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### **Advertising the Environmental Movement: Vickers and Benson's Branding of Pollution Probe**

Pollution Probe was the foremost name in Canadian environmental activism through the 1970s. Within two years of its 1969 founding by students and faculty at the University of Toronto, the organization had over 50 independent affiliates operating in five provinces. In addition to having its name synonymous with environmental activism throughout much of Canada, Pollution Probe at the University of Toronto—as the main group was officially known—played a leadership role within the burgeoning Canadian environmental movement, helping groups from coast to coast organize, fundraise, and plot action campaigns. Pollution Probe, it is safe to say, was a key cog in the rise of environmental activism in Canada.

This paper examines a print campaign conceptualized by the advertising company Vickers and Benson that appeared in *The Toronto Telegram* beginning in September 1969, with a particular focus on the first month of advertisements. These advertisements were widely viewed, and had a significant impact on Pollution Probe. At a time when the organization was first gaining renown, the Vickers and Benson campaign helped elucidate key issues, while effectively branding Pollution Probe as environmental stewards that empowered the public to act in their environmental interests. Likewise, in addition to helping raise the environmental activists' public profile, these high-quality advertisements lent the organization an aura of professionalism, belying the fact that Pollution Probe was, at the time, a volunteer organization with little money, operating out of space donated by the University of Toronto's Department of Zoology.

As the introduction to this collection notes, eco-images are inherently political, insofar as they are designed to shape the viewing public's environmental consciousness. This was particularly evident in the Vickers and Benson advertising campaign. In this case, powerful images were utilized in order to cajole the public into action. The agency also aimed to help instill the nascent Pollution Probe with the image and credibility necessary to lead the fight against environmental degradation. In this respect, eco-images were carefully constructed to educate the masses and to brand those working on solutions.

### Birth of Pollution Probe

In 1967 the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation shocked the viewing public with *The Air of Death*, a startling exposé of the country's air pollution problems. Inspired by this environmental call to arms, Sherry Brydson, news editor at the University of Toronto's newspaper, *The Varsity*, announced in a 24 February 1969 article that she and her colleagues were forming "a group action committee, the U of T Pollution Probe." The mandate of the committee would be to investigate the origins and effects of pollution, as well as "mobilizing the public, private, and government sectors to action."<sup>1</sup> Brydson's article resonated with the university community. The first two meetings, held in the spring of 1969, attracted several hundred concerned parties. From the outset, Pollution Probe was based out of the university's Department of Zoology, a move that provided the group with the physical infrastructure necessary to operate, as well as scientific credibility.<sup>2</sup> While Dr. Donald Chant, Chairman of the Department of Zoology, maintained an important role as an advisor to the group, and numerous other faculty members at the University of Toronto would also provide their support, Pollution Probe's decisions were ultimately made by its student members.

Pollution Probe first gained public renown in July 1969 when it organized a public inquiry to investigate the apparent link between the use of toxic chemicals by the Metro Toronto Parks Department and the death of numerous mallard ducks found off the city's shore. One of the parties watching with interest was Terry O'Malley, vice-president and creative director at the Vickers and Benson advertising agency. Crediting the group with raising his environmental consciousness, he recalls that "I thought, 'You know, this is a chance for me to try and do something that I hadn't even thought of before.' I called them up and said anything I could do I would do *pro bono*."<sup>3</sup> Although initially skeptical of O'Malley's offer, considering the fact that his clients included major corporations such as Ford, McDonalds, and Gulf Oil, Pollution Probe determined that his intentions were genuine and took him up on his offer.<sup>4</sup>

The author would like to thank Terry O'Malley, David Sharron at the Brock University Archives, Bob Oliver at Pollution Probe, and the editors of this volume for their help in making this article possible.

1 Sherry Brydson, "Pollution: Is There a Future for Our Generation?" *The Varsity*, 24 February 1969.

2 "We Have an Office," *Probe Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (1969): 1; *Probe Newsletter* 1, no. 5 (1969): 1.

