

Playing dirty

Coming clean on climate-change spin—how the PR industry sold the “made in Canada” solution to global warming

BY ZOE CORMIER





“**T**he federal government is rushing to ratify the Kyoto protocol,” intoned a velvety female voice from our television sets, in November of 2002. “They want to sign it now and work out the details later. Who signs a contract without knowing the cost? We deserve a Canadian approach that produces immediate results and invests in our environmental future. A Canadian plan that reduces emissions without costing jobs, damaging our economy or our standard of living. Ask your MP to stop the rush to ratify.”

The ad campaign, which ran for several weeks at an estimated cost of \$225,000 a week, was part of a last-ditch effort by a coalition of Canadian industry organizations to pressure the Chrétien government into scuttling the international agreement on climate change. They had spent months campaigning against Kyoto, which would require signatories to lower greenhouse-gas emissions by a set target or face penalties. Fearing a bottom-line impact from Kyoto's ratification, industry leaders did what any smart business would do: They turned to public relations professionals to swing public opinion against the deal.

Enter National Public Relations (NPR), Canada's largest PR company, which has represented such clients as McDonald's, Imperial Oil and Wal-Mart. NPR manufactured a coalition of those that stood to lose the most from Kyoto—automakers, mining companies, and, of course, oil companies—gave them a

progressive-sounding name—the Canadian Coalition for Responsible Environmental Solutions—and lobbied provincial leaders, the media and the public.

Unlike many other anti-Kyoto groups of the time, the CCRES didn't refute the existence of global warming itself, but argued instead that Kyoto was simply the wrong solution to the problem. Appealing to Canadians' common sense and nationalism, NPR's fly-by-night coalition asked them to reject a one-size-fits-all solution in favour of one "made in Canada." But its proposed solution was not much of a solution at all: "made in Canada" was a PR euphemism for voluntary emissions targets, which are essentially meaningless.

But the phrase "made in Canada" caught on, and it is now experiencing a renaissance. Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Environment Minister Rona Ambrose, (with the co-operation of major news organizations) have resurrected the phrase to describe new plans to deal with climate change, which involve cutting 80 percent of the budget for Kyoto, axing almost all of the Liberals' global-warming programs, and shutting down the federal climate change site.

That the climate is changing is a fact. Yet for 20 years public relations campaigns for the oil industry have managed to create doubt—even today 39 percent of Canadians say they don't support the science behind global warming, according to a recent Ipsos Reid poll. PR campaigns—including NPR's, are influential—they have paved the way for public acceptance of regressive government policies and made us dangerously slow to deal with the greatest environmental catastrophe we face today.

The public relations industry is huge in both size and influence, but largely hidden from public view. As PR pros well know, the most effective public relations is the least visible. Invisible doesn't mean unprofitable, though. "There really is no good estimate on the size of the PR industry," says John Stauber, executive director of the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD), a spin watchdog group in the United States. "The amount spent on PR worldwide would be many, many billions, but unfortunately there are no good numbers. That's just the nature of the business—it's very secret."

Revenues aren't the only thing about PR that's secret. "When you hear the term 'public relations,' you think of press releases and other things that are upfront," says Stauber, "but the term PR was invented as a euphemism for propaganda by the father of PR, Eddie Bernays, way back in the 1920s; he was very clear that this was all about propaganda."

And just like propaganda, good public relations has been a key influence on our attitudes and our history. PR has been instrumental in the success (or failure) of politicians, parties, entire countries, international trade agreements, research and policies on

pesticides, new drugs and biotechnology—and probably every other major issue of the past half century.

Stauber has co-authored six books on PR, including 1995's *Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*. "When I go to conferences and run into senior PR people, they don't disagree with my analysis—in fact, they always say, 'It's way worse than you think.'"

James Hoggan, owner of one of the largest PR firms in Vancouver, James Hoggan and Associates, is particularly put off by tactics his colleagues use to discredit environmental movements. "PR companies have been out there defending corporations, and now they are doing it with climate change—and it's a far worse problem than all the other ones."

That's why he created desmogblog.com, a website debunking PR spin on climate change, with accessible updates on the scientific evidence concerning global warming.

