

# JUST IN TIME



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## Better luck next time...

**JUST IN TIME** often discusses the challenges faced by disadvantaged members of society. The causes of disadvantage are many and varied, but problem gambling is a common chapter in the stories of many disadvantaged people. Poker machines account for the majority of problem gambling in Australia, and their cheerful electronic jingles belie the often tragic stories of those who play. The government's plan, championed by Independent Andrew Wilkie, to introduce mandatory pre-commitment technology to Australia's poker machines could be an important measure in helping the millions of Australians affected by problem gambling.

It seems that in this year of politics no issue has avoided a fiery debate in parliament or a scathing ad campaign in the newspapers and on television. Policy proposals such as the mining tax, the carbon tax, and plain packaging for cigarettes have shown us how much of a role large companies play in politics. Mandatory pre-commitment on poker machines has been no exception.

Large companies have the means to create ad campaigns and lobby politicians, but the voices of the average Australian are harder to hear. This is particularly so when it comes to gambling, as many gambling addicts feel too ashamed to speak out about their problem.

### Un-Australian?

One of the main arguments put forward by clubs fighting against pokies pre-commitment is that restricting gambling in any way is "un-Australian". Gambling is, indeed, a huge part of Australian culture. We only have to look to the Melbourne Cup and ANZAC day to see how interwoven gambling is with our national identity.

Most Australians limit their gambling to these occasional events, or to purchasing the odd scratchie.

However there are those who develop an addiction to gambling, and this addiction is ultimately very destructive.

Gambling could be easily compared to drinking alcohol - a pastime that is enjoyed by most Australians in moderation, but which causes serious problems when done excessively.

Given that there are many legal limitations placed on drinking in bars and clubs, it is surprising that so many objections have been raised against comparable limitations being placed on using poker machines.

We do not hear cries that it is un-Australian to prohibit a drunk person from buying more alcohol - perhaps because the harmful outcomes of excessive drinking are plain and clear. Placing too much money into poker machines, however, is something that can occur without onlookers being aware of the destruction that is taking place before their eyes.



Poker machines account for the majority of money spent on gambling in Australia.

## Gambling facts

- \* One in six people who play the pokies regularly has a serious addiction.
- \* Some poker machines can be played at extremely high intensity – a gambler could lose more than \$1,500 in just one hour.
- \* The actions of one problem gambler negatively impacts the lives of between five and 10 others. This means up to five million Australians are affected by problem gambling each year, including friends, family and employers of people with a gambling problem.
- \* Only around 15 per cent of problem gamblers seek help.

## Hard to escape

It is easy to see problem gambling as an isolated problem, but in reality it is part of a broader web of social ills. A study by BeyondBlue, an organisation targeting depression, found that 35 per cent of problem gamblers have a severe mental disorder, 50 per cent have an alcohol problem and 72 per cent can be at risk of depression.

Problem gambling is also a serious issue within Indigenous communities. Previously gambling was seen in many Indigenous communities as a social activity, where money circulated between families. Now poker machines draw people and their money away from the community and into the clubs.

Research has also found that counselling services offered to problem gamblers have not been designed with the needs of Indigenous people in mind. These services are also harder to access in remote and rural communities.

The link between gambling addiction and crime, particularly fraud, has been well established. This further illustrates that problem gambling leads to increased social isolation for those who are already vulnerable.

Knowing that those impacted by problem gambling are some of society's most disadvantaged people means that we have an even greater responsibility to tackle problem gambling.

Increasing the availability and appropriateness of counselling services is an important step, but so too are measures such as mandatory pre-commitment on poker machines. The clubs that profit from problem gamblers have made their position loud and clear. The rest of us must speak out for the the five million Australians whose suffering is drowned out by the jolly tunes of poker machines ringing out across the country.

## Prayer

Father,

You sent your son to bring the world's lost and vulnerable people to salvation.

Remind us to act as your disciples and to follow the example that Christ set.

Let us care for those society has cast out or forgotten, including problem gamblers and their families.

Amen



Cut and place under your CLRI(NSW) fridge magnet

## Web links



### PROBLEM GAMBLING INFO

<http://www.problemgambling.gov.au>

Read more about the facts of problem gambling, and hear testimonials from people who have suffered.

### GAMBLING HELP NSW

<http://www.gamblinghelp.nsw.gov.au>

Access help for problem gamblers, and read about how others have broken the cycle of addiction.

JUST IN TIME is an occasional publication of the Social Justice Committee of CLRI (NSW).

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