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Fletcher: Premier bitten by pest problem

By **Tom Fletcher - Kelowna Capital News**
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Premier Christy Clark has a new political problem buzzing around her office.

A year ago, the newly appointed premier was looking to change the channel for an unpopular government grappling with the fallout of the harmonized sales tax. Newly appointed NDP leader Adrian Dix was touting an idea that is all the rage with urban folks, a ban on "cosmetic pesticides." All the better B.C. communities already have one, starting with Clark's old stomping ground of Port Moody in 2003.

So she figured she'd better run to the front of this parade, swipe a popular policy from the opposition and do something to redefine the B.C. Liberal Party after the tax-cutting, regulation-repealing decade of Gordon Campbell.

But first an all-party committee would hold hearings around the province, chaired by Kootenay East MLA Bill Bennett.

Bennett presented the committee's report last week, and one could see what was coming. Bennett is the rifle-toting outdoorsman who recently called on his government to abandon the carbon tax, saying it's silly to keep pretending B.C. can change the world's climate. He was recently appointed by Clark to co-chair the B.C. Liberal Party policy committee for next year's election, a strong signal of the party's rightward shift in response to the B.C. Conservative threat.

Bennett concluded after 10 months of hearings that the public aversion to common lawn and garden herbicides is based on "chemophobia" that flourishes due to scientific illiteracy. That statement is both politically dangerous and absolutely correct.

I first covered this issue in the Okanagan 25 years ago, when environmentalists fought the use of Roundup by the forests ministry to knock down brush and promote new trees. The evidence boils down to this: these complex organic compounds break down in a short period to simpler, common components that pose no threat. Thus, with buffer zones around watercourses and temporary entry restrictions, they are safe.

Unfortunately, most people know little or nothing about chemistry and refuse to believe this. It's part of the scientific nonsense trend that has grown in B.C. society for decades.

We have parents turning their backs on routine immunization because of superstitions about vaccines. We have people panicked about imaginary health effects of smart meters, egged on by shoddy, sensationalist media reporting.

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The parallels between local government responses to smart meter hysteria and this scientifically ignorant push against "pesticides" is telling. As Bennett put it, when someone becomes convinced her child is at risk, "that mum is pretty darn compelling when she goes to council." Few have the courage to stand up to that.

The committee sought advice from Health Canada, whose scientists approve conditions of use for chemicals. Health Canada representative Lindsay Hansen said B.C. was the first province to ask for its advice, despite the fact that most provinces have imposed bans. These bans are political, not public safety measures, University of Guelph toxicologist Keith Solomon told MLAs.

The committee also learned that "cosmetic" use accounts for only five per cent of pesticide use. Most of it is in agriculture, forestry and commercial pest control, with no ban proposed.

MLAs in farming areas signalled their concern over the effect of this urban gesture politics. Backyard fruit trees go unsprayed and pests spread to orchards and fields. We have large areas of agricultural land reserve, but 85 per cent of the people who live in those areas don't farm.

The NDP is content to fan public fear and ignore evidence, as with smart meters and oil pipelines. The premier has a choice here. She can do the popular thing, or the right thing.

Tom Fletcher is legislative reporter and columnist for Black Press and BCLocalnews.com

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