

"DRIVING IS A PRIVILEGE NOT A RIGHT"

BY

TIMOTHY GRAYSON

For fourteen seasons, *Canada's Worst Driver* has had no problem gathering for ritual humiliation and training—and our amusement—incomprehensible driving incompetence and incivility. While the ineptitude is breathtaking, the self-entitlement of these road hazards is unconscionable.

The high school teacher who doubled as the town driving instructor where I grew up repeated, "Driving is a privilege, not a right," like catechism. Driver narcissism recalls it to my mind.

Bottom line: people who drive like puckered anal sphincters believe it's their right.

Wrong! And that has to change. Not just because it's dangerous and expensive.

In 2009 there were 2,209 fatalities and 11,451 serious injuries resulting from traffic accidents in Canada. These represent a low water mark of a broad decrease in traffic danger during the preceding decade, but that downward slope is unlikely to sustain without material change to the driving context. That makes it a fair place to statistically settle on numbers that represent an absurdly high cost in human life and limb, damage repair and, moreover, lost opportunity to apply those wasted resources more productively.

Beyond death and injury, property damage is the cost most associated to automotive accidents: that's autobody, never mind repair to medians, guardrails, buildings, etc. Many studies echo the sentiment that, "The annual social costs of the motor vehicle collisions in terms of loss of life, medical treatment, rehabilitation, lost productivity, and property damage are measured in tens of billions of dollars." The order of magnitude ought to floor any reader. It's equivalent to nearly \$300 annual levy on every single Canadian.

Never mind dollars. What about the *attention* that must be dedicated by first responders? If the nice policewoman were not attending to another avoidable fender bender, might she not be preventing spousal abuse or keeping gangs from spraying bullets in a shopping mall?

Opportunity cost judgments are debatable. Judgment or not, real cost ripples radiate to give the (typically) guilty their moments in criminal and civil court. Just defending against losing the right to drive impacts the justice system non-trivially. How much police time is taken to fully deal with people who behave as though driving is an inalienable right? How much of the Court's time? How much of these finite resources could be put to better use?

That question ought to drag us from remedy to prevention costs. If the first order outcome of driving as a right (not a privilege) is dangerous and costly behavior, and the second order impact beyond mere incivility is enormous and broad societal burden as unnecessary cost and harm, it behooves government to do something.

But what?

How about modest, self-funding actions not reliant on some technological salve? How about civility and *privilege* rather than *right*.

What if society *generally* didn't care that you *specifically need* a car to get to work, or if your driver's license wasn't also a license to be decivilized? What if you answered for your behavior in a car right in the moment? What could that look like?

Mostly, it would look like you... Tinted windows have the same effect as Internet anonymity: they allow us to be less civil with impunity. Fact: When we hide, we are inclined to be self-absorbed, cruel, and careless.

Proposal one: Outlaw all tinted glass from automobiles. Even the rear windows; unnecessary.

Second, if drivers are insufficiently capable, we set and enforce a higher standard. A car's driver guides a 3-tonne self-propelled missile in a crowded environment among thousands of others doing the same thing. The typically ignored risk is mitigated by rules of behavior. Not knowing the rules or how to obey them, let alone flouting those rules with a 3000KG weapon is no excuse. Given the societal costs being borne now, obviously the capability standard is too low. As a society, we are obliged to raise the bar.

Proposal two: Raise the minimum level of driving competence.

It should be evident that a twenty year-old is not the same person at thirty, fifty, or seventy. Skill and perspective, let alone self-awareness and socialization among a host of other factors, improves or declines. It's naïve to believe a relatively alert and capable nineteen year-old, who twenty-five years later has become a richly overpaid investment banker (or hedge fund manager or lawyer or...) with a taste for fine liquor and cocaine, and the means to own and drive a Lotus Esprit, is the same person with the same conscience? The older version is far more likely to be a narcissistic danger to everyone on the road.

The point is not to stigmatize success (or professions) as there are many unsuccessful bad drivers too. It is to say that as we age, we change. We change physically *and* mentally. We forget. We think we know something because maybe we once knew it, but in fact operate on the basis of built up convenient falsehoods. All of which is good cause for periodic renewal. Given the risks and broad costs the driving creates, it is only sensible to ensure those piloting well-advertised, lifestyle missiles remain certified above the set capability bar.

Proposal three: Mandatory rules retesting and road test every 7 years from issuance of license.

The licensee should pay to make it self-funding. After the age of 60, testing should be more frequent, say every three years, until at age 75 the permit to drive an automobile is withdrawn.

I can hear it now: that's not fair, it's ageist, etc. In some cases, maybe so. Still, there is too much statistical evidence to prove diminishing capacity (i.e., of physical and mental reaction time at least) in the majority of people above this age. It is substantially no different than prohibiting 15-year-olds. Besides, it's a red herring to avoid the primary point.

The key is funding. As the prevailing (re)test infrastructure ought to be more than capable of handling more, structured volume, the program would pay only marginal added costs. These are offset by the testing fees. Meanwhile, the benefits accrue broadly as reductions in all of the much-more material costs that bad driving creates throughout society, from damage and repair through medical care and justice.

Perhaps the real value of this Trojan Horse idea, which is reintroducing civility to at least one activity that dominates our daily lives, will have creeping benefits in how we as a

society behave and cohere. If the early Rudolph Giuliani had success by applying the “broken windows” theory to 1970s New York City decay, maybe this little proposition could have outsized effects on our politics and our national character.

Besides, like it or not, the idea is understandable and manageable. Even the prevailing (or, I concede, any) government, whose incapability to deal with big issues is flagrantly obvious, could deal with this little one. Maybe even successfully. Maybe they would find themselves unexpectedly rewarded financially and socially despite undoubted initial opposition and blowback.

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