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The War on Plastics: The Narrative Must Be Fed

BY KERRY JACKSON

California is now the first state to require plastic beverage containers to contain a minimum content of recycled material. A step forward? Hardly.

The bill, signed by Gov. Gavin Newsom on Sept. 24, the day after he issued an executive order outlawing the sale of internal-combustion engine vehicles by 2035, requires plastic beverage containers to be made of 15% postconsumer recycled plastic by 2022, 25% by 2025, and 50% by 2030. Manufacturers that don't meet the standards will be subject to "an administrative penalty."

Newsom is calling it the "world's strongest recycled content standards." But the world doesn't need tougher recycling mandates. The world needs more common sense and less attention to appearances.

Recycling has become a religious experience. Almost a quarter-century ago, journalist John Tierney wrote a lengthy essay in the *New York Times Magazine* headlined "Recycling Is Garbage." It thoroughly discredited the practice and naturally received the most hate mail ever at the *Times*.

Tierney has written a number of follow-ups, the most recent a piece in *City Journal*, which lawmakers and the governor should have read before passing and signing Assembly Bill 793.

“*Much of today’s environmental policy is based not on protection but on appearances. Elected officials make a show of their commitment to a greener future.*”

The headline—“Let’s Hold On to the Throwaway Society” – and subhed –“Disposable products are sanitary, efficient, and environmentally sound”—are not merely attention-grabbers. They sum up quite well an important, but largely ignored, message.

Tierney argues convincingly that the war on disposable products is a reversal of progress. Readers are taken back to “the start of the 20th century,” when “American consumers were still living in what today’s greens would consider a state of grace.” It was an unsanitary era in which people drank from a common pathogen-spreading tin cup chained to a water fountain rather than a styrofoam cup that could be tossed after one person used it. The practice horrified public health officials and gave birth to “the throwaway society.”

Despite disposable products’ value, by the 1970s, “an army of activists and scholars was inventing one reason after another to” eliminate them, says Tierney. As a result, “the most affluent society in history suddenly turned into a mass of neurotic hoarders. Sifting through garbage for valuables, an activity formerly associated with the most destitute inhabitants of Third World shantytowns, became a moral duty in American suburbs.”

While the new California recycling law won’t turn the state back to the common drinking cup, and other foul practices, such as using common towels in public restrooms, it is hardly an advance. Just as recycling was garbage when Tierney wrote his *New York Times Magazine* article in 1996, it still is today.

It’s often more expensive to recycle plastic into something useful than it is to manufacture an all-new plastic product. Recoverable materials have to be collected separately from the waste stream, sorted, and cleaned rather than dropped in landfills, which are truly modern marvels rather than the filthy and infested city dumps of the past. Earlier this year, *Plastics Recycling*

Update reported that “virgin plastic could be significantly cheaper than recycled resin for the foreseeable future.” In forcing manufacturers to incur greater costs, Sacramento is levying a de facto tax on consumers in the form of higher prices for beverages in plastic containers.

The economics of recycling also depend on China, which now refuses items it once routinely accepted in the past. In 2018, recyclable plastic shipments into the country collapsed, falling 99%.

At the same time recycling carries additional costs, its environmental benefits are, at best, questionable. Recycling plastic requires heat, which generates carbon dioxide emissions (a by-product of progress many Californians are deadly fearful of). Recycled plastics can also “present health threats to the people who come into contact with” them, says Sciencing, a “go-to resource” for students based in Santa Monica.

The melting process itself produces “volatile organic compounds, fumes that can harm plant and animal life near the industrial site,” and, unlike fossil fuel production, which is needed to make plastics, is not regulated.

Another drawback: Plastic can go through the recycling process only once, meaning much of it will ultimately end up in a landfill anyway. Is delaying the inevitable by a single generation of use worth the cost and environmental hazards?

Much of today’s environmental policy is based not on protection but on appearances. Elected officials make a show of their commitment to a greener future. Perception is more important than reality, the narrative of far greater worth than the facts. Nowhere is this more true than in today’s California.

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