

Tories misleading us about drunk driving toll



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With a provincial election campaign nearly upon us, we should no doubt expect to be barraged by a torrent of political advertising — including, of course, so-called attack ads.

There is nothing inherently wrong with a political party seeking to define its opponents on its own terms. And while we should not expect nuance in such ads, we should ensure that debates over important public policy are informed by accurate information.

The Tories are targeting the Wildrose Party in two separate radio ads, one of which deals with Bill 26 — the government's controversial impaired driving law.

While it's hardly surprising or objectionable to see the governing party defending its record, it's curious to see how they're doing so on this issue.

After aggressively ramming the legislation through last fall, the government then agreed to delay the legislation (likely

until after the election) and to hold consultations with industry.

Now they're back to aggressively defending the legislation as an urgently needed tool for saving lives.

Mind you, the government has at times told us that this law did not mark a radical departure from the existing framework, undercutting the message that lives are at stake without the law.

The Tory ad claims that "since 1998, 300 Albertans have been killed by drivers who blew .08 or less," and then implies that the Tories are eager to tackle the problem, whereas the Wildrose Party is somehow indifferent.

It's a sobering statistic, but where does it come from?

When asked by QR77 radio's Angela Kokott last week, Solicitor General Jonathan Denis replied that it "comes from an independent University of Western Ontario study that has been quoted by Robert Remington of the Calgary Herald many times."

Indeed, in one blog post on the Herald website, Remington states "the estimate is my own."

With all due respect to Remington, it's rather embarrassing that with everything at its disposal, the government must rely on an analysis of a single re-

port by a single newspaper columnist.

Mind you, if the analysis were correct, then it would be a moot point.

However, that University of Western Ontario study is an examination of the blood-alcohol content of deceased motorists, and says nothing about those who may have died at the hands of impaired drivers.

Remington, though, also refers to statistics from Alberta Transportation, claiming, for example, that in 2008 in Alberta, 14 per cent of fatally injured drivers were below .08.

However, the Alberta traffic collision statistics for 2008, available on the Alberta Transportation website, which Remington links to, show that 13.7 per cent of fatally injured drivers were "alcohol impaired" and 8.8 per cent "had been drinking." There is no further breakdown — "had been drinking" could mean .06 or .02.

Once again, however, these statistics refer to fatally injured drivers. That's not to minimize the tragedy of those lives lost, but there is a considerable difference between one's stupidity taking his own life and one's stupidity taking another's life.

I realize the Tories see much more emotional impact in the latter, but they've opted for a claim that also would appear to

have no basis at all.

If one is looking for a more detailed breakdown, it can be found in a lengthy report released last November by the Traffic Injury Research Foundation.

It includes a detailed look at each province, and separate statistics for fatally injured drivers into more specific categories of .05 to .08 and those under .05.

When it comes to those between .05 and .08, the number is not 14 per cent or anything even approaching that. Just 1.4 per cent of fatally injured drivers fell into that category; 4.3 per cent were under the .05 threshold.

One could argue that these are still lives needlessly lost, but wouldn't the same apply to the 4.3 per cent of drivers under .05?

Moreover, these statistics convey only correlation, not causation. Perhaps there's a point at which the latter can be implied, but what point is that?

Regardless of one's position on Bill 26, it represents an important issue worthy of informed discussion.

And while we can accept that reason may at times be lost in the discourse around an emotional issue, it's no excuse for misinforming Albertans.

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