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The two most important things in life are the environment and politics.

Environment because our lives depend upon it for air, water, food, and shelter. And because, the environment is the source of the energies and resources we require to realize any dreams — beyond basic survival — that we might have as individuals or as a society.

Politics because we are a social animal — like termites and chimpanzees. Without the support of a group, our chances of staying alive approach nil; our chances of creating a civilization are nil. Politics is how we control and direct ourselves in groups — no matter how small and primitive, no matter how large and civilized.

Environment and politics determine if we live or die, and how we live and die — and everything in between.

Today, politics is killing the environment. It does not have to be that way. Politics can save, protect, and enhance the environment.

Over the last four decades, environmental protectionism has grown into a multi-billion dollar, multi-million member movement. Yet it has been unable to prevent, let alone reverse, environmental degradation. There are lessons in this failure. The most important: only politics can save the environment. We don't have an environmental problem. We have a political problem: a political problem that is easy to solve.

Continuing environmental degradation is a scientific fact — and a killer.

Many government and non-governmental organizations — among them the World Wildlife Fund¹, the National Center of Economic Alternatives², the United Nations Environment Programme³, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development⁴ — have documented the decades of continuing environmental degradation occurring worldwide, and in Canada.

¹ See <http://www.panda.org/livingsplanet/lpr00/index.cfm>

² See <http://www.ncesa.org/html/execsum.html>

³ See <http://www.unep.org/Geo2000/>

⁴ See <http://www.oecd.org>

Particular to Canada, Johanne G elinas, the federal Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, has documented the failure of the Canadian government to halt environmental degradation and to honor commitments made decades ago⁵.

In Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century, Mark Dowie writes,

"Reading again the promises expressed in the preambles to the [United States] National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Clean Air Act of 1970, and the Water Pollution Act of 1972, reveals the incipient failure of modern environmentalism. Those and other landmark bills crafted by federal politicians and environmentalists working together set out among other things, to:

- halt environmental degradation before the end of the century,
- restore air, water, and soil quality to safe if not pure conditions in seven years,
- develop renewable energy systems,
- implement sustainable-yield forestry"⁶

Today these promises are laughable. The United States has kept none of them.

In 1990, when he introduced the Green Plan discussion paper Lucien Bouchard, Canada's Environment Minister, said the government's goal was "to make Canada by the year 2000, the industrial world's most environmentally friendly country."⁷ Again, laughable. According to a recent study, Canada now ranks 28th, not first, in "environmental friendliness" out of 29 OECD countries.⁸

Annually, governmental and non-governmental organizations publish thousands of documents about environmental issues. But, the real record of environmental degradation is written in death — body count and corpses — human, animal, and plant. According to the federal government, "Federal studies show there are 5,000 deaths a year that can be attributed to air pollution, and the Ontario Medical Association says air pollution costs Ontario citizens more than \$1 billion a year in hospital admissions, emergency room visits and absenteeism. Toronto Public Health Department figures show that air pollution causes

⁵ See http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/dominio/reports.nsf/html/c1obs_e.html

⁶ Mark Dowie, Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997), p. x

⁷ George Hoberg, "Comparing Canadian Performance in Environmental Policy," in Canadian Environmental Policy: Ecosystems, Politics, and Process, ed. Robert Boardman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 246

⁸ See <http://www.environmentalindicators.com/execsum.htm>

1,000 deaths a year and numerous health-related problems."⁹ Others put the annual death toll in Canada from air pollution at 16,000.¹⁰

In an oral presentation to the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, an Environment Voters witness tried to put these numbers in a human context. He said to the Senators,

"Imagine, if you will, that tomorrow a local chemical producing company accidentally releases a toxic plume into the air that settles on Ottawa and kills — over a period of a few days — 2,000 people! This would be a Bhopal scale event. The sheer horror of the disaster would trigger a massive and immediate response from emergency, medical, law enforcement, and news services, and in the aftermath from political and legal agencies.

