

Conservative MEPs

Britain's Waste: the lessons we can learn from Europe



by **Caroline Jackson MEP**



Conservatives
in the European Parliament



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Britain usually prides itself on its ability to comply in good time with the European legislation that ministers have signed up to. Indeed we take a perverse pride in going further than we need, thus “goldplating” into weighty and demanding documents EU proposals which in their original form occupied only a few pages in the Official Journal.

The EU directive on the landfill of waste shows that there can be negative aspects to Britain's adaptation to agreed EU imperatives: in this case, delay, reluctance to appreciate and plan for the consequences of the original decision adopting the directive, failure to look at and learn from the experience of continental countries, muddle, more muddle and just plain fear of the public's reaction to a directive which would touch the lives of all.

When in April 1999 the European Union adopted a directive on the landfill of waste it was not a sudden or surprising event. The directive had been under discussion for some time. The EU had turned its attention to waste as a priority when the Council of Ministers adopted a Community Strategy on Waste Management in 1990. An earlier proposal in 1991 was rejected in 1996 by MEPs because “derogations” for areas with a low population density would have excluded half of all EU territory. The Commission's second attempt was proposed in 1996; it was under discussion in the European Parliament for two years before its adoption. It was one of the last directives adopted by the Council under the co-operation procedure, which gave much less opportunity to MEPs to influence the outcome than the co-decision procedure that succeeded it. So ministers could not argue that they didn't know what they were signing or that the measure was being rushed through at the urging of MEPs.

The ministers who negotiated and agreed the text of the directive on behalf of the United Kingdom were John Prescott, then Secretary of State for the Environment at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and Michael Meacher MP,

Minister for the Environment. They were therefore best placed to see that the United Kingdom got to grips with the terms of the directive as quickly as possible: they failed to do so.

What did the directive say? Its main aim was to reduce the amount of biodegradable municipal waste going to landfill. Targets for this reduction for all Member States were set as follows:

- By 2006 to reduce the amount of landfilled biodegradable municipal waste to 75 per cent of that arising in 1995 (i.e. to about 14 million tonnes)
- By 2009 to reduce the amount to 50 per cent of that arising in 1995 (to about 9 million tonnes)
- By 2016 to reduce the amount to 35 per cent of that arising in 1995 (to about 6 million tonnes)

There was one important proviso: those countries putting more than 80 per cent of their municipal waste into landfill in 1995 could postpone reaching these targets by up to 4 years.

Other important points in the directive included a ban on putting certain materials in landfill. Bans affected liquid waste; infectious clinical waste; whole tyres (from 2003) and shredded tyres (from 2006) and any waste that is explosive, corrosive, oxidising, or flammable. The directive also banned the co-disposal of hazardous and non-hazardous waste; it specified that all waste must be "treated" (a wide definition of this was adopted) before being landfilled; new standards were set for operating and closing landfills; new permitting procedures were to be introduced for landfill operators; changes had to be made to cost structures so that setting up, operating and closure and aftercare costs for 30 years were reflected in the price charged by the operators of the landfill. It was indeed a demanding agenda.

The directive was particularly demanding for Britain, which in the late 1990s sent 85 per cent of its municipal waste to landfill. The United Kingdom's initial reaction to the directive was to oppose it on grounds that it failed to observe the principle of subsidiarity. The argument ran particularly strongly in the dying days of the Major government that disposal of waste to land was an internal matter, determined by each country's geology, and not for decision at the EU level. To this was sometimes added the plea that the UK's geology was well fitted to landfill disposal, with many "voids" and unused quarries: for example Bristol's municipal waste went by train each night to fill up the vast former brick pits at Calvert in Buckinghamshire. Thus 18th century Georgian London gave a helping hand in disposing of Bristol's waste 200 years later. Yet in some parts of England, unblessed by Calvert style sites, local authorities were already running out of landfill space and finding it difficult to open new sites.

