

**AUGUST 2007**

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**RECYCLING**

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**JAMES GLEDHILL**



DEBATING MATTERS  
**TOPIC  
GUIDES**

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**MOTION:**

**“HOUSEHOLD  
RECYCLING IS A  
WASTE OF TIME”**

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## KEY TERMS

Energy recovery incineration

Recycling

Single stream collection

Waste hierarchy

Zero-waste society

# INTRODUCTION

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# NOTES

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What we do with our household rubbish has become a big political issue, all the way from its role in our becoming a ‘zero-waste society’ [Ref: [GoZero](#)] to the furore over plans for fortnightly rubbish collections [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. While the government’s publication of a Waste Strategy for England [Ref: [BBC News](#)] may not exactly set the pulse racing, plans for £30 a year rubbish charges and cash rewards for recycling are part of a wider debate about the place of the environment among our social priorities. The themes are familiar: landfill is out, discouraged by a landfill tax, and recycling is in. Of course recycling has been encouraged for years, and it might seem like a self-evidently good thing. Who could argue with turning old products into new ones rather than burying them in the ground? But with waste meant for recycling ending up in landfill [Ref: [Telegraph](#)], and being sent to China [Ref: [Guardian](#)], the reality may not live up to expectations. Recycling may make us feel good about ‘doing our bit’, but is it economically efficient? Swedish waste experts questioned conventional wisdom by arguing that separating rubbish is a waste of time and money and that incineration of household waste is better for the economy and the environment. Environmentalists say that this, along with the other worries [Ref: [Recycle Now](#)], is an anti-green myth [Ref: [Friends of the Earth](#)]. However, it has been argued that our concern with recycling is out of all proportion with its benefits and that our priorities have become skewed. Some councils have made recycling compulsory [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and even where it’s voluntary you could still get a fine for putting paper in a bag of bottles and cans [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Then there are glitzy government-backed campaigns with ‘celebrity ambassadors’, and projects in schools. Is recycling an essential part of raising environmental awareness, or would our time be better spent on other social questions?



### A load of rubbish?

Every year around 30 million tonnes of waste is collected from households in the UK. Once this would just have been seen as something for councils to sort out, but today we're more likely to think about waste in terms of our personal impact. This figure means that each person in the country is generating 500 kg of rubbish, or seven times their body weight. In terms of total waste output, the UK produces enough rubbish to fill the Albert Hall every hour. Although household rubbish is less than 10 per cent of all waste produced, it is argued that recycling more of this waste would make a big difference. Britain's recycling rate is increasing, and has nearly doubled in the past three years. But at 27 per cent, it is still low compared with over 60 per cent in some other European countries. Landfill is still the main means of managing most of the UK's waste.

### Wasted economic opportunities or a waste of money?

Some economists point out that after collection, transport and sorting, the cost of kerbside recycling programmes generally exceeds the revenues generated by recycled products, and is also greater than the disposal costs [Ref: [Weekly Standard](#)]. They say recycling is inefficient and see market prices rather than government initiatives as the best way of setting priorities. For campaigners this is one more recycling myth. They argue that economic calculations don't take full account of benefits like reduced greenhouse gas emissions. A strong free market case (dead link) has been made for recycling and for the use of financial incentives. Rather than being a service paid for by council tax, rubbish collection would become subject to a 'pay as you throw' charge.

### Waste not, want not?

Some sceptics think that with our preoccupation with recycling it's almost as though we're trying to fill a place once occupied by religion and community life [Ref: [spiked](#)]. The desire for convenient packaged goods is described as the 'besetting sin' [Ref: [Guardian](#)] of modern life. There is concern about people's recycling 'lapsing' over Christmas [Ref: [Telegraph](#)], and those who speak out against compulsion risk being seen as social pariahs [Ref: [Barnet & Potters Bar Times](#)]. School children are taught that recycling is cool, with Recycler the rapping robot [Ref: [Recycle Now](#)] teaching the 3Rs of 'reduce, reuse and recycle'. Should we question whether recycling should be a central way through which we think about our local communities and the wider world? Or when people wash nappies rather than using disposables, for example, is it not rather a sign of responsibility and a welcome return to the 'waste not, want not' thrift of previous generations?

### Is it a question of economic efficiency or environmental ethics?

Until now, kerbside recycling has involved separating waste into up to five different bins, but new sorting technology makes 'single stream' collection possible [Ref: [Wasteage](#)]. Is this a good use of technology, or does the process of separating rubbish play an important role in changing attitudes towards consumption and encouraging us to do more further up the waste hierarchy (dead link) to eliminate, reduce and re-use before we need to recycle? Some say environmentalists would be hypocritical to ignore the environmental and economic case for incineration with energy recovery [Ref: [Integra](#)]. But incinerators are opposed



## THE RECYCLING DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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because they are seen as visual eyesores with dangerous emissions. And Friends of the Earth argue that incinerators 'all too often fail to provide community benefits in terms of education and local involvement in solving the problem of what we do with our rubbish' [Ref: [Friends of the Earth](#)].



