SETTING THE STAGE

It was as if Mother Nature packed a perfect punch and walloped southern Alberta.

A wet June that saw an initial downpour of rain saturate the province was followed by a deluge of 200 millimetres in some places, turning rivers into lakes that flooded many communities. It was the worst flood ever for the people of Alberta. At the University of Alberta, hydrologist Uldis Silins suggested, “To have these very large flood events…the stars have to line up” (cbc.ca, June 22, 2013).

The stars line up

In a sense, this is precisely what happened. While southern Alberta is prone to flooding, the region mostly enjoys a drier, semi-arid climate. An above average amount of rain in June simply forced the rivers and creeks to handle what the environment delivered. However, when a high-pressure cell to the north conspired with easterly winds, a unique weather system – composed of massive amounts of precipitation – found itself pinned down between the cities and towns of southern Alberta and the Rocky Mountains. What ensued was two days of rain that saw Calgary take on 100 millimetres of rain, while towns like Canmore in the foothills of the Rockies contended with over 200 millimetres of rain. For Canmore, the problem was compounded by the fact that the foothills were still semi-frozen, causing even more runoff. Southern Alberta simply couldn’t handle the deluge as rivers crested and local infrastructure surrendered to the floodwater.

Evacuation

All that was left for people in the path of the surging floodwaters was to flee. While rain soaked the Rocky Mountains, authorities saw the danger and ordered communities to evacuate. One by one, towns emptied as people headed for dry land. Meanwhile the floodwater set its sights on Calgary. Eventually 75 000 Calgarians in over two dozen neighbourhoods were evacuated as the Bow and Elbow rivers spilled their banks. Images of parts of Alberta’s largest city underwater made their way across Canada and around the world. Vivid pictures of Calgary’s downtown core, the Calgary Stampede grounds, and the Saddledome surrounded and immersed in water revealed the magnitude of the flood.

The Scotiabank Saddledome saw floodwaters pour into the arena, rising to the eighth row of seats. Only a concerted effort by arena’s owners allowed the building to re-open in September 2013.
No crisis in leadership
Often a time of crisis can bring out the best in people. When Mayor Naheed Nenshi learned that floodwaters were heading to Calgary, he broke off a speaking tour in eastern Canada and headed home. He put himself front and centre, keeping citizens informed of the flood’s progress via Twitter and on the television news. Meanwhile, Alberta Premier Alison Redford made her way south from Edmonton and vowed to do everything possible to help the victims of the flood. Within days her government began issuing debit cards to provide cash for the immediate flood-relief needs of those hit hardest. Later she directed $1 billion in provincial funding to rebuilding efforts. At the federal level, Prime Minister Stephen Harper flew to Calgary shortly after the disaster struck, directing 2 200 Canadian Forces personnel to southern Alberta to help emergency responders deal with the crisis. It was an almost unprecedented level of inter-governmental cooperation. Remarkably, only four people died in a natural disaster that affected over 100 000 people.

Authorities estimate the long-term cost of repairs and rebuilding after the southern Alberta flood will be $2 to $5 billion.

The challenges of rebuilding
While Alberta’s response to the natural disaster is inspiring, no one is under the illusion that there aren’t significant challenges ahead. The area hardest hit by flooding was the town of High River where all 13 000 citizens were ordered to evacuate amidst a metres-deep influx of floodwater that affected almost every home and business. Many residents of High River weren’t allowed to return to the town for weeks after the late June flooding, while some received the heartbreaking news that their home insurance wouldn’t cover damages and that their houses were condemned. Despite Redford’s pledge of $1 billion, it doesn’t look like there will be enough money or resources to help those affected to fully rebuild their homes and their lives. In other words, the real test of the will of Albertans to take care of their own will come in the weeks, months and years to come.

To consider
As the floodwater receded, and it became safe to return home, many southern Albertans faced the onerous challenge of repairing their flood-damaged homes. The first order of business — the clean up. This is where Albertans showed their true community spirit as neighbours helped each other empty homes of water-damaged items. In more extreme cases, volunteer organizations put out the call for help and Albertans responded every time.

1. Do you think your community would respond the same way in a time of crisis?
2. If you are from southern Alberta, did you volunteer? Why or why not?
3. What would it take for you to come to the aid of your neighbour?
VIDEO REVIEW

Pre-viewing

Did you know that home insurance does not cover damage caused by “overland flooding”? While insurance companies will cover flooding due to burst pipes and sewer backups, the industry takes another approach to flooding caused when a river breaks its banks. Keep this in mind as you view the documentary.

While viewing

1. Describe the combination of weather and environmental factors that made the Calgary flood of 2013 the worst in Alberta’s history.

2. How widespread was the flood damage?

3. How much rain fell in Black Diamond over a 24-hour period?

4. How many people died in High River as a result of the flood? How many people were evacuated?

5. Why were Calgary residents paying close attention to the events in High River?

6. How did the 2013 flooding compare to the flood of 2005?
7. What do you think the reporter means when she speaks of the “emotional impact” of the flooding?

8. How did Calgarians respond when authorities made an appeal for help with the cleanup? What does this say about the city and its citizens?

9. How did homeowners respond to the citizen volunteers who aided in the cleanup?

10. What major Calgary cultural event were the volunteers able to help save?

11. How long does Premier Alison Redford think it will take to clean up and rebuild after the flood? How much has the province already spent on the clean up?

12. What is the greatest challenge facing Alberta’s politicians going forward?

13. How effectively did the municipal, provincial and federal governments coordinate their efforts in response to the flood?

