

Submission to the Right of Repair Commission

Need for regulation/policy instruments regarding whitegoods entering the market in Australia – design for repair and support for repairers

Inbuilt obsolescence has been a feature of the consumer society for many decades. Whitegoods such as cooking appliances (ovens and stoves) refrigerators, freezers, washing machines, dishwashers and tumble dryers – all of which (with the exception of tumble dryers and freezers and dishwashers) are essential to the functioning of the vast majority of households – now have a considerably shorter life than such goods had in the latter part of last century (when they often lasted 20 years or more). While some of this loss in functional life may well be attributable to greater computerization and complexity in such products today, some of it must also be attributed to the design of these products. Furthermore, the cheaper end of this market appears to rely on the consumer needing to replace these whitegoods in as little as one year after manufacture due to either poor quality parts in the original product, no apparent regulation (or not enforced/enforceable regulation) of the availability and supply of aftermarket parts for any length of time, or the extreme difficulty of effecting repairs due to the design and configuration of the product.

A local repairer has described to me in some detail the difficulty of getting some manufacturers in this cheaper end of the market to honour even a 12-month warranty (becoming a war of attrition where the consumer often gives up their claim due to their need for a functioning appliance and purchases a new appliance). Furthermore, manufacturers are providing less and less adequate training to repairers in how to repair their products; or making this information less accessible (even before COVID-19, providing only online tutorials or courses which do not allow for hands-on practice with the appliance, offering no alternatives for those repairers who, for various reasons, might find it more difficult to benefit from tutorials or courses provided in this way).

A case in point

I would like to briefly describe our experience of attempting to repair rather than replace a reputable brand dishwasher.

The manufacturer of our dishwasher has a good reputation with our local repairer. So when our dishwasher failed after almost 8.5 years of service, we opted to repair rather than replace it in 2019 (long before the COVID-19 pandemic). Parts were ordered and the dishwasher was removed from our home to facilitate the repair. We were then without a dishwasher for approximately two months, as it was found to be difficult to repair due to its design and configuration. We decided to persevere nevertheless, as did our repairer, and eventually the dishwasher was returned to us with a new motor installed, and new internal plastic parts and seals (normal wear and tear). It cost us roughly half the price of a replacement dishwasher and I feel certain that the repairer did not include all the labour hours of trial and error in attempting to install the replacement motor. The repaired machine however functioned for less than 12 months more before the same type of failure occurred. After our experience of waiting for so long for repair, and its cost, we reluctantly decided to replace the dishwasher rather than even check whether it was repairable or not. *We regretted* repairing the dishwasher, as it was most likely that, due to the dishwasher's design, it had not been possible to repair the dishwasher in a way that would ensure that it would function properly for an extended period of time without failing in the same way. We are in no doubt that our repairer's competence and skills, who had done the best job possible.

Our new purchase meant that our old dishwasher was taken away for recycling (as far as we know) in Sydney.

Environmental consequences

The environmental consequences of this lack of regulation must be considerable. Although there are now companies that recycle whitegoods in major cities, in rural areas there is much less choice. Furthermore, most charitable organisations now refuse to accept donated whitegoods older than 2 years old even if they are still fully functional.

In addition, there is much less choice to repair such goods outside the major population centres, with fewer and fewer people opting to become repairers due to the aforementioned problems with getting some manufacturers to honour their warranties, and the dwindling support for repairers from even the more reputable manufacturers according to our repairer – who says their company is swamped with jobs because it is one of the few remaining repair services in our area.

This means a huge number of failed appliances that are probably not being recycled or inadequately recycled, particularly in less densely populated areas.

Cost to the consumer

A quick survey today at appliancesonline.com.au shows the cost of a higher quality 8kg washing machine is today around \$2000 with the cheaper end of the market going down to around \$487. If the cheaper appliance fails after less than 12 months, and the more expensive item after 8 years (our experience), then the cheaper appliances are still more costly to the consumer over time (opportunity cost not included). While this supports the adage that buying quality is cheaper over time, it seems unjust that it is left to the consumer to discover that the warranty on a product purchased in good faith will not be honoured in a timely way when a manufacturer has a clear history of such behaviour.

A 'right' to repair?

It is arguable that many whitegoods (and potentially other products) are essential not only to the functioning of most households per se, but by extension to the functioning of society as a whole, given that they are labour-saving, thus making those hours available for gainful employment to the benefit of the society as a whole. It then becomes not just a matter of an individual consumer right to repair, but a right of our community to product design for repair and adequate support for repairers. Australia should not be permitting the importation of whitegoods from other countries that regularly fail within less than 12 months and where the manufacturer (and by extension their local agents) has a history of failing to honour warranties in a timely way. Perhaps a sliding-scale tariff on such imported appliances based on the outcome of 12-monthly reviews of honouring warranties and the reparability of the appliances might be appropriate. Or some other instrument that would require manufacturers to take more environmental responsibility over the life (from cradle to grave) of their products. Perhaps there should also be regulation mandating a minimum warranty period for such resource-consuming, high carbon-footprint (in their manufacturing and supply chains) products in the Australian market.