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The changing face of beer retailing

The Beer Store - Ontario's retail network for suds - is now owned by foreign beer companies thanks to a series of industry mergers.

Labatt, Molson and later Sleeman owned The Beer Store, a near monopoly in beer retailing, but those companies are now owned by Belgium's InBev, Coors in the United States and Japan's Sapporo.

For years beer retailers relied on the public perception of the efficiencies of such a system and the belief that increased prices in Ontario were the result of government taxes and the cost associated with the bottle return system. In truth the retailers were running their stores quite profitably.

While more beer choices at Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) outlets appeased consumers for a time the Soviet style approach to beer retailing has taken its toll. Going from Beer Store to LCBO to another Beer Store one day looking for the products he wanted, Burlington resident Derek Forward had had enough. He started a petition. He solicited support from business and trade associations. He called me.

Every other jurisdiction has moved past our quaint notion of beer retailing to offer consumers more choice. It is time for Ontario to join the 21st century.

Ending the authoritarian approach to beer retailing will reduce prices, improve convenience for consumers on purchase and

return, improve access to the market especially for small brewers in local areas, and bring Ontario into line with other markets.

Of course there are wrinkles that need to be worked out. But every objection, from the training of clerks to ask for proof of age, to a reduction in the huge choice offered in most Beer Store outlets, is manageable.

If clerks can be trained to ask for ID for tobacco purchases they can do the same with beer purchases. Similarly, I'm guessing the guy who buys a popular brand of beer is not interested in paying a higher price to subsidize The Beer Store so it can carry 300 different brands, 299 of which he will never buy. Nor is he interested in paying high prices for beer so InBev can turn around and use his money to buy Anheuser-Busch. Perhaps the people who want choice should pay for it.

Mr. Forward has put a lot of effort into his quest to open up beer retailing in Ontario. I have a copy of his petition on my website at www.tedchudleigh.com that can be printed, signed and delivered to me.

I will be reading these petitions into the record at Queen's Park and putting the issue forward to see if we can make changes to our current retailing system.

This idea has been put forward in the past. However, I believe now, it's time has come.