

Quake-proofing our schools needs doing regardless of politics

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It's 15 years since I first wrote here about the urgent need to retrofit vulnerable schools to withstand severe seismic shocks. If the provincial government keeps to its promised schedule, the job will be completed 15 years from now.

Gosh, if the province actually delivers, only 30 years will have elapsed between identifying the problem and rectifying it.

I know, this government has commendably climbed down from its nixing of the seismic mitigation program after it took over from the last government. And given the work to be done, it has probably set a realistic deadline.

It is also, however, a reminder of the mercurial nature of these policy initiatives as each administration childishly attempts to efface evidence of its predecessor's good works -- not so different from Egyptian pharaohs chiseling the names off the last dynasty's statues.

So pardon me if I seem less than gracious. I do feel this overwhelming urge to skepticism whenever I hear politicians announce what they intend to do -- after we re-elect them.

And we have yet to see whether the promised funds for seismic upgrading will be new or will simply wind up being diverted from some other worthy area -- funding libraries, say, or providing assistance for special needs kids or dealing with the crisis in hospital emergency wards.

Back in 1989, I drew a parallel between B.C.'s apparent attitude toward seismic upgrading and the bureaucratic foot-dragging that resulted in the tragedy at Aberfan, Wales, where an unstable slag heap was ignored until it finally buried a school and 144 people, 109 of them children in elementary classrooms.

Some readers accused me then of fear-mongering. Others made arguments that the money could be better used on other more pressing things. Sure. In quick order, two governments gave us fast ferries and a money-wasting referendum on treaty issues the province had no authority to change.

Yet then, as now, it seemed clear to me that preparing for the worst is a prudent insurance policy for people who live in the unstable "ring of fire" that surrounds the Pacific Rim. Over the last half century, this seismically active zone has

produced five of the world's "great" earthquakes -- those registering 8.1 or more on the Richter scale.

Two of the three most powerful events occurred on this side of the Pacific. One in Chile registered 9.5 in 1960. An Alaska quake that sent a tsunami rumbling up the inlets on the west side of Vancouver Island in 1984 registered 9.2. One in 1949 off the sparsely populated Queen Charlotte Islands registered 8.1 -- the same magnitude as the earthquake that flattened Mexico City in 1985 killing many thousands.

So here we are, mesmerized once again by the photographs and television images that show the immensity of human suffering in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake where governments didn't take proper precautions, still waiting for somebody in authority here to make sure that what's needed actually gets done.

To be sure, a few months ago, responding to pressure from a well organized and persistent parents' lobby, Families for School Seismic Safety, Premier Gordon Campbell promised at the Liberal party's Whistler convention that his government would spend \$1.5 billion to finish upgrading over the next 15 years. Better late than never. Maybe that's long enough to finally complete a task that should have been finished five years ago and not a decade-and-a-half from now -- provided some successor government doesn't once again change its budget priorities. Maybe we won't experience what people in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, India and Africa are going through this week.

On the other hand, maybe our luck won't hold. Over the last 15 years there have been 18 great earthquakes. They have killed more than 182,000 people. How many will occur over the next 15 years? Where will they happen?

Perhaps we should ask our government not to make promises that depend upon its getting reelected but to instead enact tough legislation today that binds whoever is in power to do what needs to be done as fast as we can while we still have time to do it.