

**ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION (PLASTIC BAGS) REGULATIONS 2018 — DISALLOWANCE**

*Motion*

Pursuant to standing order 67(3), the following motion by Hon Aaron Stonehouse was moved pro forma on 16 August —

That the Environmental Protection (Plastic Bags) Regulations 2018 published in the *Government Gazette* on 12 June 2018 and tabled in the Legislative Council on 26 June 2018 under the Environmental Protection Act 1986, be and are hereby disallowed.

**HON AARON STONEHOUSE (South Metropolitan)** [6.05 pm]: I am not sure how long my voice will hold up, so I will dispense with the rhetoric and use what little time I have to cite some important data. Looking at the alternatives to plastic, such as paper bags, I know it is more normal for our friends in the Greens to quote from United Nations scientists than it is for a Liberal Democrat to do so—we are not really one world government types—but, still, I would like to refer members to the work of Dr Lilia Casanova, who was the deputy director of the United Nations Environment Programme’s International Environmental Technology Centre in Japan. In that capacity, Dr Casanova presented evidence that showed that paper bags take up as much as nine times more room in landfill than plastic and take about the same amount of time to break down. According to the scientific evidence, far from easing pressure on landfill sites, banning plastic bags will clog them up further, and that is before we stop to consider that paper bags generate 70 per cent more air pollutants and 50 times more water pollutants than plastic bags and require four times as much energy to produce. Research from the University of Oregon has shown that plastic bags cause less environmental stress than their paper or cotton equivalents. They not only use less water, but also require fewer chemicals and produce less greenhouse gas than either of these alternatives, giving plastic half the carbon footprint of cotton and paper.

Is the government really telling us that it is in favour of increasing our greenhouse gas emissions, or China’s greenhouse gas emissions, given that it is doubtless that that is where we will be buying the bulk of our new bags from? Is the McGowan government really so environmentally heartless that it would risk a rise in greenhouse gases simply to pander to the feel-good factor at the supermarket checkout? Let us not forget that once the bags have been made, they need to be transported. Paper and cotton bags, and even heavier plastic bags, take up more space than so-called single-use bags. Because they take up more space, they weigh more and require more fuel and more trucks to transport. Again, is the McGowan government really advocating for more trucks on our roads and more petrol pollution in the air we breathe?

I understand that there are some science sceptics on the government and Greens benches. It is sad, but we cannot expect everyone to walk willingly into the twenty-first century. So-called single-use plastic bags, which were never single use to begin with, are functional, durable and very re-useable. If someone needs to carry a lot of grocery bags at once, plastic bags work better than paper bags. If someone wants to separate their wet clothes from other items on the way back from the beach, plastic is better than paper every time. If someone has a leaky milk carton from the filling station, again, it is plastic. If someone needs a bin liner in the kitchen or they need to clean up after their dog or cat, it is plastic. Paper does not cut it. A paper bag has to be used about three times to equal the environmental impact of one so-called single-use plastic bag. A thicker low-density polyethylene bag has to be used four times. The so-called green bag has to be used 11 times, while a cotton bag needs to be used 131 times to equal the impact of a single-use plastic bag.

If this ban did not sound futile enough, consider a recent study that estimated that 90 per cent of plastic pollution in our oceans comes from just 10 rivers, eight of which are in Asia—the Yangtze, Indus, Yellow, Haihe, Ganges, Pearl, Amur and Mekong—and two, the Nile and Niger, are in Africa. It seems that our efforts to curb plastic pollution here will have little impact on the overall plastic pollution in our oceans. I do not know whether the hypocrisy of the Greens on the left is outstripped by their refusal to believe the science in front of them or whether it is the other way around. What I do know is that the ban on plastic bags is based on a combination of myths, half-truths and distortions peddled by science deniers who are happier proposing warm, touchy-feely policies that, at best, will not achieve anything and, at worst, will set us back than they are dealing with the real pressing issues facing this planet. I am calling them out today and I am calling out their bag ban for what it is—a crock. It is unnecessary, it is unscientific and it is time we consigned it to the rubbish dump of history.

