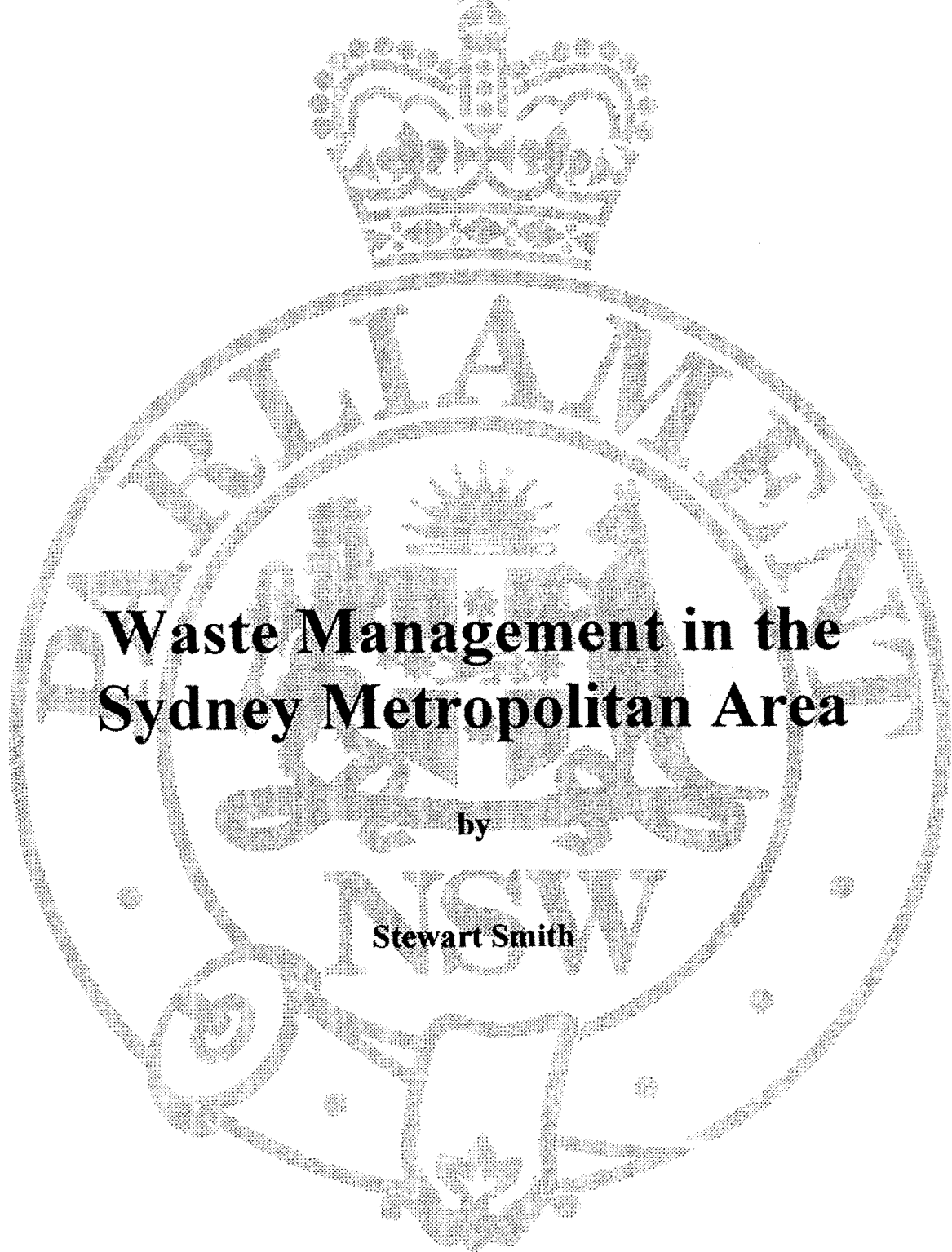


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**Waste Management in the
Sydney Metropolitan Area**

by

Stewart Smith

Briefing Paper No 29/94

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November 1994

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	3
2	History of Waste Disposal in the Sydney Metropolitan Area	3
3	No Time to Waste	5
4	Recent Developments	8

INTRODUCTION

Waste¹ disposal is one of the major environmental issues facing NSW and especially metropolitan Sydney. The majority of waste is buried in landfill depots². The problem is that these landfills are set to be full by the end of the decade. This difficulty is compounded by local community opposition to the siting of new landfills in their district, or the enlargement of existing ones.

