
All we produce becomes waste

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7th May 2018

In the May 2018 Edition of “The Monthly”, Alex McKinnon has produced an article entitled “Our waste policy is rubbish”.

Alex notes that “Domestic Recycling Industries” have been allowed to run down in favour shipping waste cheaply to China.

We had a National Waste Policy, agreed upon by state, federal and territory governments in 2009, but this has languished for years, devoid of funding or attention. The current proposal for a waste incinerator in Western Sydney isn’t part of any decent, realistic, national waste reuse and minimisation program, because we haven’t got any such thing. Other matters, such as who got the most money from our mining boom years, seems to have occupied government attentions.

Yet waste production is such a natural result of our consumption throughput economy, one might think that at least half our efforts at planning and national investment would go into managing it. One hundred percent of all stuff, after it has moved through our economic production systems, is waste. If we look to our carbon and greenhouse gas emissions, we are not managing at all. Proper waste management is avoided because it would interfere with “profits and growth”, while we ignore the cumulative problems of growth in waste that won’t go away.

A waste of decades of lost time

“Waste and recycling industries have long warned that Australia’s ad hoc approach to waste management would backfire.” [1]

Every time a government tries to push waste costs and responsibility back on to industry, of manufacture and supply, there is stiff opposition. Anytime this actually happens, we do expect the costs of extra waste recycling to be passed down to consumers.

China has now said “stop” to receiving imports of waste flow, and no other “developing” nation has asked to be the cheap dumping ground. Suddenly waste disposal is not so cheap.

Every kind of product waste recycling system requires energy, space and time. Unless the waste systems are planned, costed, and implemented, regulated and policed everywhere, in all states in Australia, then cheap, murky waste operators will exploit arbitrage in waste processing. A lot of our NSW trash is being dumped into old coalmines up to Ipswich, in Queensland. 900,000 tonnes of Sydney’s trash went up the Pacific Highway in 2016-2017, congesting our roads with heavy trucks, and caused several serious accidents.

Cheap and Nasty Waste Arbitrage

Because of differences between Australian states, and lack of standards, our municipal kerbside waste collections are the least environmentally friendly method of waste disposal. Up to 50 per cent of garbage collected may be put to some further use. Our waste recovery is atrocious by European standards. Their targets are 100% reuse of all waste, and 0% remaining for combustion into greenhouse gases, and this is close to being achieved. Incineration is a very last resort.

Values of a throw away society

I have been told that the principle “values test” for German Citizenship eligibility, now consists of learning how to sort out household waste and put it into the correct bin, of which there several differently processed collection types. If you can do this, you are a proper German. No university standard language test is applied. Australians won't be long term survivors on this globe until their attitude towards nature changes from exploitation to respectful and reverent dependency.

Federal government standards, funding, actions and leadership required

While our garbage disposal systems now stresses municipal authorities, and dismays the recycling industry, what is needed is a national policy, funding, rules, that are effective, complete, coherent, integrated, educative and efficient, and mindful of the energy, emissions and the other costs of waste mismanagement. We cannot afford to overproduce and mismanage waste.

Plenty of Scope for improvements

The first rule of waste processing is to make as little of it as possible. This means less packaging, less plastic, less paper, less cardboard. Maybe we will even stop logging our native forests to make toilet paper and wipes.

There are stores in Sydney where many food consumables can be bought in bulk, without much packaging. Goto “The Source Bulk Foods” Website.

Particular kinds of products present greater packaging difficulty with our current modes of living - refridgerated meat and dairy products for instance. I do remember when milk came in real glass bottles, that were returned.

Plastic supermarket bags need to be banned nationally.

