

There's Nothing Like Good Neighbours

And if the case of the recent discovery of the body of a 70-year-old man in his apartment in the town of Aix-les-Bains in southeastern France is anything to go by, he had anything but "good neighbours."

While there's nothing too unusual perhaps in the report of an elderly person's death going unnoticed, especially when he or she lives alone, there must be more than a little cause for concern in cases such as this one.

That's because investigators believe that the man's body, found mummified in his apartment on the 14th floor of a social housing block of flats last week, had been there for anything up to three years.

Media reports confirm that the man did indeed live alone and had no close family in the region.

But where were the neighbours?

Well one of them - living on the same floor - told reporters that he apparently crossed the 70-year-old on the landing occasionally, and the last time the two had spoken was after his dog had died. That was FOUR years ago.

The caretaker of the building - yes unbelievably there is one - but obviously not taking a great deal "care" of its occupants, noticed just last week that the old man's letter box was full to overflowing - clearly an astute woman - and alerted the authorities.

The police arrived, forced open the door and discovered the body. The official explanation of death was through "natural causes" and there won't be any inquiry launched.

Perhaps though there should be one opened on the morality and intellect of the neighbours who you would think might just have noticed that something wasn't quite right.

One of them, when questioned by reporters said,

"I didn't know that someone had died in the building. There are 14 floors and people are moving in and out all the time."

Not surprisingly perhaps, the neighbour - a woman - wanted to remain anonymous.

To put this sad story into context, there are a couple of other elements that need to be included.

A few years ago in Europe - August 2003 to be precise - there was a heat wave across much of the continent. In France alone around 15,000 people, mainly elderly, died as a consequence and there was a public outcry.

There have been subsequent calls each summer (and winter) from the authorities for people to keep a watchful but not-too-obtrusive eye on elderly neighbours.

There was even a half-hearted, but bungled attempt by the government to launch a "day of Solidarity" whereby people would give up one of the public holidays in May and instead work "free" with all money earned being put in a special fund to help the elderly.

Surprise, surprise (given the evidence of this case) the idea didn't work for one reason or another and was finally shelved this year.

As long ago as 1999, the campaign to promote good neighbourliness was launched here in France. From humble beginnings with just 10,000 participants taking part in 80 buildings dotted around the capital, La Fête des voisins (neighbours day) has grown to more than 5 million people in 600 local authorities throughout the country, according to organisers' figures for 2007.

And even since 2004 the concept has been exported to many other parts of Europe with Journée européenne des voisins (European neighbours' day) in around 150 towns and cities.

Sadly, the idea and the news do not seem to have reached Aix-les-Bains.

About the Author

Johnny Summerton is a Paris-based broadcaster, writer and journalist specializing in politics, sport and travel. For more on what's making the headlines here in France, log on to his site at <http://www.persiflagefrance.com>

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