

2020.02.04

18 Deputy I. Gardiner of the Minister for the Environment regarding the prospective banning of new plastic bags in Jersey: (OQ.32/2020)

Will the Minister advise whether the Government is planning to propose that all new plastic carrier bags be banned from being given out, or sold, in Jersey?

Deputy J.H. Young of St. Brelade (The Minister for the Environment):

As the Minister for the Environment, I want to see us reduce the use of plastic bags by any means possible and, particularly, I support the voluntary charging scheme introduced by supermarkets in 2015 that has already reduced their use; but, ultimately, I believe that we will have to ban their importation to prevent the damage done by accumulation of plastics in the environment and switch to greener alternatives. However, there are complexities and this cannot clearly be done without prior consultation, first of all with business and it would involve several Ministers, Economic Development, Tourism, Sport and Culture and Home Affairs, who I think, if I am right, do have the legal power to do so - under the Customs and Excise (Jersey) Law 1999, Article 19(1) - to either ban, or impose conditions, by Order on any imports. I think this is a matter that I will be discussing with the Council of Ministers, particularly as part of our future waste strategy.

4.18.1 Deputy I. Gardiner:

At our meetings at a workshop in Malta, I realised that the Australian Capital Territory banned 8 years ago; Seychelles banned 2 years ago; all Caribbean islands banned during the last year. Would the Minister advise approximately the timescale and maybe Jersey will lead the way in our region?

Deputy J.H. Young:

I do understand the Deputy's point and, in fact, when one looks through and sees, it is very impressive how many countries that we describe as, perhaps, Third World, or less developed countries have introduced these bans. But, of course, the reason is they do not have ... they are unlikely to have any sophisticated technology to do waste processing. We are lucky in Jersey. We have an E.f.W. (Energy from Waste) plant that at least prevents what happens in the U.K., these plastic bags get into landfill and then it gets into the environment. We do not have that. But, nonetheless, I think the principle of the Deputy is right. In the U.K. they have gone for a charging scheme and, interestingly enough, I am waiting to see what the U.K. Government is going to do. The previous administration in the U.K. announced that they were going to up the charge from the 5 pence scheme, which is a statutory scheme in the U.K. - it is not a voluntary one - to increase those charges in January 2020 and I am waiting to see what happens. Timescale: I certainly will discuss it with the Council of Ministers as soon as possible, but I think we do need to do this in a structured way. I am happy to come back to the Assembly and the Deputy with more information as we take that forward.

4.18.2 Deputy M. Tadier:

I think when a turtle ingests a plastic carrier bag in the sea, it does not really care about whether that bag, that costs 5 pence, went to charity, or whether it was a statutory scheme.

[11:30]

Could I ask, this is not just an issue about plastic bags, but it is about all extraneous packaging that shops in Jersey seem to want to provide for customers. Is it also a case that we need to make them

responsible for the packaging and the disposal of the packaging that they provide, rather than the consumer?

Deputy J.H. Young:

I think the Deputy is absolutely right. It has to be part, in my view, of a wider drive to eliminate plastics. Looking at the whole issue of the issue of pollution in the marine environment, there is no question the accumulation of plastics is getting into the food chain and destroying much of our marine life and so on. We have to deal with that, so there needs to be a strategy. On the question of charging, I think the point, why I mentioned charging is that the evidence is it has removed - so we are told - in the U.K. already 15 billion bags from the U.K. supply chain, but we are equally told there is still a lot of small businesses using those. So, I think, certainly, the direction of travel would ultimately have to be banning. But we do need this wider strategy to remove these wastes entirely and, ultimately, I want to see a situation where we do not need a replacement E.f.W. plant, because we have eliminated waste, but that is a personal ambition and I shall probably not live to see it.

4.18.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Would the Minister not agree that, one, the removal of plastic bags by burning them just simply adds to greenhouse gases, because they are made of plastics, which is a hydrocarbon and second, that now is the time for Jersey to be brave and take the lead and ban plastic bags? The population, myself and everyone in this Assembly, just needs to deal with that fact and then find another way to carry their shopping home, because of the impact it is having on the environment. Let us be brave, and can I ask the Minister, will he just push ahead with banning plastic bags as soon as possible?