This "hands off our landfills" line never got any support in Brussels. Continental countries were trying to stop cross-border waste dumping and felt that such a directive would help them do so. (Rumours subsequently emerged of a brisk illegal trade in waste across the Irish border.) The UK also argued for a simpler measure, setting EU targets for the amount of methane capture from landfills while leaving the Member States a free hand as to how to achieve these. But the evidence about how much methane could be collected from a landfill was inconclusive and the idea found little support.

Cost also figured in the UK's objections: in July 1997 the Department of the Environment estimated that the directive would propel the disposal of waste by incineration up the agenda at a cost of £3 to £7 billion.

Why did the EU feel justified in taking up the issue? Landfill was seen by many as a primitive and environmentally damaging option, which encouraged "waste tourism" in search of the lowest cost disposal site. In 1996 100,000 tonnes of waste had slipped down a hillside in Spain and endangered a nearby town. There were climate impacts to consider too: methane has a greater global warming potential than carbon dioxide, and some 32 per cent of methane released into the atmosphere from the EU was ascribed to emissions from waste decomposing in landfills. As the directive spelled out, its aim was to *"prevent or reduce as far as possible negative effects on the environment, in particular the pollution of surface water, groundwater, soil and air, and on the global environment, including the greenhouse effect, as well as any resulting risk to human health, from the landfilling of waste, during the whole lifecycle of the landfill."*

How prescriptive was the directive? Each Member State was free to reach the targets set by whichever means it chose. The EU already had arranged waste disposal options in a "hierarchy" running down from re-use and minimisation, to recycling, composting, biogas production and energy recovery, and – last of all – landfill. But the hierarchy is regarded as a guide for waste operators and has no legal force in the EU.

However, the targets, even though the word "targets" may give some impression of leeway, are legally enforceable by the European Court of Justice. In fact, with eagle-eyed NGOs on the watch, environmental policy is an area of great activity in terms of complaints to the Commission about failures to comply with the law. Greece was the first country to be fined – €20,000 a day – under such powers and its failure concerned the disposal of waste in Crete. One of the many terrors driving the United Kingdom to over-compliance with the letter of some EU law is probably the fear that the errors of some luckless civil servant will result in the country being fined by the Luxembourg court.

How the UK reacted to the directive.

Once the directive was adopted and its timetable started ticking, the government was remarkably laid back in putting in place the policies needed for us to comply with it. This was despite the fact that the directive implied the need to change people's behaviour – from unthinking deposit of as much waste as we liked into "the bin" to the greater effort needed by individuals to sort their waste for recycling, to minimise it where possible, to compost it and generally to direct everything possible away from the anonymous "bin" whose contents would still go to landfill. It was the equivalent of asking people in war time to "do their bit" on the home front.

But for several crucial years nothing happened and people went on as before, while landfills bulged and the amount of waste produced in an increasingly affluent society burgeoned. The waste management industry, large chunks of which were owned by continental companies, had already seen the necessary changes take place in some continental countries and appreciated the scale of the challenge. In Britain initially the only people who appeared to be hard at work were those tasked with thinking up clever titles for strategy documents that led nowhere. The last Conservative administration set the trend with "Making Waste Work: a strategy for sustainable waste management in England and Wales", published in 1995. This set a target of recycling 25 per cent of household waste by 2000 but this alone would not have been enough to meet the requirements of the subsequent landfill directive.

Now under Labour we have had:

- 'Limiting Landfill' (1999) a consultation paper produced to stimulate discussion on possible options for reducing the amount of waste sent to landfill – a leisurely approach indeed
- 'A Way with Waste: A draft strategy for England and Wales(1999)'. This set no targets and was chiefly notable for winning the Whitehall trophy for the most amusing and inventive government document title in that year
- 'Waste not want not' a paper produced by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (2000). This recommended that the focus should be on

reducing, re-using and recycling waste and proposed an increase in the 2015 household recycling target from 33 to 45 per cent. But this was never adopted and many voices doubted whether the methods supported by the Unit would in fact lead to compliance with the landfill directive's diversion targets.

