

## A new dawn for the management of plastic consumption?

Written by Margrete Auken on 15 February 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

There is a new momentum behind ending the mismanagement of plastic use, writes Margrete Auken.



Margrete Auken | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

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Around 85 per cent of all beach litter is plastic, and a floating garbage patch in the Pacific is believed to be larger than Mexico. In the parks of Brussels, snowdrops are now peeping out through soil covered in cigarette packaging and other plastic waste. In the lakes of Copenhagen, images of swans building their nests mainly of plastic show us how even birds are adapting to the mismanagement of plastic consumption.

Three years ago, 538 of my colleagues voted with me in favour of the so-called plastic bag directive. At the time of the negotiations, a common EU legislation on reducing the use of single use plastic bags was controversial. The European Commission, and particularly Commission vice-president Frans Timmermans, were sceptical and did not find plastic bags to be important enough to fall under their

“big on big things” approach to EU law making.

This was despite their own impact assessment estimating that there were 4.5 billion littered plastic bags in the EU in 2010 and concluding that a common strategy is the only way to solve it.

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Today, the importance of global plastic pollution seems to have gained ground. When the strategy was presented in mid-January, I could jokingly - but truthfully - tell Timmermans that despite our previous battles, I am happy to praise him every single time he gives me reason to. The plastic strategy - however imperfect - shows that the Commission is at last on the same side as the Greens regarding plastic litter.

Finally, after years of pressure and discussions, the Commission has announced that it will restrict (ban?) the use of the dangerous oxo-degradable plastic. While producers and stakeholders claim that oxo-plastic is biodegradable, oxo-plastic simply falls apart in pieces, making it impossible to collect and turning it into microplastic, which poses an even greater threat to the environment than regular plastic.

The report on oxo-plastic submitted by the Commission in January concluded “there is no conclusive evidence of a beneficial effect on the environment”-hallelujah! (The deadline for submitting the report was in May 2017, but let’s keep to the positives for now).

The proposal on port reception facilities for sea-based sources of marine litter should help solve the multiple problems arising from, for instance, fishing vessels. One example is the so-called “ghost-nets”. Kilometres of lost fishing nets can be found at the bottom of the sea. Over centuries, they degrade into microplastics, which are emitted directly into the marine environments. Before that happens, fish, birds, seals and other animals risk getting caught in the gear.

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This is but one example of marine litter that to a large degree is preventable. Although this particular example is already regulated, problems with lost fishing gear seems to continue. I look forward to seeing this addressed in the forthcoming directive.

The 2030 target on making all plastic packaging recyclable will be a substantial contribution to the development of the recycling industry. Plastic packaging serves a purpose, for instance in food preservation, but must be used cautiously. I very much share the ambition of the Commission, and I

look forward to seeing their proposals.

But alas, nothing is perfect. I am certain that Frans Timmermans would think I had lost my mind if I did not have any criticism. And certainly I do.

Even when the Commission has now realised that there is need to prevent, reuse and recycle plastic, we also have to ensure that the quality of the plastic we produce is safe for humans and for the environment. Endocrine disrupting chemicals have no space in our immediate surroundings.

"The 2030 target on making all plastic packaging recyclable will be a substantial contribution to the development of the recycling industry. Plastic packaging serves a purpose, for instance in food preservation, but must be used cautiously"

Every day utensils such as cans and pizza boxes should never give cause for concern for consumers. And while the Commission has promised to take legal action on the intentionally added plastic in products, I fear that the announced voluntary initiatives on unintentionally added plastics will not suffice.

According to a 2017 study by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, almost three million tonnes of plastic released into the oceans stem from either tyres or textiles. That is 31 per cent of all plastic emitted into marine environments.

There is a new momentum behind ending the mismanagement of plastic use that has prevailed over recent decades. The Plastic Strategy is a long awaited and very welcome step forward to a proper management of global plastic consumption.

Now it will be up to strong forces in the Parliament to ensure that the remaining shortcomings are dealt with.

### **About the author**

Margrete Auken (DK, Greens/EFA) was Parliament's rapporteur on the packaging and packaging waste report on reducing the consumption of lightweight plastic carrier bags

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