

Group two

With emigrants in the United States now able to vote in Mexican elections has the Finance Ministry's attention lately focussed on the great Los Angeles leaf blower controversy. That's why they've called on you. "The United States has long made it a policy of telling Mexico how to operate, and we are very grateful for their advice," the Finance Minister has told you, "we think we should reciprocate here."

The attached articles describe what the controversy is about. Gardeners in Los Angeles, many of whom are Mexican emigrants, use leaf blowers in their work; so do many Los Angelenos who do their own gardening. Leaf blowers, however, are noisy and polluting, and many residents oppose their use, particularly at inconvenient times of the day. The city council has responded with bans on leaf blower use, but these continue to be subjects of acrimonious debate.

The first task the Finance Minister wants you to do is to analyze the impact of a leaf blower ban on the wages and employment of Mexican emigrant gardeners in Los Angeles. Who will be made worse off by such a ban? How will the burden be allocated among workers, owners, and customers? What is a substitution effect, and what is a scale effect? What elasticities are relevant? What are the plausible relative values of these elasticities? Also you should explain why your analysis differs from the analysis done by the gardeners themselves.

The second task is to devise possible alternative policies (unless you think none is better for Mexican emigrants than the complete ban). In assessing these policies, you should be primarily concerned about their impact on Mexican emigrant gardeners, but you should also consider their effect on the people who don't like blower noise, since it is these people, or some subset of them anyway, who will have to be persuaded that implementing these proposals is a good idea.

Some of the ideas that the Finance Minister has heard discussed and wants your views about include:

- Putting time restrictions on the use of leaf blowers. One proposal here is to allow leaf blower operation only between 9 am and 5 pm, Mondays to Fridays, excluding holidays.
- Banning blowers, but simultaneously establishing a yard code, with stringent requirements on how well lawns must be maintained.
- Banning leaf blowers, but funding through the Mexican government a series of prizes for the best-maintained lawns in each of the neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Winners of the prize for, say, best-maintained lawn in Westwood would get a free vacation in Acapulco or Cancun.

- Banning leaf blowers, but lobbying for the reduction of LA water prices; or subsidizing water prices; or asserting Mexican authority over the Colorado River and diverting water from agriculture to LA.
- Establishing a fairly heavy tax on the sale of leaf blowers in California. You would have to decide what to do with the proceeds.
- Establishing a fairly heavy tax on the sale of gasoline for leaf blowers in California. You would have to decide what to do with the proceeds.
- Requiring a license to operate a leaf blower in Los Angeles, and limiting the number of licenses. They would be tradable, but someone would forfeit his or her license if she violated any other restrictions on the use of leaf blowers.
- Requiring a license, and restricting the license to people who can show that they will be able to operate their leaf blowers during the permitted hours of 9 to 5, Monday to Friday.
- Charging a substantial daily fee to all license holders.
- Banning the use not only of leaf blowers, but also of power lawn mowers, rakes wider than two feet, and any implement that was not used in Los Angeles in 1900.
- Allowing neighbors the right to sue each other, both for poorly maintained lawns and for excessive gardening noise; and funding a legal services division to facilitate these neighborhood improvement initiatives.
- Offering to take all the leaf blowers that are not needed any more in Los Angeles, and distributing them free to gardening companies in Tijuana and Mexico City.

Of course, you should feel free to consider any other idea you might have.

You should make a 20-minute presentation to the Minister and his top officials. You should also prepare a draft letter from President Fox to Mayor Riordan that outlines the new leaf blower policy of the Government of Mexico.

Copyright 1998 Cox News Service

January 12, 1998

HEADLINE: GARDENING LIFE: Turn over a new leaf: Ban blowers

BYLINE: By LEE MAY

Noise matters. Anyone who doubts that need only look at the clash over leaf blowers in Los Angeles; a battle that has drawn national attention and counts among its combatants actress Julie Newmar, a leaf-blower hater.

The 12-year conflict has pitted neighbor against neighbor, quiet-loving homeowner against blower-toting gardener and has led to a city ordinance that ranks among the strongest in the nation; it outlaws use of gas-powered blowers within 500 feet of residences.