"The deaths would be devastating for the families involved, and severe health consequences would be suffered by tens of thousands for years to come. The economic effects would be in the hundreds of millions, perhaps billions of dollars. Governments at all levels would take measures to insure that such a tragedy would never happen again. The offending company would likely never resume operations.

"Contrast that with this.

"In Ontario this year, almost 2,000 people *will die prematurely* because of poor air quality. The only differences from the fictional scenario described above will be that these people won't die over one weekend, they won't die in one place, and the blame won't fall on just one company. But these 2,000 real people will die just as painfully and their families will suffer just as much. Another difference between the reality and the fiction is that as of yet no government is going to take measures to insure that the real deaths never happen again.

"The crime is that these 2,000 people are going to die needlessly. It's too late for them now, their fate has already been sealed, despite the fact that Canadian governments — particularly the federal government — have always had the legislative powers they needed to prevent their deaths. The reality is these people are going to die because our elected politicians and political parties have been compelled for perfectly valid political reasons not to exercise their powers in a way that would have saved these peoples' lives."¹¹

⁹ See http://www.ec.gc.ca/air/introduction_e.cfm

¹⁰ See <http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~wellness/air.html>

¹¹ Stephen Best, "Oral Presentation to the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs" (Toronto: Environment Voters, 2000), p.

The Environment Voters witness was dead wrong when he told the Senators in April 2000 about the need to kill 2,000 people to "trigger a massive and immediate response." Just one month later, the tainted-water tragedy in Walkerton, Ontario showed that killing 7 people would be enough.

Killing people quickly is a crime. Killing them slowly is a cost of doing business.

Environmental degradation does not usually kill with the suddenness of a terrorist attack. There are few Bhopals. Consequently, although it is far more deadly than al-Qaeda, environmental degradation does not evoke in people the same primal fears nor the same sense of urgency and desperation for protection. Our evolved, 5 million year old, hard-wired, psychology allows us Homo sapiens to be killed slowly without complaint — and even to facilitate our own demise. Given our innate psychology, perhaps environmentalist should not rely so much on raising public opinion to force politicians to improve environmental protections.

In the early 60s, within a few months of each other, two seminal works — each taking on biblical significance for two social movements — were published: The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan and Silent Spring by Rachel Carson. Since the publication of these two books, women have made enormous gains in political rights and economic opportunities, while the environment has — with the exception of a small handful of successes — continued to degrade. By taking lessons from the women's movement and other successful groups, the environmental movement can learn what it did — and is doing — wrong, and what it should do to move forward.

Since 1970, the environmental movement has increased in funds and membership by about 5,000%.¹² Today, the movement is a multi-billion dollar industry — worth \$3.5 billion in the United States in 1999 alone, where "chief executives at nine of the nation's 10 largest environmental groups earned \$200,000 and up, and one topped \$300,000. In 1997, one group fired its president and awarded him a severance payment of \$760,335."¹³

While the environmental movement was growing in money and members by 5,000% since 1970, the quality of the environment was declining by 33% worldwide¹⁴ and 38.1% in Canada.¹⁵

¹² Mark Dowie, Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997), pp. 40-41

¹³ See <http://www.sacbee.com/static/archive/news/projects/environment/20010422.html>

¹⁴ See <http://www.panda.org/livingplanet/lpr00/index.cfm>

¹⁵ Gar Alperovitz and others, Index of Environmental Trends, (Washington, DC: National Center for Economic Alternatives, 1995), pp. 20-21

About the environmental movement, sociologist Robert Nisbet¹⁶ said, "When the history of the twentieth century is written, the single most important social movement will be judged to be environmentalism."¹⁷ His prediction could not have been more wrong. How is it possible for a globe-girdling, multi-billion dollar movement, financially supported by tens of millions of people — with the moral support of billions more — to be such a spectacular failure in actually protecting the environment? When confronted with the fact of the environmental movement's lack of net progress, one environmentalist said, "Yes, but things would be so much worse without the environmental movement."¹⁸ Perhaps, but the promise from the environmental movement — made to this day, and the reason people still donate and protest — was not to slow environmental degradation, but to end it and reverse it. It seems that even environmentalists — who are the most knowledgeable about the fatal effects of environmental destruction — can be killed slowly without too much complaint.

