

BRITISH COLUMBIA'S LICENCE PLATE TURNS 25



Not all British Columbians accepted the design of the new licence plate when it was first released in 1985

On March 21, 1985, then Premier Bill Bennett formally unveiled a new provincial licence plate at the Oakridge Shopping Centre in Vancouver as he presented the very first pair of plates from the series (which read "EXPO 86") to Rick Hansen as he embarked on his Man in Motion World Tour.

Incorporating a multi-coloured stylization of the provincial flag as its centerpiece, it is mostly forgotten now that this new design also possessed a latent political symbolism. The "wavy flag" (or just "flag") bore a striking resemblance to the symbol that the Social Credit Party had used extensively in recent election campaigns.

We now know that this was no accident and that the Bennett administration was using the levers of government communications and branding to further the interests of the Party. As Bennett's former aide, Bob Plecas, revealed in his 2006 memoir, "nothing was sacred" and the design of the licence plate was intended to "make the people think there is no difference between Social Credit and the government."

Upon seeing the final prototype the year before, Bennett is reported to have exclaimed "I can hardly wait to see [Opposition Leader] Dave Barrett fasten this licence plate to his car."

Keen to promote jobs as well as home-grown industries after the recession and "Restraint" program of the early 1980s, the government had awarded a multi-million dollar contract to produce the new plates to a Surrey sign-making firm, Astrographic Industries Ltd, in March of 1984. This marked the first time since the closing of a production facility at Oakalla Prison almost ten years earlier that the manufacturing of the province's licence plates would occur locally.

Importantly, a key condition in awarding the contract, and one insisted upon by the Premier himself was that Astrographic's had to confirm that it possessed technical expertise necessary

to produce the “flag” symbol. The government was on a hurried schedule and wanted the new plates ready for issuance within 12 months in order that all motorists would be displaying them by the time Expo 86 opened.

When production of the plates commenced, Astrographic’s fatefully discovered that applying the colourful “flag” was more difficult than it had anticipated. A malfunctioning press also contributed to their woes and the introduction of the plates would be delayed six months as a result.

At the time, it was thought that the design would only be used for what was the typical period of five, or possibly six years before being replaced. Yet, despite the early hiccups, 22,000,000 pairs of “flag” licence plates have rolled off the presses over the past twenty-five years and a whole generation of British Columbians has now been raised staring out their windshields at the symbol of a long defunct political party.

Today, best estimates are that ICBC has enough combinations left to last through 2013, but that the lead time needed to ensure a sufficient number of plates are on hand when the current series expires means that an important decision will likely need to be made in the next 12 to 24 months.

Will the “flag” design be continued through the introduction of a seventh digit, which, by all accounts, will necessitate an expensive upgrade of ICBC’s systems (but could open 350 million new combinations); or, will the opportunity be seized to finally retire the “flag” gracefully in favour of something new?

Alberta confronted this very dilemma in 2007 when it began to run out of combinations and opted to undertake a three month “Consultation” with motorists on the future of its “Wild Rose” plates. An astounding 33,000 people participated in an on-line survey and expressed a range of opinions regarding new slogans; alternate design options; to the need for front licence plates.

ICBC and the provincial government could do worse than to similarly engage with citizens on the future of our licence plate. Are we still “Beautiful”, or have we truly become “The Best Place on Earth”? If not the “flag”, how about a public design competition judged through on-line polling (a method recently utilised by States such Texas, Kansas and Nebraska)? Should optional specialty plates supporting public or corporate causes (such as the Vancouver Canucks) be made available for an extra fee, similar to the wildly popular Olympic plate?

Changing a licence plate design or slogan can, on occasion be fraught with peril (witness the recent travails experienced by New York state) and should not be undertaken lightly. Whatever route the provincial government may take, turning the page on the political artefact that is the “flag” is long overdue.