Members of both parties in Congress, calling themselves "conservatives," earlier this week managed to gut nearly two dozen environmental laws and regulations, and to slash 30% from the $7 billion annual budget of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.[1] A Presidential veto could still salvage something from the wreckage, forcing another fight in Congress, but the drift seems unmistakably clear: this "conservative" Congress shows little interest in conserving health, safety, wildlife, forests, rivers or wetlands. The credo of these "conservatives" seems to be, Whatever corporate polluters want, corporate polluters get.

Corporations, as we have seen, are not capable of curbing their own excesses—it is the nature of the corporate institution that it must seek short-term money gain, no matter who or what has to be sacrificed. (See REHW #449, #433, and #388.) This is not a question of evil—it is merely the nature of the corporation as we, the people, have created it in law. (And it will remain this way until we, the people, change it.) The INDIVIDUALS within a corporation are powerless to alter its earth-destroying course no matter what deeply-felt, unselfish beliefs those individuals may hold (unless of course a way can be found for the corporation to profit from the change).

But Congress is not a corporation. As a practical matter, it is true that most members of Congress owe their souls to the wealthy few who provide the mountains of cash needed to run an election campaign. However, when campaign finance reform is proposed, in an effort to remove the poisonous influence of private money from the electoral process, members of Congress insist that they only vote their consciences and the money doesn't influence them. Therefore, we must presume that the "conservatives" in Congress personally believe it is right and good to sacrifice the nation's few remaining healthy ecosystems for corporate gain, to extinguish wildlife wherever and whenever the corporados find it convenient to do so, and to expose the nation's children to toxic and gender-bending chemicals from the moment of conception onward.

This raises the question, What does it mean in the late 20th century to be a conservative? Do ALL conservatives believe in sacrificing human health and the environment to maximize short-term money gain for a few wealthy investors? The behavior of this Congress certainly points menacingly toward that conclusion. Yet a new book, THE MAKING OF A CONSERVATIVE ENVIRONMENTALIST, offers quite a different perspective on how a modern conservative thinks.

Author Gordon Durnil has spent nearly 30 years as a loyal Republican, managing election campaigns and steering Indiana state politics along a traditional conservative path. A friend and admirer of Dan Quayle, Durnil served from 1981 to 1989 as Indiana state politics along a traditional conservative path. A friend and admirer of Dan Quayle, Durnil served from 1981 to 1989 as Indiana Republican State Chairman and member of the Republican National Committee. His conservative credentials are impeccable.

When George Bush appointed Durnil to be U.S. Chairman of the International Joint Commission in 1989, Durnil knew almost nothing about pollution; he was a lawyer and politician who admits that he had never thought much about the environment. But he took his IJC responsibilities seriously and he stayed up nights reading mounds of esoteric studies to educate himself. Created by treaty between the U.S. and Canada in 1909, the IJC has official responsibility for water quality in the Great Lakes—a vast and badly-polluted ecosystem that contains 20% of all the fresh water on earth.

Initially, Gordon Durnil did not want to believe that pollution was a serious problem. "The truth is, in the beginning of my tenure, I wanted to disbelieve," he writes. "But being a good conservative, with the ability to think for myself instead of being told how to think, I was willing to change my way of thinking. Evidence is evidence and facts are, indeed, facts.

Soon the facts convinced Gordon Durnil (and the 5 other commissioners with whom he served—2 U.S. and 3 Canadian) that toxic chemicals were very likely harming the children of North America. As he says, "In the [IJC's] FIFTH BIENNIAL REPORT [in 1990],...we, by consensus, concluded that there was a threat to the health of our children emanating from our exposure to persistent toxic substances, even at very low ambient levels." Durnil's reading convinced him that "The scientific evidence confirming problems with human reproduction, learning, behavior, and the ability to ward off disease, is now becoming broadly accepted."

He points to such facts as these (among many):

** The U.S. General Accounting Office in October 1991 said, "In 1988, about 250,000 U.S. children were born with birth defects, 600,000 women experienced a miscarriage or fetal death, and many young children were exposed in their homes and neighborhoods to chemicals that will reduce their ability to develop the intellectual skills necessary to function in the 21st century. There is growing scientific evidence that exposure to environmental chemicals causes a broad spectrum of adverse reproductive and developmental outcomes and that they are preventable if the exposures are better controlled."

** Somewhere between 10% and 16% of all couples in the U.S. are infertile.

** The sons of Michigan mothers whose breast milk contained an industrial flame-retardant chemical had a higher incidence of testicular abnormalities and smaller penises than the norm.