- The Waste Strategy Review for England 2006 proposes higher targets for household recycling and composting for 2010, 2015 and 2020; landfill diversion targets for commercial and industrial waste; and declares that energy from waste should have a clearer role to play but not at the expense of prevention or recycling. The government's energy review is not properly co-ordinated with this policy.
- The current government target is 'to enable at least 25 per cent of household waste to be recycled or composted by 2005-6, with further improvements by 2008'. So we have lost 6 years since the Conservatives set the same percentage target for 2000 eleven years ago.

Waste produced goes up

While the government has dithered, the volume of waste produced in the United Kingdom has actually increased, and is likely to go on doing so while the UK's population increases and any strong policies on waste reduction are lacking. In 1996-7 the amount of municipal waste collected in England was 26 million tonnes; in 2003-4 this rose to 29.1 million tonnes – an increase of 12 per cent. Within these totals, the amount of biodegradable municipal waste collected is estimated to have increased from 17.7 million tonnes in 1996-7 to 19.8 million tonnes in 2003-4. This in itself represents a considerable policy failure for Labour, and an additional headache for those trying to meet EU landfill targets. Worse, the trend towards higher waste production seems highly likely to continue. The National Audit Office estimates that in 2010 the total of biodegradable municipal waste produced may reach 22.1 million tonnes of which some 10.9 million tonnes would need to be diverted in order to meet the EU target.

The government now has four instruments to divert waste from landfill and encourage alternative disposal, especially recycling:

- The landfill tax was introduced by the Conservative government in October 1996, in line with EU policies to reduce landfilled waste, but at a timidly low rate – £2 a tonne, with a projected annual increase thereafter of £1 a year. The low rate survived the passing of the landfill directive until 2005 when the annual increase went up to £3 a year. It currently stands at £21 a tonne and is set to rise by £3 a year until it reaches a medium to long-term rate of £35 a tonne. This will take until 2011. Continental landfill taxes are often higher: in the Flemish region of Belgium landfilling municipal and industrial waste is taxed a €75 (£50) a tonne, in Sweden €46 (£31) a tonne and in Holland €85 (£57) a tonne
- The landfill allowances trading scheme (LATS) was introduced by Labour in April 2005 as a means of penalising those local authorities that still had high levels of landfill. Each local authority receives a gradually reducing landfill allowance for how much municipal waste it may send to landfill. Those overshooting this may buy credits from those undershooting their limit. Financial penalties for exceeding allowances are set at £150 a tonne. LATS has been a great shock to many authorities, some of which are locked in planning battles over waste disposal alternatives, and, with the exception of some recycling schemes, all receive precious little help from government in selling to the public what alternatives they have in mind. As the UK Environmental Services Association has pointed out, LATS only provides an incentive to divert municipal waste from landfill: there is no equivalent for the business sector, although there is a strong case for one as an incentive to exploit the value in commercial and industrial waste
- The Waste Implementation Programme set up in 2003 with a budget of £290 million over 3 years. It has focused on recycling and waste minimisation.
- Private Finance Initiative (PFI) credits to local authorities to set up new waste systems – collection and disposal. But the National Audit Office (NAO) found in 2006 that 9 years after the first PFIs were signed, only 2 authorities have operational energy from waste facilities, while 4 have mechanical and

biological treatment (MBT) facilities in place or under construction. PFIs currently take more than double the time of standard waste management contracts to negotiate the road from advertisement to signature of the contract. Government promises to review planning procedures to reduce delay remain unfulfilled. Local authorities have been left to wrestle with the time-consuming requirement to assess the 'Best Practicable Environmental Option', identified by the NAO as "a major cause of delay and uncertainty in the planning process".

So how are we doing?

