

Bill Rea ? Okay to raise tobacco taxes

Let the record be clear!

I do not smoke, and I haven't for many years. We'll delve into just how many in a couple of paragraphs. Suffice for the moment to say my wife (Beth) won't let me. I should also state that I used to smoke. Again, that will be addressed presently.

Our favourite Provincial government (I say that because it's the only provincial government we have) announced last week in its budget for the coming fiscal year that the cost of a deck of smokes was to go up. Indeed, it has gone up. I stopped into Bolton Milk and Variety Sunday and asked how much I would be charged if I wished to leave the store with a large pack of Rothmans in my pocket. I was told it would set me back \$14.50. I smoked better than a pack a day all through my 20s. At that rate, my nic fits would have cost me more than \$100 per week.

I bought my Sunday paper at the store, but no smokes.

The fact is I can't afford them, and I'm making a lot more now (ravages of inflation considered) than I did in the days when I would puff away. I still shake my head in wonder that I was able to afford it.

True, my smoking days started when I was in high school, when most of the people I hung around with smoked. Being a kid, it was important for me to try to be with the ?In? crowd. I knew it wasn't a healthy habit. It could lead to things like lung cancer, which could kill you. The late William Talman (he played Hamilton Burger in the old Perry Mason TV series) died of lung cancer and did a posthumous commercial warning of the evils of smoking. But I was a kid and I expected to live forever, so what did I care?

And when I progressed into university, there were some smokers, and non-smokers, who I had to deal with. I made good and close friends during that time, and few of them smoked. On the other hand, smoking was allowed in lecture halls and seminar rooms in those days. I had a history prof who would alternate between his pipe and Rothmans during seminars. He and I got along just fine. Heading into the working world, I found myself in a proverbial smoke-filled room. I spent a couple of years waiting tables in a hotel dining room, and just about everyone smoked. There was a rule that we shouldn't do it where customers could see it, but it was never enforced, so no one worried about it.

When I studied journalism at Humber College (because I got sick of waiting tables) I was still a smoker. Smoking was not allowed in classes, although enforcement was up to the instructors. One teacher was a chain smoker, so he was pretty easy-going when it came to his charges lighting up.

It's been many years since I walked the halls of Humber. In my day, there were ash trays in the halls. I'll bet they aren't there today. And when I got my first job in newspapers, I entered into a heavy smoking environment. The editor who interviewed me for my first job was aware that I was a smoker, and made the point that everyone in the office smoked, so I would fit right in. The man was a highly-skilled recruiter.

Smoking was easier in those days. Indeed, I used to puff away at council and school board meetings.

I regularly attended meetings of the Peel Board of Education (which was what the Peel District School Board was called in those days). Lots of people smoked there, including several trustees. There was a trustee named Bob Lagerquist, who smoked a great big cigar during meetings.

One trustee announced his plans to bring forth a motion to ban smoking in the board room. My editor at the time was also a smoker, and he assured me these motions would come up with a certain amount of frequency. Since they never went very far, he told me to write about the discussion, with confidence that the motion would fail.

It passed. To this day, I maintain I was the very last person to take a drag on a cigarette at a meeting of the Peel Board of Education ? indeed, I made a point of it. The information officer of the day had to nudge me to butt out, a couple of seconds after she had crushed out the weed she was smoking.

In due time, the councils in the Town of Caledon and Peel Region banned smoking, meaning us media types had nothing else fun to do but take notes ? what a drag (there's a pun there, that some of you might have picked up on).

In time, I did quit smoking. I had a number of reasons. Although he didn't actually die of the disease, it was complications from lung cancer that killed my father. True, he had quit smoking a couple of years before, but it will certainly make one reconsider his or her habits. As well, I switched jobs, and started working in a very strict no-smoking environment.

I quit smoking partly because I realized that my health might one day suffer from such activity. There was also the fact that the places where it was permissible to smoke were dwindling. I spent five-and-a-half years working in Toronto, and smoking was allowed nowhere in the building.

That was about 22 years ago. Since then, I have smoked exactly one cigar, which was presented to me by the new proud father of twin boys 12 years ago this month.

The reason I bring this whole topic up is because the government announced it was raising the taxes on smokes in its budget last week.

I am a conservative at heart, meaning I'm not a big fan of raising taxes, and I have extremely limited use for the concept of government running deficits, although I do know they are occasionally necessary. But there are those things commonly known as 'sin taxes.' Taxes on tobacco are among them, as are taxes on alcohol.

I will take a drink. I usually open myself up a beer when I get home from work every day, and there is wine and liquor on the premises too. I assure you, neither is there to be decorative.

I have no problems with 'sin taxes.' They are applied to things that are used voluntarily, meaning I don't have to use them. I haven't paid a dime in tobacco taxes in more than 20 years, and I'm not about to start. Like I stated above, my wife won't let me, and even if she did, I can't afford them.

So if the government wants to raise taxes on tobacco, that's just fine with me. It would be nice if the government puts the money to good use, but since we're talking about government, my hopes aren't very high.

But since it's not my money, what do I care?

