

Informed

One of sustainable waste management's leading thinkers and authors, Robin Murray spoke to Charles Newman about the UK's changing relationship with its waste

Academics often struggle to communicate with a wider audience and economists talk a language that baffles the ordinary person. But, as many in the recycling sector will testify, Robin Murray is an exception – an industrial economist whose work and endeavour stretches beyond just a few knowledgeable colleagues.

"I like to work in institutions which are close to practice, so that there's a feedback between the practice of ideas and academic ideas." Robin has a long history of working with local and national governments, notably, since the waste summit in 2001, with the UK Government's Strategy Unit on waste policy. During his career so far he has also advised governments in Ethiopia, Kenya, Honduras, Jamaica and South Africa, experience that he feels has aided his under-

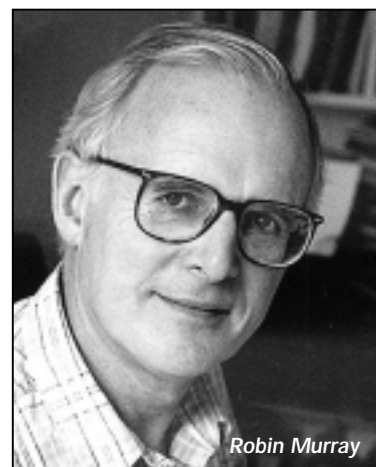
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"We've much more information about damage to the environment. And the more we can measure this, the more concerned we become. It has allowed earlier warning of what's going on"

concerns

collection, as it would diminish their power. So, like most proponents of recycling, Robin is pleased that the government has pledged to significantly raise the landfill tax in the longer term. "A waste company that I spoke to this week said it would take all its staff out for a champagne supper when landfill got to £30 a tonne, because that's the point when recycling becomes economical."

But he is wary that this could lead to unwanted results; waste managers may have sufficient incentive

directive from Brussels. He believes the real key will be to follow the practice of some southern European countries and provide a weekly kerbside collection for kitchen waste. By doing this it is possible to reduce the frequency for collection of residuals, which is "where the great economic savings come in".

Just as significant is the reform of the Landfill Tax Credits Scheme (LTCS). "The old system built up a very substantial lobby of those groups who had actually been

always known that when the terms of profitability change the big players will move in and there is a danger that the community sector will be crushed, as it has been abroad... Now the community sector has developed some of the things that large firms have, but there are still many bits of it which are, in my view, not adequately developed to face the challenge of the large waste management companies coming in to try and scoop the recycling pot with their version of recycling, which is not as effective as when you have a well-run community group interacting with households.

"If you are looking at large recycling contracts, the community sector has to have a much more available contract support system for bidding, it must have finance and financial backing, and further developed technical and support services for groups that have to step up from serving 10,000 households to serving 100,000. ECT has managed this in its own way, as has Avon FoE." Others will have to do the same.

Again, Robin has an eye on what the future could hold. Meticulously aware of the history that underpins the state we are in, it's his sense of the potential for change that stands out. "I find when I talk to people on the continent, particularly people in high recycling areas, they say to me is Britain still worried about recycling? The issue for them now is redesigning the whole industrial process; that's to say they've moved beyond recycling. It's a completely new way of thinking about individual processes of production, which is eco-design. It's eco-management of the whole lifecycle of a product." Recycling – a thing of the past? As always, Robin Murray makes the idea accessible and compelling, even if most people are just getting used to the idea of recycling as a thing of the present. **TWP ■**

"People on the continent are surprised we're still worried about recycling. They've moved beyond this. The issue is now about redesigning the whole industrial process."

to build incinerators, especially if this option comes at a predictable fixed cost, unlike recycling credits and revenue.

Aside from issues of resource preservation and wealth creation, Robin is worried about the health issues that incinerators pose and the government's pledge to look at disposal taxes in the light of this: "If you go to an incinerator and talk to the workers about what actually happens, then you have to make sure you do not leave out epidemiological studies."

Although conscious that there is a long way to go, Robin believes the Strategy Unit has made some important steps forward. Apart from encouraging a rise in landfill costs, the report identified the priority of detaching organic matter from the rest of the waste stream. He ruefully notes that the UK Government's notorious Animal By-Products order, which has stopped most composting of kitchen waste, is far more restrictive than anything suggested by the EU – in stark contrast to this country's typical stance of resisting any

receiving money to maintain the status quo, but it was an entirely anomalous experiment because it put the power in the hands of the waste management companies and, regardless of what the regulation said, this did affect who was given money and for what purpose." He is pleased that the government's Waste and Resources Action Programme is in the frame to take on an expanded role.

With higher targets set, the Strategy Unit report signals a firmer commitment to true sustainability, although much now depends on how it fares in the hands of different government departments.

It seems the UK is set to change its relationship with its waste. One implication of this is that the community sector will inevitably undergo some kind of transformation. "The community sector has embodied many of the new smart systems. At the level of collection and inter-connection with households, the community sector has been the leader, as it was in Germany and Canada, for example. This sector has