

Maddog Unleashed

Cash for Clunkers: A Nice Idea, If Not Restricted to Cars

*Step right up, step right up, step right up,
Everyone's a winner, bargains galore.*

—Tom Waits, "Step Right Up"



BY PATRICK O'GRADY

Do you ever feel like the littlest pig at the trough? I sure do. When the slops get ladled in, there I am, squirming around at the back of a very long and lard-assed line, looking woebegone.

My taxable income has been on the decline all year as the Suits struggle to figure out a new way of selling people something they no longer care to buy (news and information). So where's my stimulus package? Anyone care to propose a Coin for Curmudgeons program? Bucks for Belligerents? Jacksons for Jagoffs?

Alas, bicycle comedy ranks 109,204,504th on the list of critical economic sectors in need of a taxpayer-funded bailout, right behind mule skinner, Linotype operator and dirigible mechanic. I shouldn't complain. At least I still have a job, kind of. Well, work, anyway. For now. But I'm going to anyway. Complain, that is.

Sound It Out: "Bo-Nus." Let's not even talk about the Wall Street bailout. That taxpayers should give a serial rapist a key to the front door, pour him a glass of Montrachet and turn down the sheets is mind-boggling. "Bonus," indeed. Your spelling may vary.

I'm more sympathetic to the Cars for Clunkers program, because the auto industry employed people making tangible, physical products. Plus I'm sick of getting a snootful of carbon monoxide every time I'm nose to tailpipe with a jacked-up rattletrap F-150 at a stop light.

That Ford is doing well in this deal proves that someone in the administration has done his homework. As a recovering Ford owner, I feel safe in predicting that many a new sucker—er, "customer"—will soon be stimulating a broad swath of the economy, from service departments, auto-parts stores and exorcists to law firms, liquor stores and firearms dealers.

Driving for Dollars. But wait, there's more! You've not just lost a clunker, you've gained a monthly car payment, so the shylocks are dancing once again. Ditto the state in which you buy the vehicle (love that new-tag smell), insurance companies, salvage yards, et al.

And, if you buy GM or Chrysler, don't forget to pat yourself on the back. As a taxpayer, you're borrowing money from yourself to buy a car from yourself. It's practically free! I say "you" because I can't take advantage of this wildly popular program. My own clunker, a rust-and-white '83 Toyota pickup, is too old and too fuel-efficient—about 20 miles per gallon in town and 23 on the highway, if I were ever foolish enough to take it there.

Fewer Wheels, Fewer Options. Too bad there isn't a Bucks for Bikes program, eh? People who fetch their big-box garbage wagons to an IBD could get a C note or two toward the purchase of a bike they might actually enjoy riding, assembled by real live mechanics whose tool kits include more than a claw hammer, a Crescent wrench and some tin snips.

Expand the program to all bikes, say, 10 years old or older and I might swap one of the barges in my aging fleet for one of those lighter-than-air carbon wonderbikes that climbs by itself while you follow the market on your iPhone.

Nah. I still ride them all. Steel or ti' framesets, eight-speed Ultegra and XT, seven-speed 105—it's all good, and it all works. Clunkers? Sure. But so am I.

Alas, while a 1955 Geezer puts out plenty of noxious exhaust and bad noise, there's no Cash for Codgers program, not even in the private sector. The wife already tried Craigslist. No sale.