Zero Tolerance

I suppose it began back in '05. The accident that set Laurence Buller on the path to Prime Ministership, and our society to the place in which it currently finds itself. Amazing, really, the coincidences which seem to follow us through life. But I digress.

It was a Friday night much like many others that summer. Laurence, who was at that time a recent graduate of university and an even more recent entrant into the real world, was out at a summer barbecue with his wife of one year, Melissa. Food was eaten, drinks were consumed, conversations took place, and a good time was had by all.

Melissa decided to head home early as she had a 6AM start at work the following morning. Laurence kissed her goodbye, and watched her drive away. It was the last time he ever saw her alive. A mere five minutes from the rented house in which she and Laurence lived, Melissa's car was T-boned at an intersection. A drunk driver ran through a red light without slowing down even slightly, and plowed into the driver's side.

Apparently, Melissa did not go quickly into that long night. Witnesses reported that her screams and moans could be heard for some minutes after the initial impact. When the ambulance did arrive, the officers were unable to enter the vehicle for a further ten minutes due to the severe damage it sustained in the crash. A fire team armed with the so-called Jaws of Life was dispatched, but by the time they arrived and cracked the car open, it was too late. The teenaged driver of the other vehicle, as often happens in these sorts of accidents, was practically unhurt. When he sobered up, he expressed remorse about the accident, and, as it was his first conviction, was sentenced to three years' jail. Upon his release, he began touring schools in an effort to show teenagers the reality of what can happen when someone chooses to drink and drive.

Laurence was devastated by his loss. It took him a long time to come to terms with what had happened. He coped by changing; instead of the happy-go-lucky man he'd been before, he became driven and focused. His crusade? Against drunk driving, of course.

Over the years, there have been a few -ADD groups: Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Students Against Drunk Driving, People Against Drunk Driving, and others. Laurence spent time with each group, looking at their motivations, beliefs and activities, before deciding to strike out on his own.

Apparently, he felt that, while the philosophy behind these organizations was noble, the existing groups did not have the power to effect change with regard to drink driving.

He also took issue with the way the law treated drink drivers, especially recidivist offenders. He felt that our courts were too lenient, and that the only way to successfully deal with the problem was to adopt a zero-tolerance approach.

Police and politicians heard his ideas, read his submissions, and met with him, offering platitudes and false promises, but never actually doing anything. In the meantime, our country came to lead the developed world in alcohol-related road fatalities. And still, nothing changed.

Not one to let adversity drag him down, Laurence began to work harder. Since the system would not change, he decided that he would change it from within. He entered local body elections as an independent candidate, campaigning on a one-note platform, and lost. Undaunted, he continued to stand for elections anywhere and everywhere he could. He found support from like-minded organizations, campaigned unceasingly, and every time he lost an election it was by a smaller margin that the one before.

In 2016 it finally happened. He had stood independently in the national election, and garnered enough votes to earn second place in the Green Bay electorate. This was his best result so far, and, in his televised speech on a local TV channel, Laurence predicted that in 2020, he would win.

As it turned out, he didn't have to wait that long. The erstwhile winner of that election, Malcolm Montgomery, lost his life that night in an alcohol-related accident. Apparently, he had been celebrating his win a little heavily, and had stupidly decided to drive the ten minutes to home instead of waiting twice that long for a taxi.

A by-election was duly held, and Laurence was able to capitalize on the cause of Malcolm's death. He won by a landslide, and thus entered Parliament. From there, his cause gained more and more support each time a drunk driver caused a fatality (which, it has to be said, occurred with depressing regularity). From an outsider's perspective, it was almost as if God Himself had a hand in guiding the events to follow.

Laurence had submitted a private member's bill to the 'lucky dip box' hidden deep in the bowels of Parliament. It so happened that this bill was randomly selected from the box, and, like any other, began the process of being read, voted upon, amended (if it received enough votes to earn a second reading), voted on again, amended again, and then passed into law. Most of these bills are lucky to

make it to a second reading, let alone a third. Laurence Buller's just happened to come up at almost the exact same time as an horrific accident involving a group of recent university graduates.

It was a few weeks before Christmas, 2017. Some moron had attended the end-of-year function at work, had quite a few too many (his blood alcohol level was recorded at almost four times the legal limit), and decided to drive home. Unsurprisingly, he lost control of his vehicle, and collided at an estimated speed of 80km/h with a queue outside a popular student bar. The vehicle rolled through and over the crowd like a steamroller, crashing through the window before coming to a rest. All in all, five people were killed, and seven more injured, some critically. A witness said that the scene was so intense he had a 'GTA flashback'. Two of the dead were the twin sons of the then Prime Minister, Catherine Gallow. They had both graduated with Honours. The driver of the car sustained only moderate injuries.

When Parliament resumed for the New Year, Buller's "Drink-Driving (Revision of Limits and Penalties) Bill" passed its first reading with an astounding ninety-eight percent of votes. The few weeks between the accident and the reading had given the general population time to let their feelings be known, and for once, their political representatives listened.

