

Resource 1—Excerpts from Hansard

Excerpt 1

Matter of Public Importance discussion—Single-use plastic.

MADAM SPEAKER: I have received letters from Ms Cheyne, Ms Cody, Mr Coe, Mrs Dunne, Mr Hanson, Mrs Kikkert, Ms Lawder, Ms Le Couteur, Ms Lee, Ms Orr, Mr Parton and Mr Pettersson proposing that matters of public importance be submitted to the Assembly. In accordance with standing order 79, I have determined that the matter proposed by Ms Le Couteur be submitted to the Assembly for discussion, namely:

The importance of reducing single-use plastic in the ACT.

MS LE COUTEUR (Murrumbidgee):

We are currently in a global crisis with regard to the environmental and health impacts of plastic pollution, and we need to drastically reduce our single-use plastic consumption. That is why I have called for today's MPI. I am calling for a plastic-free ACT which will see an eventual ban on all single-use plastics.

Worldwide, only 10 to 13 per cent of plastic items are recycled, which is pitifully low. Single-use plastic usually goes into landfill, where it is burned, or gets into our waterways and makes its way to the oceans.

CSIRO research has shown that approximately three-quarters of the rubbish along the Australian coast is plastic. Most of this is from Aussie sources, and the rubbish is near urban areas along our coastline. Despite Australia having some of the greatest natural wonders of the world, we have not looked after them.

This morning while I was working on this, I saw someone walk past my office with a plastic-wrapped carton full of plastic bottles, single-use plastic water bottles. At the Legislative Assembly we should be leading the change. Canberra has totally drinkable water. The Legislative Assembly has an abundance of taps and also an abundance of cups and glasses. The kids in the Actsmart schools' program would be ashamed of what the grown-ups in Canberra are doing.

We are not doing the right thing. We need to support, promote and reward businesses that are doing the right thing.

I am not calling for an immediate complete ban on plastic in the ACT. There are many essential single-use plastic items, in particular in our health system. There are vials, syringes, sample bags, disposable gloves, et cetera. These need to be looked at. And yes, there are people living with disabilities who do need flexible, durable plastic straws in order to drink. But these are things that can be phased out. It may take time, but that time only starts when we start to do it.

Excerpt 2

MR STEEL (Murrumbidgee—Minister for City Services, Minister for Community Services and Facilities, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Roads):

I thank Ms Le Couteur for bringing this matter of public importance before us today in the Assembly. I believe we all have a role to play in reducing single-use plastic in the ACT, and especially the ACT government.

This year we introduced a "straws suck" campaign, which aims to help break our plastic straw habit, while recognising that there are some in our community who still need straws for medical reasons. Within the territory government, we are looking at ways to reduce our own single-use plastic waste. I welcome today's opportunity to speak on the importance of reducing single-use plastic in the ACT and to outline the actions the ACT government is undertaking towards achieving this reduction.

Excerpt 3

MS LEE (Kurrajong):

No-one will argue that reducing the use of single-use plastic straws will not be a good thing for everyone. However, as shadow minister for disability, I am concerned that a straight-out ban will unfairly impact Canberrans with a disability. There are people in our community who rely on sturdy plastic straws to undertake the act of taking a drink, an activity that most Canberrans take for granted. Before the government charges off to issue a blanket ban on plastic straws there needs to be a thorough consultation into any unintended consequences of the abolition of plastic straws.

Many people who have difficulty swallowing or who have limited hand movements need to use straws and other utensils to eat and drink. They are also helpful tools to exercise the lungs. And single-use straws are cheap, flexible and available. Other options like glass or metal straws are not as flexible and are difficult to clean, leading to concerns about hygiene. Cardboard straws disintegrate in hot liquids or turn into mush after prolonged use.

I was going to thank Ms Le Couteur for her very careful choice of words that the outright ban on straws and other single-use plastics would be discriminatory, yet that reduced use of single-use plastics is something that we can all work towards.

Excerpt 4

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong—Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability, Minister for Corrections and Justice Health, Minister for Justice, Consumer Affairs and Road Safety and Minister for Mental Health):

I thank Ms Le Couteur for raising this very important topic.

When it comes to actions the government has taken aside from the plastic bag ban, I was pleased, as the Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability, to launch the "straws suck" campaign, which Mr Steel referred to. The campaign aims to encourage businesses and the community to avoid unnecessary plastic waste by rethinking their need for single-use plastic straws. It is a campaign that is being delivered by Actsmart in the ACT government. It asks local businesses to take a pledge to reduce the number of single-use straws being used. I am pleased to report that almost 30 businesses have already signed up to the campaign. Community members can support this campaign by saying no to plastic straws when offered one and asking their local cafe or pub to consider signing the pledge. Individuals can also sign up to this pledge as part of the Actsmart online carbon challenge.

It may seem like saying no to plastic straws is a small act but the impacts do really add up. An estimated 10 million plastic straws are used in Australia every single day: not every year; every single day. This is an extraordinary figure. Each of these straws takes up to 200 years to degrade in the environment and they never biodegrade.

Plastic straws are in the top 10 most littered items globally. A plastic straw used today will outlive your children's children's children. The thing with a plastic straw is that we use it for a few minutes, maybe half an hour at the most, but it will result in very long-lived plastic waste in our environment. Most of us have perfectly good lips from which we can consume that drink ourselves.

As Mr Steel touched on in his remarks, there are some people who, for perhaps a medical reason or whatever, might need to use a straw. We have a duty there to make sure alternatives are available, whether it is a bamboo straw or a stainless steel one.

There is a role for both state and territory governments and the federal government here. One thing we can do as a territory is take the initiatives we can take and seek to demonstrate good examples that both do our part here in the ACT and show to others what is possible. I commend Ms Le Couteur for raising this matter of public importance today.

Discussion concluded.