

Opinion OURS & YOURS

Pollies under pressure to abandon pokies card reform

The grip of the pokies industry on both major parties means Tasmanians are the big losers, writes **Meg Webb**

In a column on these pages in May this year, I warned of signs the Rockliff government was planning to water down or abandon the nation-leading mandatory pokies card – now it looks certain.

Undeniably, the only explanation for betraying the community by abandoning the pokies card commitment would be intense pressure from local and national pokies industry heavyweights.

The grip of this industry on both major parties in this state, through a combination of donations and political threats, has historically seen industry dictate government policy and limit effective regulation.

Yet again, we are seeing the barefaced capture of the Tasmanian Liberal government by pokies industry barons.

And there's no need to wonder why the Tasmanian Labor Opposition is staying shiftily quiet – they sold their souls to the pokies industry in 2018 – when they abandoned their casino-only pokies policy, and again in 2021 when they began parroting industry-approved rhetoric about facial recognition initiatives, proven to be largely ineffective in reducing harm (but a handy marketing tool!).



Independent MLC Meg Webb

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The predictable excuses from the Rockliff government, flushed out last week by concerns raised in parliament and the media, have been

hand-wringing and squeaking about the possible economic impact of pokies card reforms. Followed by the furtive announcement that Deloitte has been contracted to undertake economic analysis of the impact of the card.

This is standard pokies industry spin, spouted by its indentured politicians. A predictable, self-serving distraction from an industry that makes super-profits peddling a deliberately addictive product.

But by all means, let's start talking economics and pokies in Tasmania.

A total of \$186m in losses is the amount taken from Tasmanians by poker machines in 2023-24. Evidence indicates half – let's say \$90m – was bled from Tasmanians addicted to



Independent MLC Meg Webb is concerned the state government is planning to water down Tasmania's nation-leading, much-needed pokies card reforms.

pokies. These Tasmanians don't exist in a vacuum: they are our family, our friends, our workmates and our community members.

For every person harmed by addiction to pokies, evidence says five to 10 people around them are also being harmed.

With Tasmania's income demographics and cost-of-living pressures, the economic impact of addiction-derived losses of \$90m a year is devastatingly harmful, including: children going hungry, mortgages and rents unpaid, homes lost, increased domestic violence,

families breaking apart, debts accrued and defaulted, employers and community organisations defrauded, jobs lost, criminal acts committed, crippling mental ill-health, and lives destroyed.

Jobs, jobs, jobs are lost to harm caused by pokies. Also lives, lives, lives.

In 1999, the Productivity Commission recommended a mandatory cashless card with loss limits as the best way to reduce harm from poker machines.

The mandatory pokies card being implemented in Tasmania will

significantly cut the losses from addiction, and meaningfully reduce the human and economic harm. Any politician stating their commitment to pokies harm minimisation is, by definition, saying they support a reduction in profit for pokies venues.

So – spoiler alert – the Deloitte economic impact analysis will definitely indicate lower revenue for pokies venues as a result of the mandatory card.

Will the analysis also include assessment of the positive human and economic impact of less pokies addiction and harm?

How will it weigh ruined lives against the maintenance of corporate profits? Will it model the jobs and growth created when money no longer drained by pokies is spent in other Tasmanian businesses?

Will it take into account the recent massive boost to venue revenue under the new individual licensing model?

At this stage we don't know. Premier Rockliff is being secretive about the origin, the terms of reference and the methodology of the Deloitte analysis under way.

Is that because it was proposed and

designed by pokies industry stakeholders?

We have a multitude of responsible opportunities to generate economic activity and growth in this state, especially in our world-class hospitality and tourism industries.

A state government with a genuinely strong plan to deliver the best future for Tasmania would instead focus on and invest in products and industries that make us healthier, happier and thriving.

Meg Webb is the independent member for Nelson