

How we can avoid drowning in a load of old rubbish



The Malcolm Richards Column

Rubbish can bring governments down! My mother, a lifetime Labour voter, switched to the Tories in the seventies when James Callaghan was annihilated by striking dustmen.

She was typical of an electorate exasperated by a parliament that had lost control of public service workers. The last

straw was the rats nibbling at the black bags piled high in the streets and, "we cannot even bury our dead."

Eva Richards, like many of her compatriots, then embraced the iron lady (an unlikely liaison that lasted for just two terms I hasten to add). My theory is that the Lib Dems lost the 2004 Richmond election because of their policy of no longer collecting dustbins from the borough's back alleys and a perception that streets were not being adequately swept.

They may have had a point about dirty streets, but the abandonment of the back passage collection which raised the blood pressure of middle class homeowners was long overdue. My own house in Mortlake is served by a narrow path which, when used as a dustbin store, encourages flytipping and vermin and stinks of overflowing debris.

Now we see the Daily Mail whipping up the fears of Middle England over the suggestions that collections be reduced and householders charged on the basis of how much they throw away – the object being to force consumers to think more deeply about excessively wrapped goods.

It was one of the factors that lost Labour popularity in local elections – although it is a sensible and farsighted policy and will put pressure on the supermarkets to reduce their obscene overpackaging.

The vast majority of English voters view clean streets and empty dustbins as the key

to a civilised society. And of course they are right.

But we are living in different times from when many of those voters' opinions were shaped. When I was a child the dustbin was generally less than a third full when the dustmen called. What little waste we had we burned or dug into the garden.

Cans were a rarity, bottles were returnable and my mother folded every brown paper bag we acquired into neat squares and rolled the lengths of string and rope into small coils and put them in the drawer for reuse.

Now we arrive home from the local Tesco or Waitrose with bulging plastic carriers, only to discard the greater portion of our burden into the overflowing, overworked poubelles. Admittedly, bottles, cans, plastic and tins and paper go for recycling – but this is a burdensome duty (ignored by most) and inefficient and energy consuming – greater than that generated by the original manufacture.

Recycling is part of the problem. When government and local authorities bend over backwards to clear up the mess that corporations leave in their wake, it simply serves to perpetuate the environmental chaos.

Limiting the Alfred Doolittles to once a fortnight visits is a subtle but effective way of making people apply their minds to whether they really need to buy four pears

encased in a foam tray covered with celluloid, wrapped in clingfilm and/or razor-mounted in a plastic plaque, housed in a stout box and surrounded by a transparent bubble.

Huge problems need visionary solutions. Landfill passed maximum capacity several years ago and we need to re-think the amount of waste that is generated on our behalf.

Newspapers are as guilty as any other business of barny overkill. A Sunday Times which costs £1.40 for a bulky cellophane wrapped package of supplements – 90 per cent of which is only of interest to 10 per cent of its readership – is a classic example. The colourful A4 sheets and pamphlets that come tumbling from our papers create a hideous paper trail. Information contained in these appendages needs to occupy the columns that surrounds the news.

A Conservative councillor, Sidney Gross convulsed a Richmond upon Thames Council committee with derisive laughter in the seventies during a discussion on the problem of increased litter on Richmond Green when he advised, "there is no point in providing more bins – people will only fill them up".

Only now can we appreciate how wise those words were.

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