



Ted Chudleigh column

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Open up the taps on beer retailing

Beer me!

The taste and availability of clean, cold Canadian beer is now controlled by foreign interests.

The Ontario beer market has been in a constant state of flux since the introduction of modern brand marketing more than 20 years ago. First it was tall bottles. That was supposed to be a death knell to the bottle collection program. It didn't happen. Then it was twist off caps, a growth in package choices, light beer, low carb beer, and . . . well you get it.

Now that consolidations have swept the beer industry, leaving Canada's brewers in the hands of foreign owners, it's a good time to reconsider the retailing of beer in Ontario. Ontario's big three brewers own the retail arm known as The Beer Store. That means that the profits attached to retailing beer go to the head offices of InBev of Belgium, Colorado's Coors' and Sapporo of Japan.

Ontarians deserve the same convenience enjoyed by people in most other jurisdictions in North America, where there are multiple outlets for beer. Surely selling beer in grocery stores is not going to bring an end to our civilization.

What it will bring, is greater choice, lower prices and a wider range of retail outlets. The public would also get a wider range of bottle return locations which would encourage a better level of participation in the program – good for the environment. I understand about 300,000 trips are made to beer stores each week. If those trips take people an average of one kilometre out of their way Ontarians are burning fuel for about 300,000 kilometres a week – enough for a significant impact on our air quality.

Other people are concerned about the security issue – feeling that underage drinkers would have easier access to alcohol. However, with proper regulation including the ability to pull a retailers' license to sell beer in the event of a violation, this should not be a problem.

Burlington resident Derek Forward started a petition asking the Ontario government to change its regulations on the retailing of beer. He has collected thousands of signatures. I will be reading these petitions into the record at Queen's Park to encourage the government to enter the 21st century and ditch the current Soviet style retail arrangement.

This idea is catching on.

Business associations which represent retailers are interested in pushing the government on this issue. They recognize that the ability to offer beer to the buying public enhances their profit margin, protects jobs in Ontario and helps build their business.

We have considered this change before. David Peterson campaigned on it. Some say his failure to implement the promised change was a significant factor in his election defeat and the surprise reign of the Bob Rae NDP.

I'll leave you to draw your own conclusions about what might happen if we don't move ahead with wider beer retailing opportunities – certainly an opportunity to reduce emissions, improve bottle collection and secure Ontario jobs will be missed.

That's why I have provided a printable copy of the petition at www.tedchudleigh.com for your convenience. I must have hard copies of the petition in order to read them into the record at Queen's Park.

Cheers.