"To create understanding with [public relations], there's nothing wrong with that," he says. "But when the goal of your communications is actually to confuse people, to create doubt about existing science—that says you are up to something unethical right from the start... An ethical approach to PR involves creating a dialogue with the public that is transparent and open—relationship building—rather than advertising or manipulating your way out of problems."

The Canadian Coalition for Responsible Environmental Solutions was a classic example of an "Astroturf" organization—a fake green group—set up by a PR firm to make it appear that an industry's agenda has grassroots support. And while the coalition was short-lived, it did leave behind at least one thing besides its old and obviously expensive website: the super-sticky, media-friendly catch phrase "made in Canada," a gift to Kyoto opponents who use it to frame their opposition in reasonable terms.

The term seems to have debuted in March 2002, when just-retired Imperial Oil CEO Robert Peterson was quoted in the *Financial Post* as saying of Kyoto: "I am of the view they are going to rethink this and come to a conclusion that there's got to be a made in Canada solution."

In September of that year, 25 Canadian business and industry associations—including the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, Canadian Energy Pipeline Association, and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce—came together to form the Astroturf group CCRES. "It was designed to be a single-purpose organization which was to present an alternative view during the debate about whether the Kyoto Protocol should be ratified or not," says Pierre Alvarez, president of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers and one of the founders of the CCRES. "It was a group of

like-minded industries who felt there was a better way to address the problem.”

The group called for a plan that “will allow Canada to stand proud among nations as a leader on the environment while ensuring our future prosperity,” according to the press release announcing CCRES’s formation. The document included 11 “guiding principles” for such a plan, such as more investment in technology and more consultation with industry.

Soon afterward, Ontario premier Ernie Eves and BC Premier Gordon Campbell joined the most vocal Kyoto opponent, Alberta premier Ralph Klein, in denouncing the treaty and calling for a “made in Canada” solution. Klein was quoted in the *National Post* on October 24 as saying that Kyoto was “not a Canadian plan” and was dreamed up by “international theorists.”

When it became obvious that Chrétien was determined to sign on, CCRES stepped up the pace, running television ads encouraging Canadians to write their MPs. Reporters received a letter, addressed to the Prime Minister from the Investment Dealers Association of Canada, warning that signing Kyoto would dry up American investment in a smothered

National Public Relations represents giants such as mining company Inco Ltd, Allergan (makers of Botox), China Minmetals (a state-owned Chinese company that has been linked to the use of forced labour in gulag-style prisons), Pfizer, Toyota Canada, and—oddly enough—Environment Canada and Natural Resources Canada.

NPR isn’t just the largest PR company in Canada. It is also the Canadian affiliate of one of the world’s biggest—and most notorious—PR firms, Burson-Marsteller.

Burson-Marsteller does not publish a list of its clients, but it has purportedly worked for some of the most infamous governments of the twentieth century, including the military junta in Argentina in the 1970s, Nicolae Ceausescu’s dictatorship in Romania, the government of Indonesia (following the massacre in East Timor) and the Nigerian government (to discredit reports of genocide). It has also reportedly worked for many years with Monsanto (in particular to push for approval of synthetic hormones to force cows to produce more milk, and to lobby against mandatory labeling of milk from treated cows in the US) and for Dow Corning to fight legislation to limit

“There is not enough light being shone on public relations and on the influence it has on how stories and campaigns are shaped”

Canadian economy. It’s interesting to speculate about where CCRES’s high-paid PR firm was when this idea came up. “We didn’t write any such letter. We didn’t even see it,” IDA spokesperson Connie Craddock was quoted as saying in the *Toronto Star* on December 3, 2002.

“We thought the IDA would be a more credible source for it to come from,” CCRES spokesperson Doug Black explained to the *Star*.

Even *National Post* columnist Don Martin—who had previously given the CCRES favourable write-ups—was offended by the tactic, describing the CCRES as the “Coalition for Irresponsible Environmental Spin Solutions” in his December 3 column.

Canada ratified Kyoto later that month, following which the CCRES put out a final press release in February 2003 (“Budget Shows Need for Consultation on Kyoto Implementation”), then faded from sight. “The government had made its decision and there was no reason to carry on—the organization had completed its work,” says Alvarez.

the use of silicon implants.

