All for naught: the plastic bag debate as a window into the abandonment of zero waste in New Zealand
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Overview of Study
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Question: Why was Zero Waste abandoned as a national strategy in New Zealand?
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- **Question:** *Why was Zero Waste abandoned as a national strategy in New Zealand?*

- **Strategy:** Inductive approach
  - focus on *one* subset of the waste stream
Overview of Study

➢ Question: *Why was Zero Waste abandoned as a national strategy in New Zealand?*

➢ Strategy: Inductive approach
   → focus on *one* subset of the waste stream

➢ Methodology:
   • Review of literature
   • Field investigations
   • Interviews with key stakeholder groups
What is Zero Waste?
What is Zero Waste?
Why Zero Waste?
Why Zero Waste?
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Landfill = Loss of Land
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Incineration = Landfill = Loss of Land
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What then?
Zero Waste: a Global Movement
Zero Waste: a Global Movement
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Zero Waste in New Zealand: a History
Zero Waste in New Zealand: a History

- Arose from grassroots
Zero Waste in New Zealand: a History

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- 1997: Zero Waste New Zealand Trust
  - Local council grants
  - Zero waste to landfill by 2015
70% of local councils signed up by 2006
Zero Waste in New Zealand: a History

➢ 2002: *Towards zero waste and a sustainable New Zealand*

--- *Zero waste in ‘aspirational’ sense only*
Zero Waste in New Zealand: a History

➢ 2004: 1st Review document
  — ‘Zero waste’ disappears from wording
  — Warning that some goals may not be achieved
Zero Waste in New Zealand: a History

- 2007: 2\textsuperscript{nd} Review document
  - Reference to ‘zero waste’ re-appears
  - Waste to landfill has \textit{increased} by 4\% since new strategy
  - Call for more legislation vs. voluntary measures
Zero Waste in New Zealand: a History

➤ 2008: *Waste Minimisation Act*

- Waste Levy of $10/tonne
- *Priority Products* Clause: → Unprecedented powers for government
Zero Waste in New Zealand: a History

- 2008: General election
  
  — After 9 years of Labour Party government...
Zero Waste in New Zealand: a History

- 2008: General election
  — National Party government is elected
Zero Waste in New Zealand: a History

➢ 2010: A new strategy

— Zero waste dropped...

— and replaced with new goals:

• Reducing harm

• Improving efficiency
Meanwhile...
Meanwhile…

Estimated 3.2 million tonnes/year of waste buried in landfills in New Zealand.
(Ministry for the Environment, 2007)

≈ 1 tonne every 10 seconds
The Single-Use Plastic Shopping Bag (PSB)
The Single-Use Plastic Shopping Bag (PSB)

- Global icon of throwaway society
- Up to 150,000 consumed globally per second
- Most PSBs made from poorly-degradable plastics
- ‘Low-hanging fruit’ on waste tree
“If you can’t eliminate PSBs, how are you going to achieve Zero Waste?”
Plastic Bag Issue Around the World
Plastic Bag Issue Around the World

- **PSB Ban:**
  - Bangladesh (2002)
  - South Africa (2003)
  - San Francisco, USA (2007)

- **PSB Tax/Levy:**
  - Ireland (2002)
  - Toronto, Canada (2009)
  - Washington, DC, USA (2010)

- Numerous other PSB initiatives worldwide...
Plastic Bag Issue in New Zealand: a History
Plastic Bag Issue in New Zealand: a History

➢ 2002: Zero Waste New Zealand Trust report recommends:

• Irish-style PSB tax…

• and shift towards sustainable alternatives
2003: PSB levy bill introduced in Parliament
Plastic Bag Issue in New Zealand: a History

- 2004: Packaging Accord
  - Voluntary agreement co-signed by industry and government
Plastic Bag Issue in New Zealand: a History

➢ 2008: Waste Minimisation Act

• Priority Products → powers to impose PSB ban or tax/levy

Waste Minimisation Act 2008

Public Act 2008 No 89
Date of assent 25 September 2008
Commencement see section 2
Plastic Bag Issue in New Zealand: a History

- 30 March 2009: Minister for the Environment asks Ministry staff to investigate a PSB levy for New Zealand...
Plastic Bag Issue in New Zealand: a History

- 30 March 2009: Minister for the Environment asks Ministry staff to investigate a PSB levy for New Zealand...

- 30 March 2009: Prime Minister reverses this directive
August 2009: 5¢/bag levy introduced at 1 of 2 large supermarket chains

→ 70% reduction in consumption

→ Other supermarket chain does not follow suit...
Plastic Bag Issue in New Zealand: a History

- August 2009: 5¢/bag levy introduced at 1 of 2 large supermarket chains
  - 70% reduction in consumption
  - Other supermarket chain does not follow suit...

- September 2009: Levy is dropped after 1 month
Other retailers in New Zealand have introduced PSB levies or bans, some of which continue today.

Otherwise… PSBs remain widespread in New Zealand, with no active campaigns for their reduction.
Key Factors Contributing to Zero Waste Demise…
… & How the Plastic Bag Issue Highlights Them
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... & How the Plastic Bag Issue Highlights Them

1. **No clear plan for achieving zero waste:**
   - ‘Zero waste to landfill’ goals
   - → yet no strategy for eliminating PSBs
   - ... and PSBs an *easy* target
Key Factors Contributing to Zero Waste Demise…
… & How the Plastic Bag Issue Highlights Them

2. **Zero waste strategy vulnerable to change in government:**
   - Previous government worked with parties active on PSB issue
     → New government has not done likewise
   - Previous government increased legislative powers
     → New government has not invoked them
3. Absence of ‘champions’ at highest levels of power:

- Success where leaders took personal ownership of PSB issue (e.g. Ireland, San Francisco) → no examples of this in New Zealand

- Proportional representation system allows a voice in Parliament, but… → minor party status not enough
Key Factors Contributing to Zero Waste Demise…
… & How the Plastic Bag Issue Highlights Them

4.  *Paradigm shift necessary … but nowhere in sight:*

- Governments focused on GDP growth
  → PSB legislation not conducive to this

- Industry pressure too formidable
  → Packaging Accord supports PSB status quo

- Public Apathy
  → Grassroots efforts, but no critical mass of support
A Cautionary Tale for Sustainability Initiatives Worldwide
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- No clear plan
- Initiative vulnerable to change in government
- Absence of ‘champions’ at highest levels of power
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• Unique to New Zealand?
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- Unique to Zero Waste?
Thank you... 😊