

Will a ban on “thin” plastic bags solve the litter problem?

The short answer: Highly unlikely.

The reason: The plastic bag was born of market necessity.

The real solution: Education, law enforcement and incentives.

Bans on market commodities hardly ever work

Remember the ban on alcohol in the USA in the early 1900's? It was called the “Prohibition” and simply resulted in this commodity being supplied – to the full extent of market demand – by the underworld, with the simultaneous and unintended consequence of stimulating huge growth in the power and influence of Al Capone and his compatriots – all because the market demanded a steady and predictable supply of alcohol and no ban could ever change that fact.

Remember the Industrial Colour Bar in South Africa? Before it was finally abolished, it was recognised more in the breach than in the observance – all because of market demand.

South African legislative history is literally *littered* with examples of failed legal bans on ‘market commodities’: the Native Prohibition Act (banned the sale of alcohol to Blacks); the Immorality Act (banned “Sex across the colour line”); the Mixed Marriages Act; the Censorship Act (banned *Playboy* magazine and naked breasts in SA theatres); the Telecommunications Act (banned satellite dish antennae, cordless telephones, etc.); the Group Areas Act (banned Blacks from trading in “White areas”); etc. They all failed because bans of any kind are seldom able to alter what the market demands at an acceptable cost.

The result of bans on market commodities is invariably to drive the price up and the affected commodity down – underground! Seldom, if ever, has a legislative ban resulted in the disappearance of any commodity, **especially that which was given birth to by market demand in the first place**. Bans almost always result in increased desirability, shortages and price hikes. In short, they merely cause distortions in the market **and are certainly no way to solve a *litter* problem!**

Why plastic bags are wanted

The ubiquitous “thin” plastic bag was born of market demand for its enormous convenience, utility and cost effectiveness. **It was not born at government behest and therefore cannot be expected to disappear at government behest**. Not unless government comes up with an idea for a replacement which is equally convenient, utilitarian and cost effective.

Imagine tired and anxious taxi commuters having to carry home their weekly supermarket purchases in sawn-off cardboard boxes and flimsy brown paper packets. What might be expected in such circumstances will be the rise of a brand new money spinning industry: “banned” plastic bags for sale on the underground “black market” at taxi ranks for harried passengers otherwise having to balance boxes of groceries on their heads!

As for the litter problem, where other than in the gutters and on the fences can we then expect to find the cardboard boxes and paper bags when they too are inevitably discarded? Plastic bag litter would simply have been exchanged for another type of equally unsightly litter!

Bans do have beneficiaries

As Al Capone benefited from the Prohibition, so almost every other ban has its own beneficiaries: Consumers and commuters cannot expect a ban on plastic bags to increase their own convenience or reduce their costs. Who then is likely to benefit from a ban on plastic bags?

The most obvious immediate beneficiaries will be the supermarkets and their shareholders. Not only will they save millions of Rands each year by no longer having to provide their customers with “thin” plastic bags, their profits will be further enhanced by the sale of new “thick” plastic or canvass bags to customers who will have no option but to pay this extra money for their food. (Little wonder that supermarket owners have already expressed their eager support for the Minister’s intention to “Ban the Bag”.)

Other beneficiaries will include the paper bag suppliers (although not the forests), the cardboard box manufacturers, the “thick” plastic bag purveyors, the “black market” bag sellers, the taxi drivers (passengers pay additional fares when carrying a box, but nothing extra for a bag) and the shopping trolley manufacturers. (More trolleys will be required as more people choose to wheel their groceries out to their cars or taxis rather than to buy yet another “thick” bag in which to carry their goods!)

These are but a few of the likely new beneficiaries, unforeseen and unintended by those who favour yet another costly market commodity “ban”.

The real solution to any kind of litter problem

This document does not purport to deny that there is a litter problem in our country. The messy state of almost every urban roadway, gutter and fence is proof enough of our problem. The shocking pollution of our river ways, ground water, nature reserves and atmosphere need only be observed to be believed. The difficulty is how best to fight this scourge. It is suggested that simply banning poor old plastic bags is unlikely to prove to be much of a solution. A more comprehensive and inclusive solution must be sought – one that will *not* lead to greater costs, especially for the poorer sections of our society.

The more complete solution will undoubtedly include:

Education and information

A sustained schools and public education campaign to discourage littering and enhance respect for the environment.

Firm application of the law

A sustained and aggressive application of *existing* anti-pollution and anti-litter laws, all of which are already perfectly adequate for the purpose.

Proper incentives

Already in place are systems for recycling glass, paper, cardboard and cans. Plastic is more difficult to recycle but it will cost the country far less to incentivise recycling than to ban plastic bags.

Government need only threaten to fine or tax plastics firms and/or supermarkets that do not make arrangements for their containers to be recycled. These companies, fearing loss of profits through State sanction, would soon devise ways to encourage the public to collect and deposit all forms of containers, plastic or otherwise, for cash at designated collection point. Apart from other benefits, this could lead to new sources of income for the unemployed, for churches and for charities.

In other words, instead of creating another inconvenience and cost for society to bear, Government can and should reduce societal costs by creating both an environment for, and a culture of, public cleanliness.

*Ban the ban and save the bag
rap the litter bug
and reward the recycler!*

Further reading

Lingle, C (1992) *The environment: Rights and freedom*, Free Market Foundation Monograph No. 8, Johannesburg.

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