A short, but vitally important digression is needed here. The failures of the environmental movement described above tend not to apply to local, citizen-based groups. While large, well-funded international and national groups usually fail at their program objectives, local groups are often very successful, and a lesson can be learned from this.

The tragedy for local groups is their great efforts are often overwhelmed by greater threats. A community group might successfully clean up a local wetland or stop a local polluter, but if the wider watershed is being polluted their efforts can — all too often — be rendered moot. Most of the credit for any progress over the last 30 years of environmental protection goes to local, citizen-based groups and dedicated individuals.

Why has the environmental movement failed to protect the environment? Analyzing why environmentalism did not become the "the single most important social movement" of the twentieth century has become a political science and publishing cottage industry, as has contriving fixes for the environmental movement. Whether it is Mark Dowie's Losing Ground,¹⁹ Pulitzer Prize winner Tom Knudson's series for the Sacramento Bee,²⁰ the SFU-UBC Centre for the Study of Government and Business,²¹ or Peter Montague's excellent Environmental Research Foundation,²² they all miss the point. The environmental

¹⁶ See <http://www.antiwar.com/stromberg/s090500.html>

¹⁷ Quoted by Lynton Caldwell, "Globalizing Environmentalism: Thresholds of a New Phase in International Relations," Society and Natural Resources, 4, p. 259.

¹⁸ Comment made to S. Best by Dr. Ronald Orenstein M. Sc., Ph. D., LL. B.

¹⁹ Mark Dowie, Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997)

²⁰ See <http://www.sacbee.com/static/archive/news/projects/environment/>

²¹ See <http://csgb.ubc.ca/>

²² See http://www.rachel.org/home_eng.htm

movement cannot save the environment. All it can do — which is more than enough — is force governments to do it.

Any discussion about the failure of the environmental movement should include a caveat. The environmental movement deserves much credit for some notable successes: for example, the Montreal Protocol, DDT bans in some countries, emission controls on motor vehicles in some countries, the elimination of lead in gasoline in some countries, and the protection of marine mammals in the US and few other countries. Tragically, these welcome and much-needed successes do not offset the general decline, so there has been no net gain in environmental quality, only a net loss.

As big as the environmental movement is, it does not have and never will have the human resources needed to clean up — let alone repair — the on-going damage caused to the environment by the global economy and culture. Yet tens of thousands of environmental groups are working tirelessly to clean up eco-systems and rehabilitate endangered species.

The environmental movement does not have and never will have the research resources needed to uncover the full extent of environmental degradation and its effects on people and eco-systems, or do all the studies necessary to understand how best to repair and enhance the environment. Yet most of the major environmental groups spend a large portion of their budgets on scientific research.

The environmental movement does not have and never will have the educational resources needed to compete with the multi-trillion dollar, world advertising and marketing industry working to convince us that reckless, unsustainable, over-consumption is the route to happiness. Yet environmental groups continue to spend donor's funds on public awareness campaigns.

The environmental movement does not have and never will have the legal resources necessary to prosecute enough offenders of environmental law — or sue enough governments which fail to enforce the law — to make any long-term difference. When environmental groups lose in court, precedents are often set which increase environmental degradation. When they win, governments often change the law to permit the environmental damage to continue. Yet environmental groups still use the courts to address environmental problems.

Add fund raising and overhead to the list of activities above, and you will have the budget items of most environmental groups. These activities have been the strategic bulwark of the environmental movement for the last three decades. They have yet to produce a reversal in overall environmental degradation and it is unlikely they will in the future. Indeed, a comparison of the environmental movement in the early 70s with the environmental movement of the early 21st century shows almost no changes in strategy or tactics. If Benjamin Franklin's definition of insanity, "doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results," is correct. The environmental protection movement is surely insane.