3 Terry O'Malley, interview with author, 8 July 2008, conducted by telephone.

4 A short profile of O'Malley, listing his various clients and awards won, can be found in Sandra Peredo, "They Chose Toronto—The Place to 'Do Their Thing,'" *Maclean's*, October 1968, 28.

With a world-class advertising agency offering its services for free, the only thing missing was the budget necessary for a campaign. Tony Barrett and Rob Mills, two of Pollution Probe's early leaders, began a quest to wrestle some free print space from one of Toronto's prominent newspapers. After talking their way into a personal hearing with John Bassett, the owner-publisher of *The Telegram*, they convinced him to donate full-page advertising space to the fledgling organization.<sup>5</sup> At first glance, Bassett and Pollution Probe appeared to be unlikely bedfellows. A prominent Tory, the businessman did not tend to sympathize with student activists. However, as Maggie Siggins explains in her biography of Bassett, *The Telegram* was on its last legs and struggling to find new niches within the Toronto newspaper market. As such, it is likely that Bassett saw connecting with Pollution Probe as a way to appeal to an emerging audience—the environmentally conscious.<sup>6</sup>

### The Don River

In the late 1960s the state of North America's urban waterways came under increased scrutiny. A June 1969 fire on the Cuyahoga River in Ohio garnered international attention, in large part due to its intense media coverage. The ensuing calls for a cleanup far exceeded those surrounding the river's previous fires, which dated back to the nineteenth century. Likewise, the same summer saw the maiden voyage of the *Sloop Clearwater*, a vessel designed to draw public attention to the efforts underway to revive the Hudson River ecosystem.<sup>7</sup> Toronto was home to its own troubled waterway. The Don River is a 38-kilometer watershed running through the heart of the city. From the time of the city's foundation, the Don served as a waste sink for industrial development and the ever-growing population. By 1969 it was reported that the river contained human sewage levels of 61 million parts per 100 milliliters of water, rendering it a health hazard to anybody foolish enough to enter it.<sup>8</sup> Pollution Probe saw the Don River as an ideal, highly visible example of the degradation of the natural environment, and therefore decided to launch a campaign to draw attention to its plight.

5 Rob Mills, interview with author, 25 September 2008, conducted by telephone; Sarah Elton, "Green Power," *University of Toronto Magazine*, Winter 1999, <http://www.magazine.utoronto.ca/feature/canadian-environmental-movement/> (accessed 15 February 2013).


6 Maggie Siggins, *Bassett* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, Publishers, 1979), 173.

7 See Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005), 137, 176; David Stradling and Richard Stradling, "Perceptions of the Burning River: Deindustrialization and Cleveland's Cuyahoga River," *Environmental History* 13, no. 3 (2008): 515–35; Tom Lewis, *The Hudson: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 269–70.

8 Thomas Claridge, "Pollution Probe mourns for beloved, dead Don," *Globe and Mail*, 17 November 1969.

**Figure 1:**  
 “How would you like a glass of Don River water?”  
 Toronto Telegram,  
 29 September  
 1969 (Pollution  
 Probe advertisement, RG 72 Terry  
 O’Malley Fonds,  
 Brock University  
 Archives).

**How would you like a glass of Don River water?**



(Isn't the Don River beautiful? Isn't its magnificent flow of water through the banks of Toronto and Owen beautiful over the Lake? Isn't it gorgeous. Are its banks a happy home to the grasshopper, the children and families and other happy creatures?

It sure is. But what if it could be...  
 It could be pretty. That it could be something other than a receptacle for the sewage that pours from the plants on its banks. That it could be something richer than a stench that comes into the air and makes you ashamed that it's there. And that this kind of thing could happen right here in the core of our city.

Don River water is full of everything new and exciting you can think of. And Don River water doesn't stop in the Don River. It goes to gardens and alleys the way with the waters of all these progressive firms and the Lake Ontario. And the Lake goes to the St. Lawrence. And the St. Lawrence goes to the ocean. And after that, there's not much left to there.