**HON STEPHEN DAWSON (Mining and Pastoral — Minister for Environment)** [6.09 pm]: Can I say that normally Hon Aaron Stonehouse is a reasonable and sensible bloke, but this disallowance motion he has moved this afternoon is misguided. I do not know where he is living at the moment for him not to realise the harm that single-use plastic bags have been having on our environment. It is estimated that about 670 million single-use plastic bags have been given out annually in Western Australia. Although most of them end up in landfill, about seven million of those single-use plastic bags end up as litter in our waterways, killing our birds and fish—our

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native fauna. This is not some scientist making up gobbledegook; this is factual. It is a fact that the Western Australian community has demanded change.

During our consultation on banning single-use plastic bags, over 92 per cent of the over 4 500 people who contributed by way of submission supported this ban. People watched *War on Waste* on TV. People have seen where this stuff ends up. The sad reality is that it ends up in our fish, and parts of it is ending up in the food that we eat. What is that doing to us? The disallowance motion moved today seeks to undo the very good work that has been happening in Western Australia over the past few months. We have seen change in society. We have seen people bring their bags to the supermarket. This will have a lasting difference on this state into the future. Again I say to my friend Hon Aaron Stonehouse, who is a good guy, that he is misguided on this. We certainly will not support this disallowance this afternoon.

**HON DR STEVE THOMAS (South West)** [6.11 pm]: I will again attempt to be brief. I actually look forward to debating Hon Robin Chapple's substantive bill in relation to plastics because I think that will give us a far greater opportunity. I intend to have quite a lot more to say at that time about plastics in the environment and the entire process. In this particular case, I indicate that I cannot bring myself to support Hon Aaron Stonehouse in his disallowance to the regulations to ban plastic bags. I am happy to suggest that although there can be an over-reaction, one can go a step too far in attempting to remove all plastics from the system immediately. The state of Western Australia and the government deserves the opportunity to make some attempt in some direction. If this disallowance gets up, it basically is a statement that says that no attempt will be made to reduce plastics in this state whatsoever. The reality is that the government has taken this policy forward so that it has the capacity to at least attempt to try to bring the community with it in one phase of that. That is one step, and that is the single-use shopping bag.

I agree with some of the things that Hon Aaron Stonehouse said; that is, in my household we re-use all of those bags. Other households do exactly the same thing. The reality is that a significant proportion of the Western Australian population does not do so. They do not do so because of that convenience. If we want to get some sort of change happening, we need to have something like the ban proposed. It will take time for the community to accept and adopt that. It will be a learning and adaptation process. I am concerned about some of the things that Hon Aaron Stonehouse said. If we go on the internet to look for evidence to support an argument, we will always find it. We can always find evidence. Hon Aaron Stonehouse has found some evidence on the internet to support his argument. I could go on there and find the exact opposite evidence to support the exact opposite argument if I were looking for it. We can always support every argument on the internet. The internet is not the best reference point for any particular source.

**Hon Michael Mischin** interjected.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** Wikipedia is the ultimate of everything!

There are arguments on both sides. We have to look at the weight of evidence in science journals by authors over time. In my view, the overwhelming evidence is that plastic is having an impact on the environment, particularly the ocean environment but also the terrestrial environment. That is not to say that we need to be zealots. In the same way that I said during the previous disallowance motion let us not be zealots, let us not say that we are absolutely going to try to ban everything. At the same time, I think it is very dangerous for us to say at the other end of the argument, "Let's do nothing." The disallowance motion before the house this afternoon is the motion that says, "Let's do nothing." I think it would be a mistake for the Legislative Council to move to that point to say, although we have rejected the extremity at one end, we would accept I think—I agree slightly misguided; not completely misguided—some of the things Hon Aaron Stonehouse said deserve credit. Some of the others were found in a way that supports a hypothesis. If we go to that extreme, we do ourselves and the state of Western Australia a disservice. I cannot bring myself, unfortunately, to support Hon Aaron Stonehouse's disallowance motion this afternoon.

