

City Room - Blogging From the Five Boroughs

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To Deter Illegal Parking, Why Not a Little Shame?

By CLYDE HABERMAN

Does public shame not have a proper role in New York civic life? A dispute between the city's lawmakers and the mayor boils down to that question.

We're talking about a bill that the City Council has pushed through and that Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg makes clear he will veto. Passed unanimously, the legislation would force the Sanitation Department to stop pasting those garish stickers on the side windows of cars to tell the owners — and everyone else — that they violated the city's alternate-side parking rules and "as a result, this street could not be properly cleaned."

How inhumane! That pretty much summed up the attitude of many Council members.

Some cited the difficulty of removing the stickers and the gummy residue left behind. Suggestions that a less stubborn adhesive might be used from now on left them unappeased, though.

For the most part, this longstanding municipal practice is being cast as an outrage practically worthy of being brought before a tribunal in The Hague: Due process is violated! Car owners are judged to be guilty before being allowed to prove their innocence! "It's not reasonable behavior in the 21st century," said Councilman David G. Greenfield of Brooklyn, the bill's sponsor.

Others would say that what truly qualifies as unreasonable behavior — in this or any other century — is for people to selfishly leave their personal property on the street at the expense of neighbors who want Sanitation Department sweepers to pass through unencumbered.

That is certainly Mr. Bloomberg's view. "I think it's one of the least productive things that could be legislated," he said the other day about the ban. If this form of sticker shock is done away with, he said, "there's no reason to believe that we won't go back to the dirty streets that we had before."

The stickers have been around for 25 years. Between 8,000 and 9,000 of them are affixed to car windows in a typical month, the mayor's office says. In November, a Sanitation Department official told a Council hearing that on his agency's scale of cleanliness, streets now have an average rating of 94.8. Pre-stickers, he said, it was 73.

But Mr. Bloomberg may as well be shouting down an empty well. His veto is sure to be overridden.

The reality is that, when a choice must be made between clean streets and the interests of car owners, the Council's default position is to be auto-philic. Witness how it has steadily piled on the holidays when alternate-side rules are suspended. Once, it was a practice limited to national holidays and a few religious days — typically, occasions when observant Jews could not move their cars because of strictures against driving. Now it flourishes in a me-too culture.

There are 32 holidays when the rules are called off, 42 days in all — from Purim to Diwali, from Ash Wednesday to Id al-Fitr. The way an ethnic or religious group knows it has arrived as a force in this city is for streets to be left dirty in its honor.

But it is something else entirely when people are simply too self-absorbed to move their cars, thus depriving everyone else of cleaner streets. As an aide to the mayor said, some New Yorkers will accept a parking summons as the cost of owning a car in the city. The stickers are not so easily shrugged off.

That brings us to the Hester Prynne factor. Yes, the sticker is a form of public humiliation. But so what? Is shaming undeserved when people give not a second's thought to the common weal?

Some dog owners simply refuse to obey the pooper-scooper law. Would it be wrong for neighbors to post notices that John Doe would not clean up after his pet had fouled the sidewalk?

Might we all not be better off if condemnatory stickers were pasted on the car windows of drivers who (all too infrequently) are stopped by the police for texting while behind the wheel? Or for running a red light? Or barreling dangerously into a pedestrian-filled crosswalk?

Do people who gratuitously make life unpleasant for everyone else not deserve having a measure of shame visited upon them?

It brings up what Mark Twain said of human nature: "Man is the only animal that blushes."

"Or needs to," he added.

Apparently, the City Council doesn't agree, certainly not when illegal parkers are at issue.