Claiming that banning leaf blowers deprives gardeners (many are poor immigrants) of jobs, the Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles organized a fast on the steps of City Hall to protest the ordinance. No sympathy from Newmar and other celebrities, who themselves had spent a lot of time lobbying City Hall to get the ban enacted.

Moreover, Newmar distributed anti-blower leaflets in her neighborhood and spray-painted the word "ruido" (Spanish for noise) near a neighbor's house when he refused to silence his Latino gardener's blower. Some opponents deride the leaf blowers as phallic symbols.

Tuesday, the ban, whose implementation had been delayed, was finally approved by the Los Angeles City Council. Violators could face fines and fees up to \$270, a reduction from original legislation allowing fines of \$1,000 and six months in jail. The ban's in the hands of Mayor Richard Riordan, who's expected to do the right thing; let it be law.

All this raises intriguing possibilities: What if lots of people in lots of other places rose up against leaf blowers? Imagine, as Newmar's leaflet suggests, hopefully, "the sound of rakes and brooms on a walk or driveway."

The thought takes on increasing significance as late winter approaches; there will be a lot of leaves to get rid of because many of us left them where they fell in the fall. Easy mulch. And now that so many people use blowers not just for leaves but for blowing off grass clippings, too; well, the idea of a leaf-blower backlash is downright delightful.

Easy for me to advocate; I garden on a lot the size of a postage stamp, one of my big-lot friends pointed out when I cheered on the anti-blower forces the other day. My retort: Even so, because my neighborhood has so many big old trees, dozens of bags of leaves, acorns, blooms and other tree droppings fall on that little plot every season.

To be sure, a leaf blower's mighty tempting. In fact, I bought one several years ago, an electric one with a long orange cord. Used it a few times, even. I gave it up for a very simple reason: Noise matters.

I just couldn't stand listening to the din. And the gasoline machines are even noisier than mine, which now languishes in the shed. The deafening racket is bad enough if you're behind closed doors and windows. But if you venture outside, it's absolutely assaulting, like loud music and raggedy mufflers. Long after using the blower, I'd hear it roaring in my ears.

So I went back to rakes and brooms. And hands in spots too tight for store-bought implements.

That was long ago. My brief fling with a leaf blower brought home to me how soothing a rake and broom can be. The steady strokes, the easy scraping, are natural, gardenlike. Too, like watering with a hose, raking the ground puts me in close touch with individual plants and with the garden as a whole. Raking is a caress, leaf blowing an attack.

Nevertheless, I understand that some people make a living blowing leaves and grass and dust. I understand the concern of all who don't want a ban on leaf blowers to put them out of work. I have a solution: Let them get rakes.

Los Angeles Times

January 8, 1998, Thursday, Home Edition

HEADLINE: FAST TESTS STRENGTH OF GARDENERS; ACTIVISM: Men Continue Hunger strike Over Ban on Gasoline-Powered Leaf Blowers. Riordan expresses support for Less Restrictive Law.

BYLINE: MATEA GOLD, TIMES STAFF WRITER

They came to Los Angeles from small villages and large towns in Mexico to find one simple thing: work.

But here, these immigrants have been drawn into a complex debate over how to strike a balance between one group's pursuit of economic opportunity and another's desire to protect what its members call their quality of life. It is a debate that has transformed gardeners into unlikely activists on the front lines of civic politics.

Convinced their cause is just, eight men are fasting on the steps of City Hall, protesting the city's decision to ban the gasoline-powered leaf blowers the gardeners say they need to make a living. Some of the hunger strikers have been gardeners for decades, their backs bent and their skin bronzed from years of working under the sun. Others are younger men, fresh with the vigor and pride that comes with a first job.

All are members of the year-old Assn. of Latin American Gardeners, a group that was formed to fight the leaf blower ban and ended up unionizing almost 1,000 gardeners.

Jesus Sandoval, 18, thinks about his parents back home in Jalisco, Mexico, and hopes they will understand why he will send them less money this month. Juan Marquez, 39, wants to take a stand for the poor and voiceless. And Robert Cabrera, 27, holds his 5-year-old son on his lap and hopes he won't have to orphan him to prove his point.