Badly. It was soon clear that the UK would have to apply for the full 4-year delay to the directive's targets. Ministers hated to admit this, since it put the UK in the same hopeless bracket as Portugal, Spain and Greece but the deed was eventually done, and the Commission was informed of the UK's intention of making full use of the derogation in June 2005. This means that we are now working to target dates of

2010 to reduce landfilled BMW to 75 per cent of the 1995 total

2013 to reduce landfilled BMW to 50 per cent of the 1995 total

2020 to reduce landfilled BMW to 35 per cent of the 1995 total

So can we relax? Not a bit of it. To reach those targets depends on developing some 15 million tonnes of new waste processing capacity for England alone, assuming no growth in volumes of waste. DEFRA's model showed the need for

- Increasing recycling and composting rates to around 40 per cent by 2010. The current English recycling rate is 27 per cent
- An increased need for residual waste treatment, including energy from waste (using waste derived fuels) for post-recycling residues
- MBT plans becoming operational between 2005-6 and 2012-13.

How much will this cost? DEFRA's model implies that local authority yearly municipal waste management costs will rise from just under £2 billion in 2003-4 to £3.4 billion in 2009-10 and

£4.2 billion in 2012-13 – all to fund new waste management practices and plant. Council taxpayers, already reeling from today's increases and the prospect of future (now politically delayed) Council tax reassessments, are in for a horrible shock. Even the staid NAO commented that "such an increase could face opposition".

Each of the government's chosen tools faces problems:

Recycling: England now recycles 27 per cent of its municipal waste, with local percentages achieved varying from over 50 per cent in St. Edmundsbury, West Suffolk to around 6 per cent Newham. Scotland's latest figure for recycling municipal waste is 24.4 per cent. Most people are in favour of recycling, many practise it but many find local authority arrangements confusing and/or inadequate.

Many environmental activists claim that well-organised recycling, together with better product design, waste minimisation and re-use, can render landfill and energy from waste superfluous. This Utopian vision ignores costs and practicalities. Britain was late in introducing recycling schemes and, although most people are in favour of recycling, it takes time to get schemes established, and after an initial spurt it takes time, money and effort to push on beyond the 25-30 per cent level. Our habit of comparing our recycling levels to those in prosperous equivalent northern European countries takes no account of the fact that they have been actively promoting recycling for decades, and may not collect statistics on an equivalent basis – for example until the EU moved to harmonise systems of data collection the Dutch figures always included business waste in their recycling figures while we did not.

The controversial topics are:

- The organisation of collection. Recycling targets are by weight. This means that local councils give priority to glass, paper and metals. Plastic is often ignored completely : in the UK only 9.3% of recovered plastic is recycled with only 7.7% used to recover energy. The rest goes to landfill. The equivalent average figures for Western Europe are 16.5% and 22.5%. Plastics collection for recycling is so low in England that plastics recyclers complain that they have to import

waste plastic from the continent to keep their plants going.

There is no national standard of best practice for recycling: since each local council operates its own policy. This means that near neighbours, perhaps even in the same street, can find themselves operating under different recycling rules. Confusion about what plastic can be recycled is a common complaint. Such confusion can put a damper on recycling. A recent YouGov study found that 46% of people said they would recycle more if they had a better understanding of what is recyclable.

Another problem is the quality of collection. Where local councils collect in "mixed recycling" hoppers or boxes, paper which could be recycled loses its quality through contamination with other recyclable wastes (dirty bottles, cans). There is too little source-separated recycling going on in the UK and some manufacturers of recycled paper and glass despair at this because the material they receive for recycling is of too low a quality.

Some local authorities have pushed ahead with inappropriate and environmentally questionable recycling schemes, notably where kerbside collection has been adopted in rural areas, resulting in two different types of collection vehicle (rubbish and recycling) travelling long distances on the same routes. Some continental countries have more rural collection points in villages rather than kerbside schemes. To encourage recycling in a context where recycling has risen more than funding and because rubbish totals have still generally been rising, some local authorities have instituted rubbish collections every other week, alternately with recycling collection – which itself has led to customer opposition and fear of rats and smells.

