



Speech By
Michael Berkman

MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

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WASTE REDUCTION AND RECYCLING (PLASTIC ITEMS) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (3.21 pm): I rise to make a contribution on the Waste Reduction and Recycling (Plastic Items) Amendment Bill 2020. Following on from other members, it would be remiss of me not to begin with some reflection on our Clean Up Australia Day activities on Sunday. I want to give my thanks to the Vera Street Community Garden, a fantastic community organisation that partnered with my office to host a clean-up event at Anzac Park in Toowong. It was a fantastic event and I really do appreciate everyone who took the time to come out. We did collect quite a bit of rubbish and there were a few jokes made that if we were to collect all of the car parts along the freeway from year to year we might be able to cobble together a Clean Up Australia automobile one of these days. We will see how we go with that.

This bill is a good step and it is the sort of reform that the Greens have called for for a long time amongst a much needed broader suite of reform around waste and plastics, both at a state level and nationally. It is a broadly positive thing that we are addressing this at a higher regulatory level rather than taking approaches that put requirements on individuals. These really are responsibilities that we need to put on producers and on businesses rather than leaving it to individual responsibility all the way. These are system level changes that are really going to see better effect over time. I do urge the government and the minister to continue on with this process over time, as we have heard is their intention, looking at those more common disposable items like coffee cups and other takeaway plastics and heavyweight plastic bags and how we can address those over time.

I want to speak to some concerns from the disability sector. I have reached out and engaged with QDN, the Queenslanders with Disability Network. I was very relieved to hear that most of its members are happy with the bill, but I am concerned that there may still be some pretty significant misunderstanding about how the exemptions around disability will work in practice and I would ask that the minister in her closing remarks provide some more clarity around how those exemptions will work in practice. It is really important that we get guidance about this in the House given that the legislation is open to interpretation.

I suppose those issues might be most easily addressed by way of some explicit examples—for example, a person with a disability who requires a straw to drink safely goes to a cafe and orders a drink. In practical terms, can a cafe keep stock of plastic straws to provide to a customer in this circumstance? Can the cafe staff offer a straw to the person or do they have to ask for a straw, if that is even something that is allowed within the legislation? Beyond that, if, for example, cafes can supply straws, on what basis would staff make the decision to offer a straw? Does the department have any plans or intentions around the kind of training that might be provided to help staff in those direct customer engagement circumstances to make that decision?

My understanding is that there is quite clearly scope for this to be dealt with in the regulations. Subsection (c) in the definition of 'exempt business or undertaking' appears to provide that power—but scope in the regulation—but I am asking that the minister clarify, first of all, what the act dictates in circumstances like this and also what the government's intention is in crafting that regulation.

What will it mean in the daily lives of Queenslanders with a disability? On that point it is clear that there is some pretty substantial residual uncertainty about how the bill will work in practice and I would make the point, as others have, that it is vitally important for small businesses that we clear up that uncertainty. It is obviously much more difficult for small enterprises and undertakings to come to terms with what regulation like this means for their daily operations. Much bigger companies can obviously hire the consultants and buy-in the expertise they need to make sense of this. I would implore the government to do all it can to make sure that small businesses are given all the clarity they possibly can be given around how this affects their daily activities.

The one really substantial residual concern that I have which I think the government could have changed and, I would say, should have changed before this bill comes to a vote is around an important exclusion in the definition of 'single-use plastic items'. This definition does not include single-use plastic items that are an integral part of a shelf ready product. Again, this is an issue that has been raised by the opposition. I would make the point that enshrining this exception in legislation means that we will need to bring legislation back before the House in the future to deal with that gap in the legislation.

With regard to some products that are packaged overseas with a longer shelf life, we might need a longer lag time to transition away from those products, but we could potentially act quite quickly to phase out single-use plastics in shelf ready products that are produced or even just packaged in Australia. I would put that this could very easily and should have been included in the regulation rather than the bill and I would encourage the government to give detailed thought as to whether and when we can return to that issue and revisit it here in the House.

The one final observation that I want to make here is about the need to do more on the bigger environmental issues. This is in some ways the low-hanging fruit and it is something that we could have acted on some time ago. Ultimately, no amount of regulation of plastics will matter at all if we do not get the climate crisis under control. The government has continued to progress this area of policy and law reform over the last few years, but we are still waiting for the environment minister to release a useful climate change policy. It was promised last term, it was promised immediately after the election and we are still waiting.

We are still waiting for something to actually guide our state's overall response to climate change. I would suggest that we should be focusing on that rather than just engaging with issues like plastics which are, in a lot of ways, simpler to respond to. In the meantime, while we are reforming on plastics—and this is good; I support it—we are quite literally walking straight towards global ecological collapse and that is going to completely eclipse any of the benefits that we will see under this kind of scheme. I applaud the government for moving on this and I will support the bill, but I do not want to see it used in the future as an excuse or a distraction when it is next asked about the environment or taken to task on other issues that need to be desperately and urgently addressed.