'Buy local' is a slogan for xenophobes

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For 235 years, since the publication of Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations, enlightened, liberal and scientifically justified opinion has favoured open borders and internationalism.

"The tailor does not attempt to make his own shoes," Smith wrote, "but buys them of the shoemaker. The shoemaker does not attempt to make his own clothes, but employs a tailor.. What is prudence in the conduct of every private family, can scarce be folly in that of a great kingdom. If a foreign country can supply us with a commodity cheaper than we ourselves can make it, better buy it of them with some part of the produce of our own industry, employed in a way in which we have some advantage."

The English political economist David Ricardo showed, writing 45 years after Smith, that even if you don't do anything well, if everyone specializes in what they do least badly and then trades that output with others, the sum total of output is maximized. You can't get more out of the world's capital and workers than by taking advantage of the specialization domestic and international trade makes possible.

Under this liberal internationalism policies of protectionism, isolationism and nationalism became verboten. The increase in living standards that followed was, by all historical standards, spectacular.

But now this world is being turned upside down. "Progressive" opinion tells us we should buy as many things as we can locally, within at most a 100-mile radius of where we live. Even big companies, who should know better, take care to point out in their ads how many of their inputs they source locally. They should be taken out behind the woodshed and have good sense spanked back into them.

Local sourcing is supposed to be good for both the environment and the economy. Let's take these one at a time.

As Newton informed us, moving something less than a hundred miles takes less energy than moving it more than a hundred miles. But it follows that buying local consumes less energy than buying distant only if everything else about production is exactly the same. And it probably isn't. If distant producers use less energy in producing their product, whether because it's naturally warmer where they are or because they use less fertilizer, which requires energy to produce, or because their workers are less energyhoggish than the typical Canadian worker, then all else is not equal and the extra energy cost of moving the good a longer distance may well be less than the extra energy cost of producing it locally.

As for whether buying local is better for the local economy, it depends how many mem-bers of the local economy currently sell their output outside the 100-mile radius. If people in other countries adopt the same "Local Good, Distant Bad" rule, Canadian distantsellers will have to find other work. If Saskatchewan scales down to produce only enough wheat for Saskatchewan, thousands of unneeded wheat farmers will have to find other things to do: growing tomatoes maybe, to replace the banned Mexican tomatoes.

Maybe they will find a way to grow tomatoes for the Regina and Saskatoon markets. But they won't be nearly as productive as they were growing wheat for the world market. Mexican tomato growers may also eventually get the hang of growing wheat, but they won't be nearly as good at wheat as they were at tomatoes.

People who want to buy local generally aren't xenophobes. In fact, many are otherwise very liberally minded people. But their adoption of a policy of personal protectionism aids and abets the xenophobes.