

**LINDSAY BORTHWICK**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

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

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

nants 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.

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JOSÉE JOHNSTON, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

ty 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

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 contami-

lished 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.

**NUTRITIONAL ILLITERACY**

**There's sex education, why not food education?**

There's a good reason why environmentalists should be interested in what children and teenagers eat. It has everything to do with their understanding and respect — for themselves, and ultimately for nature.

Unfortunately, as Debbie Field, executive director of FoodShare in Toronto, points out, Canada is facing a crisis with so many young people who are overfed and undernourished, who are uninformed and unconcerned.

As in other rich countries, malnutrition is rampant, rivalling that in poor countries where lack of food is the problem. Here, the problem is a superabundance of one type of food, rich in carbohydrates (which contain sugars), fats, and proteins, and low in vitamins and minerals. It has become the basic diet for many Canadians.

It supplies energy, but lacking essential vitamins and minerals, it leaves them hungry. When more is consumed, excess energy is stored as fat. Consequently, in poor countries, the undernourished are thin and hungry; here, they are often fat and hungry.

For the first time in human history, says the World Health Organi-



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zation, the number of overweight people is about the same as underweight — about 1.1 billion each. UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund) reports that vitamin and mineral deficiencies are responsible for impairing hundreds of millions of young minds, lowering national IQ levels, compromising immune systems and producing serious birth defects.

The Canadian Academy of Health Sciences reports that one of every six Canadian youngsters aged 6 to 12 years is clinically obese and one in three is overweight. And Statistics Canada notes that 70 per cent of children and 50 per cent of adults don't eat the minimum amount of fruits and vegetables recommended.

Yet vegetables, fruits, and grains are what contain vitamins and minerals. Vitamins are created by

plants in minute quantities through photosynthesis and are essential to regulate body functions, acting much like hormones. Minerals are taken up by plants from the soil, again in minute quantities, and help build cells, bones, teeth and ligaments, as well as support muscle control and trigger the action of vitamins.

The only way people can get vitamins and minerals is to eat them. So, FoodShare is mounting a cam-

paign to include food literacy in the curriculum for elementary and secondary schools.

And why not, asks Debbie Field? Eating, like sex, is a basic psychological drive.

"We teach sex education," she says. "We should be teaching food education."

As a start, FoodShare is inviting teachers to bring students for cooking classes at its new location in the former Ursula Franklin High

School on Croatia St., near Dufferin and Bloor Sts.

On the day I dropped by, 24 students from Grades 9 to 12 were there from the School for Experiential Learning in Etobicoke. I had some soup they made and it was delicious. However, with a few declaring that they never eat vegetables, I began to see the size of the challenge FoodShare is facing.

Nevertheless, the possibilities are exciting.

Ontario Education Minister Kathleen Wynne has already promised that environmental issues will be integrated into the curriculum. By adding food, and linking it to science subjects already taught, students could get an appreciation of the issues surrounding food, from soil fertility and germination, through photosynthesis and transpiration, and then to energy inputs, beneficial insects, microbial action, digestive tracts, and finally human health.

It could promote respect for living things in all their intricacy, including respect for one's own body — and this would be a very good thing.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF FOODSHARE

Students from an Etobicoke school take part in FoodShare's cooking classes in the old Ursula Franklin high school building.