Help us do something about things like the Don River. You write your mayor or your Provincial Minister of Parliament or your Federal Secretary or even the Prime Minister. Tell them you'd like some of the stench cleaned up. If they don't believe it's there, or they give you some kind of song and dance, don't forget to write a note to the editor of the Toronto Telegram.

**Do it. Pollution Probe at the University of Toronto.**

We can do nothing, you'd like to contribute to help us with better cleaning up our polluted air, water and land. If you would like to help us, we'd be glad to have you and a receipt for air money, if you need it to complete. Thank you.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 City: \_\_\_\_\_

Please Make Checks Payable To:  
**POLLUTION PROBE**  
 UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

On 29 September 1969 their first full-page advertisement appeared in *The Telegram* (fig. 1). Bold letters at the top of the page asked the reader “How would you like a glass of Don River water?” Below was a black and white photograph of a glass spilling over with a sludge-like substance. The accompanying text sarcastically addressed its condition—“Isn’t the Don River beautiful? . . . Isn’t it delightful how its banks have become the playground of children and families and other happy creatures?”—before inviting the reader to imagine an alternate scenario where a clean and resuscitated Don River could be enjoyed by the general public as “something other than a receptacle for the sewage that

pours into the air and makes you ashamed that it’s there.” Having addressed the Don River’s pollution problem, as well as the river’s possibilities, the advertisement then emphasized the public’s ability to bring about change. Readers were encouraged to write to their mayor, federal member of Parliament, or even the prime minister, and to “tell them you’d like some of this stench cleaned up. If they don’t believe it’s there, or they give you some kind of song and dance, invite them over for a nice, cool glass of water. Don River kind.” To the right of this message, and directly below the image, was a coupon inviting the public to make a contribution to help fund Pollution Probe’s work.

Central to Pollution Probe’s message was the idea that the general public was empowered to act on behalf of the environment. Rather than simply leaving the work to its members, Pollution Probe hoped that it could engage the public by focusing attention on important issues and disseminating information. As would become standard in Vickers and Benson’s work with Pollution Probe, this particular advertisement highlighted two simple ways people could help resolve the issue: by making a financial contribution to their continued work and writing to their elected officials. This

approach was summarized in Pollution Probe's new slogan, created by Vickers and Benson, which made its debut in this advertisement: "Do it. Pollution Probe at the University of Toronto."

The imagery contained within the advertisement's text was both eloquent and evocative. Its greatest impact, however, came from its use of shocking imagery. The glass of water featured in the advertisement was actually derived from the Don River, effectively demonstrating its wretched condition.<sup>9</sup> Having initiated the public conversation regarding the state of the Don River with this advertisement, Pollution Probe went on to hold a mock funeral for the waterway on 16 November 1969. This publicity stunt earned the environmentalists their first national media coverage, and would go down as one of its hallmark activities.<sup>10</sup>

### Ontario Hydro

Following the Don River campaign, Pollution Probe's focus shifted to air pollution. As with most major industrial cities, Toronto had a notable problem with smog. The chief culprit identified was the Richard L. Hearn Generating Station, a downtown, coal-fired plant that emitted 80,000 tons of sulphur dioxide in 1966. In order to alleviate the problem, Ontario Hydro, the Crown corporation that operated the generating station, announced that it would replace the eight existing smokestacks with a seven-hundred-foot "superstack." As George Gathercole, chairman of Ontario Hydro, explained at a 22 September 1969 meeting of the Toronto Buildings and Development Committee, "A higher stack reduces pollution by achieving greater dispersal or dilution." According to Gathercole, sulphur dioxide concentrations would be reduced by 90 percent in the city's downtown, and yet the effluent would not harm those living further downwind as it "is measurably weakened and changed by the combined influence of weather and dilution."<sup>11</sup> For the members of Pollution Probe, Ontario Hydro's response that "the solution to pollution is dilution" proved wholly unsatisfactory, as it would merely disperse effluent over a greater distance.

9 O'Malley, interview with author, 8 July 2008.

10 Claridge, "Pollution Probe mourns"; "Mock rites mourn death of Don River killed by pollution," *Toronto Star*, 17 November 1969.

