

Ode to a ton of instant wisdom

I've just read a news report about a toy company that's been fined \$81,000 for selling a bathtub toy that comes to pieces small enough to choke a kid. It sold 4704 of them, but only 46 have been "recovered".

I'm trying hard not to be sarcastic, but "recovered" by who? Are there toy police these days who go around the homes of young families and inspect their toys. If so, I suspect the first to be confiscated would be dad's motor bike and jet-ski and the shotgun he takes out duck-shooting.

But then dads are old enough to know not to put things in their mouths, so I suppose policing what baby does in the bath makes sense, starting with ensuring he or she doesn't drown. And it is a worry there are still 4658 of those things floating around in the nation's bathtubs. It could take a while.

As it happens, this is my 101st column, so it seemed appropriate to mark the ton with a bit of whimsy leading into contemplation. I was going to do it last week with the 100th, but Fitzroy interceded (and might again, if the council doesn't do something about its dodgy engagement policy).

One of the problems columnists face after a while is losing track of the things they've written in the past. If I was going to develop the start of this one, I would delve into childhood memories before making a case on how uptight we are about dangers to our children. I would recall slug-gun wars we had as kids, engagements with self-imposed rules such as no shooting above the waist. We were old enough to value our eyesight, but hadn't yet grasped the import of what was below the belt.

But I don't want to go over that ground because I suspect I've already covered it in a previous column, and now there are simply too many to check. Goodness help us if this continues and I get to four figures. By then I would be well into my eighth decade and today's ramblings would seem crystal clear in comparison.

Oops. Ageist. That's another thing, isn't it – keeping up with political correctness. I try to, but it moves so fast that trying not to offend someone somewhere is quixotic. I recently met a woman who said my columns delight her one week and infuriate her the next. I was too frightened to ask for examples.

Many columns ago I deliberately ventured into political wrongness, because at that stage I hadn't provoked a single outraged letter-to-the-editor. I wrote a red-rag piece about environmentalists, and they responded with umbrage. But it didn't feel that great, if I'm honest.

While we're on the environment, my favourite column of the first 100 was the one about the dad who built a treehouse for his kids in one of the ancient puriri in Victoria Rd, New Plymouth. The council turned a blind eye for a while, but when someone complained, they told him he had to take it down. That column drew a lot of comment on Facebook, much of it telling the council to lighten up.

My fear was the dad would take offence at my having outed what I saw as a brave demonstration of past values that once drove small children and their parents to build in trees. But one of his mates later told me he was delighted by it.

Not everyone responds like that. When someone left his car broken down in the middle of our street I thought "great column" and took some photos. He saw me, though, the day he came back to have it towed away. Next day, our letterbox suffered damage. Message received, mate. No column.

Column ideas occur daily, to the point that Lin often catches my eye at the same time I get my pensive "column look", and affirms the thought. Our conversations often end with: "there could be a column lurking in that". I have a file full of pieces dashed out in anger, fun, impulse and unreasonableness. They will never see the light of day. Cathartic.

If you or the Daily News decide one day you've had enough of me, goodness only knows where all those opinions will go. And that's a thought from someone who spent half a century producing so-

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called “objective” news, from which any hint of personal view was banned. Meantime, bath-tub toys will just have to wait.