The Bill passed its second reading as well, and its third, and went on to become law. It reduced the legal blood alcohol level to zero, and introduced a raft of penalties for people convicted of drink-driving. The police were now able to impound a car on the spot, pending the results of a blood test, and then sell the vehicle. Prison sentences for repeat offenders were lengthened, and breath-analyzers were to be installed in every new car sold from January first 2019. These devices would stop the engine from starting if they registered a breath-alcohol level above the legal limit. Some called these new measures draconian, but it was too late; they were now the law.

While successful, these new laws did not eliminate the problem, however. People being the clever creatures they are, new gadgets were soon invented, allowing people to bypass the in-car breathalyzers. Internet sales of these went through the roof when it was discovered that using a popular brand of mouthwash as recommended would cause the ignition to lock. And of course, there were those who still believed it was their God-given right to get as drunk as they wanted and then get behind the wheel.

A year can be a long time in politics. By the time the general election of 2020 rolled around, it was clear that there would be a changing of the guard in terms of the Government. Catherine Gallows had announced that she would not be seeking re-election. Laurence Buller had formed a political party of his own, and was fielding candidates in every electorate.

Their platform was essentially the same as the one on which he had originally entered Parliament; drunk driving. Statistics showed that the new laws had had an effect, but not as much of one as hoped. There were now far fewer instances of first-time drink-drive convictions, but recidivists were still a problem. Buller claimed to have a solution; one that he would reveal if and when his party won a majority of the seats in parliament. The voting public responded to this strategy – he obviously wasn't giving false campaign promises like all the other politicos, and people do have a natural curiosity.

Buller's party won the election, with enough of a majority to guarantee them the power to pass any law they wished. At his inaugural speech, he unveiled the name of his solution: the Zero Tolerance policy. Despite repeated questions from the public and media, he would reveal no further details, stating: "It would be premature to go into specifics before all implications of the policy have been fully investigated and tweaked to ensure maximum efficacy with minimum complications." Then, with a wave and a smile, he exited the party.

The country held its collective breath for what seemed like months, but was, in reality, only a few weeks. Advertising campaigns had been mounted both in print and visual media announcing the "ultimate solution" to our drink-driving problem. Full-page ads were taken out in all daily newspapers detailing the shocking history of our country's worst repeat drink-drivers, costs associated with their prosecution and 'rehabilitation', and all the lives lost because of them. A registry of drink-drivers was set up online, similar to the sex-offenders database, which allowed members of the public to find all the information they could ever want on those with drunk-driving convictions.

Finally, on April the second, 2021, what would have been Melissa Buller's thirty-eighth birthday, the full details of the new policy were revealed. Beginning on the first of May, persons convicted of at least their second drink-driving offence would be sentenced to death. The public outcry this would have caused was dampened somewhat by an accident which occurred scarcely a week earlier.

A grandmother with a string of drink-driving convictions had decided to try her luck once again. This time, after having a morning 'tipple' and deciding to head to the supermarket for more tonic water, she managed to guide her vehicle on to the pavement and run over a Walking School Bus. This group of children and their adult minders were less than five minutes from school when the 'accident' happened. Four of the children and one of the adults died from injuries sustained in the crash. The other six escaped serious injury, as did the driver. Everybody was horrified, both by the length of this woman's drink-driving history, and the astounding lack of remorse she showed. Through her lawyer, she claimed throughout the trial that it wasn't her fault, that someone else had caused the accident. She was a little vague on the finer details of this supposed other, and, unsurprisingly, the jury convicted her.

All this served to temper the public's outrage over the re-introduction of the death penalty, and its intended application. "Man-on-the-street" interviews conducted immediately after the policy announcement showed an overwhelming level of support for the new laws. The people moved along with their lives, secure in their 'it couldn't happen to me' mentality.

It happened to me.

On the twenty-second of May 2021, I was caught driving with an excess blood alcohol level. I'd been woken at 4am by my wife, who was concerned about our youngest child. He was huffing, puffing and gasping for breath, and his face was turning an alarming shade of purple. Without even thinking, I grabbed Jacen and my car keys and set off for the hospital. The night before, I'd had three or four drinks in celebration of my brother's promotion at work. If I'd taken my wife's car, or if my car had had one, the ignition-lock would have activated, but since my car was five years old, no breathalyser had been installed.. Anyway, I got in, and headed off.

The police stopped me at a random checkpoint, where I failed the breathalyser. I explained the situation, and they arranged for Jacen to be taken immediately to hospital, while I was taken down to the station for evidential blood testing. Jacen ended up being fine. He'd somehow managed to get one of the buttons off his sleep suit, and he accidentally swallowed it. The docs got it out without a problem. I, on the other hand, faced the prospect of receiving a second drink-driving conviction.

I had my day in court, but the law was clear. As I had driven over the legal limit and been caught for the second time, under the new laws I was to be executed. I also had the distinction of being the first person convicted under the new laws. The judge apologized, saying he could see where my mistake had been made, but that the law did not distinguish between situations like mine and those who

deliberately consumed alcohol and drove. Likewise, the law did not allow leniency due to the length of time (fifteen years in my case) between convictions.

Tearful appeals from my wife, tearful goodbyes with my children, crying myself to sleep, the last couple of weeks have been filled with tears. All because of a stupid mistake. I suppose, though, that I really have no-one to blame but myself. You see, my first drink-driving conviction occurred in '05. I was the driver who hit Melissa Buller's car.