But whether they’re representing a dictatorship or a drug company, public relations professionals employ a variety of techniques to try to put a happy face on facts that, left alone, might be construed as damning. One of the most effective PR tools is the “third party” technique, where a firm will hire an “expert” to speak on behalf of a company. People don’t generally trust corporate executives who say a product is harmless (say cigarettes, Teflon cookware or household insecticides), but are more likely to believe the same words from a scientist. And sometimes even more effective than hiring experts is getting average citizens to do the same. PR firms have time and again managed to create the illusion of public support for corporate causes through front groups, such as the CCRES.

The CCRES was more upfront than most industry groups—its site does list coalition members. But most people who saw the group’s name in a news article or on television would not have bothered to look

it up; all many people would have taken away from a 30-second news spot is that a Canadian “environmental” group did not consider the Kyoto Protocol to be a “responsible solution.”

In other ways, though, the CCRES was a typical example of Astroturf: it was created by a PR firm and lasted for only a short time (from September 2002 to February 2003). Astroturf groups tend to last just long enough to address the one particular issue they are concerned with, because they are not inherently interested in the broader issue they claim to care about.

The classic example of this is the National Smokers Alliance. In response to the tide of smoking bans that swept America in the 1980s and 1990s, Philip Morris and other tobacco giants turned to the big PR firms in the US. “Burson-Marsteller created the

a beauty aid rather than a pharmaceutical product. According to the CMD, leaked documents from Burson-Marsteller reveal it planned to “get women angry about having the right to make their own decision about [silicone breast] implants taken away from them.”

Astroturf groups are also a popular way to try to sabotage environmental movements. Take, for example, the Clean and Safe Energy Coalition, funded by the Nuclear Energy Institute in the US; the Save Our Species Alliance (which lobbied for softening the US’s Endangered Species Act); and the Evergreen Foundation, a forestry industry group.

In “green PR,” NPR’s American parent is the green giant. According to the CMD, it was behind Californians for Realistic Vehicle Standards (funded by the auto industry to protest restrictions on vehicle

One ad featured an image of a ship, about to sail over the edge of the world into the mouth of a lurking dragon, underneath the headline, “Some say the earth is warming. Some also said the earth was flat”

NSA, and tried to make it look like a populist uprising,” says Stauber. “This was an effort by the tobacco industry to frame the issue of exposure to second-hand smoke as a smokers’ rights issue, rather than an issue of any individual’s right to avoid exposure to carcinogens.” With full-page newspaper ads, telemarketing, canvassers and toll-free 1-800 numbers, the NSA reached out to the 50 million American smokers to get them to join the organization, sign petitions, write letters and lobby local politicians arguing for their “right to smoke.” In 1997 leaked documents revealed that the organization was funded by Philip Morris, but by that time jurisdictions across America had already delayed implementing no-smoking bans in bars and restaurants, long after science had shown the harmful effects of second-hand smoke.

According to the Center for Media and Democracy, Burson-Marsteller has created public support (or at least the illusion of it) with many Astroturf groups, including the Healthy Weight Task Force (an Australian front group promoting Xenical diet pills) and Citizens Against Unfair Health Care Taxes—created for Allergan in response to the California government contemplating taxing Botox as

emissions and SUVs); the Foundation for Clean Air Progress (which lobbies the US Environmental Protection Agency to *not* implement stricter controls on air quality); and the American Energy Alliance, founded by American oil interests in 1993 to defeat President Bill Clinton’s proposed 25-cent-a-gallon tax on gasoline, which would have been one of the cornerstones of a US plan on global warming.

Canada has found itself playing host to Burson-Marsteller green groups too, including the Coalition for Clean and Renewable Energy (to promote the James Bay 2 hydroelectric dam project in Quebec) and the British Columbia Forest Alliance in the early 1990s.

“The forest industry in British Columbia, which had been facing increasing pressure from conservationists, essentially hired Burson-Marsteller to develop a vehicle to sell the forest industry message,” says journalist Ben Parfitt, who covered the forestry beat for *The Vancouver Sun* from 1986 to 1993. “The vehicle they came up with was a ‘grassroots’ organization called the Forest Alliance of British Columbia.”

