

A fridge too far

ANITA POLLACK sees the recent debacle over recycling (or not) refrigerators as a perfect example of the UK falling far behind the rest of Europe.

In the second term of a Labour government pledged to put environment at the heart of policy, the absence of a coherent waste strategy is an embarrassment from which important lessons should be learned.

What has gone wrong? In May 1997 the shiny new Labour government offered hope it would shake off the Tory-era label of "the dirty man of Europe". Some good things have of course been done. But much is left to do.

On refrigerator recycling, the failure is of huge proportions. There are apparently around two million fridges a year thrown away. And cars and electronic waste are to follow very soon. Local authorities must be in despair, left at the mercy of government and business inertia, and thrown a paltry few million pounds to keep them quiet temporarily.

The problem? In January 2002 an EU Regulation on safe disposal of CFCs came into force. (EU Regulations are even tougher than Directives and apply directly). Nothing has been done to prepare. Ministers, perhaps too kind to blame their civil servants, feebly mumble about misreading the Regulation, thinking it was 'only' about industrial refrigerators (nothing done about them either, however). Then we had an attempt to blame Brussels, saying "they let us down". What a lot of cobblers. The latest is the inevitable Downing Street Task Force. Hapless Lord MacDonald has been drafted in over the head of Michael Meacher "to deal with the fridge mountain".

We are told that containers of old fridges are criss-crossing the country, no longer able to be tossed into landfill to pollute for generations. Around the streets of the East End of London where I live, they are competing for space with abandoned cars, being torched by the Saturday night street gangs and dangerously polluting.

This Regulation is one of a series on ozone depleting substances, ratcheting up standards in the wake of the Montreal Protocol. Montreal was agreed internationally in 1987 and the Parties to the Protocol (including the UK) regularly draw up amendments in the light of constantly updated scientific evidence about the size of the holes in the ozone layer.

It was blindingly apparent a decade ago that the use of CFCs and HCFCs (ozone depleting substances) would have to be phased out. As an MEP working on the Environment Committee, I made a tour of waste disposal facilities in Schleswig-Holstein in Germany where recycling of a range of materials was at an advanced state. Policy was legislation led rather than market led and at that stage rather in advance of EU policy. An outstanding refrigerator recycling plant was in operation then (this was way back in 1993!). It was a private sector plant, part of the big waste firm RWE. This plant collected 130,000 refrigerators a year from local authorities, in their own special leak-proof containers for which they were paid by local authorities. They removed the CFCs in a two stage process to a very high level, separated and crushed the metal and sold off the component granules to industry. CFCs were returned to Hoechst for which RWE paid. Even a decade ago there were 10 refrigerator recycling plants in Germany and others in Austria, Netherlands and Sweden, with plans to set them up in Italy, Spain and Denmark. My report on that visit went to our relevant politicians. Clearly it was never read.

It's not rocket science to think that industry should have been gearing itself up to build similar plants in the UK, even if it did have to borrow German technology. This particular EU Regulation causing grief is not something capriciously whipped out of a bottom drawer in Brus-



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-fridge
magnetism

sels to irritate government in the UK. It has been in the pipeline for years. The original draft was around in 1998. Work was interrupted in the European Parliament by the Euro-elections of June 1999. Finally the text of the Regulation was agreed by Ministers on 29 June 2000. It took a year and a half to implement the bit about refrigerators. Nothing mystifying about the text. It is in English. Discussed, analysed, pored over line by line by civil servants for years in working groups before ministerial agreement. Anyone with half a brain could see it is necessary, overdue and would require substantial change of UK practice to implement. Action taken by Member states was supposed to be reported to the European Commission by the end of 2001. Suddenly on 4 December, DEFRA discovered it and rushed out a news release saying something had to be done. This simply is not good enough. How can they pretend they didn't see it? Or didn't understand it? That's what they are paid for! Heads should roll.

Why don't we manage to see the obvious? Why aren't we working with the waste industry to get the right plants built in this country, creating jobs and prosperity? And yes, for once this is a perfect subject in which to use PFI (unlike the London Underground). Tight restrictions on disposing of old cars, computer equipment and electrical goods comprise another batch of EU legislation about improving the quality of life and coming soon to a local authority near you. All these are set to cause major problems in the coming months because we don't seem to have the slightest grip on how to plan ahead and invest in what needs to be done.

Joined up thinking? Forward planning? Doing the right thing by public health and the environment? No thanks, we're British. Crisis management is the order of the day. Well we're European too, and we deserve better.

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