




Speech By
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WASTE REDUCTION AND RECYCLING (PLASTIC ITEMS) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr O'CONNOR** (Bonney—LNP) (5.47 pm): As the shadow environment minister, I am proud to begin the opposition's contributions on the Waste Reduction and Recycling (Plastic Items) Amendment Bill 2020. I will be outlining some concerns the opposition has with the government in this space. The Liberal National Party will be supporting this legislation because it is good, practical environmental policy and because businesses and the community are already overwhelmingly taking action on this issue.

Over the last several decades plastic has become a huge part of our lives. Its flexibility and durability has been immensely positive, with essential innovations in medicine, electronics, transportation, food storage and myriad other fields. As well as these features, it is incredibly cheap to produce, but the downside of that is that we now have an overdependence on plastics. We live in a world that is producing almost as much plastic waste as the weight of the entire human population combined.

Some of the latest Australian data shows the extent of the problem. A total of 3.5 million tonnes of plastic was consumed in Australia in 2018-19, which equates to 100 kilograms per person. Some 84 per cent of that plastic used is sent to landfill and at the moment only 13 per cent is recycled and Australia uses around 70 billion pieces of soft plastics such as food wrappers each and every year. The problem is not going away. We are using more and more plastic and worldwide that is expected to double by 2040. Single-use plastics are some of the most prolific. One million tonnes of Australia's annual plastic consumption is made up of single-use plastics. There are two ways we can cut down our use of single-use plastics—by reducing litter and by working towards a circular economy. On the first of these, eight million tonnes of plastic ends up in our oceans each year, with an often quoted 2016 study reporting that by 2050 there will be more plastic than fish by weight in our oceans.

On top of that, 99 per cent of seabirds worldwide are expected to have ingested some amount of plastic by 2025. That is a staggering statistic. If you look at our nation alone, around 130,000 tonnes of plastic leaks into our marine environment every year. Just a few weeks ago baby flatback turtles were washing up on the west coast of Keppel Bay in Central Queensland. They were found with hard and soft plastics inside them. There was, in fact, one turtle which was only eight centimetres long but it had consumed a piece of plastic film that was five centimetres by two centimetres in size.

The bill before us is a big step towards stopping a huge amount of further plastic from making its way into our waterways, onto our beaches, our streets, our parks and our bushland. The initial items included in this legislation are some of the most littered, but importantly they do have viable and less environmentally harmful alternatives.

On Sunday for Clean Up Australia Day I and a team of volunteers paddled over to Wave Break Island. One of the main pieces of rubbish that we found was plastic drinking straws. I will take a moment to thank all of the local volunteers who got up early on that Sunday morning to remove two boatloads— or one ute load of my mighty Mitsubishi Triton—of rubbish from our beautiful Broadwater. In particular,

I will give a shout-out to our school leaders who joined us: Angelina Inthavong, Bitu Mahani and Elis Williams from AB Paterson College; Musgrave Hill State School's environmental captain Sabella Sinda and their school council president Kaiki Wabo; and, of course, Elliot Omrod, who is vice-captain at Arundel State School.

Most of the straws we found were from McDonald's and as a regular customer I should thank them for replacing those straws with paper ones late last year. I am told that it was quite a research and development effort to figure out an alternative made of paper that would work, although some people who I know enjoy a frappe or frozen drink still have some issues and think that it needs a little bit more work. It is good to see such a huge corporation recognising that they are one of the largest sources of rubbish and taking action ahead of this parliament passing laws to stop it.

The second driver for this change is to work towards a circular economy: looking at the waste we produce as a resource and as an opportunity. The reality is that plastic will still be a necessary material in a number of ways for a long time to come. One of the difficulties with and opportunities of plastic is that it is very durable. It does not break down in landfill as other materials do. We have an opportunity to view plastic as a valuable resource that we can re-use and recycle into new products. There is more and more innovation going into recycling in order to recycle plastics into the creation of new plastic items. In fact, Coca-Cola is now making all of its bottles under 750 millilitres from 100 per cent recyclable plastic. They have managed to do that while allowing their packaging to hold the pressure it needs to and to be transported safely at the same time as having a lesser impact on the environment.

I noticed before I rose to give my contribution that the bottles of water that we are given in this House are also made from 100 per cent recycled plastic. As industry invests in research and development there will continue to be progress made towards a circular economy. This legislation deals with items that have viable alternatives so the single-use way of producing these things can be eliminated in the first place.

