



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

*...from the
director's chair*

Every vote counts

In my many years of trying to change the system from within, I've had my fair share of frustrating encounters with obtuse bureaucrats and lawmakers. And just when I think it can't get any worse, I have one of those tear-your-hair-out moments that reminds me what I'm out here fighting for. During a recent discussion with one of my bureaucrat buddies about good public policy and government's role in the speed limiter debate, I asked, somewhat rhetorically, "How can your Minister ignore the facts, and be so oblivious to what's in the best interest of taxpayers?"

"It's simple," my friend said, "truckers don't vote."

It left me fuming that anyone would single out and dismiss truckers so off-handedly; after all, Canadians in general are an apathetic lot. Not much more than half the population bothers to turn out and vote in federal elections and close to 90% of Canadians have never contacted a newspaper or a politician.

Yet, while Canadians have an appallingly low political involvement rate, it seems we're pretty good when it comes to whining; in recent surveys, close to 90% of respondents felt they weren't consulted adequately by government officials at any level regarding decisions that affected their everyday lives. You've got to wonder if this is the same 90% that's never contacted a politician...

Perhaps we're no worse than anyone else when it comes to that curious mix of whining and indifference, but unlike Canadians in many other occupations, truckers as a population are like a river; they're "a mile wide and an inch deep," spread out in every community across the country, but generally not in sufficient numbers in any one area to make the radar screen unlike, say, auto workers in Oshawa or loggers in B.C. and northern Ontario.

So it's easy to see how lawmakers could get the im-

pression that "truckers don't vote," and it's equally understandable why truckers often feel invisible and powerless. When it comes to bringing about change in this industry, the most common complaint I hear from drivers is the futility of a single voice crying in the wilderness – you can't change the system on your own.

And that's certainly true when it comes to the business side of trucking – keeping rates up and getting customers to stop wasting your time – but at the ballot box, individual votes do count.

There's no shortage of issues for truckers to discuss with political hopefuls as election fever hits the country, with voters going to the polls in the NWT, Newfoundland and Ontario before mid-October, a yet-to-be-called vote in Saskatchewan, and the possibility of voters Canada-wide heading for a federal election.

Canada's crumbling infrastructure and lack of rest areas puts truckers at risk on a daily basis, while governments have yet to move beyond promises to restore our national highway system, which would save 250 lives and 16,000 injuries from accidents, and could reduce fuel consumption by as much as 236 million litres of fuel, every year. If they're serious about saving the environment, enlightened governments would offer incentives to encourage the use of anti-idle technology and to drive the early adoption of emerging engine technology, not meddle with truck engine computers, a scheme that makes about as much sense as using a cannon to kill a flea.

And while it might not loom as large on the political agenda as health care, the environment, and Afghanistan, don't underestimate the likelihood of governments in Ontario and Quebec grabbing the low-hanging fruit and trying to slip through speed limiter legislation to curry favour with voters who are clambering

**Joanne
Ritchie:
OBAC
executive
director**



for safer roads and cleaner air.

We're still waiting for fair treatment for truckers with respect to meal tax allowances, after a token gesture in the last federal budget, and we need a government with the guts to give Marine Atlantic a good shake-up rather than tax the trucking industry with rate hikes, fuel surcharges, and mediocre service to pay for the crown corporation's inefficiencies.

And the list goes on – outstanding labour standards issues, a plethora of unanswered questions about Mexican truck safety, driver training and testing standards, and the hands-down winner of the most-stupid-piece-of-legislation award, Ontario's mandatory annual driving test, triggered by age alone – set arbitrarily at 65 for commercial drivers. In a word – vote. If you're on the road on election day, there are options for proxy voting and advance polls. Finding out who your elected officials are and how to reach them is only a google-search or a toll-free call away.

Even if an election isn't looming in your neck of the woods, let your lawmakers know what's on your mind. Politicians are greatly influenced by public opinion, and keep tabs on the issues raised by their constituents. Not necessarily because they give a damn, but because somewhere down the road, your opinion ultimately translates into a vote – either for or against them.

So demonstrate your power. That mile-wide, inch-deep river of truckers could make a mighty clean sweep.

– Joanne Ritchie is executive director of OBAC. Do you elect for change? E-mail her at jritchie@obac.ca or call toll-free 888-794-9990.