In the last couple of years the government has proposed opening new or enlarging existing landfill depots. These proposals have all been shelved. Now, in an attempt to extend existing landfill life, the government has made a commitment to reduce the amount of waste being disposed of by half by the year 2000 (using 1990 levels as a base). To achieve this, in June 1994 the Government released the waste management strategy *No Time to Waste*³.

In order to appreciate the current waste management regime it is necessary to briefly discuss the history of waste management in Sydney.

HISTORY OF WASTE DISPOSAL IN THE SYDNEY METROPOLITAN AREA

- Prior to 1971 each of the 40 metropolitan councils were responsible for solid waste management and the operation of landfill sites. However, waste disposal had "become an environmental and operational nightmare. Fires, vermin infested piles of uncovered rotting garbage and leachate polluted streams and rivers (were) common"⁴.
- In response to the *Barton Report*⁵ on 15 June 1971 the NSW Government established the Metropolitan Waste Disposal Authority.

¹ Waste is defined in the *Waste Disposal Act* to mean effluent, garbage or trade waste. Effluent is defined as matter, solid, liquid or gas, which has been removed from a septic tank, grease trap etc; trade waste is defined as any matter which is refuse from industrial, chemical, trade or business process, including building or demolition work; garbage means any refuse other than trade waste or effluent.

² 78% of Sydney's solid waste is landfilled, 4% incinerated at the Waterloo incinerator, and 18% recycled.

³ No Time to Waste (1994) NSW Government Policy Statement on Waste. NSW Government, June 1994.

⁴ Waste Management Authority of NSW (1991) Annual Report 1990-1991, WMA Sydney.

⁵ Barton, A.E. Report by AE Barton upon investigations into the problem of waste disposal in the metropolitan area of Sydney. Gov. Printer. 1970. 38pp.

The Authority became responsible for waste disposal and operated landfill sites around Sydney.

- On 1 July 1989 the MWDA was replaced by the Waste Management Authority (WMA).
- In late 1990 the WMA produced and released the *Sydney Solid Waste Management Strategy*⁶ for discussion. The strategy emphasised that landfill was filling up fast and the need for more landfill sites.
- Following the above Strategy, Cabinet recommended the establishment of a new landfill site at Londonderry.
- In March 1991, following community opposition, the Government abandoned the Londonderry site and announced a review of waste disposal strategies. The Minister for Environment the Hon. Tim Moore M.P. also announced that *the Government would not own or build new landfill facilities*⁷. This set the scene for greater industry participation in waste management.
- In October 1991 the Waste Management Authority announced plans for the extension of the Lucas Heights landfill depot.
- 1 March 1992 the WMA was disbanded and the waste minimisation, recycling and environmental regulations function transferred to the new Environment Protection Authority. The WMA's other functions were incorporated into a new body, the Waste Recycling and Processing Service (WRAPS).
- Facing community opposition, in September 1992 the development application for the expansion of Lucas Heights landfill depot was withdrawn.
- In September 1992 the Government's Waste Management Green Paper⁸ was released. The Government adopted the Australian and New Zealand Environment Council (ANZECC) target of reducing waste by 50 percent. The paper recognised the key regulatory role of the EPA and the right to community based decision making about the location of

⁶ NSW Waste Management Authority (1990) *Sydney Solid Waste Management Strategy*. NSW Government.

⁷ Environment Minister Media Release, 26 March 1991. *Londonderry Tip Dumped*.

⁸ Hartcher, C. (1992) *Waste Management Green Paper. A Discussion Paper by the Hon. Chris Hartcher, MP., Minister for the Environment*. The NSW Government.

new landfill sites.

