

PLASTIC SHOPPING BAGS (PROHIBITION ON SUPPLY BY RETAILERS) BILL 2016

First Reading

Bill introduced, and read a first time and ordered to be printed on motion by the Hon. Penny Sharpe.

Second Reading

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE (11:38): I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Today I introduce the Plastic Shopping Bags (Prohibition on Supply by Retailers) Bill 2016 to ban single-use plastic bags in New South Wales. Today marks the next step in a long campaign for many committed advocates in the environment movement, local community volunteers and many members of this Parliament, from all sides. It should not have taken this long. The effects of this bill are simple. It will reduce waste and landfill, and sharply cut the other negative environmental impacts of plastic bags, including their often fatal interaction with marine life. Undeniably, this bill will drive change to improve the environment.

Already today the Australian Capital Territory [ACT], South Australia and the Northern Territory ban single-use plastic bags. It is time for New South Wales to do the same. Labor has been working with environment groups in calling on the Baird Government to take action on this issue for some time now. We want to see New South Wales become the latest and most significant State or Territory in Australia to introduce a ban on lightweight plastic bags that pollute marine ecosystems and put wildlife at risk.

Every second, 159 single-use plastic bags are used across Australia. In New South Wales up to 61 million bags are littered annually. These bags take decades to begin to degrade. They pollute rivers and oceans. More than 70 per cent of the rubbish entering our oceans is identified as plastic, most of it contributed from plastic bags. The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation [CSIRO] estimates that there are 124 billion individual pieces of visible plastic littering the Australian coastline, ranging from a few thousand pieces of plastic per square kilometre to more than 40,000 pieces of plastic per square kilometre, and that by 2050, 95 per cent of all seabirds will have plastic in their gut.

Plastic bag litter impacts marine life directly through entanglement and ingestion and indirectly through chemical effects. Once in the ocean, plastic begins to break down into increasingly small pieces and enters the food chain. When ingested, the plastic can cause marine species to choke; cause them to starve from a false sense of being full; or cause inflation that prevents them from diving for food, which results in starvation. If not properly disposed of, plastic kills up to one million sea birds, countless fish and 100,000 sea mammals each year. Once those animals decay, the plastic is released and spreads back into the environment, causing further harm. It is a terrible and deadly cycle.

A review of the ACT plastic bag scheme showed that this can work and that banning single-use plastic bags will make a difference. The review in the ACT saw a 36 per cent decrease in the amount of plastic bag waste sent to landfill in the first two years. It is clear that implementing

this policy in New South Wales would reduce waste and landfill and drive down other negative environmental impacts of plastic bags. It is disappointing, given all the information and data available, that this Government and this Minister for the Environment have been dragging their heels on this issue. If we delve into the history a little, in 2014, before becoming Minister for the Environment, the then member for Cronulla told the New South Wales Parliament:

... intergenerational equity does not stop at the economic sphere—it extends to environmental health. That does not mean we can never ever do things that do, or might, have an environmental disadvantage, particularly when the alternative would increase poverty. What it does require is that we do not leave the next generation with long-lasting problems that appear to be easily avoidable. Plastic pollution falls into that category.

I therefore think that we in New South Wales need to examine banning the single-use plastic bag. ... it is now time for us in New South Wales to look at banning the single-use plastic bag.

That was two years ago. Not long after this, the Minister got the very job from which he could make this happen. Unfortunately, he has failed to do so. In 2015, in response to a 12,472-person petition to ban single-use plastic bags, the Minister stated:

I am acutely aware of the significant challenge to our environment posed by plastic waste, including plastic bags.

But again there was no bill to the Parliament and no ban in the shops. No amount of awareness alone is going to get this done. It requires action. That is why I am introducing this bill to the Parliament today. The Minister wrote in response to that petition:

Environment Ministers from all states and territories agreed on 27 February 2015 that NSW would lead work to identify practical solutions to reduce the impact of plastic bags on the environment, including on marine ecosystems.

It is now October 2016. This push for a national scheme is too slow. It has become bogged down in meeting after meeting and is now being used as an excuse by the Government for its own inaction. This is not good enough, especially considering what the Parliament did yesterday when the Minister saw fit for New South Wales to move alone on implementing a container deposit scheme — a similar initiative to reduce the plastic that devastates our environment. That showed leadership, and Labor supports it. Labor members have been saying to the Government that we will support this. There is bipartisan support across the Government for this, so I hope the members of this Chamber will see fit to support this bill.

The people of New South Wales are sick of waiting. They know now that we have container deposit legislation. If we can legislate on plastic containers, why not on plastic bags? This is something we can remedy with this bill. The bill I am introducing has been drafted based on the successful ACT ban, which provides that retailers cannot provide single-use, lightweight polyethylene bags with a thickness of less than 35 microns to their customers. Those bags, which cause the most damage, would be banned. The current penalty for providing such bags is up to 50 penalty units or \$5,500. Retailers would be able to charge for alternative, re-usable bags which have a much smaller environmental impact.