- Paying for rubbish collection: other than rejigging collection schedules and repeating public exhortation (partly as now through costly TV advertisements) the only route to increasing recycling rates would seem to lie in 'pay as you throw' or charging by weight for the disposal of individual householders' non-recyclable rubbish. But local authorities cannot

do this without amendments being passed to statutes, and it will be a brave (and perhaps Conservative?) government that tangles with this one. The 1990 Environmental Protection Act states clearly (section 45.3) that 'no charge shall be made for the collection of household waste'. When the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act was being debated in 2005 it was specifically suggested that the clause in the 1990 Act should be repealed and replaced by one allowing for a charge to be made 'for the collection of household waste where this is directly related to the amount of waste collected from each household...' – but the suggestion was not adopted.

The Lyons Inquiry into local government finance is due to report by the end of 2006 on possible reforms of local government and its taxes. The Inquiry is certainly considering the localisation of waste and other environmental taxes although the Local Government Association, which supports a local charging system, makes clear that if waste taxes were localised there would need to be a transfer of some or all of the payment from the system of general taxation plus the council tax otherwise tax payers would be paying twice for the same service. There are rocks ahead for councillors here. The pressures on local authority resources might well mean that a new local waste tax is not accompanied by a recognisable drop in council tax but even by an increase in it.

The most controversial move would be to charge homeowners by weight of the non-recyclable rubbish they produce. More than 30 local councils in England are fitting microchips to wheelie bins as the advance guard of possible action to make householders pay by weight. News of such "spies in the bin" has evoked hostile reactions and references to the eternal right of all true Britons to throw away as much as they want to. In Bournemouth councillors estimated that 25,000 'bugs' – one third of the total – have been unscrewed.

We only have to look next door to see the Irish experiment with paying by weight. One year after its introduction, 28 % of Irish householders are on pay-by-weight waste

charges. Repak, the Irish scheme operator, claims that they save an average of €95 a year on bin charges, and that recycling has increased during the year by 59 %. Others have pointed out, as the *Irish Times* has reported (2 October 2006), that on introduction of the charge, a great deal of waste simply disappeared to illegal landfills or climate-damaging bonfires. The same law of unintended consequences may be accompanying the Irish introduction of a tax on plastic carrier bags. Critics point out that this has led to greater use of paper bags and a 20 per cent increase in imports of plastic sacks and bin liners, – arguments that swayed the Scottish parliament's environment committee when it rejected such a tax.

- The problem of destination: what happens to the waste we collect for recycling? The municipal 'recycling centres' are collection points and recycling does not take place there although sorting by material does. Even this sorting may not be enough. Especially where recyclable material is collected as "mixed waste" or in one green box it will then usually be hand sorted on "picking lines" – an unpleasant job. After that very often the material collected has to go long distances for further treatment. Take, for example, recyclable materials collected in South Gloucestershire. The council has produced a handy destination map showing that the glass goes to Alloa in Scotland and to Harlow in Essex; paper to Deeside in North Wales; cans and tins to Birmingham; car batteries to Northfleet in Kent, and residual waste to landfill in Swindon.

All those movements take place by road, clocking up a high volume of "waste miles". In the words of the Industry Council for Packaging and the Environment (INCPEN): "recycling has its own environmental burden- especially energy use for transport and cleaning." In INCPEN's view "recycling should be undertaken only when resources are saved. For example driving waste glass hundreds of miles to reprocessors saves sand at the expense of oil" (letter from the Director of INCPEN to Jean Lambert, Green MEP, 19 January 2004)

The appetite of China's growing economy for our recyclables has removed some of the urgency for finding sustainable destinations in this country for our recyclables. A government body, the Waste Resources Action Programme (WRAP), is charged with finding new market for recyclables. Whatever WRAP's success there will always be a proportion of waste that cannot be recycled and needs to find another destination than landfill.

