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Environmental choices must make dollars and sense

By Jeff Brownlee

As I was listening to Jay Myers debate two environmentalists on the track record of Canadian industry during a recent media interview, I couldn't help but reminisce about growing up in small town Canada.

The environmentalists were trying to paint industry, specifically manufacturing, as the proverbial bad guy in terms of the environment, but Jay was reinforcing the message that the manufacturing industry has already met emissions targets laid out in Kyoto, not necessarily because it made environmental sense, but because it was good economics. CME's chief economist then went on the attack and said something that struck a chord with everyone on the show.

"Industry is doing its part and prepared to do more, but real measures to preserve the environment come down to a matter of choice by individuals. It's a simple

choice about the cars we drive, how we heat our homes and even our choice of appliances. That's what's going to make the real difference in the future."

I couldn't help but smile, not just because the environmentalists were rendered speechless, unable to rebuke that statement, but because his words reminded me of the choices my family made more than 30 years ago. We didn't know it then, but we were environmentalists in every sense of the word.

It was as Jay described, due to a choice, a choice to pinch a penny everywhere we could and in the process, we were environmentally responsible.

We lived in a 120-plus-year-old home in a small village about 20 miles south of Ottawa – by today's standards, it felt like 400 miles. Our house was a massive, "Brownlee Block" four-storey with a four-foot basement. It was originally a farmhouse, complete with sheds. The remnants of the original coal-fired furnace were still left in the basement, including the steel hopper that was likely fitted before the floors and roof were built.

Eventually, that coal furnace and the wood-fired oven gave way to an electric stove and my great uncles decided that a gravity-fed, oil-fired floor furnace was the state-of-the-art technology back in the 40s.

Heating the home was comparable to heating the outdoors as insulation was nothing more than a number of newspapers chinked in the holes in the blocks. On a blustery January evening, you knew not to sit anywhere near the northern

corner of the house because of the nice, cool draft that radiated from the walls and windows.

Around 1976, my father made a choice to update the family abode, from the ground up. Gone were the intricate designs and wallpaper covering the plaster walls, replaced with dark wood paneling so prevalent in the decade. The dark maple hardwood was covered with white shag carpet throughout and we enclosed the summer kitchen to make a rec-room,

this time with white wood panelling on the walls.

It was also an opportunity to retrofit the home with a previously enjoyed oil forced-air furnace and the perfect occasion to get rid of the inefficient gravity model.

Spending this amount of money, well actually any amount on home improvements, was a big deal for the family. My father grew up during the Depression and it was drilled into him at an early age that money is to be earned, never spent. In fact, you have to go out of your way to find new ways to be frugal.

I was surprised to see a dark-green clothes dryer and an automatic washing machine arrive at our doorstep. Obviously my mother had worn my father down to the point he gave in and decided to lift the moratorium on a dryer – we had to hang our clothes, including sheets on



a 100-foot clothesline, even in the dead of winter – and update the old “Beatty” wringer-washer that was in the basement.

The first winter after our renovation, I vividly remember it being cold, extremely cold and I also recall the oil driver at our house once every three weeks.

During a February snowstorm, my father sat at the dining room table in the twilight – there was a rule in our house

The environmental performance of manufacturing is an inconvenient truth that the environmental lobby doesn't want anyone to hear. It's way too easy to point the finger and lay blame.

that a 40-watt light bulb was the maximum allowed and only one of those was used in the kitchen – crunching numbers and complaining about how much oil the new furnace was using.

The thermostat never went above 15 Celsius – ever.

Two weeks later, my mother somehow miraculously convinced my father that we needed this revolutionary new product on the market, a microwave. For years, that tank-like Panasonic, complete with a custom-made cabinet, sat at the edge of the kitchen, right underneath the new thermostat for the furnace. I can still see it sitting there, I couldn't miss it because it virtually radiated throughout the entire house. My dad also purchased a beautiful crystal lamp for the top of the stand and installed something we had only heard of, but never seen – a 100-watt light bulb.

For the remainder of that winter and many that followed, our house actually felt colder than ever and I remember many winter mornings, waking up and watching my breath form a cloud as I exhaled. I dreaded jumping out from the covers onto the white shag carpet and jumping into the shower.

It was strange, because even if I did sneak around and turn up the thermostat to a whopping 17 or 18 Celsius, the furnace never came on because the actual temperature in the house registered 23 degrees.

Moving to an automatic washing machine and using a dryer also had my father questioning the merits of this energy-hungry new technology.

I remember him saying that using new water to wash and to rinse each and every load was a huge waste. Two days later, he drove in the laneway in his 1975 Datsun truck – the only imported vehicle, never mind fuel-efficient Japanese model, in the entire township – with two 45-gallon drums. Down to the basement he went, with tools in hand, and emerged four hours later with a look of accomplishment on his face.

