



This 'Blog' is in order to demonstrate that all human activities can be the subject of interesting analysis – even something as prosaic as litter picking.

Not in any way wishing to undermine the enthusiasm and public spirited engagement of volunteers, including elected representatives, in the Windlesham Society's regular litter picking exercises, I have to question the measure of success when it is being expressed in terms of the increasing volumes being collected. This suggests that one of the 'philosophical laws of perversity' coined by thinkers, economists and systems theorists, may be in play.

When regular litter picking appears to actively generate more litter we may be witnessing the manifestation of four distinct 'informal' laws:

1. The Cobra Effect (The Law of Unintended Consequences) – coined by economist Horst Siebert this states that an intervention to solve a problem often inadvertently incentivises behaviour that worsens it.

The Litter parallel : By efficiently removing the litter, you remove the negative visual feedback of the act.

The 'cost' of littering drops to zero, rewarding the litterer with a pristine canvas to use again.

2. The Law of Conservation of Misery (or Murphy's Law of Systems) – a more cynical view of the original Murphy's Law (that if things can go wrong they will, so they need to be designed or engineered out, a realistic engineering principle) – this suggests that problems are never truly solved, only shifted elsewhere. [NB. Not this Murphy !].



The Litter parallel. When you pick up the litter regularly, you are essentially introducing an external energy source (your labour) to mask a systemic failure – lack of civic pride or bins. The system ‘resists’ your fix by expanding the problem to absorb your extra energy, creating a frustrating equilibrium where your increased effort simply yields an increased volume of litter.

3. Goodharts Law. This ‘law’ states that ‘When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure’.

The Litter Parallel. If the volunteer group measures their success by how many bags of litter they collect the systemic incentive shifts. Subconsciously the system now requires high volumes of litter to prove the effectiveness of the project rather than focussing on the ultimate goal of reducing litter ‘production’ to zero.

4. Jevons’ Paradox (The Efficiency Paradox). Originating in economics, this natural principle states that increasing the efficiency with which a resource is used tends to increase – rather than decrease – the rate of its consumption.

The Litter Paralell. If a clean pavement is seen as a ‘resource’, by picking up litter rapidly and efficiently, you increase the ‘carrying capacity’ of that pavement for fresh litter. Because the space is cleared so quickly, it can ‘consume’ more individual drops of litter over a 24 hour period than a space that is left dirty and quickly hits a psychological limit.

This is like all ‘Blogs’, opinions, sometimes serious and sometimes ‘tongue in cheek’ but all with the intention of stimulating debate. Your opinions are always welcomed by windlesham.life

