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Opposition fails, too, in war on pollution

By David Israelson
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Tomorrow is World Environment Day — a day the United Nations designated for people to take stock of what is happening to our planet.

In Canada, it's supposed to mark the high point of a \$1 million, week-long media blitz, cooked up to get Canadians thinking about their own country's environmental problems.

Canadians should be concerned, all right, but not just about the pollution.

What should also worry people is that this country doesn't seem serious about fighting pollution.

The Progressive Conservative government in Ottawa is partly to blame — but only partly. Their critics — in opposition and environmental groups — deserve blame too.

They should be having a field day with the Mulroney government's poor environmental record (the one exception being its \$300 million acid rain program). The Tories have cut worthwhile programs, muzzled

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respected scientists and offered fuzzy platitudes in place of a serious pollution-fighting plan.

Yet for the most part, the criticism has been remarkably feeble. There have been exceptions, but the attacks are generally dull-witted, confused, shallow or beside the point.

Nowhere is the problem more evident than in Parliament. True, a barrage of attacks on Mulroney's first environment minister, Suzanne Blais-Grenier, led to her being dumped. But she was really her own worst enemy; and in any case, the Tories' questionable policies didn't change with her departure.

The question is not so much what the opposition is doing wrong, but whether it is doing anything at all? Neither the Liberals nor the New Democrats seem able to focus their attacks.

The NDP may have good environmental policies on paper, but their parliamentary critic, Bill

Blaikie, has been all but invisible when opportunities arise to tear a strip off the Tories. There simply hasn't been enough NDP input. The party's criticism is close to irrelevant.

The Liberal critic, former environment minister Charles Caccia, has been more visible but not much more effective. No one doubts his sincerity, depth or passion for the issues — to some environmental activists, he's a hero. But he seems to have a knack for misjudging political opportunities.

It's almost as if he waits for the moment when a quick poke at some Tory folly is in order — but instead launches into a detailed critique of policy that simply deflects the heat.

For example, he said hardly a word about Environment Minister Tom McMillan's ill-advised Environment Week media blitz — even though it was a natural for some pointed fun. A few sharp questions would have reminded the public that the \$1 million ad blitz is a waste of money during a time of ongoing cuts to Environment Canada.

But instead of asking a few good questions, Caccia demanded, and got, a parliamentary debate on the Niagara River one recent Friday afternoon — leading to long-winded speeches heard by virtually no one, least of all the public.

Unfortunately, the Liberals' problems with environmental issues seem to go beyond the inability to fire a good political shot. They are hobbled with their own less-than-wonderful environmental record, which — like that of the Tories — was long on talk and short on action.

Worse, Liberal leader John Turner does not come across as a pollution fighter. During the 1984 election campaign, he said acid rain could be cleaned up by "the marketplace" — whatever that means. We know the Mulroney government has made bad moves on the environment, but we don't know if a Turner government would make good ones.

What's especially worrisome is that the inability to focus criticism is not limited to the opposition parties. Some of Canada's environmental groups have sim-

ply not been up to the job of forcing the Tories to be serious.

Indeed, some groups seem to suffer from the same problems as both the government and the opposition parties — an inability to come up with clear goals that ordinary people can understand.

In addition, some groups seem more worried about perpetuating themselves than advancing their goals.

For example, one of the biggest fights with McMillan recently had centred on his plan to withdraw "in kind" service from environmental groups — the free use of Environment Canada's long distance lines and photocopiers.

These groups are supposed to be adversaries — independently criticizing, pushing and proposing constructive alternatives. Yet here they are whining about not being able to use government phones.

If there's anything for Canadians to think about this Environment Day, it's that the opposition — both inside and outside the House of Commons — had better smarten up. Otherwise, they can expect the government to do so.