

Torbay, June 2002

Our sustainable future?

Stephen Tindale: Speech to the Chartered Institute of Waste Management

I note that this part of the agenda could look like a debate between opposing parties but I think the most important point I would make is that we don't actually sit in warring camps. In fact we share some things in common, quite apart from a desire to see waste managed sustainably.

But before we find our common agenda let's just clear the air on the one point where we most often disagree

Greenpeace thinks waste incineration is a very bad idea indeed and we will take direct action to stop it. Some of you may not agree with us or like our methods but sometimes life's like that.

Their complaint is straight forward. They believe that there is a better way of dealing with our rubbish, that our legitimate concerns are being brushed aside and the will of the majority of British people ignored. And given that talking hasn't got us very far – they are going to do something about it

This stands in a long line of direct actions and is one of the many ways we have tried to stop Britain being swamped with incinerators before there has even been a public debate.

So let's just recap on the problem. Greenpeace thinks waste incineration is bad because:

1. It's bad for people's health. I know many of you will disagree, you will waive your well-thumbed copies of the NSCA report at me with more than a hint of menace and tell me I'm ignoring the facts but let's get it straight. Incinerators discharge large amounts of very nasty cancer causing chemicals. Ask Michael Meacher if you don't believe me. We need to do everything we can to drive down pollution levels in society. Babies and toddlers are already taking in more dioxins than the World Health Organisation and the Government says is safe. There's no good argument for increasing pollution so let's talk about how to avoid it, not how we can justify it.

2. It's bad for the environment. It's bad because it's polluting but also because it undercuts recycling. If you don't believe me you can ask Brian Wilson at the DTi who just turned down the expansion of Edmonton incinerator for exactly that reason. We need to maximise recycling and composting but we will do neither if we build loads of incinerators. I know that you will tell me of continental countries where recycling and incineration go hand in hand but the truth is that in those cases it was the incinerators that came first. If recycling had come first there would be far fewer burners

3. It's completely contrary to common sense. Building a large waste incinerator locks you into a completely inflexible waste management regime for two or three decades. Not only that – you have to predict what the waste stream will actually be for the next thirty years. If we want to develop a dynamic sustainable waste management regime we will have to deliberately introduce flexibility into our plans and be ready to respond to every opportunity. We have to aim high for recycling and composting as well as being ambitious in our targets for waste reduction and reuse. Putting all our eggs in one basket and implementing a supposed solution for the next thirty years is simply bad management.

4. It's extremely unpopular. You may find the public's antagonism to incineration frustrating but at the end of the day that's democracy. Let's look at some case histories:

Edmonton – occupied by Greenpeace volunteers for five days. The volunteers were put on trial and were acquitted by the jury. Think about it – twelve randomly selected members of the public had competing arguments about incineration put to them in extraordinary detail for ten days and concluded that Greenpeace was right. The following year the Government turned down the proposed expansion of Edmonton incinerator

Sheffield – occupied by Greenpeace volunteers for four days in May last year. A year later the Lib Dem controlled council wanted to fight the local elections on an explicit campaign of support for a new incinerator. We told them that if they did that they would lose. They did that. They lost. An election analysis shows that local anti-incineration activists swung the vote away from the Lib Dems in critical marginal wards and allowed Labour to take power. The new Labour group in Sheffield is thinking very hard about whether it really wants that new incinerator

5. There are alternatives to waste incineration. You might think we spend all our money on climbing ropes and harnesses but we actually spend far more on researching and writing reports. We have already circulated two important documents on alternatives to incineration – a blueprint for local authorities and a book called, (rather unimaginatively) Zero Waste written by Robin Murray, one of the UK's foremost waste experts. We have translated significant amounts of German technical literature for the current Government review of waste strategy and we have engaged with many of the practical arguments about sustainable waste management. The alternatives are there. It is possible to reach very high recycling and composting rates – the same high rates achieved elsewhere including, ironically, Edmonton in Canada.

We often get told by the waste industry that our proposals won't deal with residuals after recycling and composting. That argument might carry more weight if the residuals didn't constitute 95% of the waste stream as it does in many urban areas. But irrespective of that there are safe ways of dealing with residuals. MBT – mechanical, biological treatment – can render residuals safe and allow the small remaining portion to be landfilled without hazard.

So that's the disagreeable bit out of the way. Let's look to what we have in common

Perhaps one experience that really binds us together is an exasperation with Government.

We mustn't be churlish – the Government have done some very good things on waste. The setting of compulsory recycling targets (albeit rather low) has galvanised the debate. And turning down the plans for expanding the Edmonton incinerator in London was entirely laudable.

But, there's also been much to frustrate us.

Firstly we are left fuming by the Government's laissez faire attitude towards incineration. The Environment Minister says that only a handful of new incinerators will be built whilst simple research shows that if current plans prevail, there will be at least 57 operating incinerators by 2010

The Government says that emissions from incinerators can cause cancer and that 'we must use every reasonable instrument to eliminate them altogether'. But does little to stop a rash of new incinerators springing up across Britain

The Prime Minister shrugs his shoulders and describes incineration as 'regrettable and something we want to avoid' but it mostly manifests itself in poor, disenfranchised communities and not in the middle of Hampstead Village. If it's regrettable why not try and eliminate it?

And the Government's support for the alternatives has been problematic to say the least. If we are to avoid mass burn incineration we will have to compost but the behaviour of both Government and Environment Agency has caused confusion and consternation amongst industry and voluntary groups alike.

We have seen multi-million pound investments in composting put on hold because the Government has failed to provide a stable regulatory environment for business. We have seen the Environment Agency ridiculed in the tabloid media for trying to ban compost heaps in scenes that frankly border on the farcical and do no credit to the Agency or composting. As an environmental pressure group we've always wanted recycling to be front page news, but this isn't really what we had in mind.

We share industry's and local government's frustrations with central Government – and we know you're frustrated because you keep writing to us asking when we're going to do something about it.

We can work together and we can use our joint forces of persuasion on those issues where we agree. And when we do we are often more powerful than lobbying separately. The whole is greater than the sum of parts.

You have to accept that if you try and build an incinerator you will tangle with the local community and we might show up as well. This campaign won't go away – you will be fought every inch of the way. But where we have common ground we are genuinely keen to work together.

We can use our combined forces to get real progress in government, to build broader constituencies of interest. Let's genuinely maximise recycling and composting before we consider any other options. If there are obstacles to increasing those rates let's work together to overcome them. If Government sloth or ineptitude stands in our way let's expose it and force government to create the regulatory environment that benefits people and planet

One thing should be clear. More incineration with some recycling tacked on to it, is not sustainable waste management. It doesn't have the public's support and it doesn't have Greenpeace support. If we want to make progress in the UK we need innovation, imagination and ambition in waste management. We need social and environmental needs to drive policy, not merely European regulations and compliance with the minimum legal requirements.

At the end of the day it is the same waste companies and local authorities represented here today that will deliver the future of waste management – whether sustainable or not. There is a way forward that will benefit, people, the environment and the waste industry. But it needs the government and the waste industry alike to focus on what we can achieve, not what we can't. It needs problem solvers not problem finders. It needs waste managers and policy makers who can, not those who can not.