

"Can you believe it?" Not really.

by BROCK WEIR

"Can you believe it?"

I don't know about the rest of you, but when I hear that question pointed in my general direction, I usually think I'm about to be on the receiving end of a real fast one ? or, at the very least, the attempted fast one zipped by so quickly I didn't even see it.

It's a phrase that's often used to express some sort of incredulity, underscoring the ridiculousness of whatever they've relayed. If they call attention to said ridiculousness, is it a question of looking for affirmation of their perspective or affirmation that whatever they're saying has more basis in reality than it actually does?

On Friday night, Canadians took a momentary break from baseball fever to react to the news that the U.S. President had abruptly ceased trade negotiations with our country. The reason? Offence at a commercial produced by the Provincial Government to challenge the very idea of tariffs in the country ? using the words of the oft-lionized Republican President Ronald Reagan to make their point.

Ontarians, whether they wanted to or not, paid an eye-watering \$75 million for this message to reach its intended audience and, regardless of the price tag, it seems to have hit its target sometime over the course of the week that was.

"They cheated on a commercial," said the President in a scrum. "Ronald Reagan loved tariffs and they said he didn't. And I guess it was AI or something. They cheated badly. Canada got caught cheating on a commercial. Can you believe it?"

What is it going to take for just one person he's addressing to answer one of his favourite queries with firm and resounding no?

But, wait, there's more.

Amid the manufactured furore, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation, which is, at the end of the day, run under the auspices of the U.S. Federal Government, released a statement, trumpeted out by the President, of course, that they're reviewing their legal options. On a commercial. Directly using the words of the man in question.

"The ad misinterprets the Presidential Radio Address [where Reagan's words originated], and the Government of Ontario did not seek nor receive permission to use and edit the remarks," they said. "The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute is reviewing its legal options in this matter. We encourage you to watch President Reagan's unedited video on your YouTube channel."

On the one hand, hopefully more people took to the ?tubes to watch the video from start to finish, even just to see how ridiculous these complaints are. But, on the other, for some members of their intended audience, they might have encountered some inconvenient truths? which may or may not inspire more ?nos? to join the chorus against the "Can you believe it?" crowd.

Yes, the speech was made to justify Reagan's imposing tariffs on Japan, an action he said he was ?loath to take,? but at the heart of the message was trade barriers like tariffs ?hurt every American worker and consumer.?

"For those of us who lived through the Great Depression, the memory of the suffering it caused is deep and searing," he said. "And today, many economic analysts and historians argue that high tariff legislation passed back in that period, called the Smoot-Hawley tariff, greatly deepened the Depression and prevented economic recovery.

"You see, at first, when someone says, 'let's impose tariffs on foreign imports,' it looks like they're doing the patriotic thing by protecting American products and jobs. And sometimes, for a short while, it works. But only for a short time. What eventually

occurs is: first, homegrown industries start relying on government protection in the form of high tariffs; they stop competing and stop making the innovative management and technological changes they need to succeed in world markets. And then, while all this is going on, something even worse occurs. High tariffs inevitably lead to retaliation by foreign countries and the triggering of fierce trade wars. The result is more and more tariffs, higher and higher trade barriers, and less and less competition.

?So soon, because the prices made artificially high by tariffs that subsidize inefficiency and poor management, people stop buying. Then the worst happens. Markets shrink and collapse. Businesses and industries shut down. And millions of people lose their jobs. The memory of all this occurring back in the '30s made me determined when I came to Washington to spare the American people the protectionist legislation that destroys prosperity.?

Did Ontario somehow cheat?

No; not only were the words in context, but the footage and audio in question is public domain, by design, and free to use.

Did Ronald Reagan love tariffs? To hear him tell it, absolutely not.

Did 'they' (Ontario) say he didn't? No, Reagan said it himself.

Did Canada cheat badly? First of all, it's an Ontario matter, and unless there was an unspoken agreement between any of the players in this drama that we would not defend our perspective, then, once again, that answer is no.

Can we believe it?

No ? for the aforementioned reasons and so much more.

Amid the ongoing trade battle between the two countries, I have to hand it to the Federal and Ontario governments for continuing to act and negotiate in good faith ? because it's clear that these acts of good faith are exclusively travelling down a one-way street.

For every one step forward we, as Canadians are knocked back at least two more, due to the increasingly frivolous and ridiculous whims of one man, which makes any negotiation impossibly unpredictable.

If we ever get close to a deal in the next three years of the current administration, will it be scuttled at the eleventh hour for some absurd perceived slight?

If we actually go as far as inking a deal that works for both countries, would it be unilaterally nullified because he didn't like the outcome of the latest Great Canadian Baking Show, or singer Katy Perry's relationship with Justin Trudeau? It sounds ridiculous, but it doesn't seem all that far removed from the world we're living in today.

It is impossible to work towards a deal when one party keeps moving the goal posts and, as apparently he's a 'builder at heart?', it's no sweat on his brow to dig them up and plant them again.

?Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant,? said Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, addressing the Nixon government. ?No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.?

That oft-repeated quote is more relevant now than ever before as the twitches and grunts make way for kicks and falsehoods.

As important as these relationships are, will there come a point where our leaders simply throw up their hands and decide to take our business elsewhere rather than stepping up time and time again, hoping for the best, only to get kicked in the teeth?

We probably can't afford to lay off being gluttons for punishment, but it's nice to dream.