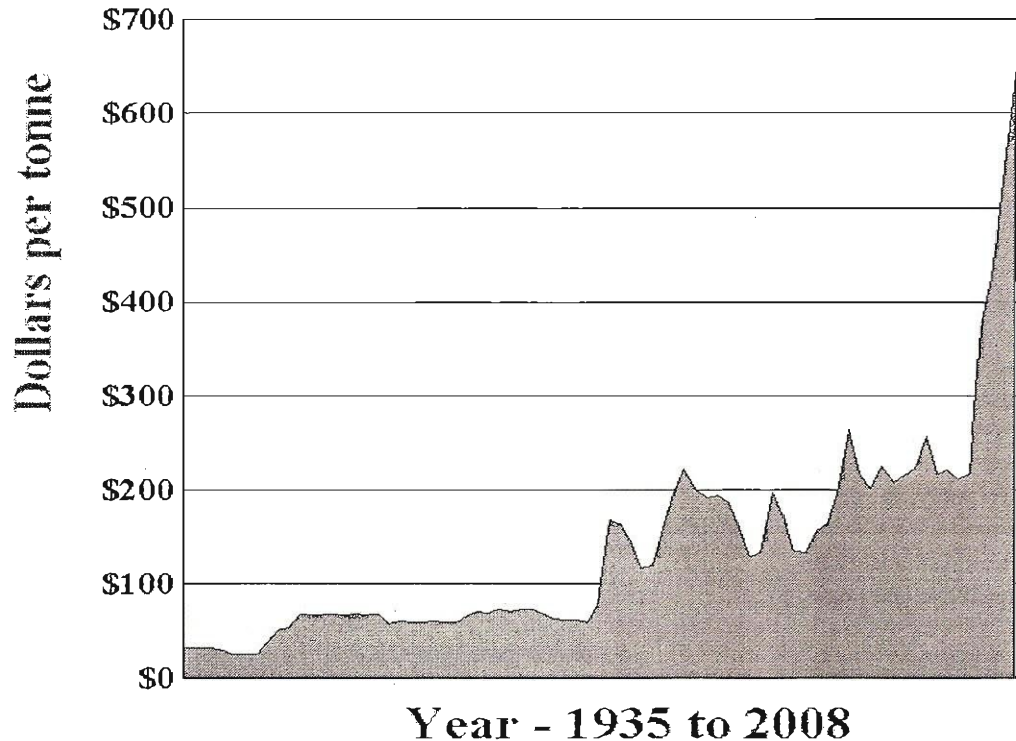
plant more wheat and one or two good crop years occur. There is no peak wheat theory, and Hubbert had nothing to say about durum reserves.

Over the past few days, I had noticed when walking about downtown that there were a number of parked cars with their trunk lids opened up all the way. Nothing was inside the trunks, and I assumed that someone was unloading their car and was inside the adjacent building. Today I saw the same cars at it, with no one around and the trunks empty. I suddenly realized what was going on. All those vehicles had their licence plates on the trunk lid, as opposed to the bumper, so that when the lid was open, the plate was facing up to the sky and high enough that the Calgary Parking Authority surveillance vans couldn't photograph them. The drivers of the vans do not stop and get out; they keep going. I had thought when the vans first started circulating that parkers would put a piece of cardboard or rag over their licence plate, but I haven't seen that yet. Probably too obvious to passing police cruisers whose constables are behind on their ticket quotas.

From the downtown core, I took the LRT train up to the University of Calgary. It was a bright cold day and the clocks were striking thirteen, but Big Brother was having trouble watching us.

# Wheat prices - Canada

A Bright Cold Day. -12-  
2008-03-01



Saturday afternoon, and I was at work. In addition to handling trouble calls I also keep an eye on the outdoor rink crews. Passing through the downtown core, not an easy job in itself, I swung by the Olympic Plaza. 9th Avenue had multiple lane closures due to skyscrapers under construction, and traffic had to keep switching back and forth across the lanes.