Energy from Waste

In Britain memories of the old generation of heavily polluting incinerators is strong. That memory is kept green by environmentalist opponents who see incineration as the enemy of recycling. They are wrong. Continental experience has shown that recycling and incineration can exist successfully side by side, with neither driving the other out of the market. Nor, following new standards introduced in 2000 through the EU waste incineration directive, are modern incinerators dangerous to the environment. Under this directive new incinerators have had to comply with tough emission standards since December 2002. Existing incinerators had until December 2005 to comply or close. Research commissioned by DEFRA in 2004 concluded that there was "No evidence to suggest that the current generation of municipal solid waste incinerators is likely to have an effect on human health". If you live in a rural area and still have a garden bonfire you should reflect that one person burning his or her waste is releasing the same amount of dioxins as an energy from waste facility treating the same waste from everyone in an area the size of Torbay. Another way of putting it is that waste burned in the open for one day releases as many dioxins as burning the same amount of waste every day in an energy from waste plant for more than 325 years.

What about carbon emissions? Energy from waste recovers renewable energy – as electricity and/or heat – from residual waste. This energy replaces emissions that would otherwise be emitted by fossil fuel power stations and helps to increase the diversity and security of Britain's supply of energy. Energy derived from the biodegradable fraction of waste is genuinely renewable. Carbon dioxide released from the combustion process in energy from waste plants is mostly short-term carbon from plants or animals rather than long-term carbon from fossil sources like coal, oil and gas. This

sustainability is recognised in the EU's Renewable Energy Directive of 2001 which includes energy generated from "the biodegradable fraction of industrial and municipal waste" as renewable.

It is worth underlining that, as the government's energy and waste reviews belatedly realise, energy from waste plants produce energy for the grid. At a time of increasing UK dependency on politically dubious supplier countries such a home-grown energy supply cannot be ignored. Could UK energy from waste schemes be linked up, as they often are in northern continental Europe, to district heating schemes? Such a major infrastructure challenge might be too expensive for existing communities, but should be explored for large new urban developments such as those taking place to the east of London.

However, the government's failure publicly to identify strongly energy from waste as a safe and effective alternative option has left those local authorities that have pursued this option to plough a lonely and unpopular furrow. Little or no government effort has gone into telling people about alternative waste options, so that the argument against energy from waste – in any form – has been led by Green fundamentalists. It is only with the arrival of LATS that local authorities have an incentive to turn to a form of technology that is perfectly normal on the Continent but has been demonised here.

One consequence of Britain's late realisation of the need to meet the EU landfill diversion targets is that waste authorities are now opting for large incinerators which will cope, typically, with the whole residual waste of an English county. This means that big contracts are on offer and that the agony of a prolonged planning enquiry has only to be gone through for the one plant. Inevitably, this practice increases the number of "waste miles" travelled, and increases public opposition to increased traffic generation. We are thus failing to exploit the lesson from continental Europe where, in Denmark, small-scale energy from waste plants typically process 50-60,000 tonnes of mixed residual waste per annum in a country that burns 53 per cent of its municipal waste.

Those who still oppose energy from waste plants after they have been approved through the

planning process need to explain how they would meet targets for waste reduction by alternative means. This is particularly topical in London: Cory Environmental has now been given the go-ahead by the Government to build London's first river-served energy from waste plant at Belvedere in Kent. It will burn unrecyclable waste as a fuel to generate 66 MW of electricity a year. This will divert over 500,000 tonnes of waste a year from landfill. River transport of the waste will save over 100,000 lorry journeys a year on London's roads. The plant has been given a clean bill of health by the Environment Agency and a licence from the Port of London Authority to use the river. To get to this stage has taken 14 years of planning and 3 public enquiries. Yet the Mayor of London and Bexley Council, without giving any clear idea of what their alternative is, still want a judicial review of the decision, leading to possible further delay.

Mechanical Biological Treatment

Mechanical Biological Treatment of waste is a family of processes that partially treat unsorted or residual municipal waste through a combination of physical separation techniques and a composting or anaerobic digestion element. Anaerobic digestion can produce energy while composting can in certain conditions produce a reliable product: both processes are sustainable. MBT also produces an end product – refuse derived fuel (RDF). Currently RDF is categorised as a "waste" and cannot therefore be burned in our power stations because they do not comply with the EU waste incineration directive. RDF can be used by cement kilns complying with the directive. Use of non-source segregated MBT residues as a soil improver or cap on existing landfills is in dispute: the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency is opposed to the idea. So the incentive to choose MBT is that it is a sustainable technology using value in waste and reducing the volume of waste that would otherwise go to landfill. MBT diversion rates from landfill vary between 24 and 90 per cent. The current disincentive within the UK is that the residue still has to find a destination if the energy it contains is going to substitute for fossil fuels.

