

Backlash

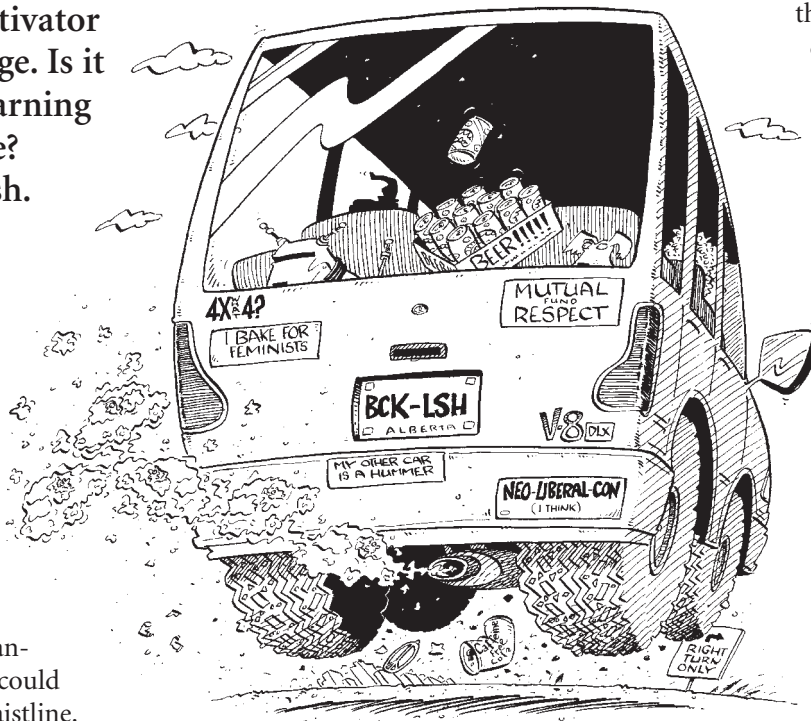
BY FRED STENSON

The leading motivator of societal change. Is it greed? Is it a yearning for social justice? I say it's backlash.

For example, consider light beer. Here was a beverage that came along in the seventies offering a two-fold advantage. First, since many of the calories of beer are found in its alcohol, light beer manufacturers boasted it could take inches off the waistline. Feet, in some cases.

The second advantage was that, in an evening of light beer drinking, you were less likely to get swacked. The morning after was less fraught with difficulties such as the inability to stand the sound of your watch.

I remember encountering a fellow in a popular bar. His pockets were bulging with dollar bills, all won at the shuffleboard table whose tawny surface shone under the no gambling sign nearby. I was surprised to see he was drinking light beer and he proceeded to give an avid testimonial. Powered by light beer, he was dispatching shuffleboard opponents as never before and was able to do his real job next morning (which



involved walking to the tops of mountains) without noticeable after-effect.

Light beer was obviously a boon to society, but what was the true result? High alcohol beer!

To my knowledge, Alberta had only one high alcohol beer prior to light beer. It went by the nickname “High Test,” and was favored by those who liked to achieve total head numbness in under two hours. But after we had light beer, the brewers came out, simultaneously it seemed, with 7.5 per cent beer as opposed to the Canadian standard of 5.5 per cent. The new beers went by names like “Snarling Cur” and “Hurl,” and

they had no other taste or color advantage save their alcohol. They tasted bad, as if grain alcohol had been added by syringe.

Suddenly the drunks in the local taverns were drunker and uglier. Barroom fighting made a comeback. Stick swinging incidents at the coin operated pool table were common. When this bunch took to their cars, your best hope was that two of them would collide heavily in the parking lot. And all of it, all this mayhem—caused by light beer.

I can tell you're skeptical, and that's fine because I have more examples.

Still with food and beverage, I submit that “caffeine free” brought us “caffeine enhanced,” for example the beverages with names like “Snap” and “Bolt” that students drink copiously before exams, and which account for answers like, “The animals in *Of Mice and Men* are symbolic of George Orwell's political opinions.”

