



Garbage: The Waste Syndrome

BY ALAIN LABELLE

We live in a consumer society. Almost nothing in it was built to last more than a dozen years. The car, the fridge, the hairdryer are all products with planned obsolescence dates, by which times manufacturers hope to sell us newer, better, less durable replacements hot off the assembly lines.

Our society, by encouraging this kind of waste, produces millions of tons of garbage per year. In 1989 alone, Montreal produced 1,149,100 metric tons of solid garbage—that's roughly one ton per person.

Too little, too late

It's only been since the early 1980s that the general public has been worried about the situation. Ecological movements tried to raise consciousness at the beginning of the 70s with events such as Earth Day; but it took a near-disaster for North Americans to grasp the importance of proper waste management. In 1981, a dozen or so citizens of the «Love Canal» in upstate New York fell sick for no obvious reason. It was discovered after an inquiry that their suburb was built on the site of an old dumping ground for toxic waste. This affair, juxtaposed with new knowledge of dumping practices, brought the debate into the public eye.

Biogas emanations are now known and recognised as dangerously toxic. Water table contamination is an open question, particularly at election times, when politicians appropriate problems

linked to mass production of garbage for soapbox rhetoric.

Recycling: First Steps

It was during this period that the Doré administration took power in Montreal. Michel Séguin, the co-president of the coalition Action-REbuts recalls the Doré years: "This administration didn't consider waste management a priority. They started some interesting pilot projects"—composting, commercial sorting boxes, Christmas tree recycling—"but they didn't come to much. In 1984, the MCM promised that every house would have access to sorting boxes within the next ten years. By 1994 a third of the population still didn't have sorters. They didn't keep their promise."

When it comes to promises, the Bourque administration has been no better. However, for Michel Séguin, it's the first time that a mayor has pledged himself with such will. "It's a really positive, encouraging sign," Séguin thinks, mentioning four signals in particular:

1. Vision Montreal wants to reduce the quantity of domestic garbage being dumped by 40% (it is currently 2-3%).
2. It wants Montreal garbage to stay in Montreal.
3. The Bourque administration rejects incineration as a final solution.
4. It wants to ban all ground dumping here by 1998.

However delighted Montrealers may be by Bourque's good intentions, the proof is yet to come.

According to Michel Séguin of Action-REbuts, proper waste management hinges on the three Rs:

1. Reduction at the source.
2. Re-use.
3. Recycling.

Reduction takes awareness of our habits as buyers and consumers. Buying used furniture and household articles would reduce amounts of garbage considerably. Re-usable products could be substituted for disposable razor blades, lighters, pens, etc. And by recycling a ton of old newspapers, we could save seventeen trees...

According to a study done by the Groupe de recherche et d'analyse interdisciplinaire en gestion environnementale (GRAIGE) at the University of Quebec at Montreal, 81.2% of the contents of those green garbage bags is re-usable, recyclable or compostable.

Tomorrow's solutions won't be those of the past

For most people, garbage disappears as soon as it's put out on the sidewalk. In Montreal, two agencies control waste management: the City of Montreal and the Régie intermunicipale de gestion de déchets de l'île de Montréal (RIGDIM). Both have been granted incineration and dumping privileges. Of all the provinces, Quebec has the most environmentally-lax garbage regulations; it's hardly surprising, therefore, to find that Montreal waste management has been placed in the hands of private contractors. By means of tireless lobbying, these companies have considerable clout when those privileges are handed out. These days, if smoke gets in your eyes it may be toxic.

Consensus of ideologies

In the fall of 1994, Montreal community groups concerned by present systems of waste management held a conference to discuss possible alternatives. Consensus was reached that proper garbage disposal MUST be a function of the three Rs.

Ecodistricts

According to Michel Séguin, what's important is to make people aware of the problems of consumption and to teach them to make solutions a priority. The current administration is preparing to launch a project in seventeen districts. Ecodistricts will provide the tools for community groups to sensitise people in their areas to reduction, re-use, and recycling of consumer products, thus taking responsibility for their own waste management. Sorting programmes, which reach about 40% of Montrealers now, will be expanded and tailored to correspond to the actual needs of the community they serve. A community in which many seniors live might choose to recycle using garbage bags instead of the heavier green sacks which would be difficult for them to lift.

When citizens understand the part they can and do play in garbage management, and the importance of reducing waste, they will be able to create common solutions of considerable longterm significance. We have to remember that small steps now have an impact on the future for generations to come. ♦

We wish to thank Action RE-buts for their help.

besoins des gens du quartier desservi. Un quartier ayant une forte incidence de personnes âgées pourra alors être desservi par un programme de recyclage de sacs à ordures au lieu de gros bacs verts, trop lourds pour eux.

Tous les citoyens seront alors en mesure de comprendre toute l'importance que prend le gaspillage dans leurs habitudes et pourront trouver des solutions communes aux problèmes de la gestion de leurs déchets. L'important est de ne pas oublier qu'une série de petits gestes de notre part a une incidence sur notre milieu de vie et celui des générations futures.

Nous désirons remercier Action RE-buts pour leur précieuse collaboration.



ERRATUM

En page 6 de notre édition de mai 1995, la caricature aurait dû porter la mention suivante: Reproduit avec la permission de R.K. Studios Ltd. et David Shaw, Toronto. Paru dans Our Times, Oct. 1990.

Nous regrettons cette omission. On page 6 of our May, 1995, issue, the caricature should have carried the following credit:

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