To sum up: the British position, seven years after the adoption of the landfill directive should have driven us fast down a different road, puts us in second position after Greece for the volume of municipal waste we send to landfill – 75 per cent to Greece's 92 per cent. We are the 4th largest economy in the world and our capital city contains some of the richest real estate and inhabitants on earth. Yet most of our waste still goes into holes in the ground. It's a stark record of government failure and the only people who can get any pleasure out of it are future archaeologists.

So how do they manage elsewhere in Europe?

It's a story of different geology (hard rock; waterlogged land); better technological grasp (Denmark, Holland); ruthless defence of a national waste industry and its technical base (France); strong central or regional governments prepared and able to over-ride local objectors.

Britain's failure to deal with the imperatives created by the landfill directive mean that we are still near the bottom of the European table on waste management. The following table gives the most recent comparable figures, taken from 2003/4 statistics:

Municipal waste management in the European Union in 2004				
Country	Recycled/composted and other (per cent of total)	Landfill (per cent of total)	Incineration (per cent of total)	Waste per capita (kg)
Netherlands	65	3	32	624
Austria	59	31	10	627
Germany	58	20	22	600
Belgium	52	13	35	469
Sweden	41	14	45	464
Denmark	41	5	54	696
Luxembourg	36	23	41	668
Spain	35	59	6	662
Ireland	31	69	0	869
Italy	29	62	9	538
Finland	28	63	9	455
France	28	38	34	567
UK	18	74	8	600
Greece	8	92	0	433
Portugal	3	75	22	43

* Table from the Institute of Public Policy Research

What lessons can we learn from the continental experience?

Lesson 1: Waste policies cannot be turned round overnight, and have to be paid for.

The first Danish recycling law was introduced in 1978. Holland had given incentives for recycling for many years before a landfill ban on 32 different categories of waste, including household organic waste, was introduced in 1995. The German Waste Act has been promoting recycling since 1986 although recycling was promoted through voluntary agreements before that. We are way behind these countries and should have insisted – as we would today – on a full cost impact assessment of the landfill directive before we agreed to it. The Labour government legislated in the dark, wanted to look “green”, hoped for the best, shovelled the cost onto council tax payers – and may still end up before the European Court. There is a lesson on the need for measured green enthusiasm for us to ponder under the oak tree here.

Lesson 2: Most continental countries organise their waste management policy on a bigger scale than we do, by dealing with it through national or regional policies.

This means that there is a clearer message to the public of what is expected of them when it comes, for example, to recycling. In Britain policies may vary between councils and each council is caught up in its own network of planning problems, with one level of local government having responsibility for collection and another level of local government having responsibility for disposal. We may welcome this as the consequence of local democracy but it does have its downside in confusion of policy and huge duplication of effort. It's also bad for the environment. For example, in the absence of any coordinated waste policy for the South West of England, the Borough of Poole, under pressure from the demands of LATS, has recently signed a 20 year contract to send its waste to an incinerator on the outskirts of London. All that waste will go in heavy lorries by road. Meanwhile Bristol's food waste goes by road to Wimborne in Dorset for reprocessing.

Lesson 3: We need to be much more active in making recycling easier for people.

We should introduce national standards for what can be recycled so that there is no confusion between the practices of different local authorities. If people are going to be enthusiastically involved in recycling we need such clarity.

Relying on kerbside collection, with a sprinkling of “bring” sites that people must drive to, neglects the fact that many people lack the space to store the waste for the weekly collection and, in an increasingly elderly population, may lack the means of heaving the ill-designed recycling boxes – often not on wheels – out into the street. On the continent there are far more boxes for recycling collection in public places (railway stations, hotels, supermarkets), and far more recycling collection points in villages and city streets. If we are to bring about a rapid cultural change on waste these are needed here.

