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Memorandum submitted to the House of Commons
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee inquiry:
Waste Strategy for England 2007

About us

The author is Dr Tim Cooper, Lecturer in History, University of Exeter, Cornwall Campus, Penryn, Cornwall, TR10 9EZ. E-mail tc239@ex.ac.uk. He is the author of 'Challenging the 'refuse revolution': war, waste and the rediscovery of recycling, 1900-50' published online by *Historical Research* and available at <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1468-2281.2007.00420.x?cookieSet=1>. This article examined efforts to recycle in municipal waste management in the early twentieth century. He is also author of 'Rags, Bones and Recycling Bins' published in *History Today*, Vol. 56, Issue 2 (2006) pp. 17-18.

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Summary

- Politicians from all parties have acknowledged the need to address the impact of waste on the environment.
- *Waste Strategy for England 2007* outlines possible approaches to waste reduction and recycling. However it does so largely without reference to the historical context of efforts to control waste and increase recycling.
- Knowledge of the historical context will assist policymakers in identifying the origins of the waste problem and some of the pitfalls associated with current efforts to solve it.
- Previous attempts to increase recycling in Britain during the 1940s and 1970s both proved to be failures after initial periods of brief success.
- The causes of failure were complex, but an unwillingness to confront the emergence of affluent, consumer life-styles, and inadequate efforts to regulate the market in waste products or to challenge key players such as the packaging industry all contributed.
- Future policy, if it is to be successful in achieving ‘One Planet Living’, will require a willingness not just to mobilise actors around the widely accepted, emotive rhetoric of ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’, but must also challenge those with established interests in the status quo.

1. Introduction: a historical perspective for household waste and policy

1.1 *Waste Strategy for England (WSE) 2007* outlines a series of ambitious aims with regard to waste reduction and recycling and correctly emphasises the contribution waste reduction must make to achieve ‘One Planet Living’. The document proposes to achieve waste reduction through a number of means including:

- a. Increasing the incentives to recycle: especially by increasing the landfill tax
- b. Effective regulation: especially of fly-tipping and waste exports
- c. Increasing the efficiency of usage of existing resources
- d. Investment in waste collection and treatment
- e. Developing local authorities' waste management infrastructure
- f. Encouraging a 'shared responsibility' between industry, consumers and the voluntary and government sectors

1.2 *WSE 2007* puts forward proposals without reference to the historical origins of the present issues surrounding waste, resources and the environment. *WSE 2007* does not recognise the attempts of previous governments to address the issues of waste and resources, or the lessons that might be learned from these.

1.3 This paper contributes lessons from the history of waste in the twentieth century. These are:

- a. An outline of the historical origins and causes of the present waste problem.
- b. An outline of previous policy efforts to encourage greater recycling, and the reasons for their failure.

2. A brief history of household waste

2.1 The character of the waste stream in Britain changed dramatically during the twentieth century:

- a. In the early twentieth century dust and cinders from household fires made up over 50% of household waste.
- b. From the 1930s packaging waste (paper, cellulose, tins, glass, etc) formed a small but growing part of the waste stream; reflecting the emergence of nascent affluence and consumerism.
- c. In the post-war era, dust declined rapidly in importance as electricity and gas displaced coal as the main sources of household heating.

- d. Plastics increased rapidly from the 1950s, largely accompanying the growth of the supermarket and packaging industries.

2.2 The history of waste in twentieth-century Britain reflected more general trends in social and economic development. However, historians have recently demonstrated that the emergence of a 'throwaway society' was also partly a consequence of government policy, especially of a post-war electoral politics that encouraged the pursuit of high standards of living.

2.3 The responsibility for coping with these changes in the waste stream largely fell on local authorities who had to respond quickly to constantly changing circumstances. In general they proved remarkably adept at developing disposal technologies to cope with the environmental and public health issues surrounding waste disposal.

- a. The 1900s saw extensive investment in new incinerator and waste-to-energy technology
- b. From the 1930s local authorities pioneered investment in controlled tipping and land reclamation
- c. During the First and Second World Wars local authorities pioneered systems of universal recycling (salvage)
- d. In the post war era there were experiments in municipal composting
- e. These achievements occurred in spite of limited intervention from central government, which was limited to a loose legislative framework for provision of waste disposal services

2.4 Throughout the twentieth century local authorities and waste professionals demonstrated consistent interest in the potential of recycling as a source of local government revenue. However, their ambitions were thwarted by unstable demand from the market for secondary materials. Before the 1970s peacetime governments showed little enthusiasm for interference in the private industrial activity of scrap metal or waste paper merchants.