Durnil— with the help of the IJC's scientific advisory board, and a 3-year series of public meetings to gather evidence from industry, government, and the public—became convinced that chemical exposures are very likely damaging North American children in many ways — reducing their ability to pay attention in school; diminishing their IQs; making them hyperactive, aggressive, hostile and unruuly; harming their immune systems and thus reducing their ability to fight off common infections and serious diseases such as cancer; perhaps even predetermining their sexual characteristics, preferences and behaviors before they are born.

Durnil's response, as a conservative, was simply this: putting our children in harm's way by exposing them to industrial chemicals is dangerous and immoral and ought to stop. Durnil, who says he has "spent a lifetime in support of industry," has little sympathy for dangerous polluters. With characteristic clarity, he says, "Science tells us of bad effects that certain kinds of discharges can have on our children, born and unborn, but we don't seem to see the analogy between a perverted individual sexually molesting a child and an industrial discharge affecting the basic sexuality of a child. I wonder why." It is a good question. Durnil sees it as a basic conservative tenet that an invasion of our bodies by toxics is a fundamental violation of a most basic right.

Durnil's response was not to fudge, waffle, delay, deny, distort, deflect, or pass the buck. He saw it as his responsibility, as a conservative and a political leader, to devise solutions commensurate with the scale and scope of the problem. Thus he led the IJC to create (and to borrow from others) a set of principles that would protect children. In a nutshell they are:

** The principle of "reverse onus." All chemicals, new and old, should be considered harmful until proven safe. Chemicals that will reduce their ability to develop the intellectual skills necessary to function in the 21st century. There is growing scientific evidence that exposure to environmental chemicals causes a broad spectrum of adverse reproductive and developmental outcomes and that they are preventable if the exposures are better controlled."

** Because we can never prove the safety of chemicals that persist for long periods in the environment and enter food chains, all persistent, bioaccumulative toxics should be unsetted.

** The principle of precautionary action, which says that as soon as
there is reason to suspect that a chemical is problematic, it should be
sunsetted--not waiting for scientific certainty.

These principles (and a few others that the IJC adopted), taken
together, provide a blueprint for sustainable industrial development.
In essence, Gordon Durnil and the IJC in 4 years did what the big
environmental groups and 20 years of liberal, Democratically-controlled Congresses had been unable to do: come up with environmental-protection ideas that might actually work.

What is a conservative anyway? True conservatives trace their
intellectual roots back to people like Edmund Burke (1721-1797), the
Irish philosopher and statesman. Burke believed that the current
generation holds the present as a patrimony in moral entail from its
ancestors and must pass it on to posterity--improved, if possible,
but at all costs undiminished. Gordon Durnil says something similar:
"The symmetry of nature is loaned to us for human use over relatively short periods of time, seventy or eighty years each if we are fortunate. Each of us has a moral duty not to disrupt that balance."

Compare this to what's going on in Washington and you will quickly see that "conservative" is not a word properly applied to most of this Congress. Proper terms to describe the self-styled "conservatives" in this Congress might include opportunistic, swinish, exploitive, fatuous, boorish, reckless, racist, pusillanimous, improvident, beggarly, perfidious, amoral, opprobrious, unprincipled, duplicitious, cruel, petty, malevolent, mean, grasping, deceptive, deceitful, disingenuous, dishonest, ignoble, self-seeking, venal, whorish, and corrupt. Not conservative, definitely not conservative. But don't get me started.

Copies of Gordon Durnil's excellent book should be delivered to all who call themselves "conservatives" (at all levels of government) asking them to sign on to its conservative principles of environmental protection--or to give good ethical reasons for refusing. For that matter, it should go to all liberal politicians--and all the mainstream environmental groups, as well--asking them to do the same. This would quickly separate the real environmentalists from the apostles of appeasement, the corporate toadies, and it would engender a worthwhile debate over fundamentals. In sum, this is an important book.


--Peter Montague

[1] John H. Cushman Jr., "G.O.P. Leaders in House Succeed in Restoring Limits on the E.P.A.," NEW YORK TIMES August 1, 1995, pgs. A1, A10. Two weeks ago, the TIMES described what sorts of "limits" conservatives in Congress had in mind: removing money from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's budget that the agency was intending to use "to enforce air pollution permits, to regulate toxic air pollution from oil refineries, to encourage tough state automobile inspections, to require accident prevention plans in the chemical industry, to limit pollution from cement kilns, to encourage state car-pooling plans, to gather and publish data on chemical use, to protect wetlands, to set water quality guidelines for the Great Lakes, to write new industrial water pollution regulations, to issue stormwater runoff rules, to control sewage overflows into rivers, and much more." As the TIMES said, "Some of the proposals are breathtaking in their potential effect." See John H. Cushman, Jr., "G.O.P.'s Plan for Environment Is Facing a Big Test in Congress," NEW YORK TIMES July 17, 1995, pgs. A1, A11.