One of the nice side effects of last month’s elections was the defeat of a proposal in Berkeley that would have sentenced people to jail for selling non-organic coffee beans.

Even in Berkeley, apparently, the idea of hauling people off to jail for coffeecrime was too much to swallow though some 30% of the voters were in favor of the measure, which is still disturbing. Even my friend Gersh Kuntzman (a product of Brown University's failed education system) praised the ballot measure and lamented its defeat in his column [1] for MSNBC.com, noting that the "once reliably liberal city" of Berkeley had let him down. There was a time, a century or so ago, when "liberal" meant tolerant, not draconian but it's probably time to abandon all those old, useless political labels anyway.

Perhaps a new label bean fascists will enter the lexicon after the Berkeley incident. After all, it takes an authoritarian mindset to consider jailing people for coffee infractions. If the bean fascists had good grounds for their views by scientific standard, one might almost be able to forgive them, but the case for organic food (and drink) being any better for you is weak, as is the case for conventional pesticide residues being harmful.

But then, if the pro-organic crowd weighed risks rationally, there wouldn't be DEADLY BLACK WIDOW SPIDERS in British produce. That's right, in an effort to avoid dreaded man-made pesticides, the British grocery chain Tesco used DEADLY BLACK WIDOW SPIDERS as bug-killers in its grape vineyards, with the unsurprising result that some customers found the still-living spiders crawling around in their fruit (as reported by an eager British press). At least if any customers die from spider bites, they'll die organically. We wouldn't want them exposed to some strange chemical compound nature never intended, after all.

Meanwhile, the fittingly-named town of Vedic City, Iowa, under the influence of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (mystical pal of the Beatles, magician Doug Henning, and Reform Party/Natural Law Party presidential candidate John Hagelin), contemplates a ban on all non-organic food. Since the Maharishi’s followers believe they have the power of levitation, they will presumably be able to remove bugs from their organic produce without using either man-made pesticides or black widow spiders.

Of course, we'd be better off if governments just kept their hands off the food supply altogether, but that seems unlikely. (Indeed, the U.S. House of Representatives, noting fluctuations in the price of coffee, found time last month to pass a resolution calling upon its members to "adopt a global strategy to respond to the coffee crisis," according to the New York Times. Don't I vaguely recall them having more important geopolitical matters to worry about?) If governments simply
must get involved, though, it would be nice if politicians and voters alike paid attention to science instead of mystics and environmental activists and avoided assuming that organic food is superior simply because it is less "tainted" by the hand of industrialized Man.

Better to raise a strong, non-organic cup of coffee with the hand of Man than be jailed in Berkeley, spider-bitten in England, or levitated in Vedic City, Iowa, I'd say.