While 30 years of failure has proven that the environmental movement does not have and never will have the necessary resources for its traditional strategies and tactics to protect the environment, it does have the financial resources and the public support to be a formidable political force which can compel governments to adopt, enforce, and fund responsible environmental policies that will, over time, not only save and protect our environment, but also repair and enhance it.

A former University of Guelph professor, David Lavigne, put it most succinctly, "what drives everything in our society is not facts, but politics."²³ Lavigne was commenting on the lack of influence that science has on the development of marine mammal and fisheries policy.

The good news and bad news is, he is right about politics. Bad news, because the merits — or the science — of an issue usually plays an insignificant role in shaping public policy, particularly environmental public policy. Good news, because acquiring negotiable political power — the kind of power that can influence public policy — is quite easy.

Consider the environment, environmental protection, and politics within the context of these salient facts.

The means to clean up our environment, protect it from further degradation, and enhance it are well known. There are no environmental issues facing Canada today — or the world — that do not have an off-the-shelf solution. All environmental issues are being effectively dealt with somewhere, but not everywhere. True, some of the damage already done cannot be repaired. Many coral reefs, for example, are lost. We may never see vast schools of cod off the east coast again. Nonetheless, where there were once coral reefs or old growth forest or cod, new but different, robust eco-systems can evolve. The environment can be saved; all is not lost.

All environmental public policy in Canada is decided by elected representatives, and no one else. The gatekeepers to a clean, healthy, robust, thriving Canadian environment, rich in bio-diversity, are our politicians.

Canada's and other countries' legislatures have all the legal authority they need to adopt the necessary policies, pass the necessary laws, and provide the necessary funding to address all environmental issues. The legal authority exists for a clean, healthy environment.

In Canada, at the Federal, Provincial, and Territorial levels the legislative power to save, protect, and enhance Canada's environment rests in the hands of the 1,033 men and women elected to legislatures. If we only consider the elected members who have the actual power to pass laws — those who are members of a party forming a government rather than an opposition — the number is 690, and of those elected members probably less than half

²³ Television interview for Environment Voters documentary, March 2000

play a decisive role in their party's policies. The quality of Canada's environment — whether it slowly kills us or sustains us — is decided by fewer than 300 people.

The prime motivator of politicians — and therefore the prime determinant of public policy — is votes, because votes win elections. Politicians function in a "vote economy," of necessity because of our electoral system. Policies and the strategies that win votes are favored over policies that might lose votes. Politicians have to win elections to function at all, which is why policies that might, in fact, be antithetical to the public good, like slashing the budget of a Ministry of the Environment, are often adopted. Money, in the form of political donations, influences politicians and their choices of policy, not because politicians are corrupt, but because money is critical to fund campaigns that win votes. The environmental movement can have an enormous influence over public policy if it changes to strategies that will give it control over the currency of politics: votes. To influence politicians, influence votes.

How to influence votes in elections is well-known. Election campaigning is now an industry, and a science. Modern campaign techniques — which emphasize targeted, research-based campaigns — can give the environmental movement the power to have enormous influence over who wins and who loses in key electoral districts. This influence over votes — this political power — can be used to negotiate strong environmental protections with the party that forms the government.

There are over 1,800 environmental groups in Canada, enjoying the support of probably more than two million Canadians.²⁴ Funds raised likely exceed \$200 million.²⁵ Clearly, all of these groups, memberships, and funds could never be focussed into a coherent, political common cause no matter how compelling that cause might be. However, enough of these resources can be harnessed for the environmental movement to become a major force in Canadian politics. Not until the environmental movement becomes a major force in electoral politics, can we hope for any meaningful improvement in Canada's environment.

