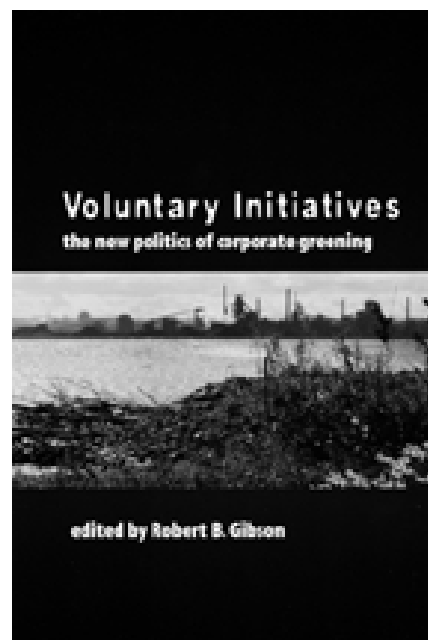


VOLUNTARY INITIATIVES: THE NEW POLITICS OF CORPORATE GREENING

Robert. E. Gibson, ed.
(Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1999)
pp. 268

Edmund P. Fowler



The word “voluntary” sounds simple enough. If a company or an industry undertakes to reduce its output of toxic waste voluntarily, it means the deed is done without pressure from the outside, via such things as fines or legal sanctions. But the distinction between voluntarism and coercion is a murky one, as *Voluntary Initiatives* illustrates.

Edited by Robert Gibson, a professor of environmental studies at the University of Waterloo, this collection of essays assesses legal issues, political dangers, and practical opportunities presented by voluntary agreements among firms to make their operations ecologically friendlier. A few contributions to the book are rather abstract, such as those covering different types of voluntary initiatives (VIs), their legal implications, and their applications to developing countries. Others are more case-oriented, describing the Canadian Chemical Producers

Association’s “responsible care programme,” the saga of Ontario’s Blue Box programme for household recycling, and the “accelerated reduction/elimination of toxics” (ARET) challenge. Sometimes the experiences of individual firms such as Dofasco or Nortel are the subject of an article. In other words, the book is an interesting mix of the general and the particular. In the end, however, the contributions are so diverse in their approaches, ranging from theoretically sophisticated analyses to journalistic accounts, that the collection lacks a certain coherence.

A partial antidote lies in Gibson’s opening and closing essays, which are excellent. They try to specify what features a VI must have in order to render it “an effective, efficient, and fair means of improving corporate environmental performance.” Basically, unlike most VIs, it must have specific, measurable goals which are audited

independently. Gibson also identifies what he calls the drivers of VIs. Image, for instance, is mighty important: The Canadian chemical producers’ VI was almost surely a consequence of Bhopal and a spate of similar catastrophes which seriously damaged the reputation of the industry. I’ll return to this point about image.

The two biggest incentives, though, are the desires to avoid regulation and to maximize profit. Most of the contributors to the volume illustrate the principle that the fear of impending or more restrictive regulations spurs businesses to come up with their own proposals for sustainability. The chemical producers’ VI was not just about repairing a tarnished image: They foresaw that such an image would bring about tough new regulations.

The Ontario Blue Box programme is another good example of the role played by the threat of regulation.

As the article by Elfred Chang *et al.* puts it:

In 1976, the Ontario government introduced a regulatory requirement that a portion of soft drinks sold in the province must be packaged in refillable containers, collected through a deposit-refund system. Successive Ontario governments were unable or unwilling to enforce this requirement, promoting a search for an alternative approach. In 1986, the Liberal government relaxed the refillable sales ratio requirement (from 75 to 40 per cent) in exchange for a "voluntary" contribution from the soft drink industry toward the capital cost of a new system of residential curbside recycling, dubbed the Blue Box programme. In the years since, the voluntary participation by householders—who carry their Blue Box to the curb once a week—has proved more durable than the voluntary industry funding ... (pp. 126-27).

That voluntary funding became less reliable as provincial and municipal funding started to melt away during the deep recession of the early 1990s. There was also the ever-present problem of free riders, companies and industries who let others shoulder the costs of VIs while they reaped the benefits.

According to Chang *et al.* it was the 1992 election of an NDP government in Ontario which prompted a proposal by a broader spectrum of food and food service product manufacturers. Their plan, the Canadian Industrial Packaging Stewardship Initiative, was that

... an industry-managed fund would be formed to provide municipalities with up to two-thirds of the costs of recycling packaging as well as provide support for market development. . . . [T]he CIPSI proposal included provincial legislation to ensure that all relevant industries did in fact participate in the funding programme... (p. 127)

This plan was actually part of a nationwide initiative which attracted more and more industry associations, all hoping to avoid more stringent stewardship regulation, such as that found in Germany. After much hag-

gling, the provincial government and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario finally endorsed CIPSI; but by then Mike Harris's conservative government had been elected. It became clear that this government had no intention of regulating food industry wastes, so by the fall of 1995, CIPSI was dead. The Blue Box programme continues in Ontario, but it is subsidized mainly by municipal waste management budgets.