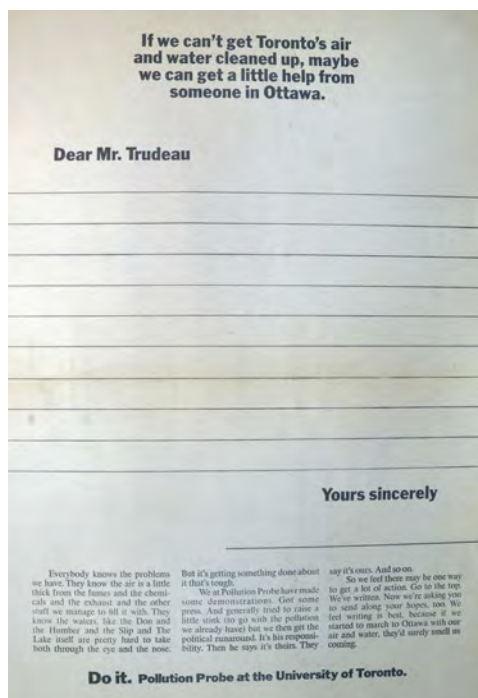
11 "City told giant stack will help cut pollution," *Globe and Mail*, 23 September 1969.

The 6 October 1969 edition of *The Telegram* featured Vickers and Benson's second Pollution Probe advertisement (fig. 2). Featuring a black and white photographic image of a smokestack filling the sky with dark effluent, the advertisement asked the reader a disturbing question: "If smoking gives you lung cancer, you give up smoking, right? Now, if breathing gives you lung cancer what are you supposed to give up?" As the main text notes, the dangers associated with smoking cigarettes were well known; however, everybody living in the city was being exposed to dirty air. In addition to smoke, citizens regularly encountered airborne materials such as pesticides, fumes, and exhaust "that somehow just can't be a great help to you, your body, your land or your total ecological system (that means everything in your environment)." In keeping with Pollution Probe's message of empowering the public, the advertisement encouraged readers to contact their elected officials in order to express their concerns about air pollution. This advertisement is unique insofar as it pairs the growing concern over health issues linked to cigarette smoking with the broader environmental problems caused by urban air pollution. It is worth noting that cigarettes were not otherwise on Pollution Probe's environmental agenda. Rather, it appears that the juxtaposition of the effects of cigarette smoke and urban air pollution was designed to play the increasing awareness of the former off the dangers of the latter.

The next advertisement, which appeared in the 14 October 1969 edition of *The Telegram*, featured a cartoon image of six anthropomorphized smoke stacks (fig. 3). Their brows furrowed and cheeks ruddy, the smokestacks concentrated their energy on blowing their smoke to the land below. On the ground, a solitary flower can be seen, keeled over and dying as a result of its exposure to air pollution. The headline at the top of the page reads, "If we left it to most industries, the only plants that would ever grow in Toronto would be manufacturing. Not natural." As the text notes, industry provides employment for many Torontonians, which is highly beneficial. On the downside, it is noted that industry has polluted the city's air and waterways. Dismissing industry's claim that pollution is a necessary byproduct of progress, and that cleaning up their act would require tax breaks, the advertisement adopts an incredulous tone: "It's kind of hard to believe that this is possible when to begin with it's our water. And our land. And our air that they're dumping all this junk into. And now it would appear to get it cleaned up or even to get someone to think about cleaning it up will cost us to have it done. Somehow that doesn't seem right." Having identified the problem, the advertisement encouraged the reader to write to their political representatives and to urge them to rein in industry.







**Figure 4:**  
 “If we can’t get Toronto’s air and water cleaned up, maybe we can get a little help from someone in Ottawa.”  
 Toronto Telegram, 20 October 1969.  
 (Pollution Probe ads, RG 72 Terry O’Malley Fonds, Brock University Archives).

