

# Oddest things defeat throw-away society

When I read the other day that Dan Carter may soon end his illustrious rugby career, it dawned on me his body hasn't managed to outlast his underpants.

I'm sure I'm not the only male to experience a remarkable phenomenon – the longevity of Dan's grunts. Not his personal smalls, obviously; I'm talking about several pairs of boxer shorts in my undies drawer identical to those he modelled in a 16-metre tall photograph on the side of an Auckland skyscraper in 2003.

Mine were bought in 2009. After eight years of service, they're showing few signs of wear. A specious calculation gives some idea of the resilience of the Carter briefs. In my case, each pair - worn once a week on average - has clocked up nearly 7000 hours of being sat on (I spend a lot of time on my backside in front of a computer).

Unlike most other brands I've bought, these under daks persist with intact seats and snappy waistbands. Their term of office has almost exactly mirrored that of the last government, but unlike that 1000-year dream, my Carters are still in power.

Dan's smalls have out-performed an inferior range of multi-coloured pretenders, whose elastic perishes and backsides wear out in the space of a few seasons. Dan's have seen me through some of the most interesting times of my life, not least being the arrival of grandchildren, retirement back to Taranaki, and a renewed career as a writer.

For most of my life, boxers weren't my preference, but recovery from a cancer op in early 2009 necessitated gentler containment, and the Carter-endorsed range was suitably loose, yet as snug as an All Black jersey.

The point we're coming to has nothing to do with under-garments, of course. The topic I want to traverse is planned obsolescence, a term I'm willing to bet you haven't seen in a while. It's been overtaken by more recent buzzwords meaning the same thing, like "throw-away society" (although that apparently first appeared in a Life magazine article in 1955), and "non-durable" and "disposable" goods.

According to Wikipedia, planned obsolescence was developed as a manufacturing philosophy in the 1920s, when mass production became popular, the aim being to make products that fail or become less desirable over time or after a certain amount of use. It was the systematic attempt by business to make us "wasteful, debt-ridden, permanently discontented individuals".

As an idea meant to keep us spending, it's application has been uneven. Refrigerators, for example, seem to go on forever, graduating from kitchen to garage to bach and finally, when the doors have rusted through, the dump. That might take decades, although I base that view on older fridges I have known, and I can't be sure the ones we buy now are going to last as long.

At the other end of the scale, short-term is never better epitomised than by solo-powered garden lights. I've just bought some for \$1.49, knowing full well – and accepting – that they'll go a season or two, but anything longer is a vain hope. But at that price, who's hoping?

TVs probably last about five years (I'm guessing) before they're overtaken by a new approach or a never-ending desire for bigger screens. Dishwashers are probably midway between TVs and fridges (I'm open to correction), while beds seem to hang around for a decade or more. We're encouraged to replace cars every couple of years, but they last much longer if we want them to.

Clothes rival solar lights for impermanence, being one of the products most prone to fashion. It's interesting that as you head towards retirement, if the threads aren't threadbare the need to buy new ones seems less imperative.

The worst culprit in the race to be obsolete is the cell phone, although Apple did such a brilliant job on recent models, most people may resist exhortations to buy the next higher-numbered version.

Not far behind phones are computers, with the desktop itself apparently on borrowed time. Most stay reliable for three to five years, and I came across a laptop the other day that was still working well after seven.

Worse than everything, perhaps, is software, which seems to need updating every second day. Perhaps the purpose is to render the appliances that use it in dire need of replacement - a dastardly piece of planned obsolescence if ever there was one. Meantime, I'm predicting the grounds will go a decade or more.