

DOUG FORD'S CHEAP BEER IS CHEAP POLITICS

There's an old phrase that describes something which is trivial, trifling, inconsequential and of no importance. It's "small beer."

Doug Ford's promise of "buck-a-beer" is small beer.

With much fanfare and loads of self-congratulations, Ontario's premier announced earlier this month that his Progressive Conservative government was keeping an election campaign pledge and, as of Aug. 27, would allow the province's brewers to once again sell a bottle of suds for a mere loonie.

Those dastardly Liberals had raised the price floor for beer from a dollar a bottle to \$1.25 back in 2008 with "another piece of red tape," the premier fumed. But a return to buck-a-beer would be his gift to hard-working Ontarians who love a bargain as well as a brew.

In this case, however, cheap beer is just cheap politics. Ford is offering a solution to a non-existent problem.

To be sure, Ontario faces major challenges today. Unaffordable beer isn't one of them.

In contrast, more and more people fear home ownership is out of reach. Many poor Ontarians can't even afford to pay rent.

By Labour Day you can have a cold buck-a-beer in your hands again. At least if you can find one.

Keep in mind this government isn't lowering the price of beer. It's just cutting a bottle's minimal price to a dollar. Many brewers have already said they can't afford to do that without losing money. So they won't.

The world's changed since 2008. The costs of ingredients for beer along with workers' wages have risen. New American tariffs on aluminum have hiked the price for beer tins. Then, there are government taxes. They've risen, too.

In Ontario, a typical case of 24 now has a hefty tax of \$18.78 on it. That leaves little room for profit for a brewery trying to sell a case that size for \$24.

Ford does have the power to lower beer prices considerably by cutting the provincial taxes on the product. Of course, he's not considering that because provincial coffers gain close to \$600 million a year from beer and alcohol taxes.

Instead, the premier is counting on the brewers to do the heavy-lifting to put buck-a-beer on the shelf. Perhaps some will do so. But what will we have really gained out of all this?

For now, the promise of buck-a-beer sounds more like an insult than a favour. Does Ford really think this is a priority for Ontarians? Is he trying to distract us by waving a shiny trinket in front our eyes?

As government initiatives go, this one tastes flat and distinctly unsatisfying.

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WHY DOESN'T ONTARIO HAVE AN INTEGRATED DIGITAL HEALTH RECORD?

AS A FAMILY DOC, I WANT TO KNOW WHAT THE DOCTOR AT THE WALK-IN CLINIC DOWN THE STREET TOLD MY PATIENT, WRITES ALAM



**NADIA
ALAM**
Column

Other health systems around the world have it. Other provinces do too. So, why doesn't Ontario?

With all its industry and innovation, its larger tax base, its special health tax and larger federal health transfer, why doesn't Ontario have an integrated digital health record?

An integrated digital health record means that patient medical information moves with them as they go from one part of the health care system to another. From their family doctor's office, to the local pharmacy, to a hospital, to a nursing home, to home care, to a walk-in clinic or a specialist's office. Critical informa-

tion right at our fingertips.

As a family doc, I want to know what the doctor at the walk-in clinic down the street told my patient. I want to know details of a patient's hospitalization. The way it is right now, to get that information I have to resort to faxes, logging into separate computer programs, giving out my personal cellphone number, or having the patient recite it all from memory next time I see them.

It's outdated, inaccurate and unsafe.

In 2008, the Liberals created eHealth, a whole new agency to do it. Ten years and billions of dollars later, we're still using fax machines.

Technical experts say the solution is straightforward: application programming interfaces, or APIs. They're used widely by tech giants

and don't cost billions of dollars.

It is amazing that I can do international banking on my smartphone. And it's ridiculous that I have no clue what happens to my patient once they leave my office. Governments talk about team-based care, but this only works if the team can communicate information quickly and accurately.

Premier Doug Ford named Dr. Reuben Devlin as head of a new council on improving health care and ending hallway medicine. In our chats, Devlin expressed an interest in using technology to make health care work better for patients. So, it's promising. Maybe. I hope we get more than promises this time.

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