

## OPINION 51

### Talking Point

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# Is pokies card still a sure bet?

Let's hope the government doesn't abandon the community, writes **Meg Webb**

In April this year, Tasmanians lost \$15.3m to poker machines, putting us on track to match last year's total losses of close to \$190m.

Pokies are clustered in low-income suburbs and losses are still up on pre-Covid levels, with the Tasmanian Liquor and Gaming Commission indicating half of losses come from people being harmed by their gambling.

That is why Minister Michael Ferguson's announcement in September 2022 – of a nation-leading poker machine card with preset loss limits to be introduced in Tasmania by the end of 2024 – was a monumental step forward.

It was the first time our state government committed to an evidence-based measure that would genuinely reduce the harm Tasmanians suffer from pokies addiction – it was the first time a government in this state dared to announce a harm-reduction measure that hadn't been designed and dictated by the pokies industry.

That is also why the early election called this year, prior to the implementation of the card, created a vulnerability.

The March election was an opportunity for the cashed-up and powerful pokies industry to exert influence on both major political parties to water down their support for the pokies card.

Without doubt, behind closed doors, pokies industry representatives were wielding both political donations carrots and threats of negative campaigning sticks. We all remember the 2018 election and how effective pokies industry cash and influence can be.

That is why it was so heartening to hear Mr Ferguson clearly state on ABC radio a week before the election, when asked whether his party was dumping its commitment to a pokies card with preset loss limits, "... we are not shifting from that policy".

It has been clear that Mr Ferguson's personal commitment

has been a driving force behind introducing the card, which is why the post-election shift of the finance portfolio to Minister Nic Street looks ominous.



**Meg Webb**

A change in responsible minister, away from the person who has championed the card, is exactly what would be expected if the Liberal government, at the bidding of pokies industry election donors, was about to go to water on this gold-standard harm reduction measure.

The next predictable step would be for the government to begin walking back its commitment to delivering the full features of the card, which were recommended by the Tasmanian Liquor and Gaming Commission.

Will there be talk of implementing the card in 'phases' – pushing out to an unknown future date the preset loss limits, or a proposal to start with a voluntary 'trial' version of the card?

Make no mistake – that is exactly what the pokies industry will have demanded, because those are the specific features of the card that will make it work.

Evidence from trials in other states is clear: the pokies card must be universal and it must have preset loss limits to be effective in reducing harm.

Tasmanians are now left with an important question: will this Liberal government hold on to the laudable steel shown by Mr Ferguson on the pokies card, or will it abandon the best interests of Tasmanian families and communities in a shameful display of capture by a major donor industry?

Time will tell, and Tasmanians will be watching carefully.

**Meg Webb is the independent Member for Nelson**