

## Report from Paris by Emmanuel Grenier

### Wasted words on Europe, environment

*Ségolène Royal's hasty and draconian decree fits into anti-German frenzy fanned by the media.*

August witnessed the unfolding of a media soap opera in France on the subject of the waste products which cross the German-French border, culminating with the publication of a decree banning the movement of all waste through France. This decree had long been in the making in the Environment Ministry. Some people say that the affair blew up because the French media, after the Olympic Games, had nothing else to sink their teeth into—as if the Balkans war, the return of concentration camps to Europe, the starvation menacing 40 million Africans, were not enough to feed the headlines. But reality is different.

It had long been known that France was taking waste from Germany. Most of it is household garbage, which is treated in France under good conditions, and allows border regions to make profits on their incineration plants. A few scandals, long since exposed, remained—such as the long truck caravans which unload German waste around Toulouse, a city in central France. Also, there remained some traffic by shady networks, such as exporting toxic waste from hospitals as household garbage. But all of this had long been known both to Customs and the Environment Ministry.

When the decision was made—in the midst of media delirium—to hastily put out a decree on waste transport, Environment Minister Ségolène Royal told the newspaper *Figaro* of Aug. 21 that the “environment must take priority over the economy.” To the *Journal du Dimanche*, on Aug. 30, her argument was even more simplis-

tic: “Before Europe, there was traffic. With Europe, there will be no more,” a reference to the “single market” which is supposed to come about with the Maastricht Treaty. Everything which is positive fits into free trade; everything which is negative does not.

The facts refute her arguments. The European Court of Justice on July 9 laid down a clear ruling on cross-border transfers of dangerous waste. The judgment rebuked Belgium in these terms: “In introducing an absolute interdiction against warehousing, depositing, or discharging in the Walloon region hazardous waste coming from another member state, and in thus ruling out the application of the procedure established by Directive 84/631/CEE of the council, of Dec. 6, 1984, related to the surveillance and control in the Community of transfers across borders of hazardous waste, the Kingdom of Belgium failed in the obligations which are incumbent upon it by virtue of this directive.” France’s decree is even more draconian than Belgium’s, since it introduces a general ban of all imports of household waste, no longer just hazardous ones. If the European Court is consistent, it will have to overturn Royal’s decree.

As for “Europe,” by chiming in with the anti-German hysteria of certain media and politicians, the minister is not helping good relations to continue between the two countries which created the European Community and which remain its base. She joins the mob of Maastricht partisans who are playing on fear of Germany and old chauvinist reflexes.

As for the environment, to create confusion between household garbage incinerated in a duly controlled plant, under a legal and transparent contract, and hazardous hospital waste which is illegally imported and dumped, via deals between unsavory circles on both banks of the Rhine, will not foster a calm and responsible handling of the waste problem by citizens. The minister visited the industrial waste treatment plant of SARP Industries in Limay on Aug. 20, the European leader in this sector. She should have been able to get a grasp of how this activity is being conducted with state-of-the-art technologies and rigorous management methods.

There might be a silver lining in the waste affair, if it awakens the larger public to the results of so-called advanced “green” laws. Northern European countries—Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands—which want to be “cleaner all the time,” are the very ones that export more and more waste to their neighbors, after adopting draconian and unenforceable legislation at home. One could only hope that German environment czar Klaus Toepfer, who says he fully agrees with the French decree, while regretting its haste, and that from now on he wants to treat all German waste inside the borders, might take the occasion to re-discover the virtues of incineration with its recovery of energy, rejected for purely ideological reasons. Europe is fortunately now in the process of adopting the French approach.

But let us have no illusions. Waste trafficking is not going to stop with the Europe of Maastricht, if that happens. The rise of mafias in eastern Europe may make this traffic even more enticing. Eastern Germany and France, where waste was dumped before the Berlin Wall fell, will simply be replaced by other countries farther east or south.