Lesson 4: Most continental countries charge a distinguishable fee to householders for rubbish collection.

This means that the householder has a much more active interest in seeing how the service is managed than when the cost is buried in a general local tax. The Lyons enquiry may recommend just such a visible fee policy. We should back it on the grounds of the need for greater openness. We should also be prepared for a backlash as householders will inevitably find that they are asked to pay a separate waste tax but that their Council tax does not diminish (or not for long) by an equivalent amount. The truth is that most people think they are already paying much more than they are for their waste management.

Lesson 5: If we make recycling easier then charging by weight for the collection of non-recyclable rubbish will seem more justifiable.

The Irish experience is that this works. We should wield some green “sticks” and Conservative Councils should be prepared to lead the way. For the system to work with us we need a much more visible and effective war on fly-tipping, and local government may need more financial help from central government to put this into operation.

Lesson 6: Waste management needs serious thought by planners, architects and builders when they design and build future housing.

In many existing houses and blocks of flats there is little room to store extra waste containers and wheelie bins, and well-intentioned recycling schemes can cause storage problems. There is no need for us to replicate these problems in meanly constructed new housing developments. One idea is to ensure that there are properly vented utility rooms in all blocks of new flats, and where possible in new houses.

Lesson 7: We should cease to be frightened of advocating and implementing energy from waste schemes as the necessary and useful companions of a policy promoting recycling.

There has been little or no leadership in promoting energy recovery from waste. The government has completely failed to lead public opinion by drawing attention to "clean" continental countries that make good use of it for energy generation. Instead it has tiptoed round the issue, fearful of adverse public reactions based on out of date information. This is all the more unforgivable when the government has known that we cannot meet EU targets for diversion from landfill without going down the energy from waste road that other advanced EU states have mapped out for us.

The new EU directive under discussion on a revised waste framework makes provision for energy efficient combined heat and power incinerators to be classified as "recovery" rather than "disposal" operations. If this goes through it might help persuade the public in Britain that they are a perfectly respectable part of a modern waste policy and useful components of an energy policy, not a hangover from dirtier days long past. Another EU directive, now in force as EU – and UK – law ensures that all incinerators have to meet very high emission standards. We need to explain and promote public knowledge of these changes

Lesson 8: If we are going to have more incinerators we need to see that they are imaginatively designed and not slapped down on the landscape looking like dying turtles.

A good example of the advantages of taking more care is the new Isseane EfW plant designed to take

460,000 tonnes of Paris's waste from 2007: it will heat 80,000 homes. The majority of the plant is being built 31 metres below ground and much of the building material and excavated soil was transported by river.

Lesson 9 If we are going to put more effort and money into dealing with Britain's waste it would be reassuring to know that we are doing so within a harmonised European system of enforcement of trade in waste.

The EU's "Impel" network of national environmental inspectors recently reported that virtually half of all waste shipments travelling through European seaports were illegal. Among their discoveries in one month were 14 containers of British domestic waste bound for India, and discarded Swedish refrigerator compressors containing CFCs bound for Pakistan. IMPEL is an informal network. It cannot do the job of permanent oversight. This needs to be taken on by the Copenhagen-based European Environment Agency whose present role is limited to processing the data that member states want to give it. It needs a new mandate to focus much more on what member states don't want it to know.

Lesson 10: Politicians must focus more on doing and less on talking as a distraction from not doing.

When Councils award waste contracts they should give planning consents for the new recycling facilities that go with those contracts. When the government imposes targets on councils, councils should be financially empowered to deliver on those targets. And instead of focusing on sideshows with jolly acronyms like WRAP and BREW (which have mixed track records) the government should give real political leadership by producing coherent policies that are good for the economy and good for the environment. And yes, in Europe, we should always make sure we really understand – before we agree to them – how the laws we make will work in practice. ■

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