



A DISSONANT NEW ERA? READER FEEDBACK

By Michael Bourque

MY LAST EDITORIAL provoked more comments than all my previous editorials combined. During a recent workshop held by the University of Ottawa, an activist asked me what I meant about “environmental NGOs picking issues to sell memberships.” She represented a very small organization, and was obviously working very hard for little compensation. I

explained that my comments were directed at large organizations, not small NGOs.

Kris Lee, an activist and former CCPA National Advisory Panel Member from Sarnia, provided the most thoughtful commentary on my editorial, so I am using the remainder of my column to publish her response:

Dear Editor of *Catalyst*:

After reading Michael Bourque’s article *A Dissonant New Era* in the Fall 2009 *Catalyst* magazine, I felt compelled to respond.

I am one of those “essential watchdogs” but along with many of my colleagues, I don’t believe we “have slipped into a cynical pattern.” If we have, then we need the CCPA community dialogue process to help us self-reflect and redirect our goals. I agree with Mr. Bourque that the media and bureaucrats are lacking in knowledge of basic science. Many years ago, I suggested to CCPA that they use their retired members to take the “show on the road” for schools in engineering, political science and journalism. What is preventing this from happening? Respectfully, here are responses to a few of Mr. Bourque’s statements:

1. ENGOS “pick issues that will help sell memberships, boost revenues ...”

Unfortunately, some groups may have a very mercenary agenda, but this is not the norm of most NGOs. Often small but successful groups operate literally without funds. In a 2009 survey by SARENE (Sarnia and Region Environmental Networking Exchange), lack of funds was not perceived as the major road block for community group success. Most small and local environmental groups rely on volunteers who use their own telephones and home addresses for mailings, pay their gas for travel, and even take turns to bake cookies

for meetings. Even professional services, such as use of Revenue Canada tax forms, can be prepared by volunteers. Surprisingly enough, many of these community heroes are content to operate locally with minimal funds (and very little recognition) because they believe in the cause.

2. ENGOS “... steer clear of the campaigns of others.”

As an example, in Wallaceburg, a community ENGO group’s support of the Shell expansion of a refinery in Lambton County was based on data provided by the consultant reports. More significantly, the support of Shell was in conflict with other environmental groups in the area. The opposing groups survived in the community and no one was tarred and feathered for agreeing to disagree. The current issue of wind power is another example of opposing views in the same communities.

3. “We are supposed to be a science-based, high-technology, knowledge-worker economy. Yet we behave as though science is the enemy.”

When I was six years old, I remember lining up in elementary school and being doused with a powder from a red-coned container. To this day, I can still remember the smell of powdered DDT. This process was science-based using the accepted methods for the 1950s. The tools and chemicals used were the appropriate way to kill lice. The rationale used by the science community was that since it improved the health and lives of soldiers in the war in

the previous decade, the same rationale could be applied to the health of children. However, the decade did not allow the questioning of other health effects until Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*. She was labelled as a fanatic and an enemy of science.

4. The ENGO “is characterized by a high degree of opportunism, fanaticism and sadly, lack of respect for science.”

The knowledge of scientific data does not equate with wisdom of experience and that scientifically distasteful term “common sense.” Does “common sense” have a place in science?

Scientific method and peer review is very prescriptive and empirical. However, the impact of scientific data on our everyday life and respect for our individual preferences and rights relies on wisdom of experience and common sense. It was science-based experimentation that brought us DDT, PCB, Freon and thalidomide. Without wisdom of past experience and a template for a common-sense approach, a totally science-based, high-technology, knowledge-worker economy exposes society to vulnerability and potential harm.

If I want to learn about data and trends, I’ll approach a scientist. If I want to ponder the fractal effects in our society of any scientific discovery—including the data and trends—it probably won’t be the person in the laboratory.

Yours respectfully,
Kris Lee