

July 4, 2007

This is your brain on speed

By CHRISTINA BLIZZARD

Call me crazy, but I don't get it.

In response to a recent spate of deadly accidents involving high performance cars that were allegedly street racing, the government steps in and limits the speed ... of trucks?

It seems to me that truckers are the guys for whom the highways are a workplace. People like David Virgoe, the trucker killed recently in an alleged street-racing incident, are the safe drivers on our roads. It's lunatic street racers who put us all at risk.

That's what's so baffling about a plan by the Ministry of Transportation to put governors on trucks, restricting them to 105 km/h. At the same time, the government isn't looking at requiring governors on private vehicles. Nor is it looking at photo radar.

Transportation Minister Donna Cansfield says the impetus for the speed governors came from the Ontario Trucking Association itself.

"Governors are used extensively in Europe," Cansfield said in a phone interview.

She said the measure would save diesel fuel and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Aside from that, she says it's a safety issue.

"When a large rig is going at 120 km/h, it takes 235 metres just to stop," she said.

"I know the drivers are phenomenal, they are good, great people. But there are a lot of other vehicles on our roads," she said.

And she nixed the idea of photo radar.

"No, it is not back on the agenda," Cansfield said. Fair enough, I'm not a big fan of the speed cameras myself.

"We are working with the OPP. There is a whole slew of tools they need and I think we have started to put them in place," she said.

Cansfield mentioned specifically the new one-seatbelt-one-person law, street racing legislation and other changes to the Highway Traffic Act aimed at cutting back on dangerous driving and speeding.

And it's true the police seem to be out on the roads in force. On recent road trips, I have noticed increased OPP speed traps on the highways. That's a good thing -- unless they catch me in one, of course. In which case, there must be something wrong with their radar guns.

But it isn't just speed that makes a dangerous driver. When conditions are good and the road is clear, it is perfectly acceptable to drive 15 or 20 km/h over the speed limit. Drivers who tailgate, who cut people off, who weave in and out of traffic and who race with other cars -- those are the dangerous drivers. And you need a police cruiser on the highway to make those judgment calls.

I remember when photo radar was first installed around the GTA during the Bob Rae government. Drivers would be moving along nicely at 120 km/h, see the photo radar sign and slam on the brakes. It was very unsafe.

A spokesperson for CAA Ontario says that organizations is not entirely opposed to photo radar.

"We would be prepared to support it if it was put in areas where there is a history of a high incidence of collisions and fatalities, providing you let people know it is there," said the CAA's Kris Barnier.

As well, he said, the identity of the driver should be verified -- so the driver, not the vehicle owner, gets charged. That's easier said than done.

I am left stunned at the stupidity of young men these days. What testosterone-driven bravado possesses them to get in a car, put their foot down and race with other cars on a crowded highway?

What will it take to stop them? If common decency isn't enough to put the brakes on, I don't think a ticket from a radar camera will deter them.

More importantly, if the technology exists to put governors into trucks to limit the speeds of decent guys just trying to make a living, why can't we implant that same technology in the brains of these idiots who imperil all of us with their outrageous antics?

Oh, that's right. I guess you'd have to find their brains in the first place.