

THE POKIES PLAY YOU

Lib-Lab duopoly in NSW fail community on pokies harm

Thursday, March 15, 2018

The Alliance for Gambling Reform today slammed the NSW Government and Labor opposition for colluding to ram terrible new poker machine laws through the upper house last night just 8 days after the complex legislation was first revealed to the public.

The Alliance's NSW spokesperson and deputy chair, Allison Keogh, who grew up in household impacted by gambling harm, said the major parties failed to protect ordinary people by continuing to deliver for a predatory industry which makes obscene amounts of money from an addictive product.

"It was incredibly dispiriting watching Labor and Coalition MPs heartlessly rejecting numerous sensible amendments put up by Greens MP Justin Field late last night which would have tackled the world record levels of gambling harm suffered by the people of NSW," Ms Keogh said.

"With some notable exceptions such as Independents [Alex Greenwich](#) and [Greg Piper](#), the Greens and Fred Nile, the capitulation by Government MPs and the feeble Labor opposition was just so disappointing and in stark contrast to Western Australia where there is Bipartisan support for limiting pokies to casinos."

"This legislation delivers on the dubious Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Coalition and Clubs NSW shortly before the 2015 state election and The Alliance is calling on the NSW Government and Labor Opposition not to sign another agreement with the predatory pokies industry before the 2019 state election."

The Alliance is particularly concerned by a number of elements in the package including:

The legislation completely failed to take a public health approach to assessing pokies applications with even Labor voting against sensible amendments to make the risk of increased community harm through family violence a factor to be taken into account;

The reduction in machine numbers, which has been running at about 600 a year since 2009, will stall now that smaller pubs and clubs will be able to lease their machines to bigger venues in more vulnerable areas, thereby creating a new category of "fake pokies free venues" across NSW which are still profiting from pokies gambling harm. [Listen to](#) Gambling Minister Paul Toole fudge this issue on ABC radio last week.

The combination of easier club mergers, reduced forfeiture requirements, leasing deals and a reduction in the percentage of the population rated as being in the most at risk areas to only 20%, means it will now be easier for the industry to inflict even faster increases in gambling losses by shifting machines from low impact areas to their more profitable suburbs and towns.

“The experience of the past 8 days demonstrates once again that the pokies industry has completely captured the two major political parties in NSW, effectively putting the fox in charge of the hen house by giving Clubs NSW with its \$4 billion in annual pokies losses almost everything it wanted,” Ms Keogh said.

“Councils like Fairfield already have more machines than the whole of Tasmania and close to \$500 million a year in annual losses, which is more than two-thirds of total losses in the whole of South Australia.”

“This is just business as usual from the state with the worst pokies plague of any Australian jurisdiction. How can the government and opposition keep ignoring the harm caused by annual losses now exceeding \$7 billion a year?”

The Alliance’s lead spokesman and director Tim Costello wrote to all major party lower house MPs on Tuesday, requesting that the legislation not be rushed through the lower house so that impacted parties such as councils, those harmed by gambling and civil society groups could have time to engage with the political process.

“The captured NSW politicians ignored this request for time and engagement, instead debating the legislation on Tuesday night in the lower house (starts p42 of Hansard) and then ramming it through both houses yesterday, culminating in a brutal late night debate which disrespected those with a lived experience of gambling harm,” Mr Costello said.

The Alliance was particularly concerned by the comments (8.50pm) of Liberal upper house MP Peter Phelps last night who dismissed all of our concerns and declared those wanting to reduce world record levels of gambling harm in NSW as members of “an axis of wowser”, who were “moral puritans” driven by “class antagonism” and wanted gambling prohibited.

“There was considerable public discussion and media debate on this notorious do nothing legislation so it was incredibly disrespectful to the victims of gambling harm to proceed with indecent haste and insults, ultimately passing these laws shortly before midnight on a Wednesday night after just 8 days of public discussion,” Mr Costello said.

“The legislation is totally unacceptable, represents complete pokies industry capture and should have been rejected outright. We need to instead look at a public health approach to reducing gambling harm and treating the gambling industry like the tobacco industry.”

“The NSW government had no specific mandate to amend 16 different pieces of legislation like this and should have delayed the whole process until after the 2019 NSW election, so the community could have a say on whether NSW should continue on as the most pokies-soaked jurisdiction in the world after Las Vegas and Macau.”

The Alliance will now be redoubling its reform efforts in NSW, with the number one priority being the release of major party gambling policies over the next 12 months which embrace reform and do not involve any more notorious MOU agreements with Clubs NSW or the AHA.

The Alliance believes there are a raft of reforms which should have been implemented during this so-called “biggest regulatory shake up in 10 years” and will now be pursued through engagement with the major parties leading up to the 2019 state election. These include:

Significant machine re-design lowering Australia’s only state-based \$10 maximum bet, unlimited cash withdrawals from ATMs and the ability to load a maximum of \$7500 onto a machine;

A significant reduction in machine numbers which are currently sitting at 95,000, representing almost 10% of the world’s high-intensity poker machines;

Limiting the types of organisations that can operate poker machines on behalf of the NSW Government by excluding registered political parties (ie Randwick Labor Club) and churches (ie Liverpool Catholic Club);

Introducing a blanket ban on political donations by any venue or peak body which is operating or benefitting from poker machines licenced by the NSW Government. At the moment clubs can donate whereas hotels and casinos cannot;

Lifting the lowest pokies tax rates in Australia, particularly for clubs, which do a majority of the harm and, based on recent media reports, have more money than they know what to do with.

Setting a maximum annual loss rate of \$5 billion and actively reducing the 95,000 poker machines in 2600 NSW pokies venues until that has been achieved.

Properly implementing smoking bans in NSW pokies venues which have the slackest rules in Australia, thereby inflicting significant passive smoking harm on staff and customers in venues;

Implementing policies which reverse the Government’s forecast of surging pokies tax revenues due to its failure to properly regulate a lethal industry;

Background documents:

[Government response to LIA review](#)

[Alliance submission to NSW LIA review](#)

[NSW projecting rising pokies losses in 2017 budget](#)

[World record losses – time for NSW to take action](#)

Media contact: Stephen Mayne: stephen@agr.org.au 0412 106 241

Allison Keogh: 0412 555 369