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The irresistible attraction of Bans.Peter Shawn Taylor

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The standard stereotype of a politician was once someone who refused to take a position on any topic, dissembled when asked a pointed question and always claimed more investigation was necessary. It applied equally to sitcoms (think: Yes Minister) and real life (think: Prime Minister Jean Chrétien). No longer.

Today that stereotype has been turned on its head. The typical politician these days is more likely to take too much action based on too little information than the other way around. And politicians seem to relish using their greatest power — the ability to ban outright items or activities — so much that it seems impossible to imagine we ever complained that they did too little.

In the first half of 2008, Canadian politicians at all levels of government have gone ban-crazy. Herewith a partial list of bans either enacted or announced since January: the use of pesticides, banned by Ontario; clear plastic baby bottles, banned by the federal government; the sale of bottled water, banned by the Waterloo Region District School Board in Ontario; Styrofoam, banned by Turner Valley, Alta.; using cell phones while driving, banned by Nova Scotia and Quebec; smoking in cars with children, banned by Nova Scotia and Ontario; the sight of cigarettes in corner stores, banned by Alberta, Ontario and Quebec.

The existence of bans is certainly nothing new. Governments have always been banning things. In fact, the first recorded use of the word came during the Middle Ages in reference to a monarch's ultimate power — the ability to summon his subjects to war. It later came to mean a wide variety of official proclamations or proscriptions, including expulsions or banishment. Over time, this heavy-handed

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application of government authority became so commonplace and routine as to be banal. In the '60s, ban briefly became a campus imperative — as in “Ban the Bomb” — suggesting governments weren't doing enough.

These days, however, the sheer number of things forbidden, and the surprising lack of scientific or other rational backing for these actions, suggests that politicians are keen to get back to the earlier application of the word. They ban early and they ban often. So how come bombs were never banned in the '60s while water bottles and foam plates get banned today? Politicians have their reasons.

Reason 1 Bans mean you care Popular belief holds that saving the environment requires direct and immediate action. Further study is for wimps. The same goes for children's health. So bans have become the dramatic policy tool of choice for politicians eager to prove they care, regardless of available scientific proof. Consider Health Canada's ban on plastic baby bottles containing the chemical Bisphenol-A. According to the most reliable scientific evidence, average infant exposure to BPA from these bottles in Canada is 100,000 times less than the known danger levels. But Health Minister Tony Clement banned them anyway. The environmental file has never been a strong point for the federal Conservatives and taking this kind of extreme action gives him the appearance of being tough on the topic. The same goes for Ontario's ban on pesticides, which directly contradicts the findings of Ottawa's Pest Management Regulatory Agency. Premier Dalton McGuinty dutifully ignored the available facts and banned pesticides in the name of “our children's health.”

Reason 2 Bans are easy For politicians hoping to find simple solutions to difficult problems, a ban is the perfect option. It's a breeze to pass and enforce a law banning handheld cell phone use in cars. The same goes for bans on cigarette “power walls” in corner stores. Of course hands-free mobile devices are just as distracting for drivers and not banned. And youth smoking rates have no connection to in-store displays. Thinking intelligently about the law can be a complicated and time-consuming process. Not so with bans.

Reason 3 Bans can make you famous As politicians discover that bans give them a useful environmental profile, there's a strong incentive to be first. Case in point, Turner Valley's curious plan to ban Styrofoam. Such a move makes even less scientific sense than bans on pesticides or baby bottles. The embodied energy costs of Styrofoam are far less than paper alternatives, and it is entirely inert. This move will most likely do more harm than good for the environment. Besides,

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Styrofoam is simply the brand name for one form of polystyrene foam, which wasn't banned. But so what? Just announcing they were thinking of a ban got Turner Valley great press. It's the same reason even smaller Leaf Rapids, Man., banned plastic shopping bags last year. A ban is a great way for small-time politicians to get themselves national attention.

Reason 4 Bans provide cover for other ideologies If there is a ban to watch, it's the prohibition on bottled water sales. The Waterloo Region School Board got there first, as per reason three. Now university campus activists across the country are gearing up for major campaigns that will see bottled water banned in student buildings and offices. But this is not a crusade based on health issues. It clearly makes no sense to deny students access to a convenient and popular source of water at school, particularly given the state of most public water fountains. Rather, this urge is motivated by local politicians and campus groups who believe it is improper to make a profit selling water. The ban is meant to enforce the leftist belief that water should be free by outlawing its capitalist version.

None of the above reasons provide much hope that the urge to ban will slow down in the near future. Environmental and other pressure groups demand bans as a way of impressing their views on the public. And politicians respond.

Yet bans oversimplify complex issues into a binary set of options: permit or ban. The lack of scientific rationale means they needlessly constrain personal liberty in favour of the appearance of dramatic action. And bans unleash the law of unintended consequences. Banning BPA baby bottles will mean greater use of glass, which breaks, and opaque bottles, which can harbour bacteria. Bans on pesticide will lead to reduced use of outdoor parks and playgrounds and a greater reliance on artificial turf. Banning bottled water in school will lead to greater consumption of juice and pop. Further, bans on specific activities such as cellphones in cars will do nothing to change individuals' underlying risk tolerance or their health. But bans do make politicians happy. And that, it seems, is all that really matters. National Post

Peter Shawn Taylor is editor-at-large of Maclean's magazine.

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