I turned onto Macleod Trail SE, the main drag that runs past City Hall. Olympic Plaza is directly across from City Hall Plaza, and is entered by a one-way lane. There was a minivan parked at the entrance, facing the wrong way, with the driver idling in it. Another man was standing in the road next to it, with a camera, taking photos of City Hall.

I drive a one-ton crewcab at work, a big Ford F-350 with a poor turning radius. Weekday supervisors, who can call on roving crews to do their heavy lifting, drive pickup trucks, but I prefer a crewcab because I can put all my tools in the back seat and its high-side bed allows me to carry garbage or run-over trees that I cleaned up. There are no weekend roving crews. It does have the disadvantage that I need 40 hectares to turn this thing around, and it wasn't making my life easy to get into the Plaza with the van narrowing down the lane. I tapped my horn, and the van driver backed up a bit, while the photographer stepped out of the way.

After I parked the truck, I walked over to the rink. I noticed a couple of police constables standing in one corner of the Olympic Plaza, but paid them no mind. While talking to the rink crew, one of them mentioned that the Serbian demonstration seemed to be going well. "What demonstration?", I asked. The one over there on the City Hall Plaza. I suppose it was because I was too busy driving and looking the other way that I somehow managed to completely overlook a mass rally across the street, with protestors denouncing Kosovo's declaration of independence and waving large Serbian flags. The penny dropped, and I realized that the van driver and photographer were CSIS agents, and the police constables weren't just admiring the scenery.

It reminded me of Robert Benchley's lament that come the Revolution, he would appear in a newspaper photograph down in

one corner of the photo, wearing a bowler hat and looking at his watch, completely oblivious to the bloodshed and fighting around him. No doubt if there is some terrible riot in Calgary, the television cameras will show me off to one side, looking up at a tree and obviously worried about a broken branch. It was a bright cold day, the clock on the Old City Hall tower was striking thirteen, and Big Brother was watching the Serbians.

**Meanwhile, Back At The Election ...**

2008-03-03

And so to the polls. In my neighbourhood, it was not at its traditional location, the Altadore Elementary School, but instead at the Altadore Baptist Church next door. I'm sure there was a reason. I wasn't going to vote for the governing Tories, who have been in power too long, nor for the Liberals, whose Québec branch stole \$100 million from the taxpayers several years ago. I decided to vote for Wildrose Alliance, the only other party with a reasonable chance to unseat the Tories.

The provincial election campaign was a dull one, at least to the general public, although certainly not to the candidates. The news media tried to whip up some sort of frenzy about anything, but failed. The only major difference between the political parties was over what percentage royalty to charge the petroleum companies on their take of oil. You know it's a dull election when the accountants are in charge.

After voting, I drove downtown to the post office for my mail. I was careful to pop open the trunk upon parking, and raise the lid high up so the licence plate would not be visible while I was inside the box lobby. It was another bright cold day, and as the clock in the box lobby struck thirteen I made certain that Big Brother wouldn't be watching me.

**The Morning After The Day Before.** 2008-03-04

Alas, the Tories won an overwhelming majority with 72 seats, while the Liberals went down to 9 ridings. The NDP (labour-socialist) went down to 2 seats, and the Wildrose Alliance lost their only riding. In my riding, Arthur Kent lost to the Liberal. I wonder if he'll go back to Iraq?

Meanwhile, in more important news to Albertans, oil touched \$104 per barrel, an all-time high even after inflation is taken into account. No screaming headlines this time, as Albertans are well aware the price has nothing to do with any actual scarcity.

**Keep On Rocking In The Free World.** 2008-04-04

This year the city of Calgary is hosting the Juno Awards, the Canadian equivalent of the Grammy awards. As part of the lead-up to the main event, there are free music concerts in the Olympic Plaza, with both big-name groups and up-and-coming musicians.