## ESSENTIAL READING

Is recycling waste just a rubbish idea?

*Yorkshire Post* 1 September 2006

Is going green still worthwhile?

*BBC News* 19 May 2005

The environment debate: Waste away

Julian Morris vs Julie Hill *spiked-science debate* 13 January 2003

### FOR

Recycle this!

James Thayer *The Daily Standard* 26 January 2006

Why recycling can be utter garbage

Adam Smith *Institute* 1 May 2005

A waste of time

Rob Lyons *spiked* 2 April 2004

Recycling: Your time can be better spent!

Jay Lehr *The Heartland Institute* 1 April 2003

Why recycling is garbage

Dan Seligman *Forbes.com* 17 November 1997

### AGAINST

Zero waste is lifestyle goal to bring Good Life for all

*The Scotsman* 27 July 2007

The price of virtue

*The Economist* 7 June 2007

Time for a recycling revolution

Nicky Conway *The Birmingham Post* 27 November 2006

Is recycling a waste of time?

Lucy Siegle *Observer* 15 January 2006

An anti-green myth: Incineration beats recycling

*Friends of the Earth*

### IN DEPTH

The truth about recycling

*The Economist* 7 June 2007

Anti-recycling myths commentary on 'Recycling is garbage'

Richard A Denison and John F Ruston *Environmental Defense* 18 July 1996

Recycling is garbage

John Tierney *The New York Times* 30 June 1996

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## BACKGROUNDEERS

Get real about nappies (and dustbins)

Jennie Bristow *spiked* 23 July 2007

Waste strategy for England 2007

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (defra) 24 May 2007

A rubbish recycling record

*Guardian Unlimited* 24 May 2007

Q&A: Recycling in the UK

*Guardian Unlimited* 24 May 2007

Key points: Waste Strategy

*BBC News* 24 May 2007

Is it really worth recycling glass?

Lucy Siegle *Observer* 14 January 2007

Out and about with the recycling police

Hannah Pool *Guardian* 5 July 2006

Should I ... bother recycling?

Leo Hickman *Guardian* 20 September 2005

Time to trim our waste lines

Melissa Jackson *BBC News* 27 September 2004

Waste incineration

*House of Commons Library research paper* 9 May 2002

Britain could be a rubbish-free society says ground-breaking study

*Greenpeace* 18 March 2002

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## ORGANISATIONS

Go Zero

Powys Zero Waste

recycle-more.co.uk

RecycleNow

Recycler the rapping robot

recyclezone

Waste Online

Waste Watch

WRAP



## IN THE NEWS

MPs criticise bin collection plan

*BBC News* 16 July 2007

The great real nappy myth - they are just as bad for the environment as disposables, admits Minister

*This is London* 3 July 2007

School kids rave about recycler the rapping robot

*Lichfield District Council* 13 June 2007

Waste for recycling 'buried in landfill'

*Daily Telegraph* 4 June 2007

Bin charges 'to boost recycling'

*BBC News* 24 May 2007

Fortnightly rubbish collection means more recycling, says government

*Guardian* 26 April 2007

Man loses recycling appeal

*Guardian Unlimited* 13 April 2007

Waste land

*Guardian* 31 March 2007

Don't waste rubbish, urges recycle drive

*Daily Telegraph* 24 December 2006

Greens rubbish recycling prosecution

*Guardian* 19 October 2006

English households meet waste recycling target

*Guardian* 12 October 2006

Cameron's green guru denounced for opposing recycling plant in Charles's idyll

*Observer* 8 October 2006

What a waste: We could be recycling more

*Guardian Unlimited* 13 September 2006

Court clears woman of putting rotting food in recycling bin

*Guardian* 11 July 2006

Green light for incinerator plant

*BBC News* 17 March 2006

Britain exceeds recycling target for first time

*edie.net* 11 March 2005

Council makes recycling compulsory

*Guardian* 6 January 2005

Waste burning's green credentials defended

*edie.net* 11 June 2004

'I won't be forced to recycle'

*This is Hertfordshire* 31 March 2004

Swedes trash myth of refuse recycling

*Daily Telegraph* 1 March 2003

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**“DEBATING MATTERS  
TEACHES A WAY  
OF THINKING.  
INTELLECTUAL  
ARCHITECTURE  
IS CREATED BY  
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**TRISTRAM HUNT, HISTORIAN & BROADCASTER**

