

Sensible speed limits anyone?

EDITORIAL

THE LAST TIME Ontario experimented with the idea of having sensible, rather than arbitrary, speed laws was in the 1960s, when John Robarts was premier.

When he took office in 1961, he succeeded Leslie Frost. Although both were Progressive Conservatives and neither was a Torontonian, they had sharply different views when it came to the matter of legal speed limits.

Mr. Frost, who hailed from Lindsay, wanted to stick to laws dating from the prewar era that dictated 30 miles per hour (50 km/h) as the legal limit in urban areas and 50 m.p.h. (80 km/h) as the maximum on all rural roads.

It was only after a campaign by Toronto city council that he relented to the point of allowing higher speed limits of 35 or 40 m.p.h. on Lakeshore Road and a few other arteries, and 60 m.p.h. on the Queen Elizabeth Way and the 400 series highways then under construction.

Mr. Robarts decided those changes didn't go far enough, and ordered a study that resulted in still higher rural speed limits that in most cases reflected the speeds actually being driven by 85 per cent of the travellers. The new limits were 70 m.p.h. (about 115 km/h) on the freeways and 55 or 60 on other paved highways.

That all ended in the 1970s in the wake of the first Arab oil embargoes, when the premier of the day, Bill Davis, responded to imposition of a standard 55 m.p.h. limit on U.S. highways by lowering the limit on Ontario's freeways to 60 m.p.h. and on rural highways to 50 m.p.h.

Since then, the U.S. highways have returned to much higher speed limits while here the same limits have merely become metric, with 100 the limit on both the freeways and the 407 toll road and 80 on all provincial highways south of the French River.

As a result, Hurontario Street in Caledon, where it now is five lanes wide, and in Mono, where it remains in its original state as a gravel road, have one thing in common: both have the standard 80 km/h speed limit that applies on all rural roads that don't have lower postings.

In the circumstances, it's not surprising that Ontario alone has had to pass a law providing particularly harsh penalties for anyone caught driving more than 50 km/h above the posted speed limit.

After all, in a jurisdiction where speed laws are broken by at least 90 per cent of the drivers, is it not to be expected that some will simply ignore the signage and in the absence of other traffic drive as fast as their vehicles can go?

In the circumstances, we would invite Caroline Mulroney, our latest Minister of Transportation, to order a fresh survey of speeds currently being driven, with the aim of returning to Robarts-style sensible maximums.

We suspect that such a survey would confirm 100 km/h as the appropriate limit for good paved rural highways, and 110 or 120 km/h for freeways outside urban areas.

Of course, something similar should be done about rural roadways maintained by counties, regions and local municipalities, where all too often unrealistically low limits are in place as a result of pressure from residents.

A key element of any program of sensible speed limits should be a 'go with the flow' campaign aimed at reducing both lane-changing on multi-lane highways and passing on two-lane roads.

Such a campaign could be reinforced by reducing the current 'tolerance' rule under which drivers are not normally ticketed if they keep within 16 km/h of the posted limit.

Ideally, that rule should be replaced by a provision that any driver would risk being ticketed by going more than 5 km/h over or under the posted maximum, the rationale being that either would increase the risk of unsafe passing.

Of course, the higher speed limits would always be subject to local conditions. No one should expect the 'normal' limits to apply to winding roadways like Mono's Hockley Road, Caledon's Forks of the Credit Road or Mulmur's River Road.

The objective of such reforms would be increased safety resulting from all drivers recognizing that the new speed limits reflect actual conditions rather than political pressure.

As for the few who still are determined to ignore the laws and throw caution to the winds, we would suggest that with the sensible speed laws in place the current 'racing' law should apply to any driver going 20 km/h above the newly posted limits.