

THE POKIES PLAY YOU

Liberals should say no to Australia's biggest pokies pusher

Wednesday, September 12, 2018

The Alliance for Gambling Reform today called on Tony Abbott and the NSW Liberal Party to withdraw its cross-factional offer to have Australia's biggest pokies pusher, Roger Corbett, installed as President of the Federal Electorate Conference for Warringah, the seat held by the former Prime Minister.

Responding to [a story on the back page](#) of *The AFR* today and [this piece](#) in *The SMH*, Alliance spokesman and director Tim Costello called on Mr Corbett to withdraw his planned nomination for President of the Warringah FEC unless he first commits to resign as chairman of ALH Group, Australia's largest operator of addictive poker machines.

"The Liberals wouldn't accept the chairman of Australia's biggest tobacco company for a position like this and nor should they tolerate the chairman of the world's biggest operator of poker machines in pubs given the enormous social damage this wreaks on society," Mr Costello said.

Mr Corbett and Woolworths recently released [the outcome](#) of an independent investigation into ALH after whistleblowers went to independent Federal MP Andrew Wilkie alleging the company was spying on customers and plying heavy gamblers with free drinks at some of its 300 pokies venues across Australia.

The Alliance believes Mr Corbett, 76, should be replaced as the Woolworths nominee to chair ALH, which is a 75-25 joint venture with Melbourne-based pokies billionaire Bruce Mathieson.

"I welcomed the [admission of mistakes](#) and the commitment to change, but also call on the Woolworths board to find a new ALH chair to show true accountability," Mr Costello said.

ALH operates more than 12,000 poker machines which will extract almost \$1.5 billion of the world record \$15 billion that will be lost on pokies in Australia this year. ALH has been [enjoying strong profits](#) in recent years and has now taken almost \$20 billion from pokies gamblers since 2004 when Mr Corbett was the Woolworths CEO who drove the company's aggressive push into pokies by partnering up with Bruce Mathieson to buy the old CUB pubs business, ALH.

The Alliance believes ALH [pushes the envelope](#) harder than any operator in the Australian pokies market, even choosing to keep [51 of its 81](#) Victorian pokies venues open the maximum 20 hours a day. And as investigate reporter Michael West [reports today](#), these losses are concentrated in the most vulnerable suburbs.

“For Woolworths and ALH to admit it has been targeting big spending gamblers and offering inducements such as free drinks, partly explains how it has emerged as such a dominant player in the Australian pokies market,” Mr Costello said. “The chairman of such a company should not be rewarded with a position of responsibility in the Liberal Party until he has atoned for these ruthless tactics.”

“It is now up to the various Premiers, Gambling Ministers and state regulators to step up to the plate and take action against ALH to ensure all Australian pokies operators are sent a clear message about cowboy tactics. This strong action should include Gladys Berijiklean insisting that the chairman of ALH not assume such an important position as Tony Abbott’s FEC President at a time when her gaming regulator is still investigating the company over these claims.”

The Alliance notes that *Eternity* magazine [recently dubbed](#) Mr Corbett “Australia’s most controversial Christian” given his pokies support. Tony Abbott also has an unfortunate history as a wrecker of pokies reform during the Gillard Government when he gave [sycophantic speeches](#) at gambling industry rallies and produced a lamentable [2013 gambling policy](#) which caved in to the demands of Clubs NSW.

“Tony Abbott and Roger Corbett have both been contributors to the tragic \$25 billion that will be lost by Australians gambling this year. We need a new generation of leaders who are prepared to seriously tackle the scourge of gambling addiction which causes marriage breakdowns, homelessness, family violence, poverty, fraud and many other social ills,” Mr Costello said.

The Alliance also noted it was regrettable the Warringah FEC annual meeting and formal endorsement of Tony Abbott as the Liberal candidate at the upcoming Federal election will be held this Friday night at the Balgowlah RSL pokies club, which stripped \$7m from pokies gamblers last year and has [an all-male board](#).

“If Sydney wants to stop being the world’s most pokies dominated major city, political parties should look for pokies-free venues to hold their meetings,” Mr Costello said.

For further information: Stephen Mayne: 0412 106 241 or stephen@agr.org.au