The question, then, is: If we need to be threatened to shape up, is our behaviour voluntary? Gibson calls this situation "paradoxical," wisely places VIs in a much broader "existing, web of motivations and methods," and suggests they are "not voluntary in the usual sense" (p. 253). It seems likely that VIs reflect two separable motives (though both are often found in the same firm or person). The first is the drive to avoid change to more sustainable behaviour, while appearing to be doing something. The second is a genuine desire to become ecologically more sensible. As rare as the second attitude might seem to be among businessmen, it is clearly present, a fact this book makes abundantly clear. Unfortunately, the book is also brimming with examples of the first kind of attitude. It does cite examples of real change, but most are provoked by the threat of regulation or legal sanctions.

The drive to become more sustainable has led many companies to seek—and to discover—ways of becoming more efficient and profitable at the same time, a fact Gibson analyzes more extensively than the other contributors. In his view, habitual "information-gathering and decision-making processes" blind many companies to possibilities of this sort. It must be stressed that these habits are the product of powerful cultural conditioning that can prevent us from noticing obvious alternatives.

It is a well-documented psychological fact, for instance, that we block out certain configurations of

reality and that these blockages are, in part, culturally determined. The American psychiatrist H.S. Sullivan labelled the phenomenon "selective inattention." Riane Eisler, in her book *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987), shows how the "harpoons" and "spears" in paleolithic cave drawings were the product of traditional (male) archaeologists' selective inattention. The barbs and points of these shafts went in the wrong direction to make them qualify as weapons: They were actually representations of trees, branches, and plants. Noticing that was simply a question of broadening and redefining the scope of one's attention.

Some businessmen have made a quantum leap in expanding the limits of what is perceived to be possible. Paul Hawken, a thoughtful entrepreneur turned writer and public speaker, has documented dozens of such cases in his books *The Ecology of Commerce* (1993) and *Natural Capitalism* (1999) (co-authored with Amory and L. Hunter Lovins). It is important to track these shifts in consciousness. Why do some people or firms take it for granted that sustainability and profitability can, and must, reinforce one another? Finding answers to this question calls for a different kind of analysis, one that transcends our narrow faith in markets and goes beyond the legalisms and dead ends of so many VI examples. After consciousness-shift, it would no longer be necessary to tease apart the numerous tactics used by firms seeking to evade regulations, to show over and over how many loopholes there are in the agreements, or to split hairs over the definition of "voluntary."

"Beyond command and control," Bradley Wylynko's essay in this book, reaches toward this kind of analysis. He describes how the Swedes' regulatory system encouraged their pulp and paper mills to reduce emissions and become more efficient at the same time, while the US system did not. It is not so important to

describe the details of the Swedes' rules about the pulp and paper industry as it is to explain how they reflect a culture that also produced profitable companies with sustainable practices (if that was indeed the case). Such a culture is characterized by a tradition of practical problem-solving which has involved unselfconscious cooperation between the public and private sectors, a cooperation that would be unthinkable in the highly charged, anti-government corporate culture of North America. Nevertheless, as Hawkin and the Lovins demonstrate over and over again in *Natural Capitalism*, there are dozens of companies in Canada and the US that have discovered just how profitable sustainable practices can be. Why not seek out and analyze the nature and personality of such companies? Then, as in Sweden, public policy could be framed to promote that sort of behaviour, instead of perversely subsidizing industries whose methods are clearly unsustainable.

Right now in Canada, particular industries of particular sizes and in particular regions are likely more open to innovation than others. For example, Erin Windatt's article in this volume on the printing, graphics, and metal finishing industries in Ontario found that smaller firms were less motivated to take part in VIs to reduce emissions than larger companies.

On the other hand, according to Martin von Mirbach ("Demanding Good Wood"), smaller forestry enterprises "may well be more environmentally sensitive and provide more socio-economic benefits than larger companies" (p. 218). In fact, articles by John Moffet, Francois Bregha, and Saeed Parta argue that VIs such as "Responsible Care" and the ISO 14000 programme (framed by the International Organization for Standardization in Geneva) are generally not friendly to smaller companies, which have too few resources to set up the management plans and auditing systems required by these agreements. Although my own biases lead me to

believe that smaller firms are inherently more sustainable, *Voluntary Initiatives* presents no systematic evidence to support that position. Still, one suspects that size should make a difference in some industries other than forestry. And it's worth noting that there is also little evidence that signing on to a VI such as ISO 14000 shows a particularly strong commitment to the biosphere.

