

Peter Garret embarrassed on plastic bag charge

By staff writers

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- Plastic bag charge is being considered
- Environment Minister embarrassed by transcripts
- Coalition states opposition to move

THE cat was out of the bag on a proposed plastic bag tax despite federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett's denials, Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson says.

Mr Garrett rejected reports shoppers would be forced to pay up to \$1 for plastic bags last week.

But Dr Nelson said it seemed Mr Garrett's own department had prepared proposals of a shopping tax of at least 25c on every plastic bag.

"Now the cat is now out of the bag. Mr Garrett is obviously a man who doesn't know whether he's coming or going," Dr Nelson said in Perth.

A tax on plastic bags would hurt fair dinkum Australian families, who were already battling with high petrol and grocery prices, Dr Nelson said.

"Apart from the economic madness of this, what are people going to do with their dustbins, their dirty nappies and their dog poo?"

"Mr Garrett might live in a different part of Australia but for the rest of fair dinkum Australia we know that these plastic bags are really important ..."

Labor went to last year's election promising to phase out plastic bag use but Mr Garrett said last week a levy was not the way to achieve this.

Garrett embarrassed

But, after *The Sunday Telegraph* presented Mr Garrett's office with transcripts of his own departmental officials outlining the plan, an embarrassed Environment Minister yesterday conceded the supermarket slug on shoppers was on the table.

The transcripts, from Senate Estimates hearings on February 19, reveal his department had undertaken detailed costings of the plan.

Mr Garrett sought to shut down the story last Sunday by issuing a press release, saying the Government would not be introducing any Commonwealth "levy".

But the transcripts show the Government has been considering both a levy, or tax, and a checkout charge of 25c to \$1 a bag to fulfil its election pledge to phase out single-use plastic shopping bags "using economic instruments". While Mr Garrett was trying to pretend no such plan existed, it was being confirmed by Environment Department officials at the Senate Estimates hearings.

The Department's First Assistant Secretary in the Environment Quality Division, Mary Harwood, told the hearings four options were on the table for the environment ministers' council meeting on April 17.

She said: "They (the four options) are: a litter amelioration strategy; banning plastic bags outright; applying a mandated retailer charge, or a Commonwealth levy on bags."

Given Mr Garrett has ruled out a Commonwealth levy, and that the litter-reduction plan would not meet Labor's election promise, the Environment Minister is left with two proposals: an outright ban, which is regarded as impractical, or a checkout charge for each bag.

Major retailers have calculated a minimum 25c charge would add an annual \$650 million to the national shopping bill - or at least \$156 for each shopper.

The NSW Government is known to have discussed a charge of as much as \$1 a bag.

Ms Harwood confirmed to the Senate committee that, no matter what decision was made, eradication of plastic bags would cost consumers.

After being presented with Ms Harwood's testimony, a spokeswoman for Mr Garrett confirmed a checkout charge was on the agenda for the April 17 ministerial council meeting.

"All environment ministers - state, territory and commonwealth - will sit down on April 17 to consider these options and the associated benefits and costs," she said.

"The Minister will not speculate on what the outcomes of that discussion will be, but he's made it clear this Government will not support or introduce a Commonwealth levy on plastic bags," she said.

"We don't favour a Commonwealth tax or levy. We don't see the phase-out of plastic bags as a revenue-raising exercise for the Commonwealth. Working families want a sensible approach that delivers for them and for the environment.

"The fact is, plastic bags have a documented impact on the environment and we have a ready replacement in reusable green or calico bags."

The Australian National Retailers Association has condemned the plan for a checkout charge.

"Imposing an extra cost on consumers for bags they already use responsibly can't be justified," ANRA CEO Margy Osmond said.

Britain last week moved to implement its own plastic bag charge. Finance Minister Alistair Darling said legislation would be introduced to impose a charge on single-use carrier bags unless retailers took action voluntarily.

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