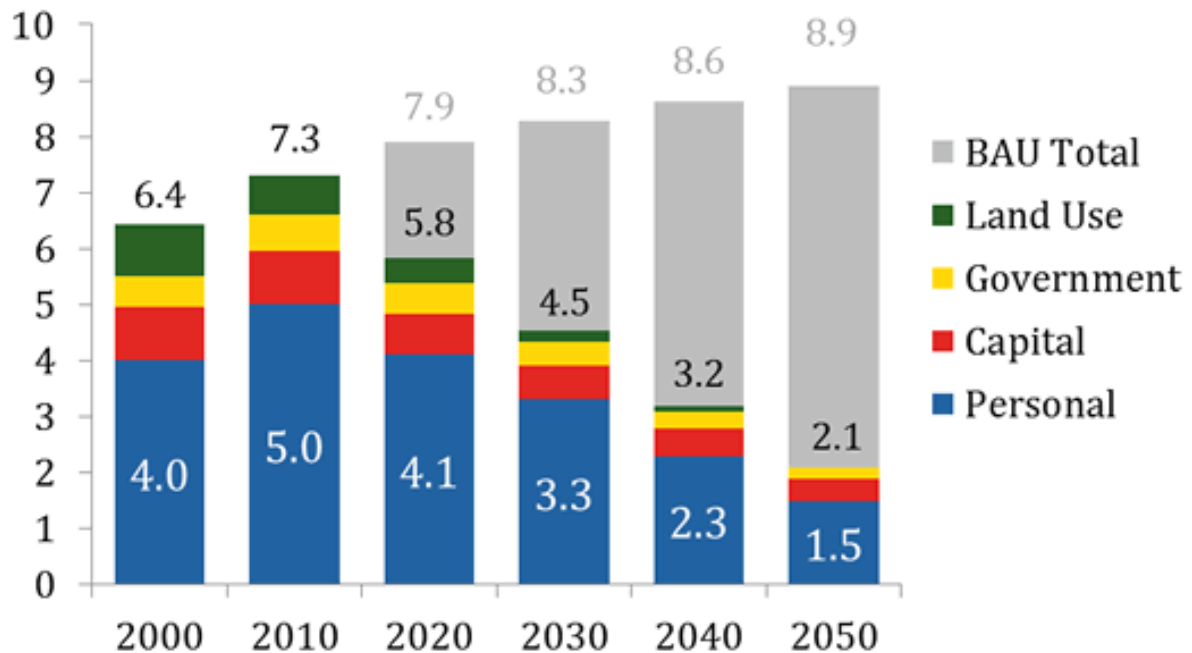
Soon their will be little spare energy to spend on waste

With regards to Global Warming - Australia's yearly per capita greenhouse emissions are still around 22 tonnes of CO2 equivalent, which is way off the scale in the graphic below.

This is almost 10 times the average level we will need to be getting down to soon, and four times the average global level if we were on track by 2020. Australian will not be long able to maintain its high level of oil imports in the face of global depletion and threats of curtailment from oil war conflicts, and later on, cummulative disasters to our economy from extreme weather.

Here is typical analysis of our average carbon budget, for keeping a liveable world of less than 2 degrees of man-made global warming. [2]

2° C Target - Personal Carbon Budget (t CO₂e)



Note: Emissions totals for 2020-2050 are based on a pathways for limiting likely temperature increase by 2100 to 2°C above pre-industrial levels. 'Personal' includes the sum of emissions of the consumption categories: housing, travel, food, products and services. BAU is the 'business as usual' forecast for total emissions. The analysis assumes global population of 6.1 (2000), 6.9 (2010), 7.5 (2020), 8.3 (2030), 8.8 (2040), 8.9 (2050) billion people.

Source: Authors own calculations, IEA, UN



Reductions on this scale cannot be done on an individual basis. They also require a lot of “collaborative consumption”, and frugal living. A cooperative minimisation of waste production, by a high degree of community sharing capital, resources, and energy, with local integration of nature reuse cycles, and human circular economies. Our current models of production, profits and waste do not begin to touch it.

Those extra emissions Australia has compared to the rest of the world include a lot coal burned for electricity, and a lot of oil burned for transport. What a total waste of time the last decades of Australian Federal Government have been.

Coal run out of town

The Coal mining industry in Australia, and its coal peddling, lobby driven politicians, needs to be terminated with extreme prejudice very soon, replaced by whatever renewable energy sources we can still build, while global oil supplies last long enough to support the mining and transport industrial base of global trade. As for hopes of companies like AGL to build more gas-fired electricity generators, there is enough evidence available now, that Natural Gas, and Fracked Gas, are as bad as Coal for global warming, and may make a renewable energy transition more expensive than otherwise necessary. Gas Profits and global climate safety are incompatible.

