

# Campaigners welcome ban on plastic straws

Could Britain's fight against plastic lead the way to other reforms? For some, the UK shows that humanity really can act to protect the Earth. For others "plastic politicians" are the problem.



**Kicking the habit:** Straws came in useful yesterday as the UK sweltered in record April heat.

Every day in the UK, 23 million straws are put into drinks, used, thrown away, and forgotten about forever.

But of course, they do not disappear. Straws are among the top 10 items found in beach clean-ups. Many are made of plastics which take hundreds of years to decompose. They all end up contributing to the 6.3 billion tonnes of plastic waste now found around the world.

Yesterday, **Michael Gove**, the environment secretary, gave the British government's most dramatic announcement yet in its war against plastic. It will seek to ban the sale of plastic straws, as well as plastic stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds.

"It's a worldwide emergency — that's why we're choosing to act," said Gove, setting the end of 2018 as the deadline for concrete action. Theresa May has claimed the UK is a "world leader" in the fight against plastic, citing charges that have been introduced for **plastic bags**.

The tide is turning against this material.

## Q & A

### Q: What do we know?

A: The environment secretary, Michael Gove, has announced that he intends to ban plastic straws. Every year, 8.5 billion straws are used in the UK, so this would be a huge undertaking.

More and more restaurants and shops are banning plastic straws, and recently, 60 UK music festivals announced that they would follow suit. Shows like David Attenborough's *Blue Planet* have raised the profile of the plastic problem.

This is a remarkable twist in the story of humanity. Plastic was a miraculous invention. It is a material made from a wide range of organic **polymers** that can be moulded into shape while soft, and then set into a rigid form.

It is cheap, light and incredibly easy to mass-produce. After the Second World War, its use soared. "In product after product, market after market, plastics challenged traditional materials and won, taking the place of steel in cars, paper and glass in packaging, and wood in furniture," wrote the author Susan Freinkel. Plastic would take over the world, many predicted. And, in some ways, they were right.

So it is an incredible thing for a liberated, free market economy like the UK to engage in an act of such self-denial. If the government

followed through with their radical plans, could it restore our faith in fixing the Earth's problems?

### Clutching at straws

This is just politicians talking, say sceptics. The Tory government is deeply unpopular with young people, and they are using this as a token, populist offering under pressure from the *Daily Mail*. They are also desperate for some good publicity after the **Windrush immigration scandal** seized the headlines this week.

Have some hope, reply others. This shows what can happen when the right kind of media pressure and public opinion combine with bold leadership. Plastic waste is one of the world's worst environmental scourges. If that can be solved, then why not melting ice caps or endangered species? This should encourage us all.

We know that campaigns to cut out plastic have been gaining momentum for the last few years, and that many governments around the world are implementing policies to curb its use.

### Q: What do we not know?

A: To what extent the government is really serious about its plans. There are plenty in the

Conservative Party who would object to radical policies like banning all plastic straws. We also do not know whether, at some point in the future, there will be a United Nations-wide resolution to deal with this problem, just as there was for cutting global carbon dioxide emissions.

## YOU DECIDE

1. Do you believe the government is serious about its plans to cut plastic use?
2. Overall, has plastic had a good or bad influence on the world?

## WORD WATCH

**Michael Gove** – Gove was the minister for education and the justice minister in David Cameron's Conservative administration. He was one of the lead voices in support of Britain leaving the EU, and was one touted as a likely future prime minister.

**Plastic bags** – These now cost 5p in the UK.

**Polymers** –

## ACTIVITIES

1. In one minute, name as many items as you can that contain plastic that are in the room which you are in now.
2. In groups of three, design a poster to raise awareness of plastic pollution and suggest at least one measure governments could take to tackle it.

Polymers, whether artificial or natural, are made of repeating chains of smaller chemical units. The materials have unique properties depending on the type of molecules being bonded and how they are bonded. Some polymers bend and stretch, like polyester. Others are hard and tough, like glass.

**Daily Mail** – The newspaper has long been engaged in a campaign to encourage the government to introduce stricter laws against plastic use.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

*"We are a plague on the Earth."  
David Attenborough*

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

**Windrush immigration scandal** – This week a scandal has erupted over the treatment of immigrants from the Caribbean, known as the "Windrush generation", who arrived in the UK after the Second World War to address labour shortages. Several immigrants were wrongly deported, with Theresa May's policies from when she was home secretary receiving severe criticism.

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