**Texte d’opinion : Water**

In a letter to the student newspaper of Harvard University, Thomas J. Lauria, the vice-president of the International Bottled Water Association, a lobby group, puts forward some arguments against the idea of a ban on bottled water on the campus. His arguments, however, seem a little spurious.

From the outset, Mr Lauria defends bottled water as a “healthful beverage choice”, and indeed, who could argue with such a statement? Water is indeed vital for human well-being, and is a precious natural resource available to all in developed countries. He reminds us of the woeful rates of obesity in America: when he wrote his letter, more than two thirds of Americans aged 20 and over were considered overweight or obese. Naturally, part of tackling such a problem involves not consuming sugary drinks, but the way Lauria frames the argument is misleading.

Firstly, Mr Lauria states that bottled water is the healthy option “when tap water is not accessible, preferred or convenient”. This seems perfectly logical but in a developed country, does such a situation often arise? One of reasons citizens pay their taxes, as well as to provide infrastructure and public services, is to enjoy access to clean and drinkable water. Most developed countries would claim that their water is indeed perfectly safe so why would one need to purchase bottled water in the first place?

The author claims that “consumer research” shows that if deprived of their precious bottled water, half of the people concerned would resort to unhealthy sodas. I would like to see the methodology of this “consumer research”. Just what question were interviewees asked, and was tap water presented as an option in the survey? Lauria chooses not to elaborate on this matter. Let us be clear. The obesity crisis in the USA is about more than just what people drink, and arguing that people will automatically reach for sugary drinks in the absence of bottled water seems reductive.

The ban proposed on Harvard campus was motivated by environmental concerns, in other words, the plastic bottle itself, rather than the substance inside it. Mr. Lauria cites a study commissioned by Nestlé Waters (part of his lobby) which concluded that bottled water has the lowest environmental impact of all packaged beverages. This may well be true. However, one must express a degree of scepticism towards the findings of a study commissioned by a bottled water manufacturer. The fact remains that the plastic used to produce bottles for water consumes energy and water, and accounts for a large part of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Presenting it as environmentally-friendly is disingenuous.

It is precisely because of such slick marketing on the part of the bottled lobby that people are so hooked on bottled water, thinking that it is somehow better for them than tap water. Water is water, and if you don’t like the taste of what comes out of the tap, then buy a home filter jug. Meanwhile, the students at Harvard and other campuses around the US should use refillable water bottles, made of BPA-free plastic or stainless steel. These could be emblazoned with the crest of the university, and should be owned and used with pride.

Using refillable bottles may require a fraction more organisation than just buying water in a plastic bottle: people need to know where water fountains and taps are, and if they are in short supply, then more must be fitted. Improvements in water infrastructure could be financed by a tax on water sold in disposable plastic bottles.

Consumers have everything to gain from not listening to people like Thomas Lauria. Drinking tap water will save them money, keep them healthy and avoid unnecessary plastic waste. The Harvard students are right to want to ban bottled water: it is expensive, bad for the environment and unnecessary. (634)