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Treating toxic nation

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Earlier this month, just as Ontario's body politic moved into election mode, the public was given a peek inside our leaders. Literally.

Environmental Defence, an advocacy group, revealed the "body burdens" of Premier Dalton McGuinty, John Tory and Howard Hampton. Our politicians, it turns out, are polluted with dozens of toxic chemicals found in the environment, including lead, mercury, pesticides, flame retardants and non-stick chemicals, known as PFCs. And they're not alone.

Every Ontarian, indeed, every Canadian, is exposed to harmful chemicals through the air we breathe, the food we eat and the water we drink. McGuinty, Tory and Hampton reacted with surprise and alarm to the results of their tests and they immediately promised to introduce tough measures to safeguard the environment and the Canadian public from these substances.

Were these more empty promises or had Environmental Defence finally delivered the jolt that would move government to take responsibility for our toxic nation? After all, isn't it up to government to manage this risk for us?

Or is it?

According to several North American sociologists, legions of consumers are taking the responsibility on themselves. They're trying to manage the risk of exposure to environmental contaminants by buying green; in so doing, they're redefining environmentalism.

The problem is, it's not necessarily for the better.

At the University of Toronto, not far from Environmental Defence's office, Professor Josée Johnston and her graduate student Norah MacKendrick are exploring what it means to live in an age of consumer activism.

Johnston, who specializes in the sociology of food, including the organics movement, has witnessed the rise of hybrid citizen-consumers who both exert their politics and satisfy their pleasures through shopping. These shopping activists are voting with their wallets "to stop child labour, to support social justice, to protect their health and to save the environment," she says. "But the goals behind consumerism and the goals behind citizenship are actually quite distinct and often contradict each other."

Then there is MacKendrick, whose work is specifically concerned with the issue of the environment. Ours has become a "risk society," she argues, in which environmental risks, including climate change, nuclear accidents and oil spills, are all around us.

The accumulation of contaminants in the human body is another such ubiquitous environmental risk. These chemicals don't respect the division between urban and rural, rich and poor, and they don't honour national borders. They're a collective problem that requires a collective response.

But what happens, MacKendrick asks in her research, to a society in which people worry about invisible contaminants in their food, water and air, and feel that government isn't adequately protecting them? The answer is something she has termed "precautionary consumption." It describes a shift in the way we shop; nowadays, people are carefully selecting products that may be better for their health and the environment, such as organic foods and biodegradable cleaners, and are avoiding products that may be harmful.

This trend is borne out in the Canadian marketplace where, in 2006, annual sales of certified organic products surpassed \$1 billion, according to a recent study by the Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada. In Ontario alone, sales jumped 24 per cent over 2005 figures.

Why is the booming market for organic foods, a reflection of our concerted effort to avoid pesticides in our food, a cause for concern? Put simply, we're losing sight of what it means to be green. At a practical level, being green has become synonymous with buying green, an idea that Andrew Szasz, chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of California Santa Cruz, explores in his forthcoming book *Shopping Our Way to Safety*.

In the face of the current environmental crisis, he says, Americans (like Canadians) have gone shopping – making what were niche commodities in the 1980s, such as organic food, into mass market items readily available on the shelves of Wal-Mart.

"It struck me at some point that this was a strange, new, mutant form of environmentalism," he writes. "There is an awareness of hazard, a feeling of vulnerability, of being at risk. That feeling, however, does not lead to political action ... it leads, instead, to individualized acts of self-protection, to just trying to keep those contaminants out of one's body."

In the book, which will be published this November, he also outlines two major consequences of the urge to shop our way to safety: First, it won't work. Second, it leads to political inaction.

"We become anaesthetized," he says. "People believe they've solved the problem, therefore they're less likely to line up and advocate for more political responses."

Johnston and MacKendrick's work echoes these concerns. "(Consumer activism) may give people a sense of agency and control ... but it can also give people a false sense of what they can achieve," says Johnston. "Norah's work really illustrates that. There's no escape from these body burdens. Everybody has them and we can't buy our way out of this."

Environmental Defence, by choosing to test a handful of politicians, has clearly placed the onus on government to protect us. "You can make personal choices to avoid certain types of exposures," says Aaron Freeman, policy director at Environmental Defence. "But this is one area where government cannot be left off the hook."

The message that emerges seems clear: Go ahead and vote with your wallet but don't forget to go to the polls.