Minutes after, I accompanied my mother downstairs for a training session. Four big black hoses went from the washing machine to the two steel barrels – both fitted with a skull and bones poison label – in newly-made pine cabinets that hoisted each of them two feet off the ground.

What my father had done was create holding tanks to recycle water. He had rigged it so that with the opening of the valve, the wash water – cold only of course – from one load would be pumped into one barrel on the left-hand side. The rinse water, by opening the valve on its hose, would be pumped into the other barrel.

My father was adamant, that my



mother should recycle the water at least three times – but against her will, she would only recycle it once each laundry day, in the years following.

As for our clothes dryer, the plug was quickly pulled on that appliance after we received our first hydro bill and we were once again relying on Mother Nature to dry our clothes.

In the golden age of the eight-cylinder muscle cars, I grew up riding in imported “four bangers.” Gas may have been cheap, but my father, who drove the 100-kilometre return trip to work each day, was adamant on finding the most fuel-efficient roadster, even if it meant foregoing comfort. Air conditioning may have come as a standard option on the imported models, but my father found it necessary to disconnect it as soon as he

drove each new model in the yard.

“It’s an unnecessary convenience and wastes gas,” he repeated each time when asked. And that was especially strange, coming from a man who spent his entire career designing industrial air conditioning units for large facilities as well as cooling systems for supercomputers.

It wasn’t until years later that I actually understood the method behind the madness, and believe me, it was madness:

Purchase a brand-new microwave and stand to house a lamp with a 100-watt light bulb to radiate enough heat to throw off the thermostat so the furnace wouldn’t come on as often; use two barrels with check valves to recycle wash water from the washing machine and reduce electric-

sense, those choices are much easier.

Applying the same logic to industry, manufacturing has an enviable track record since 1990. Canada’s largest business sector is the only industry that has reduced greenhouse gas emissions by more than seven per cent in the last 17 years.

History has proven that industry has a good track record due to economics. Companies have purchased the cleaner, the greener and more efficient technology because it made good business sense.

Industry will continue to do its part, somewhat as a result of social responsibility but mostly because of economics. As a result, economic incentives to encourage companies to make the correct environmental choices are needed.

If policymakers in this country – or around the industrialized world – are truly serious about helping industry become more green, it’s imperative they give companies the right tools to do the job.

ity consumption of the water pump as well as not dispensing unnecessary soap and water into our septic system and choosing the smallest, most fuel-efficient car on the market to save on gas.

By today’s standards, that’s encouraged behaviour. Back in the 70s, the neighbours used to point and whisper.

We conserved our water, our home-heating fuel and as much electricity as we possibly could.

It was as Jay described, due to a choice, a choice to pinch a penny everywhere we could and in the process, we were environmentally responsible.

That’s why I smiled as I listened to Jayson on CBC’s *The House* that Sunday morning.

As a solution to today’s environmental problems, he was describing what we practiced in the 70s: if it makes good economic

The environmental performance of manufacturing is an inconvenient truth that the environmental lobby doesn’t want anyone to hear. It’s way too easy to point the finger and lay blame. After all, the symbolism of the smoulder from factories’ smokestacks that reach high into the deep blue sky reinforces that negative perception.

It’s not that industry doesn’t pollute, we all know that it does. However, I think you have to give credit where credit is due. And the manufacturing industry deserves credit for reducing emissions, regardless of the driving motive. That’s a choice the industry made.

If policymakers in this country – or around the industrialized world – are truly serious about helping industry become more green, it’s imperative they give companies the right tools to do the job.

And those tools aren’t unrealistic targets – like Kyoto – and stiff regulations thrown at them with no vision or strategy to get there.

It’s realistic targets, with common sense regulations and incentives that will encourage companies to invest in technology, processes and systems, all of which save money.

But that, too, is a choice that must be made by our policymakers and our political leaders.

I can only imagine if my father were alive, what type of *MacGyver*-type gadgets he would concoct with the type of incentives for homeowners we have in place today.

He would be ecstatic to see the EnerGuide stickers on all appliances, it would save him tons of research he had to do manually back in the 70s – basically a myriad of wires connecting all types of gauges and meters.

And I am certain that even the most fervent environmentalists would have a tough job arguing that the right-wing, Conservative miser’s choices in an attempt to save money, are not elements of a good environmental story, a best practice, that needs to be told.

I lived it. And I learned from those choices.

I discovered that there are endless ways in which you can save energy, reduce costs and help the environment all at the same time. All it takes is a little innovation, lots of creativity and an endless supply of motivation. And it comes down to a choice to do nothing or a choice to take action.

I think all Canadians can learn from that. I don’t think we have any other choice if we are serious about preserving the environment.

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