

Kate Heartfield . The green middle

Kate Heartfield

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At the beginning of November, I had lunch with David Chernushenko, one of Ottawa's best-known environmentalists. Two weeks later, I was in a meeting with Tom Donnelly, the local car dealer. There were points at which the two conversations took on a surreal similarity.

If there's a tipping point for environmentalism, I'm pretty sure Ottawa just went over the edge.

Mr. Donnelly and Mr. Chernushenko aren't much alike. But they're on the same team, now, or at least they'd like to think so. Everybody wants to wear the green uniforms, and nobody wants to be the kid who's picked last.

Mr. Donnelly is no granola. He likes to say that somebody has to drive around the soccer team, so big vehicles are necessary. But he doesn't dismiss the environment. On the contrary, as the chairman of the Canadian Automobile Dealers Association, he's eager to talk about how higher gas prices could convince people to drive less or drive smaller.

Mr. Chernushenko, who bikes just about everywhere and is a member of the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, is also looking for economic tools that can influence behaviour.

Now that he's no longer active (for the time being, anyway) in the Green party, Mr. Chernushenko is starting something called the Living Lightly Project, a documentary and lecture series that will examine the many ways people can tailor their lifestyles to fit the planet's needs.

The "lightly" part is a bit of wordplay. It refers to being light on the earth, but also about taking ourselves a little less seriously. Mr. Chernushenko, like many veterans of the green movement, is good at self-deprecation. They know that earnestness and shame don't win friends. If people feel guilty all the time, eventually they'll just throw up their hands and stop bothering about the environment. Nobody likes to be hectorated.

And, Mr. Chernushenko points out, there is a lot of humour in environmentalism -- in learning the old-fashioned skill of artfully hanging one's delicates under the sheets on the clothesline, in sniffing the compost, in stumbling under an overflowing armful of purchases because you forgot your canvas bag.

That last shtick showed up on an episode of Living With Ed, a TV show about the environmentalist lifestyle of Ed Begley, Jr. The premise is that his electric car, rain



CREDIT: Pat McGrath, The Ottawa Citizen

Environmentalist David Chernushenko (above) and car dealer Tom Donnelly are speaking much the same language on green issues, columnist Kate Heartfield says.

barrels and solar panels are all evidence of his wackiness and, naturally, drive his normal wife crazy. Frankly, I can't understand why her whining doesn't drive him crazy, but hey, that's reality TV for you -- it's all about conflict, real or imagined. The point is that there's humour in this stuff. Maybe I'm just more of an Ed than a Rachele.

Green choices don't always have to be really hard, and I think environmentalists have done a good job of getting that message out in the last few years. But while there is a danger in too much earnestness, there is also a danger in too little. We shouldn't fool ourselves with the convenient notion that environmentalism must never involve sacrifice or serious change.

There's a satirical video on YouTube now called Greensumption. The actress assures us that we can "shop against climate change." She explains: "I dumped my old 2005 Honda for a Toyota Prius. Now we have a Prius for every member of the family. And there's seven of us. So now, we're saving the planet seven times faster."

You can't buy happiness and you can't buy climate-change reversal. We have to actually use less, not just be seen in our hybrids and organic cotton. I say this as the owner of a hybrid and a drawer full of organic cotton.

And when it comes to the idea of using less, everybody agrees -- at least in principle. I learned about the Greensumption video through the work of New York Times journalist Andrew Revkin, who's been writing recently about the fact that what he calls the "boring middle" is staking its ground in the climate-change debate. Everybody's a moderate on this issue all of a sudden, even Newt Gingrich.

Somehow, by the environmentalists ceding a little earnestness and the skeptics ceding a little pride, we've reached something like a consensus. It might turn out to be a superficial consensus, but heck, it's something to work with. We've reached an unprecedented moment in history: when an Ottawa car dealer meets his local paper's editorial board, what he wants to talk about -- what he has to talk about -- is the environment.

Kate Heartfield is a member of the Citizen's editorial board. E-mail: kheartfield@thecitizen.canwest.com

Blog: ottawacitizen.com/worldnextdoor

Listen to the editorial board's discussion with Tom Donnelly of the Canadian Automobile Dealers Association at ottawacitizen.com/edboards.

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