



Australian senator Nick Xenophon: odds are against pokies

July 15, 2012

An open letter to Ian Horne, CEO Australian Hotels Association (SA), from Senator Nick Xenophon.

Dear Ian,

After 15 years campaigning against poker machine harm I guess I shouldn't be surprised by the moral bankruptcy of your industry.

Nor should I be surprised when one thing is said in private and another thing is said publicly.

Three days ago single mother and ex-poker machine addict Leanne Scott took precious time out from her last few hours of freedom to meet you and talk about the harm caused by this shameful product.

Today she is in prison after stealing more than \$800,000 to fund her poker machine addiction.

By arrangement, the meeting was private and so I am not going to reveal what was said.

But I must say I was shocked by the comments made to the media on Friday.

In private you behaved decently in your dealings with Leanne and her parents, Rod and Lenore.

In public we simply heard from the industry playbook where the blame is placed on the victim and no responsibility is taken for selling them the tools of their own destruction.

I understand it's your job. It's also not a new tactic. The hotel industry is just following a well-worn path created by big tobacco.

But I felt the comments took blaming the victim to a whole new low.

Apparently, Ms Scott was not just totally responsible for her addiction to pokie machines, she also deserved criticism for not being strong enough to seek help for her addiction.

You said: " ... for whatever reason Ms Scott didn't want to, or wasn't able to (seek help)".

How can the victim be blamed when the Productivity Commission found both in 1999 and 2010 that only 10-15 per cent of gambling addicts ever seek help for their addiction?

According to the Productivity Commission, 15 per cent of people who gamble on poker machines once a week have a severe gambling addiction, and a further 15 per cent are already on the path to developing a full-blown pathological problem.

If a restaurant made 30 per cent of its regular customers sick it would be closed down overnight.

Just like the tobacco industry, it's time for us all to acknowledge the passive victims of this product.

We can start with Leanne's 11-year-old daughter, whose mother could spend at least the next two years behind bars. For a child, that kind of trauma can be a life-long sentence.

Then there are her parents, extended family and friends.

Finally consider the businesses she stole more than \$800,000 from.

Why should other businesses suffer so hotels can make profits from misery?

Just like victims of passive smoking, these people are victims of a product which they never even used.

And for every dollar the industry makes it spends less than half a cent on gamblers' rehabilitation.

The industry doesn't even have the decency to clean up its own mess.

Like the 88 per cent of poker machine addicts who ultimately steal to fund their addiction, Leanne had never previously broken the law.

The hotel industry helped make her a criminal.

I believe the industry you represent is on the wrong side of history.

Like slavery, asbestos and tobacco, people who once thought it was OK are realising it has to stop.

Right now your industry is desperately fighting the one reform that would have kept Leanne out of jail and would have helped hundreds of thousands of others from becoming addicted.

Leanne has said had bets been capped at \$1 per spin, and hourly losses capped at \$120, she would not be in jail today.

Bets above \$1 only exist to drain cash from addicts.

And that claim is backed up by the research of the Productivity Commission which found that 88 per cent of recreational gamblers never bet more than \$1 a spin.

That's why the key recommendation of the Commission is to implement dollar bets.

On ABC TV's 7.30 this week Karen Throssell spoke about her former partner who killed himself because of poker machines.

And she described the dividends she receives from Woolworths - Australia's largest pokies operator - as "blood money".

Forty per cent of all losses on poker machines come from gambling addicts.

So I guess 40 per cent of the hotel industry's revenue from pokies could be described as blood money too.

But I believe the industry's days of gross exploitation are numbered.

Australians can only take so much spin and so much destruction.

At least Leanne had the class and the courage to admit her liability in this tragedy.

Are hotels finally willing to admit theirs?

Yours sincerely,

Nick Xenophon