No doubt Betty Friedan — being the social activist that she is — still has complaints about, and harbors ambitions for, the place of women in society, but, notwithstanding, she and the women's movement have a long list of achievements. Rachel Carson has not been as well-served by the environmental movement. The reason is politics.

Political and legislative support for the women's movement is good politics: women vote. They vote for politicians and parties which have good records on women's issues, and not for those who don't. Also, much of the impetus for women's issues comes from middle and

²⁴ Jeremy Wilson, "Green Lobbies: Pressure Groups and Environmental Policy," in Canadian Environmental Policy: Ecosystems, Politics, and Process, ed. Robert Boardman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 110-111

²⁵ Estimated by author from numerous sources. Accurate figures do not exist.

upper class women who vote in large numbers. The political opposition to sound women's policies is weak. All men have mothers and grandmothers, and many men have a wife, perhaps sisters and daughters. Because most men love the women in their lives and want the best for them, most men are supportive of women's issues. Broad and strong public support, weak opposition, and a large, active voting constituency made up of people who personally benefit materially from improved women's policies combined to raise the status of women very quickly. Politicians who support women's issues are rewarded, those who don't are punished.

The environmental movement, in contrast, has broad but weak public support, strong opposition, and no voting constituency with an immediate, material vested interest. Until recently, politicians were not rewarded for good environmental policies, nor punished for poor ones. So, while women advanced, the quality of the environment declined, and people continue to die in the hundreds of thousands.

The exception is environmental activism at a local level. Citizens working on local environmental issues often succeed, because local politicians are good vote counters. When two hundred or two thousand citizen-voters protest a new landfill, want a river cleaned up, or demand a ban on the spreading of sewer sludge on farm lands local politicians are well aware that their electoral fortunes likely hinge on their decisions. The NIMBY "Not In My Backyard" Syndrome is one of the most effective political tools the environmental movement has.

That politics decides the course of our society rather than ethics, life-threatening practices, rational thought, or science is apparent in a comparison of the environmental and women's movements. Oppression of women does not destroy the ecological basis for our very existence. Poor environmental policies do. Yet, women and the women's movement have political relevance. The environment and the environmental movement does not.

Politics plays a decisive role in all our lives. Political decisions can shorten our lives, even kill us.

Thankfully, because we live in a democracy, we are vested with all the powers necessary to influence political decisions. So powerful are our democratic rights, that only a few people with modest resources can wield decisive influence over public policies.

Politics is not the grand, complex, arcane, corrupt, inaccessible, unfathomable, despicable game that most people imagine. Democratic politics is about Xs on ballots. The candidate with the most Xs wins. In an electoral district where the voting history shows the margin of victory will likely be less than 5%, 10 volunteer phone canvassers can substantially influence who will win or lose.

In Ontario, there are 22 electoral districts currently held by Progressive Conservatives that in the next election will be decided by less than 5% of the vote.²⁶ Barring an electoral anomaly, those 22 electoral districts will decide which party — Liberal or Progressive Conservative — forms the next government.

Environment Voters will be campaigning in as many of these 22 electoral districts as budget allows. And, in doing so, will gain some influence over the next government's environmental policies. Environment Voters will likely be the only environmental group campaigning in the next Ontario election.

The environmental movement's political power is greater than the villains who populate its fund raising letters. But, it is latent. The environment movement can control the environmental protection agenda, and force governments to adopt strong environmental protection policies, but only when it finds the courage to make its latent political power overt. All the campaign and political tools it needs to do that are available, like environmental solutions, off-the-shelf.

It's not politicians who need to find the political will to protect the environment, as environmentalists are so fond of saying, it's the environmental movement itself that needs to find the political will.

A closing thought from President Eisenhower, "Politics ought to be the part-time profession of every citizen who would protect the rights and privileges of free people and who would preserve what is good and fruitful in our national heritage."²⁷

²⁶ See <http://www.environmentvoters.org/Ontario2003/memberlist.html>

²⁷ President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969), Broadcast speech, January 28, 1954.