

On Gambling

Well it's that time of year again in Australia. The Spring Racing Carnival! And like lemmings to a cliff, Australians in ever increasing numbers will all flock to our friendly neighbourhood TAB to put on a bet.

And where's the harm in that I hear you say. Everyone knows that Australians will bet on anything. Two flies climbing a wall, or the odds on having a new Prime Minister – we are catholic in our betting taste. But on the Friday before the Cup (no need to elaborate on what cup!) a report is released in the media indicating that one in ten Australians (3 in 10 in Hobart) are living with housing stress, that is likely to keep them in a poverty trap. Now I'm not saying that gambling is the root cause of the 1 in 10's precarious position, but gambling is seen as primarily affecting socially and economically disadvantaged groups. So, our rush to put on a bet supports a system that is far from being benign. The Commonwealth Government's proposed legislation that seeks to restrict the damaging use of poker machines through pre-commitment is a recognition of the harm this particularly insidious form of gambling has upon those who can least afford it.

With Australians as the world's most prolific gamblers, the social costs of problem gambling are estimated at \$4.7 billion a year, according to the Australian Churches Gambling Taskforce, who have renewed their calls for mandatory pre-commitment measures. Our own Uniting Church president, Reverend Alistair Macrae, says the social costs of problem gambling in Australia are high, with relationship breakdown, mental health issues, unemployment, debt and financial hardship, theft and social isolation. According to an Economist article, in 2010 Australian adults lost an average of almost US\$1,300, beating second place Singapore (nearly \$1,200 per adult) and far more than third

placed Ireland (nearly \$600 per adult). In 2010 Australian adults lost three times as much as their counterparts in Britain and the United States. A gold medal for gambling! This is one record that that we should be ashamed of!

Yet when a government seeks to ensure that money gambled away through poker machines is limited, the vested interests in the form of clubs and hotels and media outlets like the Nine Network, whose owners own one of the largest casinos in Australia – Crown, claim that their rights are being infringed. Perversely, they claim that far from being a problem, poker machines put a great deal back into their communities. But they fail to recognise that such "community largesse" comes at a higher cost to the most vulnerable people in our society.

Most of us, especially if we came originally from high gambling states, can relate a personal story of someone who has been harmed by gambling. I have a close family member who chose to relocate to Western Australia because he could not curb his pokies habit.

As I See It, campaigning against gambling in Australia is not about wowsersism. If justice and concern for the marginalised in our society are Christian values, then we have no choice but to support any efforts to curb the cancerous influence of gambling in our society. So why not make a Christian and a political statement next Tuesday – be un-Australian – refuse to put on a bet!

Tony would be more than happy to chat about the above article.

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