

PLASTIC SHOPPING BAGS (WASTE AVOIDANCE) BILL

13 November 2008

The Hon. D.G.E. HOOD: I rise to indicate Family First's position on this bill. We obviously have considered this matter long and hard and consulted widely with various groups, consumers and the body that will be substantially affected by this measure, and that is the industry itself—that is, the industry that manufactures plastic bags, and also the supermarket/shopping industry, where the bags are put in the hands of customers.

Let me say at the outset that my personal view is that we live in an era of almost environmental extremism at some level. We tend to be concerned about things that, in some ways, really do not justify the level of noise that is made about them. For example, I am constantly intrigued by forecasts of temperature rises of X degrees over a 50 or 100-year period, when they seem to not be able to get the temperature right for the next week with any degree of reliability. I am often amused by these sorts of things. That does not make me sceptical, but I certainly approach such matters with a sense of trying to examine the real evidence that exists for these sorts of things. I think that is looking at the bigger picture.

Having said that, I think it is incumbent upon all of us (and particularly elected members of parliament) to put our best foot forward and take practical measures to protect the environment. As I said, I am not necessarily a fan of the big picture or scaremongering, which it can turn into sometimes, but I am—and Family First certainly is, as a party—committed to taking reasonable steps to make a difference in the here and now. That having been said, we consulted widely and have come to the position, after that consultation that, on balance, it is probably wise to support this bill. We are of the view that practical, short-term measures that can be taken to improve the environment or reduce the risk to the environment are ones that should be supported. For that reason, we will be supporting this bill.

I would like to outline a few of the reasons behind that, if I may, and make a brief contribution this afternoon. Supermarkets have now been voluntarily trialling schemes to reduce polyethylene bags since 2003. However, those trials have been largely unsuccessful in reducing our use of plastic bags at supermarkets. A consensus was reached nationally in 2006 among those bodies that the voluntary schemes did not appear to work. I note with interest that only this week Target has come out and imposed a voluntary ban upon itself in the use of plastic bags in its stores. So, it appears that the industry is heading that way regardless of the legislation.

Jurisdictions across Australia have now been weighing up whether to ban or impose a levy on polyethylene plastic bags. Victoria is currently trialling a charge, at the moment, which, in its first week, saw a 1,400 per cent increase in reusable bags. There was a clear swing away from the polyethylene to reusable bags which, I think, in essence, is the thrust of the opposition argument. There appeared to be a consensus developing earlier this year, but the government now believes that it may take several more years for a national scheme and, hence, its decision to move alone, that is, for South Australia to take the lead on this issue, if you like. However, we are not alone. Many other countries with a similar problem regarding the use of large quantities of plastic bags, such as China and even Bangladesh (I was surprised to find out), are opting for total bans in this regard. Indeed, Los Angeles and San Francisco in the United States have recently imposed bans on plastic bags in their retail sector.

During a briefing on this bill the government indicated that they preferred the ban because it sends a clear signal, and charges imposed on bags, according to the Irish experience, apparently tend to be factored in by shoppers over time; that is, in Ireland, where a levy was imposed on plastic bags, our understanding is that, whilst it was very successful initially, over time the numbers of plastic bags actually got up to the levels that they were prior to the levy being imposed. So, whilst it was successful initially, we understand that it was not successful in a longer term. Perhaps one of the real reasons that the government is heading in the direction of a total ban is that it does not see the

levy as being effective in the long term. Certainly, as I read it, that has been the Irish experience.

Clearly, we have to do something. I think the Hon. Mr Lucas made a very strong point when he said that the numbers of bags are grossly exaggerated, whether it is 4 billion, 5 billion, 6 billion—we hear different numbers. I think the reality is that we do not know how many bags end up harming the environment. However, I think it is reasonable for us to take the position that, clearly, there is some harm, regardless of what the number is. I think if we reduce that number it will be of benefit. Clearly, we had to do something. If we use something like 4 billion plastic shopping bags per year that, apparently, can take 100 years to decompose, then most people would agree that that is not beneficial for our environment.

Some estimates are that 30 to 50 million bags find their way into our ecosystem. Some scientists talk about there now being a 'plastic soup'—to use their words—in some parts of the ocean where the currents converge. Again, I wonder is that is overstating the problem but, nonetheless, I think that if we can do something then we should. We owe the environment more than that and, given that alternatives exist, Family First believes that we owe it to our children to ban the use of those bags, as the government is proposing. Alternatives do exist in the form of biodegradable bags, which will only cost a few cents, as I understand it. Indeed, as the use of those becomes increasingly common, then the per unit cost of the bags will decrease.

I would like to give special mention to Modbury Foodland, which is currently trialling the use of compostable bags. We would like to see a list of acceptable biodegradable bags being determined by the minister in regulation. One of the complaints about biodegradable bags is that they use more resources and potentially have a larger carbon footprint than single-use bags, which are predominantly produced relatively cleanly compared to those which use petroleum fuels in their construction.

I am grateful that the minister will incorporate one of our suggestions as a proposed amendment, regarding the definition of compostable bags. That

being said, I think we have made our position clear. We will support the bill. I think, on balance, there is more to be gained by supporting the bill than opposing it. As I said, though, I believe we have become a society that perhaps overstates the damage that can be caused, although in the case of plastic bags we believe there is a case to take some action and, for that reason, we will support the bill.