They have had only water and sports drinks since Friday. One man had to go home Tuesday night after doctors said his blood pressure was dangerously low. Two more would go home Wednesday for the same reason. Their remaining comrades worried about a predicted rainstorm that could make their vigil even more difficult.

But on the fifth day of their hunger strike, the men were losing energy, not resolve.

"This is the only way to get them to listen to us," Cabrera said. "We have to show them the poor have hearts. We need the tools for our jobs."

The gardeners hope Mayor Richard Riordan will veto the controversial ban, which was approved after Westside homeowners complained about the noise caused by the machines.

But in a meeting with organizers Wednesday, the mayor said vetoing the law would put into effect an earlier version of the ban, one that would jail offenders.

"I cannot in good conscience put something on the books that sends gardeners to jail," Riordan said when he met with two of the fasting organizers. The hunger strikers talked with the mayor as he quickly finished his own hamburger lunch. Despite Riordan's reservations, the gardeners have not given up hope of changing his mind.

On the grass in front of Parker Center, one of the strikers demonstrated a new, quieter leaf blower they hope to use. Riordan listened to the machine and agreed to help persuade the City Council to consider a less restrictive law. He promised to meet with the strikers again today, along with some City Council members and a manufacturer of the new leaf blower.

Meanwhile, the gardeners braced themselves for another cold night of waiting.

"I want to set a good example for my family," said Sandoval, who lives with four friends in a house in Canoga Park. "In unity, we have strength. We will make it."

Sandoval has only been in the United States two years. A friend taught him gardening, and he has been sending most of the money he makes back home to his parents and three brothers in Jalisco. He's afraid to tell them what he is doing, especially since his older brother here disapproves.

"He thinks I'm crazy," Sandoval said, smiling slightly. "He thinks I'm going to die. But I know everything is going to be OK." Ultimately, the gardeners hope their organization will help them get group medical insurance, a workers' cooperative and a formal group to fight employer exploitation.

Adrian Alvarez, an organizer who helped form the group, said the strike is about more than a ban on leaf blowers. "We're on hunger strike for the right to earn a living wage," said Alvarez, who became an activist as a student at UCLA in the late 1980s. In 1987, he and others fasted for nine days to pressure the administration to continue financial aid for undocumented students.

"Presently, the leaf blower is the only viable alternative for gardeners, but if they came up with something else, we would use it," he said. "This current law is not a Solomonic piece of legislation. Hopefully, we can come up with a wise solution."

This is the first political action for the others. But when the group looked for volunteers to go on a hunger strike, none of them hesitated.

Jaime Perez, 29, arrived back in Los Angeles from Mexico only 15 days ago. During the past decade, he has come every other year to earn money for his family in Jalisco. This year, he decided to join the protesters with his friend Pedro Gonzalez, 34, whose wife did not want him to fast. Perez's wife, back in Jalisco, does not know.

The two men sat next to each other and offered murmurs of support.

"I'll stay out here as long as I can," Gonzalez said. "They need to know they can't just take away our blowers. It's like cutting off our finger. It's an injustice."

Later in the afternoon, a doctor told Gonzalez that his blood pressure was dangerously low. Organizers sent him home, assuring him there were enough people to carry on.

While they waited, the other strikers sat in patio chairs in front of City Hall wearing green caps. Three small tents have been erected on the lawn under a big black sign that says "HUNGER STRIKE."

Many of the men have beards several days old and dark circles under their eyes from lack of sleep. While they rested, young children raced up and down the white steps, mothers and wives huddled in small groups nearby, and other gardeners stood by to lend support.

Marquez leaned back in a folding chair and closed his eyes. For 14 years, the North Hollywood gardener has cut grass and trimmed bushes. Now he sits idly and feels the strength flow from his body. He thinks about his 6-year-old daughter at home, terrified that her father is going to die.

"I know this is dangerous, but I don't have another way to buy food for my kids without using the blower," said Marquez, a native of Zacatecas, Mexico, and father of six. "That's how I earn my living. Do they want my family to be homeless?" Many of the men said their work will take at least twice as long without the assistance of the motorized blowers. Their customers are not willing to pay more for slower work, they said.

Maria Cabrera sat next to her husband Roberto while their 6-month-old son wriggled on her lap. She brings her three children to City Hall every morning. They stay until midnight, when they catch the bus back to their home in Hollywood.

