

Dear Judith,

I bought a cup of fair-trade, organic coffee, feeling pretty content with myself, despite having paid a bit extra for the brand. I rationalized my modestly extravagant gesture by thinking of the kids of some dirt-poor, oppressed coffee farmer. They would all be able to rise to a better life if enough of us in the developed world did "the right thing". Why, you could almost see a brighter future for them if you looked deeply into the cup.

The cup was one of those cardboard jobs with a national brand logo printed on the side. Wonder if the ink used was vegetable-based? And how many trees fall each year to make these one-time-use containers? Aren't the plastic tops made from fossil fuel products? How about the slick coating inside?

By the time those kids reach "a better life", there won't be anything to inherit. There will just be clear-cut forests, garbage heaps of old coffee cups and David Suzuki wandering about ankle-deep in discarded plastic swizzle sticks muttering, "I told you so," over and over.

To get a grip on my wandering doomsday scenario thoughts I took a sip. It tasted like coloured warm water.

Now, I ask you, what hope is there for the survival of mankind if organic java producers can't even produce something that tastes like coffee?

Or, perhaps, staff training in coffee kiosks is the problem. I contemplated the young ladies at the counter. They seemed awfully young to be running a busy coffee bar. But, then again, I often make the same observation about airline pilots and policemen these days.

It's a complicated business, the economy and the environment, in the 21st century. There's no question about it. Just ask the governments of the day. Why, all those world representatives in Copenhagen, seen recently arriving in their jet planes and limousines through the worst winter snowstorms in years in Europe, could not arrive at consensus about global warming. What hope is there for a Canadian government, torn between melting glaciers and oil sands plants, not to mention the need to balance votes with vegetarians? Canadian

national policy - or not - on climate change is confused enough at home without the need to cloud the issue internationally by taking a clear stand.

We're told that the Canadian economy has to be sheltered from any massive environmental action. I'm not sure what to believe about the economy. There have been some rather confusing signs lately from a number of quarters. First it's down, then it's up and then it's not so up. Always the eternal optimist, I like to think we are recovering nicely. But how are we to know, really?

It seems to me that we have the same chance of gauging the economy as we do of measuring climate change. Which spreadsheet you read depends upon where you sit at the debating table.

I finished my non-tasty but environmentally friendly, over-priced coffee slowly. Being a retired and a Doddering Old Man does give one time to reflect on the weighty problems of our time. Unfortunately, it would appear, the wisdom that comes with age still can't guarantee getting a good cup of coffee.

Next time I'm in a contemplative mood, maybe I'll try a beer.

Yours truly,

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