The point is, one should not expect characteristics of successful VIs (however "success" is defined) to be similar in fields as disparate as computer manufacturing, mining, housing, agriculture, and printing. The individual deal worked out between Dofasco, Canada's largest steel manufacturer, and the Ontario government illustrates this issue. Lynda Lukasik's article in this book describes how environmentalists criticized the deal because it was with only one company and precluded the creation of a level regulatory playing field. Yet it could also be argued that each company has different resources and circumstances and that blanket agreements are sure to be inappropriate for at least some firms. The industrial landscape is too heterogeneous, both within and between industries. The Dutch recognize this fact: in the Netherlands, according to Wylenko, regulators negotiate "covenant agreements" individually with different companies.

As a number of contributors point out, shifts in consciousness extend to decision-making processes. The Dofasco agreement was criticised by environmentalists because it was done in private and was therefore not subject to public accountability. Emission reduction programmes are being pushed by public opinion, but, according to Paul Muldoon of the Canadian Environmental Law Association, effective implementation of those programmes "assumes that the public has the resources and information basis to reveal the process of the agreement, that the

media are willing to publicize the problem and that the interested public will be able to take action when companies do not meet voluntary commitments" (p. 145). These assumptions are not really tenable.

Once again, we need to consider our conditioning. The scenarios, not just of secretiveness, but of media and a public who must be watchdogs over corporations which cannot be trusted, define political processes and values which date from the 19th century. These processes and values are out-of-date, a fact which Gibson, in his own oblique way, alludes to.

Simple reliance on existing market forces is not a promising basis for sufficient improvements. A broad shift to greater energy efficiency would entail a whole set of changes involving the redirection of broad social trends (... in land use, transportation, and housing) and the combined exercise of government, corporate, and citizen power.

A similar reality affects evidently costly environmental improvements. They too are considered in the existing market context, with existing prices, incentives, penalties, and risks. Changes in consumer expectations, tax regimes, regulatory demands, liability rulings and other such factors affect the calculated costs of, and gains from, environmental actions ... (p. 246, emphasis added)

And therefore, one could add, the very definition of voluntary. Gibson is suggesting not only a redefinition of what we mean by "profit," but also quite revolutionary cultural changes, including where we live and what we expect out of life: For example, the single most significant choice an individual can make about saving energy is not to live in the suburbs.

The key to voluntary incentives' importance, then, lies less in how pathetically ineffective they are at this point than in where they reflect genuine transformations in consciousness, not just on the part of businessmen, but on the part of the whole society. The importance of image, for example, could be analyzed very cynically, yet if

companies want to appear environmentally friendly, there must be some opinion shift which makes that image desirable.

We are now, as Hawken has said, working under the constraints of a market economy (and, I might add, government policies) that are sending us the wrong messages about how to behave. Because we are so used to these constraints—which are really a set of assumptions we ourselves have made—we never think of them as subject to change. But what we want to do—volunteer to do, in fact—is in part defined by those assumptions, which Gibson refers to as habits. In this regard, he argues that ISO 14000, a weak agreement by larger corporations in the North to set up internal structures to plan for more sustainable operations, does actually make companies more conscious of the environmental dimensions of each policy decision. In other words, habits of

thought *are* changing.

This seems a small morsel indeed in a book filled with examples of VIs with loopholes you could drive a truck through, of companies not bothering to sign on, and of governments without the courage to enforce even the flaccid regulations they have been able to put in place. Indeed, much of the language made my eyes glaze over, since it is full of technical terms, combined with plastic, feel-good phrases such as “self-regulatory systems,” “accountability and public involvement framework,” “responsible care,” and “environmental management standards.” While such phrases may end up being necessary to allow specialists to communicate with each other, intelligent public debate on VIs needs, literally, earthier discourse. David Orr’s book *Ecological Literacy* (1992) proposes just such a discourse, one which involves not merely a capacity to read meaning in about

Nature but also to speak and write articulately about its web of interrelationships, from our position in the web itself. If the debate over VIs reaches that level, we shall have made an important step.

Gibson has done a commendable job in his own essays of summarizing a collection of quite dry and sometimes technical articles. His ecological literacy is shown in his editorship: There are numerous cross references in these articles to each other, surely the work of someone who is used to thinking about the interpenetration of complex processes. His own essays, though, are the most worth reading.

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