

13 May 2020

Support for Senate call to rethink Australia's relationship with gambling

The Alliance for Gambling Reform applauds a speech made in the [Senate](#) last night urging for state and territory governments around Australia to take the opportunities presented by the COVID-19 shutdown to rethink the impact poker machines have on our communities.

The speech, made by Senator Stirling Griff, recognised the devastating harm caused by the addictive machines, and the unexpected benefits coming from the COVID-19 shutdown for many Australians.

"We have a unique opportunity to help people permanently break away from the hold of these despicable machines. State governments may love the tax revenue the pokies bring in, but they cannot ignore that the shutdown of pokies has had very much a public health benefit well and truly beyond COVID-19. And that was once in the too hard basket. It has been the circuit-breaker so many gambling addicts have needed. We cannot drop the ball now. No Australian should be put at risk of gambling harm by reopening these venues. To do so is unconscionable.

Of course, we are concerned for workers at gambling venues, many of whom have lost their jobs in the fallout of the current shutdown. They are entitled to safe, stable and meaningful work. Realistically, that kind of work can be found outside of the gambling industry because, despite what owners of pokie dens claim, research suggests it is far more productive to invest in hospitality—where, we know, 20 jobs are created for every \$1 million spent on food and meals. Contrast that with a mere three jobs for the same amount lost to gambling. Gambling doesn't add up."

Alliance for Gambling Reform Chief Advocate, the Rev Tim Costello, supported Senator Griff's speech and said the COVID-19 pandemic had made urgent gambling reform more imperative than ever.

"The power to arrest the inordinate amount of gambling harm poker machines cause in Australia lies with Premiers and Chief Ministers around the nation," Rev Costello said.

"We are completely behind a [move by the ACT Government](#) to support community clubs in surrendering poker machines in exchange for \$15,000 per machine that must go towards retaining and supporting staff. That is the sort of visionary policy making that we need now more than ever.

"The reality is that poker machines do the majority of gambling harm in this country because there are just so many of those machines plaguing our nation -- roughly 200,000 of them. Western Australia has got it right -- they only have poker machines in the casino and accordingly they have significantly lower rates of gambling harm. Other states can and should follow suit."

Rev Costello said that, like Senator Griff, he was concerned about the numerous people in the hospitality industry eager to return to work, but without poker machines switched on.

"We want to see pubs and clubs thriving as community hubs with music and meals," he said.

"Australians are effectively saving more than \$1 billion per month from going into poker machines while they are shut down. That money is paying bills for people, it's buying coffees and takeaways from independent businesses struggling to survive, not lining the pockets of a wealthy few.

"COVID-19 has presented us with a unique opportunity to rethink the dire situation Australia has gotten itself into with the prevalence of gambling. Australians lost \$25 billion gambling last year, the highest rate of losses per head in the entire world. We can change that now!

"We can come out of this crisis with a real positive if we can significantly reduce gambling harm in Australia. That will not only save families and individuals from inordinate pain -- including family violence, mental ill-health and homelessness -- it will provide billions of dollars to be spent in our economy at a time when we need it most. We want to #BuildBackBetter from all this, and we can do just that. Let's not go back to the way things were when we know we can be healthier and happier."

Media contact: Rebecca Thorpe on 0491 209 436 or rebecca.thorpe@agr.org.au