The fourth advertisement, published in the 20 October 1969 edition of *The Telegram*, focused on the power of individual action (fig. 4). The message at the top of the page stated, “If we can’t get Toronto’s air and water cleaned up, maybe we can get a little help from someone in Ottawa.” Below is a blank note, addressed to the Canadian prime minister, Pierre Trudeau. In the accompanying text, it is noted that Pollution Probe had taken its concerns to local politicians, but were repeatedly told that jurisdiction for the problem rested with someone else. Sick of being given the runaround, they announced that “we feel there may be one way to get a lot of action. Go to the top. We’ve written. Now we’re asking you to send along your hopes, too. We feel writing

is best, because if we started to march to Ottawa with our air and water, they’d surely smell us coming.” Playing on the theme of personal empowerment, this advertisement also demonstrates environmentalists’ frustration with the lack of clearly defined jurisdiction over pollution during the period in question.

Pollution Probe took direct aim at Ontario Hydro in its fifth advertisement (fig. 5). Published in the 27 October 1969 edition of *The Telegram*, the advertisement bore the headline, “The Ontario Hydro is getting ready to give it to you from great heights.” On the left side of the advertisement was a cartoon of a giant smokestack, with a dark plume coming out in the form of a monstrous creature. At the bottom of the smokestack stood a small crowd of men, women, and children, looking up towards the plume. The text dismantled Ontario Hydro’s claim that the superstack would be a positive development. As it opened, “There are lots of polluters who are filling the air with poisons but around Toronto, there is none as blatant as the Ontario Hydro.” As it continued, the superstack would indeed result in “less ground sulphur dioxide poison around the plant areas but the 80,000 tons

still have to go somewhere. As of now, it looks like that somewhere will be Scarborough. Or Pickering. Or out in the Lake [Ontario].” Having addressed the manifold dangers associated with sulphur dioxide, the advertisement notes that Gathercole had publicly rejected converting the generating station to natural gas, a cleaner fuel, saying it was impossible to secure an adequate supply. However, the advertisement highlights the fact that a local supplier had expressed a willingness to supply the station. Readers were then encouraged to fill out the attached coupon—which stated their opposition to Ontario Hydro’s plans and support for an alternative to the sulphur dioxide-emitting plant—and to send it to George Kerr, the Ontario minister of energy and resources management. Like the advertisement printed on 14 October 1969, this one juxtaposed a harsh message with a cartoon image that, while still portraying an urgent situation, managed to provide a moderating influence.

Following this Vickers and Benson campaign on air pollution, Pollution Probe sponsored a public inquiry into Ontario Hydro’s superstack plans in February 1970. This event featured a variety of health and environmental experts, as well as Gathercole. The opposition led by Pollution Probe would pay dividends. On 29 June 1970 Gathercole announced that plans to build a superstack for the Richard L. Hearn Generating Station had been scrapped, and that it would be converted at year’s end to burn natural gas. This move would require an increase in energy rates, due to \$4 million in renovations. Nonetheless, Gathercole informed the media that it was the correct choice, explaining that “Anti-pollution measures are costly but our customers have indicated to us that they are prepared to pay for them.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> “Hearn to Switch to Gas, See Rise in Hydro Rates,” *Globe and Mail*, 30 June 1970.



Figure 5:  
“The Ontario Hydro is getting ready to give it to you from great heights.” Toronto Telegram, 27 October 1969 (Pollution Probe ads, RG 72 Terry O’Malley Fonds, Brock University Archives).

## Conclusion

The Vickers and Benson advertisements appeared at a pivotal time in the history of Pollution Probe, as it was just then gaining renown beyond the University of Toronto campus. As Pollution Probe's first executive director Peter Middleton notes, the Vickers and Benson connection "made an impact. It made us look professional"<sup>13</sup>—a significant achievement for an upstart organization with limited funding at its disposal. Furthermore, the advertisements helped the organization set its public agenda, while advancing its recognition as a group that empowered the public to act on behalf of their environment. Pollution Probe's Vickers and Benson advertisements would continue to appear in *The Telegram* on a regular basis until the newspaper ceased publication in October 1971.

13 Peter Middleton, interview with author, 21 February 2008, Toronto, Ontario.