

Muzzling the Green Message

by Ole Hendrickson

Why did the mainstream media exclude the Green Party from the April 12th English language leaders' debate, and the April 14th French debate?

Could it be they don't want the environment to be an election issue?

What is "the environment", anyway? It's life. It's our communities. It's everything we eat and all that goes on around us. It's our health and our children's health. It's the basis for our long-term economic prosperity.

Why should we not discuss this during an election?

The decision to exclude the Green Party was made by a "broadcast consortium" consisting of four members: CBC/Radio-Canada, CTV, Global and TVA (the latter being a subsidiary of Quebecor Media). The consortium provided limited information on its decision, which was made behind closed doors.

One can only speculate as to their motives. Given that television is all about making money - selling cars, and beer, and cosmetics - perhaps the television barons worry that debating environmental issues during an election campaign might make us buy less stuff.

The broadcast consortium provided a dribble of information that backs up this theory - sort of. Actually, the consortium did not say that debating environmental issues is bad for business. It said that debating any issues during an election campaign is bad for business. Democratic debate itself is the problem for the television barons. It distracts people from more important things - like watching hockey games.

I'm not making this up. Troy Reeb, the Global Television news executive who chairs the broadcast consortium, explained their decision in a Globe and Mail interview. He said "The sacrificed cost of prime-time revenue is a huge hit to all the broadcasters. It's massive. This is worth pointing out. People will say debate is earlier in the campaign than it has been in other years, but what starts on April 13? The hockey playoffs on CBC. That's hugely important."

The CBC didn't exactly say the election distracts us from hockey. It did, however, characterize any discussion on its decision to exclude Ms. May as a "diversion". A CBC story entitled "Debate over May diverts campaign" begins by saying "Canada's federal election campaign took a temporary detour Wednesday into whether Green Party Leader Elizabeth May would be excluded from the televised leaders debates."

This story was widely circulated. See how many times the phrase "Debate over May diverts campaign" appears on internet sites. Who wrote this story? Not a real journalist, but "CBC News": Big Brother.

After deciding to exclude the Green Party from the debates, the mainstream media carefully spun its own coverage of this decision. It argued that any serious discussion of the implications of its decision would "divert the campaign". Divert the campaign from what, precisely?

The strategy succeeded. When the media get together and agree not to cover their own decision, there is no media coverage. Slam dunk.

This helps ensure that environmental issues will have minimal impact on the election. Discussion will be limited roughly to what can be covered in a 140-character Twitter "tweet".

The degree of control of corporate media over news, and implications for democracy, are chilling. Corporate media have succeeded in sowing doubts about the reality of climate change in the minds of a huge proportion of the North American population. The environment no longer matters. Nothing is real.

Big Brother Television has spoken. Debating how the federal government should address environmental issues - or any other public issues, for that matter - is a "temporary detour". God forbid that we should think any thoughts other than those sanctioned by the mainstream corporate media.

Watershed Ways is a publication of the Ottawa River Institute (www.ottawariverinstitute.ca), a non-profit, charitable organization based in the Upper Ottawa Valley. Ole Hendrickson has a Ph.D. in ecology from the University of Georgia and is a member of the International Society of Ecological Economics.