

Bill Rea ? People notice booze disruption

There are certain ways to get at certain groups of people, that is, if you want to hurt them and teach them some sort of lesson. With a little child, one can always take away his or her favourite toy.

If the kid is a couple of years older, curtailing access to the TV works quite well, as my late parents could have confirmed (I'm not sure if they would have). And after a couple of years, grounding a kid or revoking his or her privileges to be out after dark has an admirable track record.

And the concept of taking away is not just restricted to kids.

If you want to hit a professional athlete (or top-ranked amateur, for that matter) where it hurts, restrict his or her playing time.

If you want to get at a person who prizes his or her mobility and loves to drive, lift the old licence. You want to get at a golf fanatic, then confiscate the clubs.

If you want to get at the rest of the adult population, stop their booze.

That's what we were seeing last week, as employees of the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) were all set to go on strike. Now some of you might wonder what the big deal was. Those of you who are still wondering that probably weren't hanging around an LCBO outlet last Thursday. That was the day of the strike deadline, and people were crowding the stores to stock up (smart people like me had actually done some stocking up in the weeks leading up to the strike, since the possibility of such an occurrence had been well known for at least a month).

I had occasion to be around the LCBO outlet in Bolton that day (oh all right, I was doing some last-minute stocking up ? my wife likes her glass of red wine every Sunday night). I can testify it was a busy place, with long lineups that, thankfully, moved pretty fast. I had occasion later in the day to be in Caledon East, driving past the liquor store there. I noticed the parking lot was packed, and I congratulated myself for having the good sense to have stocked up in advance.

As well, while I was driving last Thursday, I was listening to some talk shows on the radio, and this topic provided a lot of grist for the mill (good thing this issue was settled before the latest controversy regarding Toronto Mayor Ford hit the proverbial fan, or else the talk show hosts would have had trouble deciding what to talk about).

But all of this sounds to me like a big deal to a lot of people. They were facing the threat of being cut off their supply of whisky and wine. Those responsible for this strike that almost happened really know how to hurt people.

Now I am not about to take sides in this mess, because I really don't know who the villains are. As I stood in the long, yet fast-moving, lineup last Thursday, I heard the LCBO cashier express the hope that she would be working the following day. I guess she was. For her, it was a happy ending.

I find it very hard to criticize such sentiments. To be honest, I would have very little time for anyone who would.

I am not a great fan of labour unions, although I understand why they came into being in the first place. In times gone by, there was plenty of opportunity for the exploitation of workers, and history has plenty of stories of exactly that taking place. Unions helped level the playing field.

But as time has progressed, there have been too many cases in which they have gained more strength than they need to perform the mandate they deserve. There have been lots of times when they have been able to hold the consuming public almost in a position of hostage. Transit strikes impact on the commuting public. Teachers' strikes cause problems for parents, not to mention the well-being of their children. Thus I have little patience for strikes against the public interest.

I will grant that I am a product of pretty conservative upbringing, especially on my mother's side (interestingly, her father is remembered for his union affiliation). But on the other hand, I am fully aware that unions are not always the bad guys in labour disputes. We saw an abbreviated professional hockey schedule this year, and that was not because of a players' strike. It was a lock-out ? management driven. And during my days working in Toronto, I covered a lock-out of teachers by the local Catholic school board.

In short, I am not so naïve, nor such a hard case, as to not realize that management is frequently the author of its own misfortune. As much as possible, I try to avoid letting strikes or lock-outs impact on my day-to-day life.

For example, there are those who will not cross a picket line, but I am not in that group. Now I am not one to be deliberately provocative, so I will not look for picket lines just to cross for the hell of it. However, if there's a picket line around a building that's still open to the public, and I have business to transact within that building, then I go about my business and cross the line. And that business is none of the business of anybody on any picket line. I even once said as much to a picketer who accosted me for crossing the line.

I have crossed picket lines lots of times, and will do so again if necessary, without hesitation.

One thing I won't do is try to drive a car across a picket line. I tried it once, and realized I had put myself in an awkward situation. I'm agile enough to get my beautiful bod through a bothersome mob (even at my age) on foot, but an automobile can cause injury in such instances, and I'm not interested in going there.

I am also mindful that strikes and lock-outs are rather rare. We hear a lot about them because they generate more attention when they occur.

There was a course in labour reporting when I was in journalism school, and I remember reading that the vast majority of labour-management negotiations end without work disruptions.

So last week's settlement in the LCBO situation was to be expected.

I'll drink to that.