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*...from the
director's chair*

MTO needs to get its house in order before focusing on speed-limiters

Curiouser and curiouser! I'm so astonished at the silence following the release of the Ontario Auditor General's report, I'm beginning to wonder if residents of the province have fallen down a rabbit hole and are off carousing somewhere in Wonderland with Alice and the gang.

It's been almost two months since Ontario's AG, Jim McCarter, tabled his annual report in the Legislative Assembly, and his harsh criticism of the Transportation Ministry's Commercial Vehicle Safety and Enforcement Program should have sent road safety advocates into a tailspin. But so far, not a twitter, except from yours truly and OBAC's membership.

I can understand – but not forgive – why some trucking industry folks might be unwilling to draw attention to the AG's findings, but what about J.Q. Public? That's the masses, remember, Transport Minister Jim Bradley felt he needed to protect – with speed-limiter legislation – from (in his words) "speeding trucks on Ontario highways that pollute our environment and create unnecessary risk."

That folks, is the best example I've heard in a long time of the pot calling the kettle black.

According to the AG's value-for-money audit, the taxpayers of Ontario didn't get much for the \$39 million MTO spent on its commercial vehicle enforcement program last year. Road safety in Ontario has been compromised because of inadequate facilities, slipshod monitoring, and outdated systems and procedures.

For example, the number of inspections has been dropping steadily – by 34% in the past four years – and in 2007, only three out of every 1,000 commercial vehicles were subject to a roadside inspection. For anyone who's had to endure a Level 1 inspection by an overzealous creeper cop ferreting out chaffed air lines, that might seem like a good thing, but it's actually pretty scary

when you consider what they're not looking for.

The report revealed that some 20,600 operators – who have been involved in collisions, convicted, or pulled over for a roadside inspection – have never applied for the required Commercial Vehicle Operator's Registration (CVOR) certificate. And – get this – MTO takes almost no follow-up action against these operators.

It's mind-boggling that the government is prepared to divert obviously scarce enforcement resources to verifying speed-limiter settings when there are more than 20,000 operators running around the province who don't even have CVORs. And that's just those who have already hit the radar screen in some way. It demonstrates what we've been saying from the get-go in the speed-limiter debate: when it comes to setting priorities for road safety, the folks at Queen's Park have one very badly skewed view of the world. The commercial vehicle safety and enforcement program is a mess. MTO can't do its job now because it lacks resources, yet they're prepared to add an enforcement initiative with no proven safety benefit to already overburdened roadside inspectors? Un-friggin-believable. Among other highlights of the AG's report are these gems:

- 65% of roadside inspections are conducted between 6 a.m. and 2 p.m. Although 21% of commercial vehicles trips are made at night, only 8% of the inspections are conducted then;

- Since only 15 truck inspection stations have impoundment facilities, unsafe vehicles identified in other locations are released after being repaired, without the required minimum 15-day penalty being imposed. Also, enforcement officers tend to avoid impoundments because of the paperwork involved;

- Inspectors could often not retrieve CVOR records from the database quickly enough to use them in deciding which vehicles warranted a

Joanne Ritchie:
OBAC
executive
director



roadside inspection. As well, almost 10,000 inspection reports languished more than five months last year before being entered into the system;

- The number of interventions against high-risk operators has been declining since 2003; and the most serious interventions, such as suspension or revocation of a CVOR certificate, have dropped by 40% since then. Two-thirds of 740 operator facility audits – which Ministry policy requires for operators with high safety violation rates – were cancelled by Ministry staff.

And on it goes – a discouraging litany of failure and abdication of responsibility on MTO's part to get the riff-raff off our roads.

When Minister Bradley introduced Bill 41 in March 2008, calling it another step in Ontario's plans for safer roads, it was a disheartening display of politics above reason. And when he continued to tout the law's safety benefits, long after Transport Canada studies showed clearly that speed-limiters could compromise safety in a number of situations, it revealed an alarming indifference to the security and well-being of Ontario motorists.

But if he thumbs his nose at the AG's report and persists in squandering MTO's limited resources on speed-limiter enforcement, he should be trundled off to the Mad Hatter's tea party and never seen again. What we need – and every last one of us should be clambering for it – is a Minister who has the fortitude to put lives and livelihoods ahead of votes, and give under-staffed and over-tasked MTO officials the resources and tools they need to do their job.