

Those plastics you dutifully recycle? They're shipped to China

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My neighbours came home the other day to discover six large new recycling bins sitting on - I should say covering - their front yard. The house is a semi, divided into three apartments. Together, the bins constitute a virtual fourth - 480 litres of prime space in the Annex! Are we all mad? The new blue-bin rollout raises the question - and, in that much alone, confirms the suspicion. Our good intentions have run amok.

So who's to blame? Everybody wants to blame the bumbling bureaucrats, but they're the wrong target. In point of hard fact, recycling overkill is the direct result of a corporate conspiracy to make people fat and stupid, one that has ballooned into a huge, haphazard industry that sprays unwanted plastic indiscriminately across the globe.

It all began when the soft-drink industry embraced the aluminum can as a mechanism to cut costs and rationalize distribution. In return for the right to abandon refillables, the conspirators offered partial funding of new recycling programs.

Ontario caved quickly. The greenest imaginable distribution system disappeared, and government became responsible for expensive new programs to which the corporations contributed no more than a pittance. Even today, corporations contribute less than half the cost of managing the system their throwaway containers make necessary.

But the cost of soda pop has never been lower! In some markets, it's cheaper than municipal tap water. And child obesity is rampant.

The kids are fat and the rest of us are stupid. We think we're doing the right thing when we quaff our chardonnay in allegedly recyclable new containers, not knowing that "recycling" such novelties means baling them up for shipment elsewhere - at significant cost to municipal taxpayers.

More than one-third of the most common type of plastic collected in blue boxes in this province - polyethylene terephthalate or PET, aka Plastic NO.1 - is shipped to China for "recycling."

Nobody knows what really happens to it.

What sort of working conditions prevail in these Chinese facilities, presuming the material is actually recycled? Why is it travelling halfway around the world in any case?

A basic tenet of recycling ideology is that landfills are evil. Environmentally, however, a modern landfill is infinitely preferable to sending alleged recyclables around the world. Ideally, the material could be landfilled locally and left until such time, if ever, that it becomes valuable.

Better still, ban it. If we respected the hierarchy of the three Rs - in which recycling comes last - PET bottles would be refillable. Much modern packaging simply wouldn't exist.

But elevating the last R above the rest only encourages more throwaways. Many other alleged recyclables go straight into the garbage after elaborate collection and sorting.

Despite a quarter century of effort and unstinting subsidy, glass collected in municipal recycling programs still has negative value. It is too contaminated to sell, and collecting it destroys the packer trucks used for the job.

That's nothing compared to what irresponsible and rampant recycling can do to human beings. Granted this is poorly mapped terrain that does not necessarily reflect the Toronto experience, but a glimpse of what has happened in the United States and Britain can be obtained easily enough and may be a warning about what could happen here.

Just Google "recycling" and "killed." Dozens of pages of foreign-news reports of horrible industrial accidents at recycling plants will appear.

Like the supposedly valuable crap they sort, the non-union workers who staff this burgeoning industry are essentially disposable.

Guess who pays for that at the end of the day?

You might as well guess, because nobody has ever done a proper accounting.

There has never been an environmental assessment of the blue-box system, no analysis or audit to determine its real value.

The bins just get bigger and bigger to accommodate a burgeoning conspiracy to offload the true cost of wasteful lifestyles.