

Toronto's tempest in a Tim's cup

Recycling targets seem based on the belief that the more we recycle, the faster we will go to Heaven



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Poor old Toronto is in the dumps. Poverty is growing and the economy is tanking. House prices have taken a mighty dive. But never fear! City Hall never sleeps. Ever vigilant on the citizens' behalf, Toronto city councillors have taken on the biggest menace of them all. I refer, of course, to plastic coffee cup lids.

"The status quo is going to change, and it can't change soon enough for me," roared waste czar Glenn De Baeremaeker.

We Torontonians are crazy about our takeout coffee. And where does most of our takeout coffee come from? Tim Hortons! Tim's cups are made of virtuous recyclable paper. But the lids are made of evil plastic, which means they might as well be WMDs. The lids make the cups impossible to recycle unless you can persuade people to separate the cups and lids when they throw them out. There is an expensive recycling machine that will separate them, but the city says it can't afford one. So now the city wants people to use their own mugs for takeout coffee. It wants Tim's to give them 20 cents off when they do. Right now Tim's only gives them 10 cents off.

The tempest in a Tim's cup has brewed up bitter arguments between righteous city councillors and the restaurant industry. And there's more to come. The city is soon to vote on a measure that will require stores to start giving 10 cents off to anyone who brings her own shopping bag instead of using a plastic one.

Virtuous Toronto has perhaps the most aggressive recycling target of any city in the world. This target - 70 per cent - is not based on economics, or feasibility, or anything that resembles common sense, but on the simple belief that the more we recycle, the faster we will go to Heaven. Or, as Councillor De Baeremaeker said after this week's marathon 11-hour debate, "I hope we all go home tonight and remember that we all have a responsibility to this planet and to our children."

It never occurred to me that choosing a coffee cup for my double-double is an ethical decision. But now that I'm enlightened, how hard can it be?

The answer, I am sad to say, is that it's quite a bit harder than you think.

I have now spent many hours researching this matter on your behalf, and I have found entire websites, engineering reports, and university student subcommittees devoted to the environmental impact of coffee cups. The classic of the genre seems to be a study called Reusable and Disposable Cups: An Energy-Based Evaluation, by former chemistry professor Martin B. Hocking, who, I am proud to say, comes from our own University of Victoria.

To perform a proper lifecycle analysis of coffee cups, Prof. Hocking began by calculating the embodied energy (MJ) in each type of cup. Not surprisingly, he found that it takes a great deal more energy to manufacture a reusable ceramic cup than it does to manufacture any kind of disposable cup. For every paper coffee cup you use, you'd have to reuse your ceramic mug at least 39 times to break even, energy-wise (assuming that you wash it once in a while). For every polystyrene cup, you'd have to use your mug a whopping 1,006 times to break even.

I trust that clears things up.

The moral of the story, if you are still with me, is that it's a whole lot easier to harass coffee chains, retailers and citizens than it is to do something that actually makes environmental sense. Take the case of plastic shopping bags. These days, cities can scarcely tax or ban them fast enough. Everybody likes to point to Ireland, which slapped a hefty tax on plastic shopping bags a few years ago. Voila! People practically stopped using them. But then they started buying plastic doggie poop bags and plastic kitchen bags and plastic wastebasket bags to replace all the plastic shopping bags they had formerly recycled.

And just in case you're thinking paper bags are better, think again. Paper bags are even worse than plastic, according to none other than the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Plastic bags require much less energy to manufacture, ship and recycle. They generate less air and water pollution, and they take up far less space in landfills. Even so, Ontario's gigantic liquor board has switched to paper bags, a move that does nothing at all for the planet, but no doubt makes its customers feel all warm and fuzzy as they're picking up their evening snort.

In Vancouver, where a plastic-bag ban is also in the air, one brave city councillor admits that the move is largely symbolic. Even David Santillo, a marine biologist at Greenpeace, is a skeptic, partly because, contrary to popular belief, plastic bags don't kill marine animals. "We're not going to solve the problem of waste by focusing on plastic bags," he told the Times of London. "On a global basis plastic bags aren't an issue."

I am rather sure this information will not deter the swarm of 6th-graders who descended on City Hall the other day, warning that plastic bags will destroy the planet. "Children need to lead on this because it's our future," one boy said earnestly. As for the grown-ups, I'm afraid our future is to be harangued by clueless city councillors and sanctimonious 11-year-olds. They have found their WMDs, and their mission is to wipe them from the Earth.