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By George Monbiot,  
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## Waste Colonialism

The UK government is flagrantly flouting its own rules, allowing our scrap tyres to be sent to India for burning.

What we see is not the economy. What we see is the tiny fragment of economic life we are supposed to see: the products and services we buy. The rest – the mines, plantations, factories and dumps required to deliver and remove them – are kept as far from our minds as possible. Given the scale of global extraction and waste disposal, it is a remarkable feat of perception management.

The recent enthusiasm for plastic porn – footage of the disgusting waste pouring into the sea – is a rare reminder that we are still living in a material world. But it has had no meaningful effect on government policy. When China banned imports of plastic waste<sup>1</sup> a year ago, you might have hoped that the UK government would invest heavily in waste reduction and domestic recycling. Instead, it has sought new outlets for our filth. Among the lucky recipients are Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, none of which<sup>2</sup> have adequate disposal systems: as I write, our plastic is doubtless flooding into their seas. There's a term for this practice: **waste colonialism**.

Our plastic exports are bad enough. But something even worse is happening, that we don't see at all. Every month, thousands of tonnes of used tyres leave our ports on a passage to India. There they are baked in pyrolysis plants, to make a dirty industrial fuel. While some of these plants meet Indian regulations, hundreds – perhaps thousands – are pouring filth into the air<sup>3</sup>, as officials look the other way. When tyre pyrolysis is done badly, it can produce a hideous mix of toxins: heavy metals, benzene, dioxins, furans and other persistent organic chemicals, some of which are highly carcinogenic. Videos of tyre pyrolysis in India show black smoke leaking<sup>4</sup> from the baking chamber, and workers in t-shirts, without masks or any other protective equipment, cleaning tarry residues<sup>5</sup> out of the pipes and flasks. I can only imagine what their life expectancy might be.

India suffers one of the world's worst pollution crises<sup>6</sup>, that causes massive rates of disease and early death. There is no data on the contribution made by tyre pyrolysis plants, but it is doubtless significant. Nor do we know whether British tyres are being burnt in illegal plants there, as our government has failed to investigate. It seems prepared to break its own rules on behalf of the companies exporting our waste. And this is before *Brexit*.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/dec/07/chinese-ban-on-plastic-waste-imports-could-see-uk-pollution-rise>

<sup>2</sup> <https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2018/06/14/china-plastics-ban-malaysia-vietnam-poland/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/haryana/pollution-board-recommends-closure-of-three-pyrolysis-units/623198.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4eGqiJGyWw>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OD3U2\\_nkYS0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OD3U2_nkYS0)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/15/delhi-blanketed-by-smog-so-toxic-it-cant-be-measured>

Unlike plastic waste, there is a ready market for used tyres within the UK. They are – or were – compressed into tight blocks to make road foundations, embankments and drainage beds. It's not the closed-loop recycling<sup>7</sup> that should be applied to everything we consume, let alone the radical reduction in the use of materials required to prevent environmental breakdown. But it's much better than what's happening to our discarded tyres now. The companies that made these blocks have either collapsed or are in danger of going that way, as they can no longer buy scrap tyres: Indian pyrolysis plants pay more.

I was contacted by a leading tyre block broker, David L Reid. He was halfway through a major order from a local authority when his supplies dried up. The contract was lost, and the local authority had to switch to stone, costing it a further £200,000. He has other interests, so is able to weather this disruption, but his company, like others, has had to cease trading. With some of his competitors, he has been frantically trying to discover what the government is playing at, so far with little success.

Government guidelines<sup>8</sup> seem clear enough: exporters must be able to demonstrate that the final destination of the waste they send to other countries *"operates to human health and environmental protection standards that are broadly equivalent to the standards within the EU."* But when one tyre block company tested the UK Environment Agency's willingness to enforce this rule, by asking whether it could send tyres to pyrolysis plants in Africa that *"will not meet UK and EU pollution controls"*, the agency told him

*"your suggested business plan is acceptable as long as the relevant procedures and documents are completed correctly."*

The UK government's due diligence consists of asking tyre exporters which companies they intend to sell to, then asking the Indian government whether those companies are legit. It has made no efforts to discover whether the firms receiving these tyres are their final destination, or whether the Indian government is properly regulating them. It has no figures for UK tyre exports to India. Arguing that they are classed as *"green waste"*, it washes its hands of them as soon as they leave our shores.

To become a tyre trader, all you need to do is to fill in a *"U2 environmental exemption"*<sup>9</sup> form. Then you can buy used tyres from garages, ostensibly for bundling into construction blocks. But there appears to be nothing in British law (or at least in its implementation) to prevent you from using this licence to put them in a shipping container and send them to India.

I sent questions to the government about these issues but, despite repeated requests, it failed to send me a response on time. Reid has approached Michael Gove, his Labour shadow Sue Hayman, Liam Fox and other MPs and officials, all without answers. Does anyone care? Are the lives of people in India worth nothing to politicians in this country?

It appears that among the first people to export used tyres to India, in 2009, was Richard Cook. He is the former Conservative parliamentary candidate for East Renfrewshire who channelled £435,000<sup>10</sup> (whose origins remain mysterious) through Northern Ireland and into the *Leave campaign* in England

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/ce100/directory/closed-loop>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/importing-and-exporting-waste#article-18>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/waste-exemption-u2-use-of-baled-end-of-life-tyres-in-construction>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/brexitinc/adam-ramsay/fresh-concerns-raised-over-dup-s-secret-brexit-donation>

and Scotland. Investigations by openDemocracy<sup>11</sup> and BBC Northern Ireland<sup>12</sup> allege that his shipment was classified as illegal by both the Indian government and UK regulators. Indian law at the time forbade used tyre imports. Cook denied the allegations. After I tried to speak to him, his solicitor rang to say “we have intimated a claim for damages against the BBC for defamation” and will not be making further comment.

In principle, the government could be held to account on this issue by European law. But if this is the way it is prepared to operate before *Brexit* – flouting its own rules on behalf of British exporters – imagine what it might do<sup>13</sup> after we have left the EU.

Every child is taught a basic environmental principle: you clear up your own mess.

Our government seems happy to dump it on other people.

[www.monbiot.com](http://www.monbiot.com)

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/brexitinc/peter-geoghegan/revealed-dirty-secrets-of-dup-s-dark-money-brexit-donor>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-44624299>

<sup>13</sup> <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/brexit/no-deal-brexit-environmental-impact>