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Food for Life Report

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BECOMING A *SQUEAKY WHEEL*

IN THE MID-1990s, a former employer (a telecom watchdog) helped give public voice to consumer grievances against a cable TV company that automatically charged basic cable TV customers for extra channels unless the customer pro-actively declined. (This is a practice called "negative option billing.") Customers saw this as a government-endorsed rip-off and rebelled, the company backed off, and the regulator tightened its grip. But some wondered if messing with people's TV was an embarrassingly rare and potent trigger for activism.

Years later, while I was meeting with an MP about food law reform, his assistant poked his head into the room to report receiving the 40th contact from constituents urging him to vote in favour of an unrelated resolution in the House of Commons. The MP changed his mind on the spot, surprising me that so few voices could be so influential. Anthropologist Margaret Mead's reflection that only "a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world" met proof of concept.

In 2000, comedian Rick Mercer launched an online petition calling for a federal referendum to change Canadian Alliance Party leader Stockwell Day's name to Doris Day. Mercer ranted about Day's proposal to allow fringe political views to spur $150 million referendum votes.

Mercer's one million weekly viewers helped spread the word to one million endorsers (3 % of eligible voters) within weeks, a high-water mark for spontaneous displays of political activism in Canada. Doubtless, some endorsers had ticklish funny bones and nothing more. But, of the 541 petitions submitted to the House of Commons since Parliament first officially recognized online petitions in 2016 (in addition to paper), none has come close to Mercer's following. Only one exceeded (barely) 10 % of Mercer's million (this time proposing electoral reform, not opposing it).

That is the past.

This spring, Health Canada proposed regulations to mandate "warnings" on labels of foods high in sodium, saturated fat, or sugar, nutrients responsible for less than 20 % of nutrition-related deaths. The proposed rules will still let food companies make misleading nutrition marketing claims, and lock in confusing labels for 15 years. (See pages 20-25.)

If all *Food for Life Report* readers—let alone the estimated 68 % of all Canadians who support front-of-pack nutrition labelling—insisted to their MPs and the Minister of Health (not just pollsters), this might provoke effective label changes, not just confusing rules that are least offensive to food companies. If just 1 % of the 70 % of Manitobans that support a national school meals program (according to last year's Manitoba Food Matters poll) called their 14 MPs and 57 MLAs, those 9,000 phone calls could hasten tipping points in Winnipeg and Ottawa legislatures.

American peace activist Marianne Williams wrote "Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate, but that we are powerful beyond measure." Let's learn how to help Canadians come out of their shells to become more powerful champions of public health.

Bill Jeffery, BA, LLB, **Editor**

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