

WASTE II

John Carrad

(For contact details, please see the DRC)

Preliminary List

1. Excessive Competitive Advertising
2. Managerial Pre-occupation with Sales (the “in-house” sales effort)
3. Gambling. Particularly Gambling as an Adjunct to Advertising
4. Distortion of Production caused by Advertising
5. Cheap Goods that don’t last – Waste Material and Human Input
6. Takeover Battles
7. Inequality as a Form of Waste
8. The Throw-Away Society
9. The Private Car and the Commuter Phenomenon
10. Heavy Road Haulage. The true Use of the Railways.
11. The Legal Tobacco Industry. The Illegal Marihuana Industry. Policing. The Balance of Costs?
12. Misemployment – Unemployment
13. Crime and Ill-Health
14. What do we really want from Life?
15. The Remedies

Well-informed people will get from the above list a fairly good picture of what I am driving at. I shall try in the main to limit my comments to brief indication of important argument.

(Unfortunately, my full essay on Waste has grown to something just under 10,000 words (“The topic expands with probing” as I have said). To create a publishable version I have decided not to attempt a scaling-down in detail, but to include the treatment of Numbers 8, 12, 15 of the above list, – to give the flavour of the thing, so to say – and leave the reader to exercise his/her own critical faculty on the remainder. Some copies of the full text will be available for those particularly interested.)

Perhaps the important thing about centering in on Waste, is that eliminating it is one thing all reasonable minds can agree on.

8. The Throwaway Society

Many things contribute to developing the Throw-Away Society, including some already mentioned in this essay.

Advertising and the sales drive generally leads to impulse buying. The drive to cheapness and the rapid obsolescence of articles, all lead to early dumping. Above all perhaps, the concentration of wealth leads to superfluity of goods in wealthy families. These factors lead to a torrent of unwanted, often still useable, articles into the landfills, to the embarrassment of responsible local authorities.

A more subtle factor, creeping in in recent decades, is the tendency to design articles to prevent repair, often by enclosing entire mechanisms in plastic so that they cannot be got at. This can sometimes be justified as a safety measure, – but the manufacturer of course wants the customer to buy a new article, rather than repair an old one.

Future generations may be reduced to the ghastly necessity of mining our landfills for the raw materials we have thrown away!

If it is not worth keeping obsolete articles in use, at least we should recycle valuable materials in them.

I consider myself to be something of an expert in this field. For some years I acted as Transport-and-Repairs-Man to an organisation which seeks to assist one-parent families in the Hutt Valley. This involved collecting and delivering donated goods to needy families, and repairing their poor belongings when these fell apart. I quickly realised that the steep gradient from rich to poor had brought about the collapse of the bottom end of the second-hand market. The affluent had no need to sell; the poor had no means to buy. When a well-to-do family refurbished their home, they called up not a second-hand dealer, but a rubbish skip, into which they then piled tables, chairs, beds, mattresses, chests-of-drawers..... Then I came along, knocked on the door and asked permission to yank the stuff out again.

In the meantime I mended cheap beds the kids had jumped up and down on. – Flimsy, so-called “hardboard”, clipped into place by those lousy little wire staples fired from a gun, – awful to pull out when no longer serving! (Everything to be cheap!) I replaced with sturdy sheets of salvaged plywood, firmly screwed down.

I was asked to take non-functioning hand-mowers to the tip. Usually there was nothing wrong with them except that they had not been oiled or adjusted for fifteen years.

I pleaded with clients to tighten nuts and bolts before they fell out and were lost. My carefully husbanded stock of salvaged replacements was always in danger of running out.

I replaced curtain rodding, torn loose by desperate yanking at resistant curtains. Then sprayed the rodding with silicone spray so that the curtains could be gently moved with a finger tip. (This party-trick never fails to amaze). Lubrication in the home is a forgotten art.

All my materials for these repairs (not the silicone spray) were salvaged, while firewooding on the beaches or from bulldozed houses, or from other sources.

12. Misemployment – Unemployment

I am not sure now whether Mr 70% introduced me to the concept “Misemployment”, or whether I formulated the concept, perhaps subconsciously, and this caused me to project Mr 70% into the world. (Mr 70% is explained more fully elsewhere. He is my familiar, who excoriates me when I fail to stand up to conventional opinion).

So far as I am aware, the term “misemployment” is not in common use. It ought to be.

Mr 70% has a habit of subjecting human effort to rigorous cost/benefit analysis. He takes into account damage to human beings or the environment as well as usefulness, if any, and cost in terms of expenditure of human capacity. If the effort rates zero or worse, it ranks as misemployment and he wants it abolished.

I am inclined to agree with the general opinion that his declaration of 70% redundancy is too severe, but Mr 70% is a perfectionist, as his comments on the private car indicate. In argument he hammers me down every time.

Note that, even if we rate misemployment at the more reasonable rate of, say, 40%, this still sets misemployment at about four times as bad as unemployment, which tends to hover at about 10%.

Unemployment causes evils beyond the mere waste! – but so does misemployment.

The first thought concerning misemployment might be: “Well, it isn’t so bad: it gives employment – a job – and an income!”

Further pondering, and close observation, will lead to a much grimmer conclusion.

Misemployment cannot contribute positively to the wellbeing and prosperity of a human community. By definition it is performance at or below zero. In the nature of things, most will be below zero, – costing the community. What happens – and can be observed to happen – is that the community wilts and flags. The misemployment is a drag on the economy. Standards fall. The worker (every worker, not merely those who are misemployed!) experiences the effects of misemployment as fatigue and futility. He must work harder, and yet his earnings drop.

