

**Gorrie: Why all the fuss about Ontario's eco-fee?**

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**Peter Gorrie**

What's been silliest: the media hysteria over Ontario's eco-fee; the bumbling attempts by government and industry to implement and explain it; or the frothing of opposition politicians misrepresenting it for cheap points?

Okay, all three get 10 out of 10 for turning a good, albeit imperfect, idea into another knee-jerk opportunity to attack "tax grabs."

The fee is part of a larger plan to keep discards out of landfills and, if possible, to recycle or reuse their components — and without shipping dangerous materials to places where people get sick and die from tearing our castoffs apart with bare hands or heating them, with no ventilation or protection, to extract the valuable bits.

The goal is for the companies that make and sell stuff, and those of us who buy it, to take responsibility for what happens when we're finished with it.

This isn't a novel concept: We began in this direction in the late-1980s, when the Blue Box was invented to reduce the mountain of garbage created by the switch from refillable pop bottles to single-use containers.

Since then, the list of recyclable materials has expanded, and several payment schemes have been tried.

At present, municipalities and industry split the cost of recycling the basic Blue Box contents — paper, cardboard, glass and some plastics and metals — and the municipalities recoup part of their cost by selling those materials. Funding for the rest is a hodgepodge.

The expense has been included in property taxes or municipal solid waste fees, as well as hidden in slightly higher prices for some consumer products to cover industry's share.

Under its Waste Diversion Act, the province is shifting completely toward "producer responsibility," which means companies that make or import products must look after, and pay for, recycling or disposing of them. Which means, in turn, that consumers pay, since no business eats a cost it can pass to its customers. In a few years, the system is to cover almost everything we buy. The same is happening elsewhere in Canada and around the world.

We are, in fact, already well along that road: We pay a tire tax and a charge for disposing used motor oil. On April 1, 2009, fees were introduced on some electronics products, and the list was expanded last April 1. On July 1, 2008, we began paying eco fees for some hazardous materials, and that list was expanded 17 days ago.

Funny, how only the most recent addition unleashed such sound and fury.

Sad, that it's being portrayed as the Devil's handiwork.

It makes sense to pay a small fraction of the cost price to dispose of things we so happily consume.

I like a system that makes us more aware of waste, and that might encourage us to demand less packaging or choose materials that are relatively easy to recycle.

We don't have choice in everything. But when we do, I'd rather control and pay for my own level of consumption than be hit with higher taxes to subsidize the wasteful habits of others. If

they want a 90-inch plasma TV, let them handle the cost of its final disposition. If they buy drinks in hard-to-recycle multi-plastic containers, let them absorb the eco-premium.

Ontario's program has flaws: There are, for example, far too few hazardous materials drop-off locations. Implementation has been confusing; sometimes inept. We need more transparency in how the fees are set.

But it's early days and such faults could be discussed and improved.

Instead, though, the eco-tax uproar might be making the basic notion of producer responsibility so politically toxic that it won't survive — which would be a shameful trashing of a very good idea.

[peter.gorrie@sympatico.ca](mailto:peter.gorrie@sympatico.ca)