"I'm so worried about him," she said softly. "I'm afraid of the consequences of what could happen to him. But the cause is important. It's worth it."

Dressed in pajamas, their 5-year-old son curled up in Roberto's lap. Roberto Cabrera has been preparing for the strike for several weeks, slowly eating less and less.

"We're willing to die to defend our people," he said. "In Mexico, we don't have a voice. There, it is dangerous to speak out. But this country is free. We can talk about injustice and protest it. We're going to win."

New Times Los Angeles
January 15, 1998, Thursday
HEADLINE: The Finger
BYLINE: By Rick Barrs

Blow Hard

Oh, how The Finger wanted to stay out of the leaf-blower controversy! Like other L.A. Neanderthals in attendance at a comedy club a few months ago, it had smiled at a Latino comedian's joke that Mexican immigrants seem to cross the border with the noisy contraptions surgically attached to their backs.

Then, practically every time The Finger pressed its remote-control to catch snippets of local TV news, it would be disgusted by rich, white Westsiders--including Hollywood celebs Peter Graves and Julie Newmar--whining about that noise and about alleged horrible pollution from the blowers. (Let's get real... L.A.'s air is the most polluted in the nation, but it's not because of leaf-blowers, for God's sake!) Yeah, all the rich-and-pampered practically weeping to our mega-wealthy mayor and our well-to-do City Council members that they just couldn't stand much more abuse from the city's brown-skinned gardeners! (It was enough to break your heart.)

Which caused The Finger to travel downtown last week to poke for itself into the gardeners' hunger strike on the lawn of City Hall. There, it found several hundred of the city's poor yard workers at a rally for the eight or 10 gardeners actually starving themselves to make a point important to their livelihoods. It should not escape us that this was a protest--not by people who refuse to work for a living, who shake styrofoam cups at us on the city's sidewalks--but by people who work hard for extremely low pay cleaning the yards of Angelenos who treat them worse than the shrubbery they tend...and who are too freakin' cheap to pay more than a pittance for the luxury of landscaping. (Graves and Newmar have loads of time on their hands now: The Finger suggests they take up rake and broom and start cleaning yards in their tony neighborhoods. "Ouch, I broke a nail!")

The leaf-blower controversy reminds The Finger of the old debate about short-handled hoes. It used to be that citrus farmers in California required field workers to use the tiny tools to tend crops, arguing that this was the only efficient way to do things. To hell with the fact that the hoes were breaking backs. Activists like the late Cesar Chavez put a stop to the practice.

Now come the manicured fat cats who have persuaded a City Council majority (led by cry-baby Westside Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski) and Mayor Howdy, a.k.a. Richard Riordan, to force the gardeners to abandon the noisy leaf-blowers in favor of much more expensive equipment, or the more likely option of sweeping and raking the city's yards, vast and small. Has anyone stopped to think about how much time the blower ban's going to cost these already overworked and underpaid people? And unless The Finger's missing something, nobody's talking about paying more for the work. (At The Finger's meager estate, a band of four leaf-blowing gardeners charges \$50 a month to clean for an hour or so a week--that's \$3.12 an hour per worker.)

The mayor attempted to explain to the gardeners the other day that he had no choice but to sign the latest leaf-blower ordinance, which calls for a fine of \$270 for each violation. Otherwise, he muttered, an earlier ordinance calling for jail time would have gone into effect. (As if the overburdened LAPD's going to put measly yard workers in the slammer for annoying ancient has-been TV actors like Graves, who told the council last week that he went to Manhattan recently and didn't hear any loud blowers. Hello... There aren't a whole lot of yards in New York City, fool!. "Now that a member of the I.M. Force has been caught making such a stupid comment, the Secretary disavows any knowledge of your actions.")

The best part of Hapless Howdy's rare appearance outside the boardroom was that he was munching on a greasy Bob's Big Boy as he tried to explain himself to the starving workers. Then (and The Finger's not kidding here), he invited them over to his greasy-spoon, The Original Pantry, for a hot meal. Adrian Alvarez, leader of the Latin American Gardeners Association, could only shake his head at the memory: "What can I say?" Jeez, Howdy, what the hell's the matter with you?! These people were starving themselves to make a point and you show up with burger juice dripping off your chin. The Finger's beginning to understand why your chief of staff Robin Kramer insists on pulling your public puppet strings, since whenever you make a decision for yourself, you wind up looking like a complete idiot.

