



By George Monbiot,
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Fishy Business

The ease with which I registered my dead goldfish as a waste disposer shows how total regulatory collapse has opened the door to organised crime.

It's a tragic story, with a happy ending. Until I was seven, I had a goldfish called Algernon. He wasn't the most exciting pet, but I was quite upset when I found him floating one morning on the surface of his little tank. This, or so I thought, was the end of a short and uneventful existence.

But a few weeks ago, I wrote a column¹ about the failure to regulate waste disposal in the UK. It showed how millions of tonnes of waste, some of it extremely hazardous, are now being handled by organised criminal networks, and illegally dumped or burned, presenting major hazards to our health and to the living world. It showed how the Environment Agency in England and its equivalents in the rest of the UK have lost control, to the extent that anyone can now get themselves officially licensed² as a waste disposer, using false information that can remain unchecked.

Some people found this hard to believe.

But as chance would have it, at that very moment, the spirit of my dead goldfish spoke to me. With a clarity he had never exhibited in life, he explained that he wished to be registered as an upper-tier carrier, broker and dealer in waste.

This would ensure that anyone paying him to dispose of waste materials could be confident that he had met the requisite standards, and was not the kind of fishy operator who would take your money, dump your waste illegally, evade landfill tax and potentially land you, the unwitting householder, with a £5,000 fine for failing to exercise your "duty of care"³.

Perhaps motivated by a sense of guilt, as I had neglected him in life, I sought to fulfil his wishes. On the Environment Agency's website, I affirmed that he was a, ahem, sole trader and had no unspent convictions. I gave his name as Algernon Goldfish, of 49 Fishtank Close, Ohlooka Castle, Derby, and paid the requisite fee. It took less than four minutes.

A month on, my long-deceased goldfish remains on the register⁴ as a bona fide upper-tier waste dealer. If you want your rubbish safely removed, no job too big or too small, Algernon is your man.

Or your fish.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/24/waste-dumping-uk-environment>

² <https://environment.data.gov.uk/public-register/view/search-waste-carriers-brokers>

³ https://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/info/20705/reduce/2057/householders_duty_of_care

⁴ https://environment.data.gov.uk/public-register/waste-carriers-brokers/registration/CBDU414534?_pageState=result-waste-carriers-brokers

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Registration CBDU414534 – Algernon Goldfish

Registration number	CBDU414534
Business name	Algernon Goldfish
Registered as	Carrier, Broker, Dealer - Upper Tier ▶ Help with tier types
Applicant type	Sole trader
Registration date:	24/11/2021
Expiry date:	24/11/2024

Business address

Address	49, Fishtank Close, Ohlooka Castle, Derby, DE3 9LH
Postcode	DE3 9LH

Already, in other words, the system has fallen apart. The government says,

“We have pledged to reform the licensing system for waste carriers”,

but this has been going on for a long time, and the situation is likely to get worse.

Last month, the Environment Agency circulated two memos to its managers. They explained that while reports of pollution, illegal dumping and other kinds of damage are rising, grants for incident management have been reduced in real terms “by 90% in 10 years”. The only events to which it can still respond are those it is specifically funded to investigate, which means incidents at “regulated sites” (such as places handling radioactive waste, certain kinds of illegal waste and those involved in flood control) and water companies.

The memos instructed staff to “not routinely spend time” on anything other than acute catastrophes caused by other businesses. Members of the public reporting incidents at unregulated sites should be “reassured that their report is useful to help us prioritise our work”, and are effectively advised to take the law into their own hands, by speaking directly to the perpetrator. The agency’s officers are then instructed to “shut down report”.

In other words, unless you run a regulated site or are a water company, you can do what you damn well like. Mind you, as a constant stream of filth⁵ suggests, if you are a water company or a regulated site you can also do what you damn well like. Everything is fishy now, except our rivers.

There are two categories of crime in this country: those for which you can expect to be prosecuted, and those for which you can't. There's no consistent connection between the seriousness of the crime and the likelihood of prosecution. Bag snatchers stealing a couple of hundred pounds a week are more likely to be caught and charged than fraudsters emptying the bank accounts⁶ of elderly people. Carrying a few grams of cannabis is more likely to land you in trouble than dumping hundreds of tonnes of hazardous waste.

On one estimate, aside from the fake companies registered on the Environment Agency site, there are more than 250,000 unlicensed⁷ (in other words outright illegal) waste disposers in the UK. The number of con artists involved in ripping off vulnerable people and in white-collar fraud must also be high. According to the latest report by the auditors Crowe UK and the University of Portsmouth, in 2020 fraud cost people and businesses⁸ in the UK £137bn. Their estimate has risen by 88% since 2007. Yet only 0.4% of fraud⁹ is believed to result in a criminal sanction.

Many tens of thousands of people are likely to be involved in the industrial-scale money laundering¹⁰, tax evasion, shell companies, corrupt practice and concealment of assets¹¹ in the City of London and its satellites, and the UK's property market. Large numbers are running coercive labour rackets in farming¹², car washes, nail bars¹³, restaurants and other businesses. Altogether, it would not be surprising if more than a million people in the UK were engaged in the kind of organised crime that seldom leads to prosecution.

This is what you get from 40 years of deregulation. While good citizens are bound by ever more oppressive laws¹⁴, "the market", according to neoliberal theory¹⁵, should be released from regulatory constraint. Deregulation is a euphemism for destroying the effective capacity of the state to protect us from chancers, conmen and criminals. Empowered to cut corners, fishy businesses outcompete responsible ones and we begin to shift towards an organised crime economy.

As crime syndicates extend their reach and expand their wealth, they become politically powerful. Eventually, mafias become embedded in public life. This is what happened in the US during prohibi-

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jul/13/water-companies-britain-seas-sewage-fines-environment-agency>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/12/laws-protect-scams-enforcement-gutted>

⁷ <https://e93pibt92z7.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/An-Independent-Study-into-Fly-tipping-and-Unregistered-Waste-Carriers-in-England-FINAL.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.crowe.com/uk/insights/financial-cost-fraud-data-2021>

⁹ https://www.policyforum.laour.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/Tackling_serious_fraud.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2021/dec/08/uks-anti-money-laundering-measures-need-complete-reset-says-report>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/11/opinion/pandora-papers-britain-london.html>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/may/11/gangsters-on-our-doorstep>

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/21/what-does-your-10-manicure-really-cost-the-unvarnished-truth-about-nail-bars>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/01/imprisoned-51-weeks-protesting-britain-police-state>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot>

tion. You can see it at work today in Russia, Italy, Mexico and Lebanon. There is no obvious mechanism to prevent it from happening here.

When Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's chief strategist, announced that his aim was "*the deconstruction of the administrative state*"¹⁶, people were horrified. But in reality, it has been happening for years, on both sides of the Atlantic. It's just that they do it subtly. Our government couldn't simply close down the Environment Agency: people would be up in arms. Instead, it hacks the budget and creates an institutional culture of demoralisation and failure. The same goes for the other regulatory bodies.

Probity, integrity, trust? They sleep with the fishes.

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¹⁶ <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/30/politics/trump-bannon-administrative-state/index.html>