- The NSW Parliament established the Joint Select Committee upon Waste Management to examine and report upon the Waste Management Green Paper. In September 1993 the Committee reported back to Parliament⁹. The majority report endorsed many of the policy directions as outlined in the Waste Management Green Paper. This endorsement included the devolution of waste management to local councils, the privatisation of the waste industry, including putrescible landfills, and a greater emphasis on waste minimisation. A "Dissenting views" section was also included in the Committee Report. This section outlined the concerns of some of the members of the Committee. Concerns included the transfer of responsibility for waste to local government and the privatisation of waste management. The dissenters considered that the State Government is the most appropriate waste management operator, and that the EPA should regulate the waste industry.
- June 1994 the Government released its blueprint for reform of the waste management industry, *No Time to Waste*¹⁰.

NO TIME TO WASTE

The government's response to the challenge of reducing waste by half is contained in this document. It re-defines the roles of industry and local and state government. The policy has three major goals;

- Avoid the production of waste by individuals and the community;
- Reduce the waste going to disposal by reusing and recycling it;
- Dispose of the remaining waste in an environmentally responsible way.

The strategy places the responsibility for waste management back on local councils. Local councils are to group together to form Regional Waste Authorities and produce Regional Waste Management Plans for all normal domestic, commercial and industrial solid waste generated in their regions.

Regional Waste Authorities will be established under the Local Government Act as county councils.¹¹ The Authorities will be responsible for developing

⁹ NSW Parliament. Joint Select Committee upon Waste Management, September 1993.

¹⁰ *No Time to Waste*. NSW Government Policy Statement on Waste. June 1994.

¹¹ *No Time to Waste*, Local Government Overview Information Sheet.

and implementing waste management plans which will involve:

- profiling the regional population, industries and dwellings;
- detailing the nature and quantities of wastes generated in the region, both existing and projected for the future;
- develop an inventory of waste services, policies and facilities in the region;
- setting a year 2000 target for waste reduction and assessing options for meeting that target;
- selecting those policies, services and infrastructure to be developed and implemented to achieve waste reduction targets and ensure disposal of residual wastes;
- submitting the draft plan for EPA approval;
- securing waste disposal, processing and recycling services, and implementing chosen policies and services.

It is interesting to note that the Waste Authorities will be able to select their own year 2000 waste reduction target. Presumably this will have to be coordinated with the Government's commitment to reduce all waste by half by the year 2000.

Currently putrescible (waste that will decompose such as vegetation and food scraps) and liquid waste disposal is the domain of the Waste Service. The strategy allows for the private sector to provide the full spectrum of waste facilities. The Waste Service is to be corporatised, and the pricing of waste services is to be referred to the Government Pricing Tribunal.

Household waste forms a small percentage of overall waste produced in NSW. It is therefore important to reduce the amount of industrial waste entering landfills. *No Time to Waste* requires industry to develop formal Industry Waste Reduction Plans. These plans are to be drawn up by key industry sectors and the EPA under a system supported by conditions placed in licences under the Waste Disposal Act. The plans will require industry to¹²:

- identify the opportunities for reducing waste in product design, production and packaging;
- identify, on an industry by industry basis, ways to inform consumers about the environmental impact of products;

¹² *No Time to Waste*, Industry Overview.

- determine methods for reducing, re-using and recycling and safely disposing of waste;
- agree to targets for reduction, re-use and recycling
- specify the time frame for waste reduction;
- set in place a public monitoring and reporting program.

The strategy therefore provides industry with a framework to reduce waste other than by legislative means.

The strategy attempts to ensure a stronger regulatory environment for all waste operators by:

- developing guidelines indicating where landfill/incineration facilities cannot be sited due to physical environmental factors;
- designating waste disposal facilities under the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act* to require more detailed appraisal of sites and community consultation on the location of waste facilities;
- setting and enforcing strong pollution control standards for landfills and incinerators through the EPA
- requiring all landfill and incinerator operators to lodge a bond with the EPA to ensure they meet operational standards and rehabilitate sites after closure.

The fundamental idea of the strategy is to return the control of waste management to local communities, within an EPA regulatory environment. The EPA therefore plays a crucial role in these new administrative arrangements. Some have questioned the willingness of the EPA to take on the role of enforcing strong pollution control standards citing, as an example, the NSW Waste Service's Castlereagh Liquid Waste Depot being found to be in breach of the *Clean Waters Act*. The EPA did not prosecute the Service because this course of action was "not likely to be of any advantage in managing the existing contamination and minimising further contamination"¹³.

