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Changing times at the LCBO

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Anyone who's been around for quite a while may remember the old-style Liquor Control Board of Ontario stores that sold wine and spirits across Ontario.

It may be the worst example in history of how to run a retail business.

For some reason they were staffed by crusty old guys who eyed you with suspicion when you entered the establishment.

I'm pretty sure there was a question on the job application that asked, ?Are you by nature grouchy and surly??

If you answered ?yes' to the question, your application was put on the top of the pile and you were put on the ?call next opening' list.

While perusing the listing of available liquor and wine you made your selection by looking at a list. Yes, a written list.

The available fine wines included a choice of products from maybe three wineries.

This was the golden age of Ontario wine making when Brights and Chateauguay seemed to dominate the local market and such classics as Cold Duck and Sparkling Duck could be snatched up for $3 per bottle. It was a little like drinking Cream Soda except with alcohol and added carbonation for that tingly feeling.

You made your selection by writing down the stock number on a little slip of paper and handing it to the guy behind the counter. He eyed you suspiciously, then disappeared into the hidden back room of mystery.

A few minutes later he would reappear with your purchase hidden in a brown paper bag, top folded down tightly so no one could see it. It was placed on the counter, you were again eyed with suspicion and sometimes contempt as you took your purchase and headed for the door.

The trip to your car also required a look around the parking lot to make sure no one you knew would see you escaping with your liquor and stuffing it into a hiding place in the trunk.

Buying a bottle of rum back then could be a nerve-wracking experience!

I don't know who decided to modernize the LCBO, but I'll bet that at some meeting, someone finally screwed up enough courage to point out that their retail outlets were about 100 years out of date.

That's what happens when you have government trying to run a business ? especially a business that was created on the heels of the prohibition era when liquor was considered by some to be a tool of the devil.

The Beer Store has also modernized in recent years with most going from the old style back room warehouse delivery to an open, choose your own concept.

There have been recent radios ads lately sponsored by the labour union that represents Beer Store employees.

The ads claim that the provincial government's ongoing plan to allow beer sales at some retail stores and grocery stores will put 7000 Beer Store jobs at risk.

The question here is how is that the government's fault?

The Beer Store is not a government-run operation. It's a private business.

A 2013 Angus Reid poll reported that only 13 percent of Ontarians knew that the Beer Store is a private enterprise. People readily assume that everything to do with alcohol in the province is government-run.

The Beer Store is primarily owned by three brewing companies ? Molson, Labatt, and Sleeman. In 2016 the Beer Store made a profit of around $396 million, so they are doing well although I thought that considering Ontario is a real beer drinking province, it would have been more.

The Beer Store, formerly called the Brewer's Retail until they finally decided to change the name to the common vernacular, pretty much had a monopoly on beer sales in the province save for craft beers available at the LCBO.

The union that represents the Beer Store employees is misleading the public by saying the Province is going to cost them jobs. If allowing beer sales at other outlets affects their bottom line, then they will have to work that much hard to retain customers.

This is no different than having a new grocery store open in a town and having the existing store demand the government stop them because it will affect their business.

The Beer Store as a retail outlet is fine the way it is. They have a huge selection, the staff are well trained and friendly, and it's a convenient way to pick up a 2-4.

However, when it comes to selling a product, having a monopoly on the entire industry controlled by three major players goes against the principles of a free market and fair competition.