Post-viewing

When building inspectors finally got the chance to go into the northwest section of High River to inspect close to 2,000 homes, they didn’t like what they saw. Almost half the homes were in bad shape with over 100 deemed uninhabitable. The problem: the property owner’s home insurance would not cover the
damage done to the house because standard insurance companies do not cover overland flooding. All that the home owners could do was turn to the government for help and, by the end of the summer of 2013, it looked like the financial aid promised by provincial authorities wouldn’t be enough to restore severely damaged houses.

1. Do you think insurance companies should cover damage done by overland flooding (even if it means that everyone’s insurance premiums go up)? Why or why not?

“The purpose of insurance is to spread risk amongst many policyholders. But overland flooding is a risk for only a small percentage of the population — that is, those who live in a flood plain or close to rivers or lakes. Since most homeowners are not exposed to the risk, and would not share in the cost, providing flood insurance would be unaffordable for the homeowners who might need it.” — Insurance Bureau of Canada, from a May 30, 2013 media release (www.ibc.ca)

2. Do you think the government should simply find the money to rebuild the condemned houses (even if it means that everyone’s taxes go up)? Why or why not?
SUPER-MAYOR NAHEED NENSHI

Minds on

People tend to be skeptical or doubtful when they consider the actions and intentions of their political leaders. Working with a partner, discuss your personal view of your town or city’s mayor, your provincial premier, and the prime minister of Canada. Keep notes on your discussion and be prepared to share your views with your classmates.

The flood and the mayor

It’s easy to become cynical or distrusting when it comes to politics in Canada. Political corruption surrounding Montreal’s mayoral office, Toronto’s mayor Rob Ford facing persistent allegations of “un-mayoral” behaviour, and Canada’s senate recently revealing a “fat-cat,” free-spending approach to public money are all examples of how uninspiring politics can be. However, in the early summer of 2013, one politician in particular caught the attention of the entire country and put the collective political cynicism of Canadians on hold.

The mayor quick to act

As floodwater made its way from the Rocky Mountains to Calgary, Mayor Naheed Nenshi rushed home from a speaking engagement in Toronto to face the crisis head on. Once in the city’s emergency operations centre, Nenshi began to understand the magnitude of the flood: This one was going to be much bigger than the flood of 2005. What ensued was a whirlwind of Nenshi, where the mayor — already enjoying a 73 per cent approval rating — became the voice of the crisis. He took to Twitter, held several news conferences a day, and, wherever possible, engaged with distraught citizens who desperately sought guidance through the crisis. Nenshi even got away with chastising foolhardy citizens who decided to go for a canoe ride on the tumultuous Bow River. After learning that emergency services had to rescue the canoeists, Nenshi said, “I have a large number of nouns that I can use to describe these people. Stay off the river, and I won’t use any of the nouns that I really want to use.”1 His point: emergency personnel needed to help people trapped by the flood, not keep thrill seekers from hurting themselves. Nenshi’s comments inspired some of his Twitter followers to trend a discussion of “Nenshinouns.” Suddenly anyone who acted despicably during the crisis was labeled a “Nenshinoun.”

Nenshi on

When the crisis in Calgary was at its peak, Nenshi worked tirelessly to bolster the spirits of Calgarians and help local authorities respond to the flood. At one point word got out that the mayor had been up for 43 hours straight. Twitter started to buzz with messages directing Nenshi to take a nap.

Eventually, the floodwater began to recede and the clean up began in earnest. By that time, Nenshi had achieved momentary super-stardom. Posters promoting the new movie “Man of Steel” saw admirers putting portraits of the
mayor over Superman’s face. Some people made posters that proclaimed, “Keep Calm and Nenshi on.” And one popular t-shirt emerged with a picture of Nenshi wearing goggles and snorkel.2

**Long-term uncertainty**

No doubt the honeymoon will be short lived for the Calgary mayor. Alberta premier Alison Redford predicts the flood clean up could take as long as 10 years. Mayor Nenshi is quite aware that his popularity will soon wane. In an interview with Maclean’s he said, “As we move forward, tempers will fray. People have lost a lot. There’s going to be a lot of pain. People are going to have problems with insurance. There’s the challenge of getting flood relief from the provincial government out to the people who need it.”1 Whether Naheed Nenshi can rise to the challenge of rebuilding flood-ravaged Calgary in the same way he rose to the initial challenges of the floodwaters of 2013 remains to be seen.

Source:


**To consider**

The Maclean’s article by Charlie Gillis used as a source for the Nenshi profile you just read refers to a quote by Rahm Emanuel, the mayor of Chicago — and a former White House chief of staff to President Barack Obama. He said, “Never let a serious crisis go to waste.”

1. What do you think Emanuel meant by this?

2. Do you think Mayor Naheed Nenshi followed Emanuel’s advise?
WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Imagine receiving a text from a family member telling you that a local river has broken its banks and flooding is on its way. You turn on the television and learn that a nearby neighbourhood has been evacuated, and you know that your neighbourhood is likely the next in the line of the flood’s path. You figure you only have an hour to spare before a mandatory evacuation order is issued and maybe about two hours before the floodwaters reach your home.

**Step 1 – Answer the following questions**

1. What would you do?
2. Which valuables would you try to move to a higher level of the house?
3. Which valuables would you take with you?
4. Do you know of anything you could do in the short term to defend your home against the floodwaters?
5. How much time would you give yourself to do what you need to do before you leave your home?

**Step 2 – Tell your story**

Based on the answers to the questions, write a short story about how you escaped the flood. Be as specific as possible about the steps you needed to take to protect your belongings and escape to safety.

If you want, imagine you have lost everything to the flood. Indicate how you would feel and how you would respond to losing the things you valued so much.

Note: This exercise is just about losing “things” not people. You want to gage your attachment to the things in your life and how you would secure your own — and perhaps your family’s — safety.

If you have had a direct personal experience with flooding, forget about the imaginary exercise above and tell your flood story.