The concept of landfill operators lodging a bond with the EPA to ensure they meet operations standards and rehabilitate sites is a major strengthening feature of the regulatory strategy.

¹³ Sydney Morning Herald, 28 October 1994.

The strategy *No Time to Waste* has attracted criticism. The Local Government Association considers that the State government is trying to abdicate its responsibility for waste management¹⁴. The Association would like waste management to remain in public ownership and control, with the Waste Recycling and Processing Service replaced by a new waste management body comprised of a majority of elected local government representatives¹⁵. The Association would like this body to control revenue gained from waste disposal, with revenue committed to fund schemes to increase recycling, waste minimisation and composting schemes.

Environmentalists also argue that to privatise landfill depots would hamper efforts to reduce, reuse and recycle waste¹⁶. It is considered private operators of landfill would be eager to accept as much waste as possible to maximise returns rather than attempt to reduce the waste stream. The environmental groups would also like to see the State government responsible for the waste management industry, and in particular putrescible landfill depots¹⁷.

No Time to Waste considers that, if local councils become accountable for waste disposal in their region, they will be able to overcome community opposition to the siting of landfills in their area. However, as State authorities have been unable to site new landfills without considerable community opposition it may be open to some doubt as to how local councils will be able to achieve this.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In response to changing State Government policy, there have been several development applications (DA) by private companies to local councils to operate putrescible landfills. For example, Pacific Waste Management has submitted a DA to Penrith City Council seeking to extend its solid waste landfill at Badgerys Creek to also accept putrescible waste. The Council subsequently refused the application. Pacific Waste Management appealed and this is now the subject of an inquiry before the Land and Environment Court.

¹⁴ See "Govt. dumps its waste problem" Sydney Morning Herald, 24 June 1994, p.4.

¹⁵ See "Private dumps plan rubbished" Sydney Morning Herald, 2 February 1994, p. 5.

¹⁶ See "Lots of rubbish and nowhere to go. How is Sydney going to dispose of its garbage in the future?" Sydney Morning Herald, 31 March 1994, p. 5.

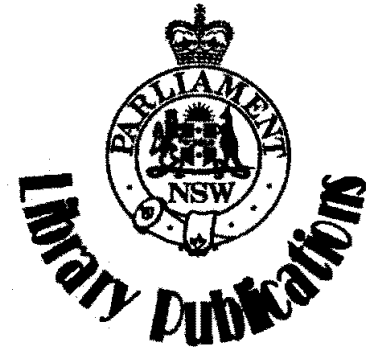
¹⁷ NSW Parliament. Joint Select Committee Upon Waste Management, September 1993, page 33.

Mrs F. Lo Po' MP introduced into the Legislative Assembly on 27 October 1994 the Badgerys Creek Waste Facility Bill. The Bill is designed to prohibit the establishment or use of a putrescible waste facility at Badgerys Creek.

It is thought that no new putrescible tips will be allowed by the government until the Regional Waste Authorities are in place. Some observers note that this may take some time, much longer than the December 1994 target as indicated in *No Time to Waste*. This will allow time for the EPA to produce environmental guidelines on the siting of new landfill facilities as discussed above.

The State Government may also be under some pressure in honouring previous commitments not to develop new putrescible landfill depots in a particular area when it is devolving site allocation to local government. This may necessitate Acts of Parliament to prohibit the operation of specific putrescible landfill sites.

