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The war on bags [1]

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So: Marks & Spencer says that it is going to make a 5p charge for plastic bags in its food stores. UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown is getting on the bandwagon, with a speech suggesting that such schemes should be compulsory. Two more examples of high-profile PR preening.

It's true that Britain's supermarkets use billions of plastic bags. Tesco alone dishes out about three billion of them each year (though they do give you a discount if you bring your own). But maybe you hadn't noticed ? plastic shopping bags are incredibly thin these days. They actually take up far less landfill space than the waste food we throw out.

Indeed, go to developing countries ? or remember back in the UK just a few decades ? and look in people's dustbins. They're not full of packaging, like ours, but they're full. They're full of potato peelings, orange skins and much else that in the UK is recycled for animal feed and other useful purposes, without being transported to and thrown out by consumers.

I'd guess that plastic supermarket bags account for less than a hundredth of a percent of the UK's carbon emissions. It's things like cars and home heating that cause the damage. Mind you, on any realistic assessment, UK motorists pay many times more in taxes on their fuel than any damage that their driving causes the environment. While energy (even with oil at $100 a barrel) is sufficiently cheap that most ways of insulating your home wouldn't pay you back for
decades.

So the Prime Minister's down on bags. It's gesture politics. More laws to curb free people, and more regulators and enviro-cops to burden the taxpayer. This policy should be wrapped up and thrown out.

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