2.5 The scale of the municipal waste problem grew quickly and changed so rapidly, especially in the wake of the Second World War, that local authorities had no reasonable alternative to the adoption of landfill for the large amounts of domestic waste. Estimates of the growth of household waste indicate the following:

- a. By the outbreak of the First World War about 9,000,000 tons of household refuse was collected annually.
- b. By the end of the Second World War about 15,000,000 tons was collected annually.
- c. By 2005/6, Defra estimates showed approximately 29,000,000 tons of municipal waste was collected annually.

2.6 These estimates of the weight of municipal refuse in the twentieth century illustrate the remarkable growth that took place. However, they hide the most important change, which was a dramatic increase in the volume of waste. This was the consequence of the decline of dense refuse elements like cinders and dust and their replacement by relatively lightweight packaging and consumer items.

2.7 The growing volume of domestic refuse caused collection and disposal to become increasingly difficult and expensive. The rising costs were borne almost exclusively by consumers, although this was partially disguised through the local tax system and the subsidisation of local by central government. Consumers did not necessarily feel the full force of the costs imposed by refuse disposal and producers none at all.

2.8 The innovation and growth-orientation of the consumer economy resulted in a rapidly changing waste stream, which prevented the establishment of recycling on a permanent basis in the twentieth century. New waste problems often emerged as soon as old ones had been addressed, demanding the development of new recycling methods: e.g. plastics, mobile telephones.

2.9 Conclusion:

Rapid social and economic change as well as government policy contributed to the creation of a new municipal waste stream in the twentieth century. The waste stream grew rapidly in weight and volume and changed in composition. This presented immense difficulties in terms of waste disposal and made it difficult to establish a widespread and permanent recycling system.

3. Recycling and policy in the twentieth century

3.1 The idea of a central government 'waste strategy' aimed at reducing waste and increasing recycling is not new. At least twice in the twentieth-century governments have attempted to develop a centrally guided policy aimed at increasing levels of recycling and reducing waste:

- a. During the Second World War the National Government (1940-1945) used powers of compulsion to increase local authority salvage.
- b. The 'War on Waste', a policy designed and implemented by the Labour Government (1974-1979) in response to fears about finite resources.

3.2 In both the cases initial successes met with eventual failure. Both efforts contain important lessons if present efforts to increase recycling and reduce waste are to prove sustainable in the long term.

4. Wartime salvage

4.1 During the inter-war years (1919-1938) a series of new technologies for the large-scale sorting and recycling of waste were developed by waste management professionals.

4.2 In some cases these technologies were adopted by larger local authorities, such as Birmingham which built a large recycling plant after the First World War. In general these

innovations were confined to the larger urban municipal authorities, which could afford the capital and labour costs.

4.2 During the Second World War the National Government in collaboration with the local authorities developed a universal and successful recycling system in Britain. This was a response to the temporary scarcity of raw materials caused by the shortage of shipping space.

1. A specialist Salvage Department was created within the Ministry of Supply (1939) charged with monitoring levels of resource recovery from municipal waste and encouraging increases.
2. From 1941, councils with populations over 10,000 were compelled to organise salvage schemes.
3. Most salvage schemes were organised on an *ad hoc* basis as simple additions to the general waste-collection and disposal process
4. The shape of salvage was primarily determined by local government, which organised household sorting or centralised sorting according to local conditions.
5. Between 1939 and 1947 almost 9 million tons of re-usable material were recovered, generating an income of 26 million pounds sterling for local councils.

4.3 Many experts and local authorities wished to continue the salvage system into the post-war period. It was widely believed that recycling could be made profitable and become a means of paying for municipal waste disposal.

4.4 In the event salvage was allowed to decline both relatively and absolutely in the period after 1950, as can be illustrated by what happened to paper salvage

1. In 1942 62.1 percent of paper consumption was met by salvage; in 1959 this had declined to 26.5 per cent.
2. This decline had two causes:

- a. The absolute decline of municipal waste paper collections from 433,664 tons to 392,240 tons, which reflected a fall in demand for waste paper.
- b. The rapidly growing consumption of paper from 1,408,000 tons in 1942, to 4,903,000 tons in 1959, which resulted in a severe relative decline in waste recycling.

