

## EDITORIAL

### *Take It Down to Zero*

I just got back from a walk in my neighbourhood. I wish you'd been there.

It's our garbage day tomorrow and in the back lane is marshalled one-week's collection of my neighbours' household discards. A computer monitor and a set of stereo speakers. Cans of old paint. An Ikea desk and bed frame (broken). A 20-pound propane tank. A broken rake. Two tire rims. Two television sets. The back panel of a Mazda pick-up truck. A crumpled lampshade. A heap of carpeting.

All these items are put out on the back lane with the expectation that the city will pick them up and figure out what to do with them. For over a hundred years, we have been putting things out and "they" have been taking them away.

Think what would happen without this convenient weekly pick-up by the city. My neighbours would soon realize just how much garbage they create. When the waste disappears every week, we don't see what a year's accumulation would look like. Picture 20 stacked-up refrigerators' worth of garbage – that's how big a pile of waste each household in Canada generates in a single year.

And picture this: the yearly pile has grown from 12 refrigerators' worth since 1993, the last time Alternatives took a close look at waste.

In this issue of Alternatives, we look back again at our seemingly insoluble garbage problem. Once again we ask: Why do we still create so much waste, more and more each year, despite all our efforts to Reduce, Reuse and Recycle?

One answer might be that we have created public institutions to manage our waste. Our convenient weekly municipal garbage service provides the safety valve that allows us to sustain our consumerism. If the public waste system didn't pick up all our discards – providing, in effect, "charity for waste" – what other solutions might emerge?

Local governments in the Kootenay Boundary region in British Columbia are slowly weaning their citizens off their addiction to waste, prohibiting the disposal of products that can be recycled. National governments in Europe are looking at the fastest-growing category of waste, computers and electric appliances, and forcing producers to take them back and recycle them. In both cases, government policies are directed at waste prevention, rather than waste clean-up.

Once recycling is mandatory and producers can no longer count on public charity, they will begin to design waste out of their products. Diapers will be certified for recycling or composting and these features will be a selling point – the producer's "extended warranty". We will discover, as the airlines have, that waste prevention is a transformative principle that vitalizes business.

A century ago, our waste looked a lot like that in the developing world today, and municipal collection is still promoted as the "progressive" solution. Will countries like Cambodia follow our example and become Throw-Away Societies where public waste collection enables rampant consumerism? As Kate Parizeau reminds us in this issue: we have a lot to learn before we start telling others how to manage their waste.

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