The Plaza was rocking with fans, busily clicking away with cellphone cameras at their favourite performers. (No one seems to use digital cameras anymore at public events.) It was a bright cold day in April and as the clocks struck thirteen, everyone was watching. -14-

The big excitement here in Cowtown is that Feist is a nominee. She had no luck at the Grammy awards, where Amy Winehouse beat her, but will do better here. Leslie Feist, to give her full name, is a Calgarian who leaped to fame doing iPhone ads and with her song "1-2-3-4". At 32 years of age, she is not an overnight sensation but a hardworking performer who is finally getting her due. She attended Mount Royal College, whose campus I can see from my living room window. We're all very proud of her. And oil closed at \$106.

**1-2-3-4-5** 2008-04-06

Feist won five Juno Awards. Meanwhile, I am at work on the weekend shift. Early this morning some drunk decided to practice his chainsaw skills, cutting down several trees in Shouldice Park. He then went to work on a power pole and successfully dropped it onto a soccer field, still attached to live lines. The Enmax (electrical system) Trouble Crew told me they were amazed whoever it was didn't get electrocuted. In an ideal world, the culprit should have won a Darwin Award.

## Game Over -- You Win



Calgary	Toronto	Montreal	Vancouver
0	26	26	26
0	52	52	52
0	78	78	78
0	104	104	104

OK



[In Calgary, it's not so much people sneering at convenience store clerks as it is the petroleum industry outbidding everyone for staff. Anyone with a Class 1 licence (semi-trailers) can easily get \$20 per hour plus bonuses, and a journeyman certificate as a plumber or diesel mechanic is a licence to print money. Why work at a 7-Eleven for only \$11 an hour?]

FROM: Sheryl Birkhead  
25509 Jonnic Court  
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20882

2007-10-05

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets.]

FROM: Lloyd Penney  
1706 - 24 Eva Road  
Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2  
2007-10-01

[Re: staff shortages] Most restaurants in Toronto are constantly advertising for new staff. The future of the service industry is bleak; on one wants to serve, but everyone wants service, and we do tend to look down on those who serve.

I'm not convinced that humans will keep on. Around here, population pressures are already causing serious problems. What is happening is that the local governments are getting creative in their interpretation of various built-in safeties such as agricultural reserves and green zones. Huge developments are getting approval almost overnight with horribly expensive problems cropping up as soon as the construction begins. So far, quality of life is suffering and I suspect that will escalate.

[Almost sounds like Calgary. Notwithstanding the local urban problems, the human race still has plenty of room. The 1,500 km stretch between Calgary and Winnipeg, for example, is mostly empty land. One hour's drive east of the jammed downtown core

of Calgary will put you in the heart of the endless shortgrass of southeastern Alberta. The Canadian prairies have cattle ranches bigger than Maryland, with only one family on them because the kids would rather live in the city.]

FROM: Brant Kresovich 2007-09-27  
Box 404  
Getzville, New York 14068-0404

I think people from a farm background are less sentimental about animals than city folks. They know some animals are born ornery, and they know animals are prey to all kinds of diseases and accidents, so it's better not to get attached to them.

[Plus knowing the ultimate fate of the livestock at the packing plant, and where that juicy steak came from that they had for supper. As far as livestock personalities are concerned, I've met many people who are surprised to learn that farmers can recognize individual animals by their personalities, not their markings.]

Don't be mad but I was surprised to read that women collect stamps. I thought the hobby was Guyville like shortwave radio.

[That's a good comparison I missed for stamp shows considered as SF conventions. There are nowadays many female philatelists.

The two types of events are quite similar in the progress of women in the hobby, with few before the 1960s, many coming in during the 1970s, and now a substantial proportion today, with a noticeable number in positions of authority.]

FROM: Henry Welch 2007-11-08  
1525 - 16 Avenue  
Grafton, Wisconsin 53024-2017

[Re: rodeos and stamp shows considered as SF conventions] Is all life really just a metaphor for SF conventions and fandom? Or have we simply co-opted societal norms into our events and secret handshakes? I'm certain greater minds have tackled this subject in a more scholarly fashion than I am doing here now.

FROM: Franz Zrilich 2007-09-25  
4004 Granger Road  
Medina, Ohio 44256-8602

The closest thing to an SF convention we have locally is the annual March return of the Hinckley buzzards.

**I Also Heard From:** John Held Jr