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*...from the
director's chair*

The tipping point

Recklessly speeding cars claimed two more innocent lives over the Thanksgiving weekend. Two cars were allegedly racing along a southern Ontario highway when one of them went out of control, slammed into a third car, and triggered a chain reaction of death and destruction. Police say the cars were seen travelling at speeds in excess of 140 km/h along Highway 50, an 80 km/h two-lane highway, just north of Brampton.

This tragedy came a week after Ontario enacted legislation aimed at drivers who operate their vehicles with reckless disregard for the law. It empowers police to seize vehicles caught travelling more than 50 km/h over the posted speed limit; speeders will lose their cars and their driving privileges for a week, and be liable for a minimum fine of \$2,000.

Twenty-eight drivers were nabbed the first day the law was in effect – Sept. 30 – and a turkey hunt over Thanksgiving weekend saw Ontario Provincial Police impound 179 more cars, including the Audi and the BMW involved in the horrific accident on Highway 50.

By the time the legislation was eight days old, the total had reached 327, with the number steadily rising at the rate of about one car every 23 minutes. Several vehicles were clocked at over 200 km/h. Like OPP Sgt. Cam Woolley predicted, I was “shocked and awed.”

Speeding is nothing new, anywhere in the world, and it's been a serious issue in certain parts of Canada for some time. Depending where you live in this country, it's not unusual to see vehicles routinely driving at 20 to 30 km above the posted speed limit. On Ontario's 400-series of highways, the de facto speed limit has crept up to 120 km/h. It's rare to see any vehicle doing

less than 110 km/h around here.

But 50, 60, 100 km/h over the posted speed limit? A flagrant speeder caught every 23 minutes? How the hell did we get here?

In a recent interview, Woolley said the provincial police force hasn't seen any staffing increase in 30 years, despite considerably more traffic on the roads today than there was three decades ago. It's not surprising that motorists believe they can get away with just about anything, given our invisible police force.

I travel Highway 401 between Ottawa and Toronto on a fairly frequent basis, and I don't see many police out there, apart from the occasional patrol car flying by me at far more than my modestly-over-the-posted-speed-limit pace. Very rarely do I see a cop with another vehicle pulled over. Nowhere nearly enough, anyway, to have a calming effect on traffic.

The OPP will tell you that 340 people have died on Ontario roads so far this year, up from 329 at the same time last year. Eighty-seven of this year's fatal crashes involved speed and aggressive driving. What we don't hear them say very often, by the way, is the fact that in over 90% of the fatal crashes involving heavy trucks where speeding was a factor, the other driver was speeding, not the truck driver.

Clearly, highway safety hasn't been a priority with the past half-dozen provincial governments in this province. Dalton McGuinty's Liberals did little to change that during their last stint in power – until, that is, they were forced into action by sheer public disgust at what some drivers were getting away with.

The best McGuinty's Liberals could come up with – all in recent, pre-election months – was to impose fairly

harsh penalties for speeding in excess of 50 km/h over the posted limit. And of course, the inane idea of mandating speed limiters for trucks.

Tipped by the Thanksgiving weekend accident, speeding suddenly became an election issue in Ontario, and no doubt the sensationalism of the cops hammering dangerous drivers with the “immediate consequence” of impounding vehicles, yanking licences, and imposing heavy fines was fresh in voters' minds when they sent McGuinty back to Queen's Park with a massive majority.

It's early days, so I'm willing to give them the benefit of the doubt, and hope this tough new stance is a genuine attempt to get dangerous driving under control, and won't fizzle out when the government gets back to work.

Which brings me back to speed limiters. It should be patently clear by now that sucking up government resources to mandate something that business-minded, safety-conscious carriers and owner/operators should be – and are – already doing is actually compromising highway safety.

Earth to government. Heavy trucks are the least likely vehicles to be speeding on our highways. Knee-jerk legislation targeting the wrong group of offenders is not the answer. Getting road racers under control is. So is whacking drivers going 20, 30, or 40 km/h over the speed limit. As is some serious attention paid to driver training and behaviour modification. And how about infrastructure renewal? And in the words of McGuinty himself, “we need a lot more public education.”

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