“Burson-Marsteller was very clear that the forest industry couldn’t sell that message themselves—it

had to come from others. So the Forest Alliance was a vehicle through which Burson-Marsteller, funded by industry money, could create an organization that would be a counter to the environmental organizations. The whole idea was to present people with the idea that taking forests away from the forest industry hurt working families.”

Parfitt published a piece in the *Georgia Straight* on the BCFA, its ties to Burson-Marsteller and Burson-Marsteller’s international record, including its campaign for Argentina’s junta. He then found himself attacked by the BCFA and confronted by the *Sun*. “I was not fired, but there was definitely a linkage between the work that I did and my being removed from the forestry beat. In my experience, there was at the time, and there remains, not enough light being shone on public relations and on the influence it has on how stories and campaigns are shaped,” he says.

So when it comes to the CCRES legacy, Parfitt is, of course, highly skeptical. “The language is wonderful—I mean, ‘made in Canada,’ who can argue with that?” he asks. “But what exactly does that mean?”

Parfitt’s skepticism is well-founded—the coal and oil industries have spent tens of millions of dollars funding front groups that have denied the science of global warming and lobbied against caps on greenhouse-gas emissions—and they have been successful in preventing the public from understanding the gravity of the problem, and ultimately from dealing with it.

“Just as the PR industry rallied to protect big tobacco and guarantee that millions of people would die because of their work, they have rallied to obfuscate the debate around global climate change,” says the CMD’s Stauber. “They push forward people with scientific credentials to say that global climate change isn’t occurring, just like tobacco-funded scientists and doctors who came forward and pooh-pooed the risks of tobacco.”

In fact, one of the most well-known climate change deniers, Steven Milloy, is a lawyer who got his start as a scientific spokesperson for the tobacco industry. Milloy then served as the executive director of the Advancement of Sound Science Coalition (TASSC), which disbanded in 1998 after its origins as a front for polluting companies was exposed. He is now a columnist for Fox News. He also runs the website junkscience.com, which debunks science that runs counter to the interests of business.

Thanks to Milloy, the phrase “junk science” has become common parlance among both right-wing pundits and everyday journalists. After looking at more than 250 newspaper articles published between 1996 and 1998, a University of Pennsylvania professor found that 62 percent used the term “junk science” to refer to scientific arguments furthered by environmentalists and corporate critics, while only eight percent of the news articles used the term

to describe corporate-funded studies.

Milloy continues to deny the ecological damage caused by DDT, any health risks from second-hand smoke and the link between fossil-fuel use and global warming, among others. His site does not, of course, mention how many hundreds of thousands of dollars Milloy has received from Philip Morris, Exxon Mobil and other corporate giants.

Throughout the 1990s, TASSC and other US oil-funded groups such as the Global Climate Coalition, the Global Climate Information Project and the Information Council for the Environment (ICE) spent tens of millions of dollars on advertising and lobbying campaigns to “reposition global warming as theory,” in ICE’s words.

These groups ran full-page ads in the largest newspapers in the US ridiculing the science of global warming and perpetuating the idea that it is a myth spread by hysterical tree-huggers. ICE had some of the most memorable. One featured an image of a ship, about to sail over the edge of the world into the mouth of a lurking dragon, underneath the headline, “Some say the earth is warming. Some also said the earth was flat.” Another featured a terrified, cowering chicken. “Who told you the earth was warming ... Chicken Little?” One that ran in Minneapolis in the winter asked, “If the earth is getting warmer, why is Minneapolis getting colder?”

The scientific consensus on global warming is rock solid—and has been for at least 10 years. In 1995 more than 2,500 of the world’s leading climate scientists from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change declared that global warming was already occurring. All of the world’s leading scientific journals, including *Nature*, *Science* and the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, are in agreement that global climate change is real.

But the public has been slow to realize the validity of the science, mainly because of PR-fueled climate-change denying campaigns.

“When you talk to scientists, they are very circumspect in the language they use; they talk in terms of trends, estimates, probabilities—they sound very wishy-washy,” says Ross Gelbspan, author of one of the first books on the oil and coal industry’s efforts to bury the debate on climate change, *The Heat is On*, published in 1997. “To an untrained ear, one of the skeptics sounds much more convincing because they talk in terms of absolutes—either that it’s not happening or it’s no big deal.”

