

Trying to Block the Wind

When I was five years old my family took a vacation to the Oregon coast. This happened 32 years ago so I have almost no memories of it except for one. We were out exploring the sand dunes one day when the wind picked up. Sand was blasting through the wind all around me, I lost track of my family, and I got scared. Perhaps some people in this scenario would start running around haphazardly, but I had a different tactic. I crumpled myself into a little ball on the ground and covered my face. I knew my parents would come find me, and sure enough they did. They even commended me for my decision to take cover. That's why, to this day, when trouble comes my way I just get into the fetal position. The armadillo is my spirit animal.

This story is what comes to mind anytime I think of the taxi industry in BC. They were out enjoying a nice sunny vacation when the wind changed direction. All of a sudden they had ride-sharing services blasting them from every direction. That's when they made the decision to hunker down and wait for saving. Sure enough the BC government came along and carried them off to safety.

We've all had bad experiences with taxis. It's inevitable. From the guy who was falling asleep at the wheel, to the driver who said he would only take cash, there's no shortage of problems. I've seen denied fares, dropped reservations, and the horrendous line up of people waiting at the airport. The bottom line is that the taxi industry has problems.

Whenever I have a bad experience with a taxi I'll inevitably take to social media to decry our lack of ride sharing services. Among the agreeable replies there will typically be someone who comes out in support of the taxi industry. The most memorable instance of this was when a friend of mine shared a podcast about a New York cabbie who sadly committed suicide after ride sharing devalued his taxi medallion.

A taxi medallion is the license to operate a cab, and before ride sharing came along, a retired medallion owner could make a few thousand a month by renting it out to other drivers. Many drivers counted on the value of their medallion as part of their retirement. When the medallions lost their inherent value, many drivers were left without a retirement plan. It's understandable that someone suddenly losing their ability to provide for themselves would succumb to those feelings of hopelessness and despair.

We have a similar system in place here in Vancouver. The license to operate a taxi is incredibly expensive. I heard a rumour that at one point a taxi license was worth about a million dollars. This means that the person driving your cab is certainly not the license holder. Much like single detached homes, a taxi license in Vancouver is just a place to park your money. You dump 6 or 7 figures into a license and slowly

recoup that investment by charging other people to drive your cab. It's understandable why the taxi industry is so vehemently opposed to ride sharing. They've invested a lot of money into the current system, and they're rightfully concerned about the wellbeing of their drivers.

I can see where both sides are coming from, but here's the sticking point. I don't understand what makes the taxi industry different from any other. We know for a fact that Walmart destroys small businesses, and yet we had no problem letting them into Canada. We told small businesses that if they wanted to compete they would have to adapt and grow their business online. Then we had no problem letting Amazon annihilate their online sales with predatory practices. For anyone who doesn't know how Amazon kills business, here's a brief explanation. They allow vendors to sell products through them for as long as it takes for them to develop a competing product, and then they force the original seller out of the market. Amazon will happily sell things at a loss if it means hurting their competition.

Uber came to Canada in 2012 and since then BC has done everything to stand in their way. The ban on ride sharing is finally ending in BC, with services expected to be available by Christmas. As damaging as this will be to the taxi industry, we have to view it as a necessary step for our city. Vancouver attracts visitors from all over the world, and it's incredibly confusing for people from the states who arrive and realize there's no easy way to get around. If Vancouver wants to be known as a world-class city, then we have to have the same services you'd expect to find in New York or LA. Otherwise, we run the risk of alienating the business community, the sporting community, and countless others. Why would people plan important conferences or event in a city where participants have to rely on an outdated system of transportation? Imagine being late for the NHL draft because you couldn't get a cab.

The taxi industry has had seven years to prepare for the launch of ride sharing, and while some cab companies have developed apps for easier booking in that time, the systems are still far from perfect. Perhaps they thought the government could protect them forever from the changing times. Unfortunately technology marches forward and our society either moves on with it, or gets left behind. Ride sharing can't be stopped. If you need evidence of this you only have to look as far as Richmond. The Chinese community has been using black market ride sharing for the last few years. They have their own apps and even when this became public knowledge, there was little the government could do to stop it. Embracing change or let it push you out of the way.

It's natural for us to want to protect our fellow citizens from having their livelihood destroyed, but trying to stand in the way of innovation is like trying to block the wind... it'll just go around you.