**HON RICK MAZZA (Agricultural)** [6.15 pm]: There is no doubt that the ship has sailed on this issue. The fact is that retailers have made changes when it comes to single-use bags, or what I would prefer to call convenience bags. I rise to support Hon Aaron Stonehouse to highlight the fact that I believe that the ban on convenience bags probably has not been as successful as the government would like to think. Hon Robin Chapple pointed out that he had been very upset by what he had read in a recent newspaper article. It reported that there were thicker, bigger bags with polka dots all over them in a corner and people were not re-using those bags. I have had exactly the same experience. In the apartment complex I live in, every time I open a bin to throw stuff in it, it is full of those polka dot bags. People are simply paying 15c, filling the bag and continuing exactly the same habits that they have always had. I am guilty of that as well. Because we get fewer than we used to with the old convenience bags, suddenly households are buying rolls of bin liners to achieve the same outcome. I do not think we are reducing the number of plastic bags that we would like to achieve.

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The Minister for Environment also pointed out that styrofoam trays with the plastic around them have very suddenly—when I say “very suddenly”, within the last couple of years—become quite dominant in the fruit and vegie section. Supermarkets never used to do that. Suddenly there is the convenience of picking up trays. For example, brussels sprouts are all wrapped up on trays and out people go with them rather than using the bags that Hon Robin Chapple tried to ban earlier to put them in and take them home. Looking through a supermarket, just about every single item in there has plastic packaging, whether it is a drink bottle, a detergent bottle or a blister pack of something. They are full of plastics. I watched a video on YouTube, as you do on occasion, in which a bit of a sage had brought in all of these environmentally friendly bags and then proceeded to take out all the plastic items that he had bought in the supermarket. I understand the sentiment. It would be good if we could reduce plastics. However, the ban on convenience bags is simply window-dressing in all of this. It has disadvantaged a lot of people going to shopping centres. I always forget to take the bags I have on the back seat of the car. When I walk into the supermarket, I say, “Jeez, I need to get a bag” and I do. Everybody else in front of me in the aisle is doing exactly the same thing. Unfortunately, I do not think the ban on plastic bags has been that successful.

I will finish on this point. The ban on plastic bags in San Francisco took place in 2007. It had bans on plastic bags some time ago. In 2012, the University of Pennsylvania conducted a study. It was estimated that about an extra 5.5 people a year died from food poisoning because the green bags increased shoppers’ exposure to E. coli—meat, milk and other things leaked into that bag. Of course they are not supposed to be washed or they have a sign on them not to wash them. They can be quite unhygienic. I will support the disallowance motion, even on the understanding that it will not be successful today.

**HON ROBIN CHAPPLE (Mining and Pastoral)** [6.19 pm]: I will be very brief, understanding the time. The Greens will not be supporting the disallowance motion for many of the reasons articulated by my friend the Minister for Environment! I was really surprised by the contribution made by Hon Dr Steve Thomas when it was, in fact, Hon Peter Katsambanis who prohibited the City of Fremantle from banning plastic bags. I am pleased to hear that the Liberal Party has changed its position on this.

**HON COLIN HOLT (South West)** [6.20 pm]: I realise that we are running out of time but I was driven by a couple of contributions to say something, which I will get to very quickly. In this place, how do we change behaviour? We use education and we hope it changes behaviour, but it often does not. In this place, we have a way to change behaviour through legislative tools. I want to change behaviour in this instance, and I think that we have taken the right step to ban plastic bags so people take their own bags when they go to collect their shopping. If people are just going to substitute a bag that they pick up for free with a bag that they pay 15c for, I am not quite sure that is the outcome we are trying to drive towards. We are trying to drive an outcome in which people do not take an extra plastic bag because there is no substitute available. We have to start somewhere. I will not support the disallowance motion, because we are trying to change behaviour. It takes a long time. Education, to this point, has not done it. We have to use the tools at our disposal, and that is one of the tools that we supported through this Parliament.

Question put and negatived.