

Opinion Piece

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Memo to US bottle bill states: Hang on to your drawers

by Jay Arthur

Seven years ago, I was moved by some weird goings-on in British Columbia to write a column urging the good burghers of this province to beware Greeks bearing gifts.

Well, they weren't Greeks, but they were from the East. To a westerner that usually means Ontario, and that usually means Toronto. It is part of Western Canadian folklore that anyone from Toronto is automatically presumed to think the world, or even the universe, revolves around that fair city.

In the case of the well-dressed men who were offering BC programs big dollars to abandon their deposit-return beverage container collection system, they were quite right.

In what can best be described as an exercise in hubris squared, it was being suggested the Ontario model was not only more efficient than the BC model but also would be cheaper for municipalities.

Essentially, to use a somewhat indelicate (and possibly vulgar but extremely accurate) analogy, BC municipalities were being asked to drop their drawers for cash.

At the time, BC was leading the country in its approach to extended producer responsibility (EPR). While its blue box program did not receive funding from industry, it didn't have to look after beverage containers, either; industry did. And other materials were part of a long list of government-regulated, industry-funded recovery programs. This list has continued to grow.

Ontario didn't at that point have any support from industry, except for the occasional scrap of bread thrown at the peasants when they became restless.

Legislation was, however, slowly being developed based on what was euphemistically described as the "shared responsibility model".

The alleged, but never actually achieved, 50/50 split that was called for by the Waste Diversion Act of 2003 was turned on its head when Ontario's environment minister John Gerretsen started calling for stewardship plans for

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other materials, based on full product stewardship - i.e. 100% funding.

When he reviewed the WDA, he said that should apply to the blue box, too.

It hasn't happened yet for the blue box but Minister Gerretsen has signalled he is determined to make it happen soon. These are heady times for Ontario.

In the end, the boys from Bay Street were unsuccessful in persuading the boys from BC to relinquish the high recovery they get with deposits for the mediocre performance offered by the Ontario system.

Now, it seems, the same gang, acting for US industry interests, is making the rounds of the bottle bill states to the south of us (i.e. those with mandated deposit systems in place).

It's essentially the same pitch—look to Ontario as your role model.

And here's where it gets interesting.

It's not the 2010 Ontario model (i.e. 100% industry support). It's the old 50/50 model that is being touted as the way to go. Fifty-cent dollars are on the table, in exchange for the abandonment of their bottle bills.

The pitch talks about Ontario's high average recovery rate and its relatively low cost. It is likely a very persuasive argument when made by some of the best snake oil salespeople on the continent.

What the argument often leaves out is the role newspapers play in beefing up the numbers and reducing the cost.

And I doubt the argument includes any discussion about how newspaper tonnages are down and how this is affecting the average recovery rate and revenues.

And I doubt the argument includes any discussion about the growing number of hard-to-recycle items that are appearing on store shelves.

And the impact that has on the net cost of recycling.

Recent reports about Delaware repealing its bottle bill for an eco fee run contrary, thank heavens, to recent trends.

A number of states are now looking at expanding bottle bills and/or at EPR to reduce waste and promote recycling.

There will be arguments till kingdom come about who's got the best statistics on recovery (many of them bogus). But the only number that counts is the one that reflects the percentage of producer/consumer (not taxpayer) responsibility to manage the materials at end of life.

And that number should be 100. That is the Ontario model now.