

Bill Rea ? Clear case of over-reacting

?If there weren't any fools in the world, there wouldn't be any fun.?

Nevil Shute

I heard about a really interesting story coming out of Portland, Oregon, last week.

At first, I thought the information coming from out west was an absurdity on the parts of those in charge over there. I still think it's absurd, but only in so much as it's a response to the absurdity of the world in which we live. Intelligent people will, of course, realize how nutty this all is. But bureaucracy usually employs practical people. My late father was a very practical man. He spent the last several years of his working life as a Provincial bureaucrat, and regarded it as the low point of his career.

And it is also a practical reality that stupidity is alive and well and living throughout human society. That means it has to be addressed, no matter how dumb it might be. Enter bureaucracy!

Officials in Portland have announced that a water reservoir, which is part of a system that services some 900,000 people, is going to be drained (it might already have been drained by the time this appears in print). The amount of water that's going to be ?lost? amounts to roughly enough to fill 2,000 average backyard swimming pools, according to one of the accounts I read. Needless to say, there are conservationists who are up in arms about this waste.

And what has prompted this move? Some 19-year-old kid is accused of having urinated into the reservoir.

They have to drain an entire water system just for that! And it seems to be based on the fact that they caught this joker in the act.

What about the ones they didn't catch? Although I have no authoritative data on which to back up this assertion, I'm willing to bet that for every one they catch, at least 20 other men and boys have done a certain amount of ?business? (you know what I mean) in the same spot. We males are like that.

I have lived through the time of ?women's liberation,? when members of the sex into which I was not born started demanding equal treatment and rights. There was an awful lot of justification to their arguments (I have to put these statements into print because my wife reads these columns and I don't like sleeping on the couch), but there is also a reality that we all have to face. There are certain things that members of one sex can do better than others. I was born a male, meaning I can't bear children, but I can excuse myself if nature calls, find a secluded area (preferably with a lot of trees) and address the issue (you know what I mean). I've done it a couple of times, although I'll grant not recently.

My father and I used to do a lot of fishing when I was a kid. The two of us would be out in a boat in the middle of a lake. When I was a little kid, there would be a haver sack with beer and Coke in the boat, and when I was a bigger kid, we didn't bother with the Coke (and yes, I know that was against the law ? arrest me). There was always a can in the boat, mainly intended to be used for bailing if the boat sprung a leak, but it was normally used more to deal with other kinds of leaks (you know what I mean). The results, there in, went into the lake.

I was a Boy Scout many years ago (Trudeaumania had not quite run its course by that point), and did a certain amount of camping. Since it was an all-male environment, we used that certain method for putting out the camp fire at night (you know what I mean).

?It stinks,? my Scoutmaster would say in the middle of the process, ?but it's sure a good way to put out a fire.?

It was, too. But only when one is dealing with very small fires.

I first heard about this story on the radio, with a commentator asking what they do about dogs and other animals doing certain things in the reservoir (you know what I mean). That's a very legitimate question, and there are others.

Just out of curiosity, how do officials in Oregon handle things when a goose flies over the reservoir and answers a call of nature, depositing the product (you know what I mean) into the drinking water? Geese do such things, you know? I pretended to grow up near Grenadier Pond in Toronto, and I do know that goose poop was a problem then, and it got worse as time went on. People loved to feed the geese, as well as the area ducks. It was not uncommon to have these feathered folks go door-to-door in the neighbourhood, knowing there was lots of free grub to be had. The hotel where I waited tables for a couple of years was just a couple of minutes walk away from the pond, and many were the times when parents would ask if we had any spare bread for their kids so they could go feed the ducks and geese. It was seldom a problem to scare up some rolls from the previous day (they were hard by that point, but the feathered folks rarely complained). We were always happy to oblige.

Things got to the point that Toronto officials had to put restrictions when it came to feeding the birds. Pity ? the city lost something of a tourist attraction, but the reality was things were getting out of hand.

Was that the case in Portland? I don't think so.

One would presume (and if I lived in Portland, I would bloody well expect) that the water supply would go through some amount of processing between the time it's in the reservoir and the time it gets to my tap, simply because part of reality includes geese and

other birds, as well as dogs, other wild animals and dumb 19-year-old kids.

On the other hand, I think I can appreciate where the authorities in Portland are coming from on this. My wife and I were talking about this the other night (municipal water supply issues sometimes come up during commercials), and Beth actually summed up the situation rather well with three words: "Too much knowledge."

People heard about what this dumb kid had done and many of them would have jumped to the conclusion that the whole water supply was contaminated, not even bothering to contemplate what a goose might have done earlier in the day. I think it was a classic case of the old line "What you don't know won't hurt you." But in this case, a lot of people knew. It wouldn't have hurt them, but there would have been no telling some of them that. I have been in the newspaper business long enough to know that there are a lot of people who, once they get an idea in their head, will cling to it, no matter what - even the stupid ideas.

And those public sector employees in Portland would have been obliged to react to the complaints, if for no other reason than they're paid to act (I wonder if Oregon has a Sunshine List?) That is the great burden of bureaucracy. Those people who occupy it don't get the luxury of picking and choosing the issues they address or the complaints they deal with. They have to handle all of them, including the stupid and frivolous ones.

So I don't think the situation in Portland has been handled properly, but it's been handled correctly, if that makes any sense

