

When equal doesn't equal fairness

by Sabine Eiche

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A string of English words grew out of the Latin adjective “aequus” (meaning level, equal, morally fair) – equal, equality, equity, equanimity, equator, and so on. Interestingly, there are also comparative and superlative forms for “aequus” – so, are there degrees of moral fairness? Or are we all equal?

The City of Richmond certainly seems to believe we're all equal, which is to say the same, at least when it comes to extorting fees for garbage collection. Like other local residents, I've just received the metered utility bill, the one including the annual fees for garbage. This year I'm being charged \$217.22, over \$9 more than last year. In 2012, it was \$197.23, in 2011 \$191.17, and in 2010 \$154.28 (what happened between 2010 and 2011 to make the rate shoot up almost 24 percent?).

I live in a neighbourhood where many houses are rented out. Sometimes there are as many as ten people living in various units in what is still referred to officially as a single-family residence. On garbage collection day, these tenants drag out their garbage cans, which are always jammed to the brim.

Last year I began to wonder how Richmond calculated the garbage fees. I enquired at City Hall and was told that the rates were the same for all single-family houses. “Regardless of the number of people residing there or the quantity of garbage they produced?” I asked. The city clerk nodded her head. According to these terms, someone like me, putting out garbage every three or four weeks, is charged the same as people who put out their two 100-litre containers, full to bursting, every week.

Now, when water meters were introduced in Richmond, residents were given the chance to pay only for what they consumed. To everyone's delight, costs plummeted. The garbage-recycling programme is currently being redesigned, and from what we can read in the leaflets sent around, there are highly commendable changes in store, with enormous benefits for the environment. Why can't the city go a step further and devise a method for applying a garbage collection fee based on the number of people occupying the residence and the quantity of garbage they produce?

It can't be that difficult. It's done elsewhere. In Florence, when I became a resident, I filled out a form indicating the location and size of my apartment and the number of people living at that address – in my case, one. I was charged a rate based on what was calculated to be the average amount of garbage produced by a single person in an apartment of that size. Incidentally, garbage was collected every single week-day in Florence.

In the town in southern Germany where my aunt lived, they used another system for calculating garbage collection charges – they weighed the garbage cans! That got people seriously weighing – in the sense of evaluating – what had to go into the garbage and what could be recycled.

So, Richmond, how about it? What will you do? Count heads? Weigh garbage? Whatever you do – stop believing that all single-family houses contain only one family. Do SOMETHING to make equal equal fair.