

Slacktivism - beware the plastic witch hunt

By Nick Cater, The Australian, 24 July 2018

The party is over for plastic straws, declared *The Sydney Morning Herald* on Saturday as Hungry Jacks followed Macca's and Ikea in banishing the evil tubes from its counters.

The speed with which corporations and governments have surrendered to this eccentric campaign is a triumph for slacktivism, the one-click, cost-free way to take a stand for humanity or the planet.

Eighteen months ago, plastic straws were merely a cheap, efficient and effective way of pumping milkshake into kiddies. Now they're hunted down by just about every petty government regulator on the planet.

Milk bar owners in Seattle face a \$US250 (\$336) fine for issuing straws or plastic utensils to customers; Toowoomba Regional Council wants them banished from the mountain; Adelaide City Council is debating the issue tonight in response to a motion from Deputy Lord Mayor Sandy Verschoor.

"It sends a very strong message about Adelaide," Verschoor told the ABC, as indeed it does.

It is difficult to find a rational explanation for the rise in public anxiety over plastic, the ubiquitous and versatile mainstay of modern manufacturing and distribution that delivers unrivalled functional properties at low cost.

Plastic food packaging cuts waste and significantly extends shelf life, making fresh food cheaper. It is strong, safe and exceptionally light. It reduces transport costs, warehouse back injuries and fuel emissions.

Having made a noble contribution to modern life, plastic can be given a decent burial as odourless, toxin-free, compacted landfill, where its stabilising and anti-leaching qualities make it the tip manager's best friend.

Despite our best endeavours, however, some plastic waste escapes to the ocean, where its impact on the marine environment is poorly understood.

A Senate inquiry on the threat of marine plastic two years ago acknowledged that waste was a growing problem, but it was restricted in making firm recommendations by vast "knowledge gaps" in marine and waste science.

Knowledge gaps present the kind of opportunity that scaremongers thrive on. Unknown and unquantifiable threats are their stock in trade; all they need is an everyday object to which to apply them.

It is unlikely that banning plastic straws and single-use bags will make a noticeable difference to the amount of plastic in the ocean. Government estimates suggest that only 2 per cent of single-use plastic bags end up as litter, and only a quarter of those make their way to the sea.

A submission by one non-government organisation to the Senate inquiry found that plastic bags and other plastic wrapping accounted for less than one in 20 items of plastic waste collected from beaches.

On a global scale, the impact of Australian plastic waste is insignificant. A study published in *Science* in 2015 found that more than a quarter of the 12.7 million tonnes of plastic washed into the ocean comes from China.

Australia contributed less than 0.08 per cent.

The moral panic about plastic says more about us than the state of the oceans. It reflects a heightened susceptibility to fear in an uncertain world, a phenomenon examined by sociologist Frank Furedi in an instructive book published last month.

Moral panics are not new. The witch-hunts in early modern Europe, the 19th-century fear of airborne diseases emanating from city slums, and the syphilis scare that took hold between the wars are prime examples.

The question Furedi tries to answer is why seemingly irrational fears are so prevalent in a world we like to imagine is ordered by science and why moral panic grips people who consider themselves more sophisticated than their ancestors.

In Furedi's view, the culture of fear is driven by a lack of agreement about how to make sense of threats to the social order. During periods of social disruption, fear can break free from institutional control and acquire an unpredictable dynamic. Communities respond by seeking refuge in simplistic solutions, like banning plastic bags, building windmills or taxing sugar, even though the effectiveness of such measures is highly contested.

Justification is sought in science, but the empirical basis for the fears, and the measures that are demanded, is often flimsy, to say the least.

Social reformer the Reverend Charles Kingsley drew attention to the dangers of "blind fear" in a speech on superstition in 1866.

Rational fear is natural and wholesome, said Kingsley, and stemmed from the instinct for self-preservation. Blind fear, however, "fear of the unknown, simply because it is unknown", leads to terrible follies.

Kingsley warned of the tendency to "erect ... superstitions into a science", as people struck by blind fear attempt to impose order on the unknown.

The science adopted by the anti-plastic movement is questionable to say the least. The UN Environment Program claims that "51 trillion micro-plastic particles — 500 times more than stars in our galaxy — litter the seas", costing "at least \$8 billion in damage to marine ecosystems".

"According to estimates," UNEP says without so much as a footnote, "by 2050, oceans will have more plastic than fish if present trends are not arrested."

Common sense tells us these are guesstimates at best, hunches dressed up as facts to give coherence to an irrational fear about the coherence of modernity.

The same unfounded, unknowable and unverifiable assertions are repeated time and again by the slacktivist entrepreneurs who compete for our attention, and our dollar, in a world saturated by worthy causes.

They repeat the fatuous claim that “seemingly small daily decisions” like rejecting plastic bags and renouncing plastic straws, have “a dramatic effect on our oceans”.

Dramatic? Hardly. We are not supposed to argue, however, but simply to comply.

The faux science of marine plastic, like the faux economics of a sugar tax or the false promises of renewable energy can no longer be questioned. Scepticism itself is cast as a reason for fear.

“Fear itself has become a perspective through which life is interpreted,” writes Furedi.

“A palpable sense of intolerance towards freedom, particularly towards free speech, is intimately connected to the working of the culture of fear.”

How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century, by Frank Furedi, is published by Bloomsbury Continuum.

Nick Cater is executive director of the Menzies Research Centre.