Energy and waste reduction 10 - fold challenge

The implications for waste processing is that with a ten-fold reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, a ten-fold reduction in waste production is implied, with drastic implications for our throw-away waste producing society. Some of our greenhouse gas emissions will still occur because of waste production. There are many new jobs to be had in a properly designed, nearly circular, materialistic economy.

Soil wants its waste back

Human waste and organic waste is another significant issue for the maintainance of agricultural soil, fertility and nutritional content of our soil-based civilisation. As cheap and easy supplies of phosphorus disappear, and nitrogen-fertiliser will no longer be made in vast quantities from methane gas sources, there is the standard problem of capturing all animal and human excrement, rich in these chemicals which were originally present in soils, that need to be brought back to soils, so that the “metabolic rift” of industrial civilisation, can be healed. The “metabolic rift” was highlighted by Karl Marx. The oil based stop gaps end soon, and organic nutrient replacement is the remaining source, in a finite recycled world.

Our waste is growing out there

Now we have vast dead zones growing in our oceans, deoxygenated by flows of waste nitrogen from agriculture, and made worse by ocean heating, leading to water layer stratification and further deoxygenation. Other oceanic waste includes the growing concentration of micro-plastics and plastics crowding out the remaining fish.

Trade is waste

Local recirculation of soil chemicals and metabolites implies that economies for the large part, under energy and greenhouse gas emission restrictions, become very local compared to today's global food distribution markets, as the costs of large shipping distances will get higher. The reasons are simple enough. Renewable energy in its raw and immediate storage forms are not exportable long distances. Transmission involves energy loss. Hence the complete hostility to these in Australia by capitalist and financial class interests. that wish to earn international currency by materials and energy trade. Trade will reduce to specialist capital products in the absence of large scale fossil fuel mining and distribution. That is entirely necessary for longer term survival of our global warming crisis.

Waste shrinkage means no waste incinerator

Our current cities with high population density, with high energy and ecological footprints are un-maintainable in the coming age of oil depletion and fossil fuel abandonment. There is to be expected, even now, a decline in average energy, housing affordability, services per person, and even waste production per person. Much of this expectation comes directly from observations about Energy Returned on Energy Invested.

Government investment required for regulated community empowerment

Net energy decline, or decline in “energy productivity”, ensures greater poverty, which can only be relieved by greater community resource sharing. Unfortunate it is that declines in government

revenue and extreme wealth inequality growth, privatisation profits, ensure presently that community resources, including better waste processing, are being starved. Investment will be mandatory for survival. For this, other prosperity and wealth goals need to be tempered.

Private pollution profits are ruled out

It seems that someone has a personal plan to burn as much waste as possible, proposed as an adhoc, profit making, cheap solution, which is not integrated into our national waste policy, not integrated into nature's greenhouse gas emissions, nature's cycles for everything, and not making any progress towards our real existential and interlinked, economic growth, capitalism, profit-centred, global waste production crises. Burning waste is evidence of systemic failure of our resources management. Waste management does not easily fit into a private profit making system.

Of course, if capitalism had always been mindful of "doing the right thing", it wouldn't have had enough profits left to be able to grow into the world eating cancer we have today. Waste and pollution is the direct consequence of treating nature and life very cheaply.[4]

Capitalist societies make the same mistake over and over again. Nature's forgiveness is not boundless. The aim of economic policy should not be to keep a small segment of society in the wealth profits to which they feel entitled, but to always to manage a balance of creation and destruction, so all life continues to evolve and wins.

References

- [1] <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/may/1525096800/alex-mckinnon/our-waste-policy-rubbish> "The Monthly" Alex McKinnon - May 2018
- [2] <http://shrinkthatfootprint.com/carbon-targets-for-your-footprint> Shrink That Footprint, Carbon targets for your footprint.
- [3] <https://thesourcebulkfoods.com.au/> Bulk foods stores. Yummy, everything that can fill as big container as you like.
- [4] A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet. Raj Patel, Jason Moore.