4.5 The decay of the wartime salvage network therefore had two main causes: firstly, the decline in waste prices in the post-war era; secondly, the return to high levels of consumption in the post-war era.

4.6 Numerous historians have demonstrated that the pursuit of affluence was a deliberate policy decision made by both Labour and Conservative post-war governments largely for electoral reasons. The waste problem of the late-twentieth century consequently had political as well as social roots.

4.7 By 1968, 1,226 local authorities disposed of waste primarily through landfill, whereas only 47 still ran significant salvage systems.

4.8 Conclusion

A successful system of recycling was established under the economic conditions prevailing in wartime Britain. It was sustained by resource scarcity, high raw materials prices and government intervention. However, with the pursuit of increasing standards of living by all post-war governments, sustaining the salvage system proved impracticable.

5. 'War on Waste'

5.1 The 1960s and 1970s were a period marked by the emergence of the new environmentalism. The Oil Crisis (1973) brought to the fore fears of raw material shortages, which accentuated the fears raised by the Club of Rome's report on resource depletion *Limits*

to Growth (1972). In 1974 the new Labour Government responded to popular concerns with a green paper *War on Waste: A Policy for Reclamation*. This outlined a series of policy responses to the issues of waste and resource availability:

- a. Recognition of the limits of market mechanisms in achieving increased levels of recycling;
- b. Reliance on local authorities to create new recycling systems based on household separation;
- c. A new Waste Management Advisory Council (WMAC) to provide advice to industry on recycling, and to formulate policies dealing with packaging, etc;
- d. Development of a joint producer-consumer approach to waste reduction and recycling.

5.2. Unfortunately *War on Waste* failed to effect any significant changes in waste generation or disposal patterns, for the following reasons:

- a. The WMAC was largely staffed by industry executives and local government officials. Although official policy relied heavily on the voluntary sector it offered little meaningful representation or engagement with voluntary groups;
- b. The strength of industry representation and lobbying prevented the WMAC offering the kind of radical policy initiatives necessary to cope with new problems like packaging waste. This caused further disillusionment among voluntary and environmental groups;
- c. *War on Waste* explicitly limited government intervention to the areas of research and development and information/education. The failure to develop any means of intervening in the waste industry to set or amend price levels in order to create sustainably high levels of recycling proved fatal to embedding significant change in the waste management system.

5.3 Conclusion

The 1970s provided an opportunity to develop a new approach to waste. However, the government prioritised the needs of industry in the policy process and placed policy making in the hands of the WMAC, rather than voluntary or environmental bodies. These actions ensured that radical policies, required to deal with issues like packaging waste or the creation of a sustainable market for waste materials, could not be developed. A moment when government concern with raw materials and waste could have coalesced with public concern with environmental issues was consequently lost.

6. General conclusions

6.1 The waste problem emerged in Britain during the twentieth century alongside important social and economic changes, especially in the emergence of widespread affluence and the supermarket retailing system.

6.2 Two efforts to put recycling at the centre of waste management policy both ultimately ended in failure.

6.3 The causes of this failure were complex, but some important factors can be seen in the failure to intervene adequately to stabilise the prices for waste materials, government encouragement of affluence, and a failure to challenge industries that encouraged waste, such as the packaging and retail sectors.

6.4 The unwillingness to challenge those with interests that contributed towards waste generation undermined the 'War on Waste' in the 1970s, by destroying the confidence of voluntary and environmental groups in government policy.

6.5 *WSE 2007* contains elements that suggest some of the weaknesses of previous policy can be overcome: there is a mechanism for penalising landfill in the shape of the Landfill Tax and greater clarity on the role of producers in minimizing and recycling waste.

6.7 However, the ultimate test of WSE 2007 will be whether it can sustain and extend existing achievements in recycling and waste minimization, and this may depend ultimately on government being able to show an **equality of sacrifice** between householders and consumers (who have borne the brunt of efforts to increase municipal recycling) and industry and retailers.

6.8 Recent press interest in packaging and consumer campaigns against packaging, set alongside the debate over weekly versus bi-weekly rubbish collections may be the first signs of public discontent that the sacrifice of effort in terms of waste reduction and recycling is unfairly balanced against householders and consumers.

Dr Tim Cooper

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