The pressure on the workforce is relentless. Men are known to take on three jobs in order to make ends meet. Families in which the man works all day and the woman all night are commonplace. Since much of the workforce is employed to no good purpose, all must strain to take up the slack. The weak, who cannot hack the pace, go to the wall – forming the comparatively small group of unemployed, surviving as best they can on the dole.

The unscrupulous take refuge in crime.

The employer, caught in the backlash, must fight to make a profit. – It was notable how desperately employers resisted the Labour/Alliance Government’s attempts to ease conditions of employment. For most employers, in a raddled economy, profits depend on severe exploitation of labour.

(Some employers are clever enough to avoid this dilemma. In fact, of course, well-handled labour is much more efficient than ill-treated labour. Good performance in this area would be much easier for employers to achieve in an efficiently run economy).

One can state a simple rule:-
Any misdirected work devalues all work.

(Note that this principle means that marginal labour becomes unemployable. This is how misemployment – rather surprisingly – creates unemployment)

15. The Remedies

Little will be achieved by merely cutting out wastes, however resolutely we do this.

We must also do Mr 70%’s positive thing: Add 40% of genuinely useful activity to take the place of the 70% (according to his ideas!) of rubbish we have removed. – Note that this will leave at the end a 30% easing of pressure on the work force. This can have many benefits.

It would be desirable to work deliberately but rapidly, working through a scale of priorities, the most damaging mis-actions removed first, and replaced by the most rewarding substitute actions which can be identified. If developed human abilities can be directly transferred from the undesirable to the desirable, so much the better.

Gifted psychologists – now manipulating the susceptible into gambling – could be employed supervising the delicate operations of a genuinely caring administrative apparatus, perhaps in the very process of the shifts of orientation we are speaking of, if we make first the necessary changes, of financing of course!, but also of fundamental motivation and mental outlook. The community carries the cost of the gambling now. It can carry the cost of useful work taking its place.

Recuperation of waste should be intensive everywhere in the global human community – but particularly in a small island population like that of New Zealand, where trade has to be conducted expensively over vast distances. This puts a premium on care in everything we do.

The biggest wastes are excessive advertising, and inequality. Appropriately graded taxation can turn both from disasters into useable money, but it will take political courage.

For what purposes can we best use this money?

Let us return to a delicate and challenging word I tossed out unthinkingly:

Care!

The pressures of a crazed economy have made the exercise of care impossible in a wide range of important activities: the unending embarrassments of the health service, of mental health, of the social services, of the sacrificial victims caught up in the cross-beams of an out-of-control administrative apparatus, Cave Creek, the Erebus plane crash, and on and on!

With adequate funding, appropriate intellectual leadership and human talent rescued from misemployment, it should be possible to put an end to these disasters.

Care starts with care in the disposition of human labour!

Careful integration of conservation and development – adequate care! – could perhaps even allow controlled mining in national parks – to mention the unmentionable.

Nothing exasperates me more than the imbecile use of the word growth! The environment cannot support our present economic activity. Heaven help us if we increase it unthinkingly. We must precede increase in some areas with reduction in others.

Given that we have slimmed the economy, where – apart from revival of care in appropriate places – can we actually develop it? —

Given the improved availability of both funds and human capacity in the country, it should be possible for “value added” to our exports overseas to increase more or less unbidden (some customs protection for this activity would help of course, if the international situation allows it.)

Greater attention to our considerable mineral resources might follow.

If we are bent on the “new” in the New Zealand context, I suggest the following:–

1. The possum industry – handily stimulated now by new developments in the use of fur – Jim Anderton is right to centre on this. (I urged it in 1987 in a letter to the then Labour Government).

2. Organic farming: intensive re-cycling of organic detritus. No more kitchen refuse and garden cuttings to the tip! Rot down and re-use. (Possum bones ground up and sold, of course!) Scour our long coastlines for washed up seaweed and firewood (burn the firewood for home heating, where appropriate, and use good clean ash as fertilizer). Mine the large deposits of old sawdust (untreated!) in our countryside, and scatter the sawdust on our pastures. Ultimately, tackle the safe re-cycling of human wastes, rather than poisoning the sea-fishes with it.

(All the above would be hugely important as the basis of massive improvement in human health in the country, and to reduce dependence on artificial fertilizer).

3. Environmental cleansing: clean up the bad pollution spots scattered throughout the country, from which governments of the past half-century have studiously averted their gaze. This job has to be done sometime, and on the whole the sooner the better.

4. Low-grade coal deposits in the South of the country: these are apparently immense. As global supplies of oil, gas and even high-grade coal run out, and if there is no scientific break-through in the provision of power (nuclear power being apparently too scary for wide-spread use), we may yet be glad to develop and adapt these deposits of low-grade coal. This is a matter for an uncertain future, but we should be glad of such insurance within our borders.

5. Re-cycling generally and without end, particularly of valuable metals.

6. Seabed mining: I have saved the biggest and most important till last. The area of sea allocated to our jurisdiction is vast, potentially much more important than our cluster of land islands! I assume that our fisheries are more or less developed (this may turn out not to be complete!). Seabed mining has hardly commenced, and must surely be the centre of much future technological development. We should become a nation of oceanographers. In this sort of respect our development is not only not matured, but not yet begun!

If our fishing is fully-developed, its efficiency may still need intensifying. One reads that by-catch is often thrown away, because the allocation system encourages concentration on the most valued species. This is a profligacy which could only be tolerated in a resource-rich area! We should be conscientious enough not to tolerate it.