

The complexities of plastic bags

Do you dislike the UK's "throwaway" culture? Do you share the *Daily Mail*'s concern about the damage with plastic waste is doing to our coastlines and oceans? If so, you will probably be pleased to know that since the introduction of the 5p charge on plastic bags in supermarkets in 2016, single plastic bag use has dropped dramatically – by as much as 90% according to some sources.

Now the 5p charge is being extended. Small outlets (defined as those with less than 250 employees) will lose their exemption and will have to start charging for plastic bags too, most likely before the end of the year.

While most of us must surely be delighted if there are fewer discarded plastic bags cluttering up our roadsides, the issue isn't quite that straightforward.

Firstly, it exposes the complexities of political life for politicians like Michael Gove, the current Secretary of State for the Environment. Gove has traditionally been labelled "Centre Right", which has historically meant a supporter of small government. You would think, therefore, that although he was apparently "haunted" by the amount of plastic which is polluting our oceans, he would look to find a solution which is more free market and less statist than the introduction of what is, in effect, another tax.

This, however, is far from the only complexity which has been raised in this war on plastic. When the initial legislation bringing in the 5p charge was introduced, nowhere did it mention that it has its origins in an EU directive. Not once does the 2015 Bill mention the EU or the Directive, according to the EU Observer. Perhaps, claims the author, Gove "may want

to portray the success of the 5p charge as a domestic affair". For sure, given that the original legislation predated the Brexit vote, the omission of any mention of the EU cannot have been as a result of wishing to downplay the EU's role for fear of boosting its popularity and thus undermining the case for Brexit. More likely, as the writer suggests, in these days when politicians are eager to emphasise their "green credentials", it is more a case that Michael Gove or perhaps even Theresa May are wanting people to make assumptions that the 5p tax is their idea, given that the war on plastic is largely seen as a good thing.

In a sense, the EU Observer is making something of a mountain out of a molehill. Although the writer is upset by the reluctance of UK parliament and politicians to acknowledge the EU's role in the war on plastic, preferring to claim the credit themselves, as one astute observer has put it, without the UK's influence, much of the EU's environmental legislation would never have got off the ground in the first place:- "all the current EU countryside environmental schemes have their origins in UK policy goals and schemes."

And finally, to anyone who now feels uncomfortable now they realise that a development which they considered beneficial had its origins in Brussels, it is worth remembering that even the most odious of political régimes occasionally do good things. For instance, Germany is rightly proud of its Autobahn network and while the oldest section of it dates from the late 1920s, its most significant and dramatic period of expansion, from a mere 108km to 3,736km took place between 1935 and 1940 because of one man's far-sighted recognition of the value of a nationwide high speed road network. His name was Adolf Hitler.

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