The contents of this bill are relatively simple. It involves banning the single-use variety of items such as plates, bowls, items of cutlery, straws and stirrers. The last minute amendment circulated by the minister is a welcome addition. Polystyrene food containers and cups will be included in the ban. This came after many calls from stakeholders, the research that the minister referred to and a recommendation in the first committee's report. I note that in the Australian government's recently released National Plastics Plan expanded polystyrene will largely be phased out in 2022. Given this direction, it is good to see this included in our own bill.

Curiously, items that are not banned if they are a single-use plastic item and are part of a shelf ready product include a straw attached to a juice box, a fork included in a pre-packaged salad, a spoon attached to a yoghurt container and a plate forming part of a frozen meal. Alternatives exist for a number of these and there is a six-month transition period built into the legislation so I would welcome clarification from the minister about the potential exclusion of these items and clarity on whether there is active consideration about dealing with them through regulation.

Further to that, there are clear parameters on how additional single-use plastic items can be added to the ban. This can be through regulation but, importantly, can only be after carrying out consultation with the public about the proposed change, examining whether there have been voluntary measures to achieve the objects of this part that have not been effective and whether there is availability of alternative products to the single-use plastic item proposed to be banned. These clauses are important to make sure that any new items added are with consideration and consultation, which is very important to give businesses certainty. As the ones purchasing, selling or dispensing these products, we need them to be part of this change and although I have pointed out they are already leading the way, they need to not have any surprises from the government.

There are some exemptions to the bill that are important for particular parts of our community. The bill allows for exemptions for businesses to sell to a healthcare business or undertaking—including a clinic or facility that provides care to persons with a disability or healthcare needs, a dental clinic, a hospital, a medical clinic, a medical supply business or undertaking, a pharmacy—or a school, or a business or undertaking prescribed by regulation for this definition that involves the sale or supply of banned single-use plastic items for use by persons with a disability or healthcare needs. There are also exemptions for certifiable compostable products.

There are a number of elements of this bill that I think are worth noting in more detail. Firstly, on commencement, I thank the government for the delay in the start date. To say that last year was a difficult time for those in the retail and hospitality industry is a massive understatement, as we all know. Delaying the start date until September will hopefully allow ample time for businesses to exhaust their current supply and anything they may have on order. I note that they will be able to use up their existing stock, but, talking to the National Retail Association and the Australian Food and Grocery Council, it is

clear that many retailers have orders and contracts in place in some cases anywhere from six to 12 months out. As the campaign about these changes rolls out, it is essential to have clarity for them around these issues. It is no help to the environment if existing plastics end up dumped directly into landfill to avoid some sort of penalty or infringement.

In terms of the definitions, education is going to be essential when it comes to this bill. For some time now stakeholders have been working with the department to pin down what exactly the definitions of items will be and they are thankful that this is almost complete. The fear was that without knowing exactly what will and will not be allowed it will be impossible for businesses to prepare adequately and adjust their stock. It might seem obvious what these items are, but when we come to things like bowls and plates it turns out there are a number of possibilities.

Questions were raised in particular over lidded bowls and the size of plates and whether they would include platters used in catering services. One example that came up was sushi containers or takeaway laksa bowls and things like that. There have been significant discussions to ensure the guidelines are clear and I thank all the stakeholders who have contributed to this. Whilst the big retailers have been at the table for these discussions, the difference between big and small businesses on these matters is like night and day. Education in relation to small and medium businesses will be essential to ensure supply is phased out and that alternatives are found in time for the commencement of these changes.

Turning to the exemption of schools, the bill states that schools are identified as exempt from this ban, recognising that some students, teachers and other staff may have healthcare and disability needs that require the continued provision of single-use plastic items like straws and cutlery. Of course I want to see all students and staff facing these challenges supported. However, I could not understand from the bill or from either of the committees' reports why schools had this exemption. The Waste Management and Resource Recovery Association of Australia has advocated against it, stating that schools should not be allowed to distribute, sell or use banned plastic items unless it is to persons who require these products due to a disability or medical requirement.

Last year in my electorate I participated in the Arundel State School Clean Up Australia Day and there were a large number of straws, forks and other single-use plastic items littered all around the school. Just like across the general public, these are some of the most littered items and including them in this ban could make a big difference.

Often our young people are the best advocates for our environment. They have inspired older generations through their actions, including on the very laws that we are discussing. They too will want to understand why they are not included in the ban. I ask the minister to give a clearer explanation of that. If an exemption is necessary for the care of a staff member or student then we should absolutely allow it, but the majority of students should not be treated any differently to businesses or broader community groups that are not exempt. If this is a matter of cost it would be helpful for that to be acknowledged.

