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Each year, Britain produces 28m tonnes of municipal waste. What form of waste disposal suits Britain best? Is it recycling, incineration or landfill? Following the introduction of the EU Landfill Directive, this freedom of choice is a luxury that Britain has been denied. Since 2001, Britain has had to increase its recycling rate. It currently stands at 17% with a target to reach 30% by 2010. Landfill is decried in EU circles because purportedly it wastes resources by burying them beyond reach forever and creates ideal conditions for the release of greenhouse gases.

So how do the different waste options measure up for Britain? What impact is the Landfill Directive having on its future?

### Recycling

The most expensive and the most onerous is the EU's preferred option. The clamour for recycling is based on two premises: first that that we are running out of resources and second that we do not have enough space in which to dump our rubbish.

These assumptions are false. Recycling has succeeded only when it is based on economic sense. Look at the recycling of plastics. The price of oil is just not high enough to persuade producers to buy rehashed plastic. Recycling rates for plastic are in the low single digits. Plastic is very difficult to recycle. There are too many different types

## The Waste of Nations & the EU Landfill Directive

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and incompatible compounds and chemicals.

Conversely, there are instances when recycling has worked for the UK. With very little forest to grow its own paper, the paper industry is the nation's leader in recycling at 66% compared to a European average of 50%. The UK has been recycling paper for over 100 years. Paper is relatively easy to recycle and there's plenty of separated waste to exploit. The success of paper recycling in Britain is a cultural as well as economic one, achieved very largely without government intervention.

Recycling aluminium cans is the other green bright spot, because the cost of extracting bauxite, used to make aluminium, exceeds the cost of recycling. There is though still plenty of it – it makes up some 8.2% of the earth's crust.

The potential for recycling is inherently limited. Britain will struggle to meet the recycling target under the Landfill Directive.

### Is incineration the answer?

Burning rubbish disposes of waste with the merit of providing power from the heat generated. Britain's 7,000 incinerators burn 2.5 m tonnes a year, or 8% of municipal waste. But this is very low compared to other European countries like France, 24%, and Denmark, 52%. Green purists such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth strongly oppose incineration, citing the threat of dioxin emissions – organic substances that can cause cancer. However, the threat of dioxins is far greater from diet, as meat and milk both contain dioxins, food only a vegan can avoid. Yet while the government and the EU play up the benefits of recycling, the hidden result is that incineration is expected

to replace up to 50% of landfill tonnage by 2010. It is far from obvious that this is what people want.

### Landfill

Landfill is the cheapest option of all. And contrary to what one might think, it really does not require much space. Bjorn Lomborg, controversial author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, estimated that even allowing for a growing population and a growing economy, the UK's entire 21<sup>st</sup> century quota of trash could be deposited in a square 8 miles by 8 miles and 100 feet deep or 0.07% of Total British Land Area. So, we are far from running out of space.

Britain has not only embraced landfill because it is cheap, but also because it possesses the impermeable clays that stop toxic leakage into the surrounding water, unlike some of its European neighbours.

The further benefit is that combustible greenhouse gases are captured from the putrescible waste, which can be used to create electricity. Indeed until recently, Britain's 99 landfill gas electricity plants were generating far more electricity at lower cost than all the wind farms of the UK!

To sum up, Britain is doing well with landfill at relatively low environmental and economic cost. The benefits from more incineration and recycling do not justify the financial outlays involved.

There is no magic bullet for waste disposal. Governments must embrace pro-growth and pro-market environmental policies: tax cuts for biodegradable plastics and pricing based on the weight of rubbish. Technology, not EU Directives will help our environment.