The bill does not prevent the supply of any of the following bags: a plastic bag that is an integral part of the packaging in which goods are sealed prior to sale; barrier bags such as those

dispensed from a roll that is intended to be used solely to carry unpackaged perishable food; b in liners; heavy retail bags typically used by clothing and department stores; and biodegradable bags. In case anyone has missed it, that also means nappy bags and dog poo bags. The bill provides for a six- month transition period during which a retailer and community education campaign would be required to ensure compliance and support the increased uptake of reusable shopping bags by the community.

The re is broad support for this ban . I congratulate the Boomerang Alliance and Clean Up Australia, among others, for years of strong campaigning to get the issue to this point. In July 2015 , OmniPoll revealed 63 per cent of Australian residents and 64 percent of New South Wales residents — who also happen to be grocery buyers — support a ban on single - use plastic bags from supermarkets and stores in New South Wales. In States that have implemented a ban it has been found that shoppers quickly adjusted to taking t heir own bags and paying for bags when they needed them. Since the ban was introduced in the ACT, 71 per cent of people polled about the ban said they did not want the ban overturned and 68 per cent said the ban should be implemented nationally.

I want to go into more detail about the experiences of other jurisdictions, both in Australia and abroad, to give context to the debate around this issue. In New South Wales we are slow when it comes to acting on this. In 2008, China banned production of ultra-thin bags under 0.025 m illimetres thick and ordered supermarkets to stop giving away free carriers. In October last year, England introduced a 5 pence minimum charge for single- use plastic bags. South Africa has banned plastic bags. Ireland imposes a plastic bag levy. France will ban single- use plastic bags from supermarkets and small corner stores from 2016. From 2017 the ban will be extended to single - use plastic bags used to carry fruit, bread, vegetables, meat and fish. In the United States, a large number of individual States have successfully placed a levy or ban on plastic bags.

Perhaps more concerning in comparison to a wealthy nation such as ours is that many poorer, developing countries have already stepped up to the challenge and banned single - use plastic bags. Bangladesh has a ban ; African nations such as Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda and Somalia have implemented bans ; and a place many Australians love to visit, Bali in Indonesia, has committed to banning bag s from 2018 . Recently I met with some of the instigators of the Bali bag ban and I wish to acknowledge them. T wo local teenagers saw what was happening to their beloved island and wanted to do something about it. They founded an organisation called Bye Bye Plastic Bags . Melati Wijssen and Australian teenager Billy Barge, who is bringing this campaign to Australia, are ready for all of Australia to also ban the bag . These are inspiring young people who are committed to getting on with the job of banning plastic bags . I wish we had a bit more of their spirit in here more often .

In Australian jurisdictions, the ACT conducted a review of its 2011 ban and reported increased popular support for the ban and also a reduction in the amount of bag waste appearing in litter audits conducted by the Keep Australia Beautiful Council. The review also reported a high degree of retailer compliance with the ban. The review of the first two years found that the ACT's plastic shopping bags ban has resulted in a 36 per cent decrease in the amount of plastic bag wa s te sent to landfill and is supported by more than two-thirds of Canberra grocery shoppers. Those supporting the ban said they did so for environmental reasons and agreed the ban has had a positive effect on the environment.

As I mentioned earlier, 71 per cent said they did not want the ban overturned . It is clear when visiting Canberra or any of the States with this ban in place that consumers willingly understand

the system and that they can get a bag if they need to . It is also clear that there are none of those lightweight plastic bags flying around, getting into every corner, every beach and every bit of bushland. Using information from major retailers in the Territory, the ACT Government estimated 171 tonnes of plastic bags were sent to landfill and that decreased by hundreds of tonnes after the ban.

While there was an initial increase in sales of bin liners immediately after the ban, sales have now fallen to pre-ban levels, which indicates that people are reusing the thicker plastic bags for rubbish or other alternatives. In South Australia, the move to ban the bag is estimated to have led to 400 million fewer plastic bags being used in that State every year. According to the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science at the University of South Australia, more than nine in 10 shoppers now take reusable bags to do their shopping, compared to about six in 10 before the ban took effect. The majority of shoppers understood and supported the ban and adjusted their behaviour to take their own bags shopping or paid for bags when needed.

Those results should speak for themselves. This is hardly a debate any longer; it is simply a no-brainer. The ban can be implemented in New South Wales with minimal cost, requiring a public education campaign informing the community of the change, and compliance arrangements to be developed within the Environment Protection Authority. We have seen the time to act nationally come and go. Now is the time for New South Wales to lead the eastern States in banning single-use plastic bags. We have an obligation to take reasonable and sensible steps to protect the environment for future generations, and this is one small but simple step that has a lot of support. It is not good enough for the Government to pay lip service on this issue in yet another talkfest of Federal and State Ministers. The longer the talk goes on without action, the more we contribute to the growing plastic pollution crisis. The community wants action. Labor wants action. The Government should step up and join us. I commend the bill to the House.