I understand that many P&Cs run their tuckshops at little profit and adding this cost could place a major strain on them. If that is the case it would seem more appropriate for the government to provide some sort of funding support to help with the transition, rather than exempting a huge user group of single-use plastics. Other community groups and not-for-profit organisations are not exempt, except in the case of medical or healthcare needs. I note that this will be up for review after two years and I welcome that inclusion. I certainly encourage all schools—and I know some have already—to voluntarily move away from these items where possible, particularly if that move is driven by their incredible young people.

In terms of waste facilities, compostable plastics are exempt from the bill so it is important to look at where Queensland is at in terms of composting facilities and whether people know how to dispose of those items. There is no benefit if the items end up in landfill and if they become litter they are still harmful to the environment because they will take many years to break down. We need to ensure that we have the right facilities and education so that those plastics are disposed of in appropriate ways.

Queensland's own waste strategy notes that an absence of policy certainty and strategic direction has inhibited investment in the recycling and resource industry in Queensland. In particular, insufficient investments in recycling and resource recovery infrastructure have restricted Queensland's ability to improve waste recovery performance. Improved onshore reprocessing capacity will be needed to contend with a growing stock of recyclable materials.

Disappointingly, Queensland is the only state that has not announced how it will match and invest in the federal government's substantial commitment to the Recycling Modernisation Fund. Nationally, that initiative is worth up to \$600 million. It is designed to co-invest in critical recycling infrastructure as a response to the COAG waste export ban agreed to in March 2020. We are lagging behind and it is

not good enough. National Waste and Recycling Industry Council CEO Rose Reed has been critical of Queensland trailing behind other states and territories that are already using the fund, saying that this is no time for Queensland to be complacent.

According to the *National waste report 2020*, in 2018-19 Queensland's resource recovery rate was 48.7 per cent, well below the national average of 63 per cent for the same period. Queensland makes up 17.8 per cent of Australia's waste generation but is sending more than 26.8 per cent of the 22 million tonnes total to landfill. Being innovative with our waste will help us greatly to reduce our carbon footprint. This is not an area in which we want to fall behind. With such a precious environment to protect, Queensland's waste industry should be leading the nation and not lagging behind.

In terms of future items added, in these matters I am very aware that it can be easy to go for what looks like the right direction rather than the right action. As we go forward we need to ensure that we maintain a holistic view when it comes to environmental benefit or impact. For example, the waste hierarchy model suggests that re-usability is preferable to recyclability. A plastic takeaway container may actually be better for the environment than a recycled paper box that can be used only once. A good way to put it is that not all plastic is evil. Of course that will not always be the case, but as future items are added to the ban we need to ensure that we are making the best decision by looking at the whole life of a product.

I thank the committee for their work on this bill. I understand that much of the bill is the same as the one introduced in the last parliament, but the work of the committee has been important nonetheless. I thank the members of the former committee who prepared the very detailed report on the first bill. In particular, I acknowledge the members from our side: the members for Buderim and Condamine and the former—and hopefully next—member for Bundaberg, whom I am told was a driving force in that excellent report.

Government members interjected.

Mr O'CONNOR: I have heard some interjections so I acknowledge members opposite. I also thank government members for their contributions. In particular I thank the committee for pushing for expanded polystyrene takeaway food containers to be included in the first tranche of banned items. This is the right move for Queenslanders. It is a move that many businesses have already started to make. At large businesses such as McDonald's as well as local cafes in my own electorate—such as Crafty's at Harbour Town, which is our local sports bar—you will struggle to get a plastic straw. At Crafty's, Dave Galvin has made every effort to reduce the plastic that is used in the restaurant, swapping out their straws and increasing their compostable and recyclable products. That is just one local business doing their bit to make a big difference.

Around Queensland industry is already working hard to reduce their use of plastics, and they are well and truly at the table as we debate this bill. Across Australia the use of plastics is being closely watched. The National Plastics Plan, which was released last week, has a clear path forward for reducing waste in Australia and works hand in hand with the National Waste Policy Action Plan. I commend the brilliant Assistant Minister for Waste Reduction and Environmental Management, the federal member for Brisbane, Trevor Evans MP, for his work in this area. He is ready to take Australia forward and wants Queensland to be a big part of it.

The bill before us needs to be just one tranche of the legislative and practical action taken to reduce our waste. Queensland needs to sign up to the Recycling Modernisation Fund. We need to ensure we are the hub of innovation for new technologies that drive a circular economy and deal effectively with our waste. I am proud to support this bill and I ask the government to do everything they can to support businesses and our community in the transition.