Well, The Finger offers this suggestion to the gardeners, who ended the hunger strike Friday after promises to hold hearings on the blower issue from council members Mike Hernandez and Jackie Goldberg. Set up another hunger strike on the sidewalk in front of The Pantry. The fumes from the place will make it easier for you to avoid solid food for weeks on end. And as noted earlier in this space, Mayor Howdy will do almost anything to keep his beloved business from (ka-ching!) losing customers. Maybe even engineer a repeal of the blower ban.

One final note: Don't believe that bullshit about hearings to address your concerns. Blow-hard turncoats like Hollywood's Goldberg (who abandoned her liberal principles and voted for the ban) have no intention of going against glitzy constituents with deep pockets, no matter how washed up they are in show biz.

Copyright 1998 San Antonio Express-News
January 19, 1998, Monday , METRO
HEADLINE: L.A. mayor has power in expressing empathy
BYLINE: George Will

LOS ANGELES - It says much about modern government that one of the nation's most successful elected officials is one of the least powerful. And it says something about political leadership today that that official is this city's mayor, Richard Riordan, who has a personal library of 40,000 books and is given to citing Moses Maimonides on "the eighth level of giving" (giving that makes the recipient self-sufficient). Lately he has been coping with a multilayered controversy about gasoline-powered leaf blowers.

Many middle-class Southern Californians tolerate immigrants when there is lawn work to be done. Much of it is done by immigrants, whose wages are depressed by competition from the constantly growing reserve army of other immigrants. To maximize their efficiency, the lawn workers use the blowers, which make noise and other pollution.

Banning gas-powered blowers will mean that the lawn workers will earn less by servicing fewer lawns, or that lawn owners will pay more per lawn for maintenance. During this controversy - a conflict of class, ethnicity and hypocrisy characteristic of this collage city - it was the job of the mayor, the only visible symbol of community, to seem sympathetic to all sides. Which Riordan seems to have done.

Public empathizing - and "acting as if I had the power," he says - may seem a humble task. However, such tasks are the stuff of municipal governance, and of a mayor's life in a city where the city council and various agencies are notably nonsubservient.

For Riordan, being an ameliorative presence amounts to practicing what he, a Catholic intellectual (a philosophy major at Princeton), preaches. That is the theology of G.K. Chesterton, who distilled it to this: I am important, and everyone else is, too.

Besides, bite-size actions, such as spreading a balm of sympathy in the leaf-blower dispute, nibble away at tensions in a city that should be enjoying this momentary respite from larger calamities - a moment for worrying about microproblems like leaf blowers.

This was, after all, the first city to suffer a major postwar riot (Watts, 1965). It is the only city to have suffered two such riots. (The 1992 riot, after the first trial acquitted the policemen charged in the Rodney King beating, was the nation's worst since the New York City draft riots of 1863.)

The Northridge earthquake of 1994 was the worst - in terms of the dollar value of destruction - natural disaster in the nation's history.

Meanwhile, Riordan, a Republican in his second term, can savor the not inconsiderable success of a steep reduction in violent crime, largely because, he says, so many of the relatively small

cadre of violent people are now in prison. And he says city government has become less of a job-killing machine.

The bureaucratic drag of permit processes has been diminished enough that movie production is up 60 percent since Riordan became mayor. That paradox - measuring success in terms of movies made in the movie capital - leads to another: Success in economic revitalization has required a surge of upscale immigration to this capital of immigration, bringing people (particularly from Ireland, Israel and India) to fill some of the more than 30,000 unfilled jobs in the computer industry.

Perhaps more efficiencies are needed in a city where, Riordan says, some hotels send their linens 120 miles to Tijuana to be laundered by low-wage workers. However, Los Angeles has passed New York City as a center of the garment industry because immigrant workers - Riordan calls them the "backbone" of the city's recovery - have transformed this city as radically as immigration has transformed Miami.