[Approbation]

Deputy J.H. Young:

I certainly hear what the Deputy has to say and I am hearing the stamping of feet. I have already committed to take this forward to the Council of Ministers. It is an open secret that we absolutely desperately need to do more about waste reduction. Waste reduction and plastics are pretty well number one, so the actions that we take have to be part of the strategy. We have to work with business, because even I accept that they need to find alternatives, they need to gear up to use paper bags and other means of doing it. But I do think - unless I am wrong in the reading of the law, I only looked at it this morning and we do not have the Attorney General designate here - we have possibly got the legal power already. Certainly, it is an issue that I shall be taking to the Council of Ministers.

4.18.4 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

I appreciate the complexity around imported goods, that are wrapped in plastic when they arrive, but carrier bags are simply used to facilitate people carrying their things from one place to the other. What is the worst that could happen? If the Minister were to ban bags tomorrow, what is the worst that could happen?

Deputy J.H. Young:

I, personally, do not have those powers at my disposal to exercise. I think the honest truth, if I had those powers, I would probably sign the Order tomorrow and take the hit and see what happens. Possibly, the worst that would happen would be a vote of no confidence, but nonetheless I do not have that power and we do try to work constructively as the Council of Ministers together. This does cross over a number of Ministers. It crosses over the Minister for Infrastructure, who has got the job of sorting this out and doing the disposal of it, so he is having to pick the problem up. It is

the Minister for Home Affairs, who has got the powers to stop stuff coming in the Island and it is the Minister for Economic Development, Tourism, Sport and Culture, who is trying to steer our economic strategy, but I cannot really believe that the loss of plastic bags is going to wreck our economy.

Deputy M. Tadier:

Can I raise a point of order? It seems that the Minister might be unintentionally misleading the Assembly, by saying he does not have the power to lodge a Proposition banning plastic bags.

The Bailiff:

I am not sure that is a point of order; it does not require a ruling from the Chair, does it?

Deputy M. Tadier:

Could he clarify, Sir?

The Bailiff:

That is just a question to the Minister. That is not a point of order. Well, firstly, Deputy Perchard, it is a little bit difficult to believe you are talking to the Chair when you turn around and look behind you. That is just the first observation.

4.18.5 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

While you can reuse a plastic carrier bag, can I add to the Minister's list the top of coffee cups, because they make a huge amount of plastic waste and do not necessarily get reused at all?

Deputy J.H. Young:

I think you are pushing ... my expertise is probably running out now. I know that the whole issue about the plastics, the type of plastics, it is not a one size fits ... there are all different types of plastics. There are alternatives to these things and we are all trying, I think, to achieve the same goal. I think that whatever we do about plastic bags has to be in the context of plastic generally, I think it should do. When I said that I did not have the legal powers, yes, I can bring a Proposition, but that is not the way to work collectively in Government, is it? Well, so could the Deputy bring a Proposition and I would be happy to support it if he does.

Deputy R.J. Ward:

A point of order: for backbenchers, it is the only way for us to work in Government.

Deputy M. Tadier:

And for Assistant Ministers.

The Bailiff:

Neither of those were points of order, but never mind.

4.18.6 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I am pleased to hear the Minister talking about working with others and so on. I fully agree with the idea of climate change measures, we have got to, but we do not need to take ... and I am not saying this as a knee-jerk reaction in terms of plastic bags, because it is something we need to do. However, recent research has come out that says as we use our washing machines, the fibres are going through the water out into the sewers, into the thing and some of them into the sea. They have discovered that a great deal of pollution is coming from that source. There are many things that add to pollution. We need to look at them, not spending months, or years, looking at them, but

we need to look at them collectively and come up with a way and take the public with us. You do not just use sanctions and beat people over the head if you want to get their co-operation. Does the Minister not agree?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Yes, but I want to say just a tad more, if I may. I think the Deputy is right, that the issue of microplastics is probably one of the most serious things. These are things that are not visible. There is no question that the use of artificial fabrics and our current practices means that these particles get in our liquid waste. That liquid waste goes through our S.D.W. (sterile distilled water) plant and the effluent goes out to sea. Marine monitoring has shown that there are very high levels of microplastics within seawaters generally. Our waters... I understand and I believe so - and I cannot be sure - the latest information I heard that the levels were higher in the outflow in St. Aubin's Bay, which you would expect them to be. But, nonetheless, this is an international problem, it is a worldwide problem, because these microplastics get into our marine ecosystems, get into fish and get into our bodies. I think this is an issue that I, as the Minister for the Environment, will be working with the British-Irish Council, the other British jurisdictions, and I have made a plea. We are investing more money in science and that money is going into research to find ways of trying to deal with some of these very insidious hazards, so the Deputy is right.

The Bailiff:

I note a question from the Connétable of St. Lawrence.

Connétable D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:

No, it was my binder.