



Some Historical Perspective on the Current “Buck-A-Beer” Controversy

On 27 August 2018, the Conservative government of Doug Ford made it legal for brewers to sell bottles and cans of beer in Ontario for just one dollar (plus deposit). “The days of the government putting its hand in your pocket each time you buy a two-four or six-pack is over,” stated the Ontario Premier of his controversial new plan. “Instead we’re going to do what we said we would do and put Ontario consumers first.” The move fulfilled an election promise and was designed to get votes and please his electoral base.

By hitching his wagon to beer, Ford joined a long line of politicians who had promised cheaper consumer goods in an attempt to gain votes. But, as history shows, doing so has not always taken our leaders to the political promised land.

One of the first would-be politicians to use beer as a sop was John Carling. At the age of 21, John Carling and his brother William took over their father’s brewery on the bank of the Thames River in London, Ontario. In 1850 the brothers Carling expanded their plant to take advantage of emerging markets and technologies. The expansion represented a huge investment that the brothers decided to protect from the rising temperance tide by having John Carling enter local politics. While William felt that his brother’s natural charisma was enough to endear him to voters, John decided to leave nothing to chance. On election day he put the company’s liquid assets to good use lubricating the electorate. The bribe did not go unnoticed. “In a room adjoining the polling station,” wrote the editor of the *Canadian Free Press*, “was a barrel of beer for the refreshment of the thirsty, conspicuously branded with ‘J. Carling.’” Carling won the election of 1851 and never looked back. With the support of London’s leading conservatives, he moved slickly from local to provincial and then federal politics.

But not all attempts to sway voters with booze went down so smoothly. Such was the case in Ontario during the election of 1934. While prohibition had come to an end in 1927, drinking full-strength beer in public places was still illegal in Ontario during the first few years of the Great Depression. Between 1927 and 1934, the Ontario government only allowed the public consumption of “Fergie’s Foam,” which contained 2.2% alcohol by volume, in tightly regulated “beverage rooms” across the province. But in light of the continuing economic crisis and the government’s ever-growing need for revenue, the idea of returning to a world in which there was public drinking of full-strength beer began to be seriously debated in the provincial capital.

With an election looming in the summer of 1934, the Conservative Premier George S. Henry decided to shore up the support of “wets” in society by passing beer-by-the-glass legislation. On 21 March 1934, Attorney General William Price rose in the House and asked leave from the Speaker to give the first reading to an Act to Amend the Liquor Control Act. To be proclaimed after the election, the Conservative government’s new liquor act would permit the sale of full-strength beer and wine in hotel dining rooms, restaurants, and clubs. With the bill passed in the House, the only thing left for the Conservative government to do was to call an election, which George Henry set for 19 June 1934. In the months leading up to the vote, the brewers of the province poured thousands of dollars into the Conservative Party’s war chest. According to the historian Albert Tucker, Labatt donated \$25,000 to the Conservative campaign.

Despite the promise of greater access to alcohol, the Conservatives lost the election. On the day after the vote, a headline in the *London Free Press* read: “Conservatives are swept from power; eight cabinet ministers are beaten in landslide.” Unlike Carling before him, Henry was unable to win-over a majority of the electorate with promises of an ever-wetter oasis.

In a country like Canada, with its long history of thoughtfully considering the “liquor question,” associating oneself with beer or a brand does not guarantee political success. For most of Canadian history the liquor question has divided the population. But more importantly —beyond the political calculus of it all — one worries about the social consequences of Mr. Ford’s buck-a-beer challenge. After all recent studies by the *WHO* have shown that there is a correlation between the lower minimum price of alcohol and alcohol related deaths and hospital admissions. Understanding this, Canada was the first nation to impose minimum pricing in 1991. Mr. Ford’s “buck-a-beer challenge” breaks with a great Canadian tradition of soberly reflecting on the place of alcohol in society. There is no doubt that Mr. Ford appreciates the special place that beer currently holds in the collective consciousness. Today beer is to Canada what wine is to France; it is our alcoholic beverage of choice and, for many, it is intertwined with the “Canadian identity.” But what Mr. Ford has yet to understand is that, since the time of Confederation, most Canadians have wanted their governments to ensure that beer is consumed moderately and responsibly.

Matt Bellamy,
English Language Secretary