Riordan says part of his job is answering, "nothing," when asked what he can do to solve particular neighborhoods' problems (abandoned buildings, aggressive panhandling, graffiti). Nothing much, that is, beyond bestowing recognition by expressing empathy. Which is, come to think about it, a lot.

Copyright 1998 The San Diego Union-Tribune
September 14, 1998, Monday
SECTION: OPINION Pg. B-6
HEADLINE: Leaf blowers and U.S. immigration
SOURCE: THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS
BYLINE: Richard Estrada

As the leaves begin to fall in the weeks after Labor Day, don't be surprised if September's song begins to sound like a small but loud gasoline- powered engine.

For home and apartment dwellers in states including Texas, Illinois and California, the noise is a signal -- a signal not just of the onset of a cool season, but of the re-emergence of a heated controversy as well.

From the sprawling suburbs of Dallas-Fort Worth to the tiny neighborhoods of Chicago, West Los Angeles and the Silicon Valley, the tool has become a bone of contention between lawn-care workers and everyday folk who chafe at the noise and pollution that leaf blowers spew.

In face-offs before city councils, the defenders of leaf blowers say the machines are indispensable. Citing the jobs they help create, the advocates also note that leaf blowers help provide for the long-term well-being of their children.

In a demonstration earlier this year in Menlo Park, a little boy carried a sign that read: "It is time for the council to stop the ignorance on all of our Mexican parents. They need the blowers to get money to send us to college because that is the future for us."

Old-fashioned, straw-based technology might do the job, and it may even feature the benefit of being environmentally friendly. Yet brooms and rakes are slow. The economics of lawn maintenance crews in this day and age demands the fastest work possible in order to do as many lawns as possible.

That low-tech leaf blowers could be cited as essential to the livelihoods of thousands of people in Dallas, Chicago and Los Angeles reveals a problem that goes well beyond efficiency, aesthetics and pollution. At a time when the skills and educational requirements for well-paying jobs are far higher than ever before, the supply of functionally illiterate workers continues to grow.

Because the vast majority of lawn maintenance workers are Hispanic immigrants -- often illegal - - the leaf blower controversy has also become a social issue. The popular linkage of low-skill jobs and Hispanic background is becoming more widespread all the time. Told that she doesn't look Hispanic, one comedian on HBO replies: "I must have forgotten my leaf blower."

Asked by his father what had most impressed him about his first day of school, a little boy in El Paso replied, "Kid maids." It turned out that the child's interaction with people of Hispanic descent was limited to maids who had worked for his parents. "Kid maids," therefore, were children of Mexican descent.

But in places such as Los Angeles, the issue is about local politics, pure and simple. City Council members there recently went so far as to tout a battery-powered leaf blower. It has to be recharged much more often than gasoline has to be poured into garden-variety leaf blowers, but the battery model is quieter.

On a loftier plane, President Clinton told the American people five years ago that in the brave new world of globalization, they would have to accept the loss of certain kinds of jobs to other countries and acquire the skills necessary for well-paying high-tech jobs.

Today, many people in the country are acquiring those skills; but many others are not. Among those doing most poorly are the growing number of low-skill immigrants that is exceeding the capacity of many schools and job sectors to help them -- especially in Southern California, but also in Texas, Florida, New York, New Jersey and Illinois.

According to a recent Rand Corporation study, the newcomers do improve their skills and educational levels over time. The problem is, the gap between their skills and those of the native-born tends to expand rather than close. In the golden age of leaf blowers, Hispanic dropout rates hover around 50 percent.

Nearly two centuries ago, English workers called Luddites attacked machinery that made manual labor obsolete. At the end of the 20th century, low-skilled newcomers are fighting mightily to retain gasoline-powered leaf blowers that provide subsistence-level income in a modern post-industrial, knowledge-based service economy.

Americans may wish to ponder the issue in all its dimensions. Is the debate about intolerance toward a particular machine and the people who use it? Is it about government's refusal to spend far more money on education and job retraining?

Or, if neither of the above, could it be about an outmoded policy of mass immigration -- one that thoughtlessly downplays factors such as education, skills and numbers of immigrants that heighten the chances of making immigration work for America and the newcomer alike?