According to the law of backlash, the concern over the long-term effects of cholesterol and saturated fats looks very good for the makers

of pie and doughnuts, good as well for the beef industry. Japan is a reliable coal mine canary as regards backlash. Soon after the rest of the world started reducing fat in their diets, the Japanese hired people to massage and spit beer on steers whose steaks would eventually cost a gold brick per ounce. Look for “extra fat” designations at the grocery store and perhaps a chain of shopping mall restaurants called “The Suet House.” If you’re currently invested in health clubs, bail.

If you still don’t believe me, let’s look at the environment. The fear of automobile and industrial pollution led to the American Clean Air Act in 1970. Soon Japanese mini-cars were taking the world by storm, zipping all around the great land-ships of Detroit Steel, sort of like the nimble Arabian horses ridden by Moors unhorsing unwieldy Spanish knights in armour. Thanks to the Japanese mini-car, and the American mini-

cars that followed, the graph for greenhouse gases checked its upward ascent and there seemed to be hope for the future, even in Los Angeles.

And what did all that good environmental work accomplish?

Well, most noticeable to me is that it prompted a love of the Sport Utility Vehicle. Suddenly, SUVs are the thing to drive, even among environmental activists, and no engine smaller than a V6 is fit to power them. The V8 engine, which was considered as environmentally friendly as DDT not that long ago, is now a badge of honour. Even the folks who don’t like the country, and won’t drive there on account of the possibility of splattering mud on their mudflaps, want V8s and 4x4s. SUVs flunk crash tests but they look smart and they’ll plow right through a snowdrift—except there aren’t any because the Christmas temperature in Edmonton is plus nine and the Northwest Passage is yawning open in January.

Thanks to backlash, all the people who predicted that the nineties would be the decade of environmental change are written off as Nervous Nellies and Cranks. People like myself who still drive Civics are sniggered at by people who pull up beside them in SUVs. “Get off the road, insect vehicle man.” Vroom.

Next, let’s look at how HIV, AIDS and Safe Sex ushered in a bedlam of sexual obsession like nothing this side of Caligula. They would have hanged Lenny Bruce for half the lyrics 13-year-olds groove along to on their headsets. The Internet is so overwhelmed by porn sites that no search string is sacred. (Try “nun,” “dog,” or “joy.”) After taking in a few Much Music videos, I look back at the Free Love Sixties and think: “How timid. How chaste.”

Backlash is wonderful. It brought down the Berlin Wall. It gave Coca-Cola to the Chinese. Young women (recipients of the rights, privileges and powers won for them by 20th century feminism) use their freedom

of speech to proudly announce that they are not and never will be feminists. People who might be cutting peat on feudal farms if it hadn’t been for the rise of liberalism get columns in newspapers and question the need for universal education. Not only did the children of the hippies become mutual funds salesmen and Internet marketing gurus, SO DID THE HIPPIES. (Backlash works much faster, after all, than human life.)

There is no long term when it comes to backlash, so let’s look at the near term and see what we might expect.

Despite the nitwits in the Alberta Government, who have proven they don’t know the first thing about backlash by making it against the law for teenagers to smoke, teen smoking will probably decline, especially among girls.

About the time the *Calgary Herald* becomes the *National Post* with slightly different ads, Calgarians will discover they badly want a locally written newspaper, and they will try to get one, against insurmountable odds.

In terms of fashion, the worship of the unmarked human body would seem to be on its way in. Millions of costly piercings will be left to grow over, while the laser surgery entrepreneurs add laser tattoo removal to their list of costly services—and it won’t work very well.

The red-hot stock market looks very bad for the red-hot stock market.

Electronic pets will give way to living cats and dogs for awhile, and then I’m afraid we’re into the zone of the clone. Instead of collecting movie star and sports star memorabilia, we’ll be collecting the real thing.

“I’ll give you a Michael Jordan for a Michael Jackson.”

Remember, especially if you’re unhappy with the way things are: whatever is, soon won’t be. ✖

Fred Stenson is the author of *Teeth* and *Working Without a Laugh Track*. A new novel, set in the fur trade, is due out this fall.