

# Outside the Box



**What responsibilities does the anguished ethical consumer owe to the environment, asks CAN's Adele Blakebrough**

If only I'd known how valuable the gift Eugenie Harvey sent me was, I may not have been so hasty to rip off the cellophane wrapper and pour the contents of my old office bag into the pristine, new, cream-coloured bag with its embroidered eco-message: 'I'm not a plastic bag.'

I'm a great fan of the 'We Are What We Do' campaign ([www.wearewhatwedo.org](http://www.wearewhatwedo.org)) and have always supported its initiatives, so the bag was welcome.

I've had a variety of comments about it. Many people are impressed and ask me where I got it from. Some question whether I realise what I could sell it for on eBay. Some are jealous I've got one and are full of admiration for the designer. Others are less generous, criticising the fact that the bag is made in China and is being hogged by celebrities.

A recent critical comment made me think twice about parading the bag. In a debate about ethical shopping on Radio 4's *Moral Maze*, Claire Fox, director of the Institute of Ideas, suggested that a more fitting slogan for the bag would be: 'I'm a smug t\*\*t.'

Is that what it's all about? Parading your environmental credentials to pour scorn on others?

I am always slow to join campaigns – I find it difficult to respond to rallying calls. However, on environmental issues I do feel I've woken up recently and I want to respond as well as I can.

It's not easy if you are a questioning person like me. I want to get it right and, I guess like most of us, I am discouraged when a laudable action proves to be misguided.

Fair trade, for example, has enabled consumers to try to alleviate the issue of workers in poor countries being exploited by unacceptably low wages. So when I buy my Kenyan, organic, fair-trade beans am I allowed to feel virtuous?

Unfortunately it's often more complicated than that.

Many customers question whether they should be consuming produce that's flown all over the world to feed me out of season, even if the workers are better paid. Critics of organic farming say that in the long term this produce is more environmentally unsustainable. Apparently organic crops take up more agricultural land than conventional crops. If we want to protect the rain forests we need to reduce the amount of land we need for agriculture. Perhaps it would make sense to only source food from countries and climates where optimal growth is possible. It could be argued that most lamb should come from New Zealand, say, where it's easy to produce, rather than up a mountain in a desperate part of Scotland where the yields aren't so good.

It's hard to find your way between the voices of the cynics urging no action versus the do-gooders who are sometimes misguided. There's also a dilemma between the value of individual actions in contrast to the need for large-scale political solutions.

I was recently at a Business in the Community dinner where Prince Charles and Al Gore were speaking about their environmental passions. Gore has moved from the large stage of government to the large stage of an impassioned individual. He is important because he combines the need for the macro and the micro to work together to effect change. One without the other is never very satisfactory.

I remember debating the pros and cons of the social enterprise Belu and its bottled water. A critic was questioning whether it might not be better to avoid buying the bottled water altogether and simply give a donation directly to Water Aid (Belu gives all its profit to Water Aid and associated water projects). The answer to the critic is that in theory that might be correct but in reality we know that we don't end up doing anything.

If we drink bottled water, it's better to do so with a product that is raising awareness of water issues and contributing to a social cause than a product that does neither.

We also need encouragement to become more environmentally responsible. We need a variety of methods and tactics to help us change our behaviour. The individual action certainly has its place – it's individuals who have had an enormous effect on the way supermarkets behave, for example. They are influenced and regulated by government but each influences the other. Government has to support large-scale solutions to environmental challenges if they are going to have a big enough effect, including international co-operation.

So, for example, when we start to debate what's right and fair about food production we quickly rub up against the Common Agricultural Policy that means suppliers outside Europe can't compete because of our subsidies. The individual action isn't enough on its own.

It is true that in the arena of environmentalism and fairer food production we need to pay equal attention to the macro and the micro. Neither extreme cynicism nor smugness is going to help our situation very much.

So I'm happy to carry my bag because it reminds us that there are alternatives.

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