

OPINION-EDITORIAL ON FEDERAL ELECTION RECYCLING POLICIES

By Pete Shmigel, ACOR CEO

Many Australians might agree: there's certainly a lot of rubbish in this Federal election.

But it's not the kind of rubbish – and recycling – that might first come to mind.

Indeed, the poll on Saturday marks the first time that Australians will go to the polls with the ALP, the Coalition and the Greens all offering substantive policies to improve our national recycling system – which ranks about 17th in the world at present and well behind the European ladder leaders.

We have before us our first ever 'recycling referendum', and the good news is that no matter how you vote, improvements of recycling will be on the agenda under a new government.

This is because there's now unprecedented tri-partisan support, including from Scott Morrison and Bill Shorten themselves, for Australia becoming more domestically sustainable when it comes to recycling by doing a better job at making and using new products from the materials we collect from our homes, schools, workplaces and building sites.

Our political leaders have seen that by creating the "pull" of new recycled content product manufacturing in Australia – and not just the "push" of collecting material via our yellow bins – we can get many benefits like landfill diversion, greenhouse gas reduction, regional job creation, and increased sovereignty over urban resources and their management.

So, why after many years of policy silence, especially until the switch to Scott Morrison in terms of the Coalition, have our parties now become proactive?

The answer is both in the politics and the economics.

A survey conducted by the Australian Council of Recycling (ACOR) using pollsters to the Liberal Party found 88% support for greater government support for recycling. Support levels were strongest among older Australians living in regional areas – rather than only the "hipster vote" one might assume. Specific measures like building new infrastructure and buying recycled by governments had especially strong support.

In some respects, due to the heightened interest in waste and recycling driven by Craig Reucassel's "War on Waste", it's now become politically smart to support recycling and help people confidently answer the question: where's my stuff go?

On the other hand, there's a real problem that needs solving. Kerbside recycling, which is about 1/3 of the overall recycling system, is being impacted on by changes out of Asian countries who no longer want to take some of our material. Though exports aren't the majority of the material we handle, harder access to Asian markets has reduced revenues into the system, and made it harder to cover the costs of collection and sorting of materials, including plastics. It's put a squeeze on both Council rates and industry viability.

Coupled with some poor business choices, we've seen this result in the recent suspension of some services in Melbourne, and that's not something punters find acceptable when the alternative is burying useful stuff in a hole in the ground.

To guarantee that punters' efforts are worth it, the Federal political parties have stepped up with commitments of up to \$500 million to more investment in on-shore gear, more emphasis on producers taking responsibility for their products at end-of-life, and more national direction of what can be an inconsistent and non-coordinated 'system'. (Think of all the different Councils doing different things with when they collect, what they collect and how they collect.)

True to their overall DNA, the Libs have emphasised a more market-based approach with substantial investment for technology and infrastructure and plastics reduction research. The ALP, on the other hand, have emphasised a more regulated and managed approach, including the creation of a National Waste Commissioner, mandatory recycled content purchasing by government agencies, and the goal of a national Container Deposit System. (Victoria and Tasmania now remain the only States without a CDS either running or in the making.)

An analysis and report card of the Parties' policies conducted by ACOR with three other industry associations released yesterday found the Libs and Labor effectively neck-and-neck, and the Greens very competitive too (if not realistically able to implement).

In fact, the "perfect" policy might come from combining their policies - incentives plus intervention - and then adding compulsory requirements for manufacturers to fund the recycling of items like batteries, which are growing in consumption by 300% per year, and all items with a cord or battery.

It's illogical for the TV and computer sectors to have to contribute to the cost of their very successful recycling scheme when the manufacturers of microwaves and washing machines made from the same materials aren't subject to provisions (which would cost less than 2% of the product price).

Community education is vital too. As per funding promised by at least the Coalition, ACOR is looking forward to producing an app that uses visual identification and artificial intelligence to let consumers know if an object is recyclable and what happens to it once presented.

With 90% of Australians regularly presenting materials out on the kerb or otherwise, we insiders of a 50,000 strong industry sometimes joke that, if voting wasn't compulsory, more Australians would be regularly recycling than voting.

On Saturday, they get to vote for recycling at the ballot box in addition to their bin. And, they should know – that in an election called a policy-free zone by some commentators – tri-partisan action on recycling policy is a welcome exception. All three contestants have put forward reasonably solid pitches and, no matter which one you choose, Australia's environmental and economic outcomes are well served by it.