How green are our governments?
What are those wielding power doing to protect your health?

BY ADRIA VASIL

You can shower and scour with all the organic ingredients in the world and purge harmful toxins from your home and diet, but clean, green living only gets you so far. So what are those wielding power doing to protect your health? Here are the highs and lows.

THE FEDS

THE BOOSTER SHOT Harper may have declared open season on the environment, but he’s wise enough to keep appeasing the family vote by declaring certain outlaws officially toxic. Too many dodgy recalls and toxic baby stories are just bad PR.

Hence the feds brought the Canadian Consumer Product Safety Act into force 10 months ago, then coughed up $508 million for better product safety and more research on health villains like bisphenol A.

Speaking of which, the government just announced it will be declaring triclosan an official toxin. Shame it’s talking voluntary phase-out, not all-out ban.

THE BIG CHOKE Probably the single biggest shaft to our environmental health is the budget’s slashing of funding for enviro assessments by 40 per cent and word of bulldozed regulatory hurdles for a good 500 of the biggest air-, water- and climate-polluting industrial projects in the nation (think Big Oil and Mining). You can bet we’ll be breathing in the ramifications soon enough.

While Health Canada’s website openly notes that many will suffer from climate change’s human health impacts, somehow we don’t think Harper’s budgeted for how much his climate-screwing is going to cost the health care system.
By the way, Canada is still aggressively lobbying on the international scene against recognition of access to clean water as a human right (probably since he won’t provide it our own First Nations.) And let’s not forget Harper’s astounding attempts to revive Quebec’s cancer-exporting asbestos mines. PS: We’re still waiting on a promised cosmetic regs overhaul to, for instance, require label ID for sensitizers in fragrances.

THE PROVINCE

THE BOOSTER SHOT  Ontario’s done fairly well on the enviro health front over the last few years. Banning chemical lawn and garden pesticides has reduced pesticide concentrations in some urban streams by up to 97 per cent. And thanks to the ongoing coal phase-out and McGuinty’s green energy push (well, minus the slashing of feed-in tariffs for solar), 2011 saw more smog-free, lung-friendly wind and solar produced in this province. Hopefully, the province’s air pollution death toll (9,500 a year in 2008) will drop as a result.

THE BIG CHOKE  Health risks are hiding in the fine print. Coal may be on its way out, but plants are still pumping out over 300 megawatts of the dirtiest energy on the planet as you read this. Docs and nurses like those at the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment are urging McGuinty to shutter all remaining coal plants in 2012 and not wait till 2014. Also, why is the province funnelling billions of dollars into nuke refurbishment? We don’t need more radioactive tritiated water dumping, especially after the Pickering reactor spilled 20,000 gallons of it into Lake Ontario this time last year. Plus, it’s a shame the province has stalled on getting businesses to map and reduce toxins through the Ontario Toxic Reduction Act.

THE CITY

THE BOOSTER SHOT  The biggest breath of fresh air comes from the heroic rescue of Transit City’s LRT. And the salvaging of Environment Days means we can keep more household hazardous waste out of landfill. Plus, Torontonians will finally be able to see who in their community is pumping out toxins come June. Yes, sir, a decade in the making, Toronto’s Community Right To Know bylaw signed in by David Miller is going live this summer. We’ll be the first town in Canada to force small businesses to publicly disclose 25 emissions.

THE BIG CHOKE  Don’t expect any big greenhouse-gas-slashing, imaginative climate change preparedness thinking or green innovation in general, unless the far-seeing wing of council get its way over the mayor’s wishes. And it’s hard to imagine Rob Ford shutting the core to cars on smog days. As well, David Miller’s target for doubling our tree canopy by 2050 has been dangerously put off. Such a shame – our lungs would have been grateful.