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- (C) BRIEFING NOTE
- (D) STATISTICS

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<i>Cannabis: The Contemporary Debate</i> by Gareth Griffith and Rebekah Jenkin	1994/1
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(B) BILLS DIGEST

TITLE	NUMBER
<i>Legal Aid Commission (Amendment) Bill 1994</i> by Gareth Griffith	001/94
<i>Maritime Services (Offshore Boating) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by Sharon Rose	002/94
<i>Gaming and Betting (Race Meetings) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by Sharon Rose	003/94
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<i>Occupational Health and Safety Legislation (Amendment) Bill 1993</i> by Jan Newby	005/94
<i>Workers Compensation Legislation (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill 1993</i> by Jan Newby	006/94
<i>Property, Stock and Business Agents (Amendment) Bill 1994</i> by John Wilkinson	007/94
<i>Crimes Legislation (Unsworn Evidence) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by Gareth Griffith	008/94
<i>Bush Fires (Amendment) Bill 1994</i> by Rebekah Jenkin	009/94
<i>State Emergency and Rescue Management (Amendment) Bill 1994</i> by Rebekah Jenkin	010/94
<i>Police Service (Complaints) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by Sharon Rose	011/94
<i>Timber Industry (Interim Protection) Amendment Bill</i> by Rebekah Jenkin	012/94
<i>Privacy and Data Protection Bill 1994</i> by Gareth Griffith	013/94

<i>Health Legislation (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill 1994</i> by Jan Newby	014/94
<i>Retail Leases Bill 1994</i> by Gareth Griffith	015/94
<i>Environmental Planning and Assessment (Amendment) Bill 1994</i> by Rebekah Jenkin	016/94
<i>Mental Health (Amendment) Bill 1994</i> by Sharon Rose	017/94
<i>Crimes Legislation (Dangerous Articles) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by Sharon Rose	018/94
<i>Native Title (New South Wales) Bill 1994</i> by Rebekah Jenkin & Gareth Griffith	019/94
<i>Rural Lands Protection (Amendment) Bill 1994</i> by Rebekah Jenkin	020/94
<i>Motor Accidents (Amendment) Bill 1994</i> by Rebekah Jenkin	021/94
<i>Protected Disclosures Bill 1994</i> by Gareth Griffith	022/94
<i>Film and Video Tape Classification (Amendment) Bill 1994</i> by Gareth Griffith	023/94
<i>Constitution Further Amendment (Referendum) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by John Wilkinson	024/94
<i>Crimes (Detention After Arrest) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by Gareth Griffith	025/94
<i>Courts Legislation (Mediation And Evaluation) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by Rebekah Jenkin	026/94
<i>Criminal Procedure (Indictable Offences) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by Gareth Griffith	027/94
<i>Courts Legislation (Civil Procedure) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by Rebekah Jenkin	028/94
<i>Professional Standards Bill 1994</i> by Vicki Mullen	029/94
<i>Water Board (Corporatisation) Bill 1994</i> by Vicki Mullen	030/94
<i>Traffic (Penalty Defaults) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by Gareth Griffith	031/94
<i>State Bank (Privatisation) Bill 1994</i> by Vicki Mullen	032/94
<i>Tree Plantations (Harvest Security) Bill 1994</i> by Gareth Griffith	033/94
<i>Crimes (Prohibited Material) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by Gareth Griffith	034/94
<i>Community Protection Bill 1994</i> by Gareth Griffith	035/94
<i>Electricity Transmission Authority Bill 1994</i> by Vicki Mullen	036/94
<i>Forestry (Environmental and Fauna Impact Assessment) Bill 1994</i> by Stewart Smith	037/94
<i>Crimes (Dangerous Driving Offences) Amendment Bill 1994</i> and <i>Traffic (Negligent Driving Offences) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by Marie Swain	038/94
<i>Crimes (Home Invasion) Amendment Bill 1994</i> by Gareth Griffith	039/94

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<i>Reform of Defamation Law in New South Wales</i> by Vicki Mullen	028/94
<i>Waste Management in the Sydney Metropolitan Area</i> by Stewart Smith	029/94

(D) STATISTICS

TITLE

NUMBER

Quarterly Statistical Bulletin by Jan Newby

Vol 1 No 1 October 1993

Vol 1 No 2 March 1994

Vol 1 No 3 May 1994

Vol 1 No 4 August 1994

Vol 2 No 1 November 1994

TITLE

Electorate Profile - *Parramatta* No 001/94 by Jan Newby

Electorate Profile - *Maitland* No 002/94 by Jan Newby

Electorate Profile - *Manly* No 003/94 by Jan Newby

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