Until a couple of years ago, virtually every major story you saw in the news (particularly in the US) would present both sides of the debate—several thousand scientists with peer-reviewed research on one hand, and a few dozen industry-funded climate change-deniers on the other—as though both sides had equally valid proof.

“The industry invoked this false ethic of journalistic balance—and a lot of journalists fell for it,” says Gelbspan. “From my 30 years of experience as a journalist, the issue of balance really only comes in when it’s a matter of opinion—not fact. I find the media more reprehensible than the oil industry. Journalists are more responsible because they have allowed themselves to be conned; they published a lot of questionable material without really looking at it.”

Whether you want to blame the oil industry or the media who failed to see through their spin, it has taken much of the public a long time to become aware of the reality of global warming. Even now a sizable chunk of Canadians remain skeptical.

But with the reality of climate change becoming harder to deny every year as the polar ice sheets shrink and temperatures rise into the 20s in January, the Global Climate Coalition, TASSC and ICE, along with many other climate-change denying organizations, have disappeared, and many of their former bankrollers (such as Shell, British Petroleum and General Motors) have admitted that climate change is real. But new groups have sprung up to take their

view. I don’t see anything wrong with bringing other views to the table, and frankly I don’t think it’s had any impact on the policy process in Canada.”

However, the impact of climate-change denial on policy will likely become stronger with the shift in federal power to Stephen Harper’s Conservatives and the West. The Tories are hardly known for their environmentalism, and Fleishman-Hillard’s Morten Paulsen, listed as the PR contact for Alberta-based climate-change denying group Friends of Science is a Conservative insider, having held a number of positions in the Reform Party, the Canadian Alliance and the Conservative Party.

We all suspected Harper’s Conservatives were more concerned about tar sands revenue than the environment, and they proved it once elected. One of their first acts was to eliminate the vast majority of Liberal initiatives to fight global warming, cutting funding for climate-change programs from \$10 billion to \$2 billion. Now, Rick Mercer is no longer imploring us to reduce our household greenhouse-gas emissions by a tonne, and we hear more about the Asia-Pacific Partnership than Kyoto.

“Be prepared to specify and quantify the jobs lost because of needless, excessive or redundant regulations. Emphasize common sense”

place, often admitting that global carbon dioxide levels are rising—but arguing that that is in fact a *good* thing (the ultimate in spin).

The Greening Earth Society, for example, predicts that higher carbon dioxide levels will lead to more plant growth (which is partially true, but only in some regions) and hence higher biodiversity (for which there is no scientific basis—research published in the world’s top journals in fact states the opposite). And there are still soothing ads—The Competitive Enterprise Institute has been running ones on television featuring a little girl blowing dandelion fluff into the breeze as an announcer says, “Carbon dioxide. They call it pollution—we call it life.”

“I think that there are differing views on what’s affecting climate change,” says Jayson Myers of the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters (another founding group of the Canadian Coalition for Responsible Environmental Solutions). He doesn’t deny that the climate is changing, but adds: “I don’t see a problem with industry funding a different point of view and the environmental community funding their point of

The federal government made no mention of Kyoto in its 2006 budget. Instead, politicians spent the spring hinting that they would sign onto the Partnership known as AP6, a new international agreement on “climate change, energy security and air pollution” involving China, the US, Australia, South Korea, India and Japan.

The AP6 emphasizes energy efficiency, and does not limit greenhouse gas emissions; targets, are—you guessed it—voluntary. It’s telling that the AP6 meeting in Sydney, Australia, this spring was organized by heads of state, industry and energy, and green groups were specifically prohibited from attending the conference.

Environment Minister Rona Ambrose, who has announced that Canada will not meet its Kyoto targets, said in April that “the key principles around the Asia-Pacific Partnership are very much in line with where our government wants to go. I think they’re doing things that we’re very interested in participating in further down the road.”

