

Opinion

Come'on over says U.S. customs

By TERRY O'SHAUGHNESSY

As if cheaper prices and lower taxes were not enough, American border officials are currently in the process of sweetening the cross-border shopping pot by making it easier and faster for Canadians to pass through U.S. customs on their way back home.

A pilot project, entitled "Autopass" and conducted (for now) in the Niagara region of southern Ontario, will make passing through United States' customs that much simpler for Canadian consumers in pursuit of cheaper goods south of the border. While Uncle Sam is hoping to lure even more Canadian dollars into the coffers of American bordertown retailers, there is deep concern that easier access to shopping in the U.S. will kill off greater numbers of already struggling businesses north of the border. And there is little doubt any success of this initial program will guarantee its expansion to other border points across the country.

It is a geographical fact of life that the majority of Canadians live within a few hours drive of the United States. Add a tough economic climate and a heavy tax burden, and Canadian retailers are left having to fight for their economic lives. Pitted against a scenario of cheaper goods and lower sales taxes, they are seeing their more expensive Canadian goods simply collect dust in otherwise empty stores.

Catherine Swift, vice president of research and chief economist of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, says the new Autopass program will deliver another damaging jolt to border communities already sputtering from the effects of the recession.

"Faster and easier passage through border checkpoints may well be the final blow for many businesses within driving distance of the U.S.," says Swift. "Recent studies show that day trips to the U.S. are significantly on the rise. The new Autopass program will only further increase those numbers and Canadian businesses will continue to suffer the consequences."

The Autopass program works by allowing Canadians (who apply for and receive special car decals and personal passes) to bypass normal U.S. customs and immigration procedures. American officials admit they are simply responding to the great demand of the Canadian public, but Swift emphasizes that Canadian consumers are not to blame for the current cross-border shopping crisis.

"These are extremely difficult economic times," she points out, "and consumers cannot be blamed for wanting to stretch their hard-earned dollars. It is the federal government's policies which have been the most destructive, severely weakening the competitiveness of Canadian firms. A stubbornly high dollar, painfully high interest rates, and a greedy Goods and Services Tax have really hurt business owners. All they need is a level playing field. All they have received - from governments at all levels - are more taxes and no positive support."

Currently, the Autopass program only applies to the Fort Erie/Buffalo crossing at the New York/Ontario border, but it may soon be expanded to checkpoints across the province. "However," cautions Swift, "Canadian retailers in all regions will be seriously affected by the expansion of this project across the country. As consumers are showing no signs that they are prepared to resume shopping at home, easier access to cheap American goods will only serve to make a bad situation even worse."

Just how much worse is anyone's guess. But with cars full of American goods - and empty Canadian wallets - being waved through U.S. customs, it appears it may have to get worse before it gets better.

CFIB Feature Service



The Georgetown/Halton Hills Chapter of the Canadian Diabetic Association is \$1800 richer after Georgetown Lions made the presentation,

Monday night. Don Coghlan, left and A-11 District Governor Russ Fedun made the presentation to Diabetes President Lisa Burrows.

Our Readers Write

Concerned group disagrees with MP

(The following was filed with this newspaper for publication.)

Dear Mr. Turner,
Re: Your Ottawa Report of May 4/91 in the Halton Hills Weekend.

Democratic government requires, if I may borrow a term from our southern neighbors, that our MPs form a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." In our opinion, you, as our elected representative, are not fulfilling this role very well. We will not be voting for you at the next election.

In the article, you state, "These are my goals" but we believe the goals should be those of the majority of the people in your riding.

You state that income taxes could not be reduced. We believed that your government (not ours unfortunately) said that the GST would be used exclusively to lower the deficit so why could personal income taxes not be lowered?

You say one of your goals is to reduce spending. We agree with that goal, but not with the methods you mention to achieve it. Many pensioners are living from one pension check to the next now. Would you dare make their living standards even lower by reducing their pension checks? You also want to lower the family allowance. Many needy families require that family allowance check to help cover the high cost of raising children nowadays, especially with the GST added on now.

To reduce spending, we suggest the following government costs should be the first items to be lowered:

- (1) Free handouts to people illegally in our country eg. Mr. Ng in B.C. and Ms Benbenek in Thunder Bay, who are using our laws and our money to protect themselves from the laws of their own country;
- (2) Politicians using government planes for business trips rather than regular flights like the rest of us;
- (3) Politicians taking unnecessary trips;
- (4) Politicians taking their families on trips at our expense;
- (5) Buying GST pins for people who helped to get that despicable GST act through. (Isn't that a bit much since the vast majority of Canadians did not want the GST?)
- (6) Having plush, over-staffed, over-supplied offices in Ottawa for our representatives where many items eg. desks, computers and cabinets are never used;
- (7) Giving money to foreign individuals and countries eg. Mr. Mandela when we do not know

how it will be used, while we have thousands of our own Canadians going hungry because there is not enough in the food banks to feed them!

(8) Cutting back by half the number of MPs in our federal government;

(9) Buying "Canadian" instead of paying foreigners to make things for us eg. an American being paid a huge amount to design our dollar coin;

(10) Starting government pensions for politicians at 65 years of age like regular pensions and penalizing those that start sooner just as our Canada Pensions are lowered for the rest of us if we take them before we are 65;

(11) Taxing should be done by the level of government closest to the people that provides the service for which we are being taxed.

We tentatively agree with some of your ideas but we would have to see them in detail before supporting them definitely! For example, we agree that making the tax system fairer is desirable but we would like to see a minimum tax for people with a gross income of \$60,000 and up annually as well as a minimum tax on all businesses. Also, a Family Care Credit sounds fair but is this benefit not being recognized already by allowing some income tax deductions for a wife and children etc. now? Allowing volunteers to deduct minor expenses sounds alright but what minor expenses are we talking about here?

We agree that some of our institutions need reforming. We believe that the senate should be abolished now as it has recently been shown that the ruling party can control it by simply appointing more members who will vote as the government of the day prefers. Your idea to make government "more equal" sounds good but the way you want to implement it leaves a lot to be desired. People in sparsely populated provinces must feel that they can affect policy in some slight measure.

We would be interested in hearing from you regarding our questions and comments.

Yours sincerely,
A GROUP OF CONCERNED CANADIANS
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Jane Moffatt, 32 Baird St.
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Halton Hills

WEEKEND

The Georgetown Independent and Acton Free Press

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