



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

*...from the
director's chair*

Since when did truck inspections become a spectator sport?

You can tell spring is in the air because the roadside truck inspection blitzes are starting up again. Odd, isn't it, how they cease during the winter. I guess warm weather makes trucks unsafe. Or maybe the media camera people and reporters just don't relish waiting around in the cold for a shot of vice grips clamped around a brake hose.

I'm not sure how it works in other parts of Canada, but here in Ontario, the MTO makes a point of sending out media advisories prior to the blitzes to ensure they get coverage. They announce a time and location, and wait for the camera trucks to roll in.

So what's going on here, anyway? Since when has truck inspection and enforcement become a spectator sport?

You don't usually see camera crews following Ministry of Health inspectors around as they ferret cockroaches out from under restaurant counters, or Ministry of Labour inspectors seeking out unsafe work environments.

So why do bald truck tires and broken trailer springs rate a couple of minutes on the six o'clock news? Unsafe trucks play to public anxiety over road safety, so what better way to placate uneasy motorists than by showing them their tax dollars at work?

Ever notice how blitz numbers always suggest that a shocking number of trucks on the road are unsafe? That's not the case, of course, but try to convince your neighbours otherwise if they've heard it on the news.

What is usually left out of the media reports is whether these roadside blitzes are random or targeted inspections.

The subtle difference would probably be lost on most non-trucking folks anyway, but it

can make a big difference in the way the numbers get reported. In a targeted blitz, the cops are purposely seeking out trucks that appear to be under-maintained, and if they know their stuff, the number of infractions they find should be high.

But taken out of context, those numbers can be alarming. Take, for example, results of a recent two-day blitz in southern Ontario where 15 out of 26 trucks inspected – over 55% – were deemed out-of-service.

What isn't reported is the number of trucks that weren't inspected. If, say, 1,000 trucks rolled by the inspection point and only 26 were singled out for inspection, the out-of-service rate would be 1.5%. Hardly worth reporting.

In any case, we all know how little it takes to sideline a truck – sometimes the defects aren't even remotely related to the propensity for calamity.

Three minor violations are sufficient to put a truck out-of-service. Usually, repairs are made at roadside and the truck is on its way again.

Sadly, the media doesn't differentiate between a grossly deficient truck and a truck with a couple of burned out lights. To the media – based on reports from inspectors – every truck taken out-of-service is an accident looking for a place to happen.

If you try to pin down MTO with a question about targeted versus random blitzes, they'll tell you that random actions are a way of getting a snapshot of the general condition of the trucks on the road. That's crap, in my opinion. No way can you get a statistically valid picture of the province's entire fleet by inspecting a few dozen trucks in a Toronto suburb.

If the MTO had computers that worked,

**Joanne
Ritchie:
OBAC
executive
director**



maybe they wouldn't need blitzes to help them develop that elusive industry snapshot.

But then, as Ontario's Auditor General pointed out in a recent audit of MTO's commercial vehicle enforcement regime, the computers they use are so slow they can't pull up data fast enough to check a carrier's safety rating as the truck creeps past the shack in the scale lane.

At the end of the day, what value is an industry snapshot anyway? It's not even clear what the connection is between out-of-service rates and road safety. I'm far more interested in getting the non-compliant carriers and their scabby trucks off the road so the law-biding carriers can compete on a level playing field.

For my money, a far more effective compliance tool is a facility audit, which most jurisdictions require for operators with high safety violation rates.

Perhaps if Ontario had spent less last year on roadside blitzes, they would have been able to carry out the facility audits they were forced to cancel due to lack of funding.

Maybe it's time for MTO and all the other jurisdictions in North America to put an end to these self-serving publicity stunts and get serious about separating out the good operators from the bad. We'd all get a bigger bang for our buck, and we might actually achieve safer highways rather than just scaring the hell out of the motoring public.