The Tories say their plan is superior to Kyoto,

since it is “made in Canada”—as though the phrase described a genuine plan on global warming. And Canada’s three largest newspapers show the degree to which a made-by-PR-experts phrase has been a gift to the Conservatives. So far this year, the term has appeared 90 times in climate-change-related articles in *The Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star* and *National Post*. By contrast, it showed up just four times in all of 2004.

To date, the Tories have announced just two policies to deal with global warming: a tax rebate for people who buy monthly transit passes, and a requirement for five percent ethanol in diesel fuel and gasoline by 2010. In order to meet the Kyoto target, we need to cut our annual releases of greenhouse gases by 195 million tonnes. At the very best, the ethanol requirement should shave off 5.6 million tonnes (according to the government’s own figures), and the transit measure promises to be even more pathetic, cutting off just 20,000 to 33,000 tonnes a year—assuming it gets people out of their cars and onto busses and trains.

The Conservatives’ quiet shutdown of climate-change.gc.ca, the official federal website for information on climate change will cut zero tonnes of emissions.

University of Toronto history professor Paul Rutherford, who has written several books on the use of marketing, doesn’t expect the Conservatives to do a lot on climate change, but he does expect them to employ good PR tactics. “When you’re putting forward a policy, you frame it in language that makes it appealing to people—know the buttons that push people.”

It’s useful to think of politics as a marketplace, says Rutherford, with public goods on sale like any other form of merchandise. “You have a policy—Kyoto or not Kyoto. How are you going to sell it? You don’t really want to be against environmental policy,” he says. “You might challenge it on the grounds that it means economic disaster—but going head to head is not a good tactic.”

“So what you want to do is find something else that says we will do something *better* than Kyoto, but it will be suited to our purposes. So you plug it in to a different set of values—not just environmentalism but patriotism.”

A made in Canada solution.

Republicans in the United States have been particularly astute in their use of public relations and their finesse with the language of politics—thanks in large part to the work of party pollster and consultant Frank Luntz in the 1980s and 1990s. Luntz is considered to have been instrumental in the crafting of Ronald Reagan’s policies, in sensationalizing “Monicagate” and in taking global warming off the presidential election agenda in 2000 and 2004.

Canadians familiar with his work were quick to raise an eyebrow when he visited Ottawa this May. He had a private meeting with Harper, and gave a talk to the party, offering advice on how to win a majority government (his topic was “Massaging the Conservative Message for Voters”).

This certainly wasn’t his first visit to Canada—he worked with Preston Manning’s Reform party in the early 1990s. Given his prevalence and success in right-wing politics, it has been suggested that he has been involved in current Canadian PR tactics as well. “I would be really surprised if this ‘made in Canada’ thing didn’t have Luntz’s fingerprints on it,” Gelbspan suggests.

In 2003, a leaked memo offered a glimpse into spin, Republican-style. The 16-page memo, prepared by Luntz Research Companies, advised politicians on how to speak convincingly about their environmental commitments (without having to be committed to the environment), and included some gems:

“Assure your audience that you are committed to ‘preserving and protecting’ the environment, but that ‘it can be done more wisely and effectively’.... If you must use the economic argument, stress that you are seeking ‘a fair balance’ between the environment and the economy. Be prepared to specify and quantify the jobs lost because of needless, excessive or redundant regulations. Emphasize common sense.”

“Voters believe that there is no consensus about global warming in the scientific community. Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled, their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue in the debate, and defer to scientists and other experts in the field.... The scientific debate is closing [against us] but is not yet closed. There is still a window of opportunity to challenge the science.”

More than half a century since scientists first realized that fossil-fuel use might affect the planet’s climate, television and radio ads that dismiss the issue are still on the air, many Canadians still question the science behind global warming, and our new Conservative government has shown beyond a doubt that climate change is not a real concern to them.

James Hoggan, and many others, think that in this case the PR machine and its clients are spinning in the wrong direction. “I find it amazing—you see all this overwhelming evidence, and yet there’s still this ability to manipulate,” Hoggan says.

“Being against climate change is pretty stupid from a PR point of view. If you don’t want to end up looking like those cigarette executives standing in front of Congress a few years ago, telling us that there is no evidence that cigarettes cause cancer, don’t fight something that you are inevitably going to lose.” ■