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Think back a couple months to the biggest crisis facing us as a nation. Let’s see now. Was it international terrorism? No, that was last year.

How about the war against Iraq? Or was it Afghanistan? Oh, now I remember. It was West Nile virus. Or was it SARS? No, wait. It was mad cow disease. Wasn’t it?

Having trouble keeping these crises straight? It is easy to get sucked under by the flood of world events washing over us daily. International health risks like West Nile and SARS remind us how vulnerable we are to unknown and as yet incurable diseases in a borderless world. Alternatively, the borders separating us from our neighbours are very evident when a lone sick bovine on a farm in northern Alberta costs our economy billions of dollars in lost beef exports.

The fact is, unless we’re affected directly, we don’t give much thought to global issues. Most of us can’t do much anyway—it’s not as though writing a stinging letter to the United Nations is going to give us satisfaction.

This is the nature of politics in a global environment. As our international borders signify less, our ability to affect decisions at a national level diminishes, increasing our feelings of helplessness and alienation from the political process. A national malaise is already evident. Only 63 per cent of eligible voters cast ballots in the November 2000 federal election, the lowest voter turnout since the Second World War.

If global theorists are right, it will only get worse. With borders disappearing, so the thinking goes, we will look for political power closer to home, at the regional, municipal and community levels. The declining nation state

will give rise to a powerful city state.

This phenomenon even has a name—Glocalism. “Urban centres will come to think more closely about their own communities and seek local political solutions,” writes researcher Katherine Harmsworth in a paper for the Canada West Foundation. “As engagement in a globalized world increases, so too does the importance of the local places where individuals live.”

This is a scary thought. When it



comes to engaging the public in the political process at the local level, our record isn’t something to brag about. Routinely, fewer than half of eligible Albertan voters bother to cast ballots in municipal elections. True to form, voter turnout in the 2001 civic election was 38 per cent in Calgary and 35 per cent in Edmonton.

Perhaps the two-out-of-three Albertans who voted with their duffs knew something the rest of us found out only recently—our efforts were not going to mean much anyway. One of the features of the 2001 civic ballot was the long-promised opportunity to elect regional health authorities, which in most races gave voters a chance to register their opposition to contracting health-care services to

private companies. Unhappy with the message voters sent him, Health Minister Gary Mar simply overruled them last spring by firing the elected board members he didn’t like.

If people are going to find ways of expressing themselves in a global atmosphere, it will likely be outside the electoral process. With the click of a mouse, hundreds of thousands of twentysomething Canadians have marshalled their forces for a number of anti-globalization protests over the last few years. It is no coincidence that youth turnout in the 2000 federal election, as estimated by Elections Canada, was only 38.8 per cent for those between 18 and 24 years old—the demographic most familiar with the Internet.

“A growing number are using extra-electoral methods of doing politics,” says University of Alberta political scientist Judith Garber. “If people feel the system disenfranchises them, the incentive isn’t there for them to participate. You can look at it as a problem with the people or as a problem with the political system.”

At a time when our provincial government should be leading us out of our electoral doldrums, it is only adding to our sense of disengagement. Ralph Klein’s Conservatives have no interest in a politically active populace. Only 53 per cent of eligible electors cast ballots in the 2001 provincial election. The Conservatives received 61 per cent of those votes. This means they were able to win 74 of 83 ridings, giving them control of 90 per cent of the seats in the provincial legislature, with the support of only 33 per cent of Albertans. With numbers like these, Klein can continue to coast to victory on voter apathy.

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