

Tasmanian MPs under pressure from gambling lobby over harm minimisation plan, Michael Ferguson claims

By state political reporter Adam Langenberg

Gambling

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In short:

As the state's former finance minister, Michael Ferguson proposed nation-leading reforms that would see Tasmania implement a mandatory cashless gaming card with an annual default spending limit of \$5,000.

In an opinion piece, Mr Ferguson — now a backbencher — says a concerted campaign against the card by the state's hospitality association is putting pressure on every Tasmanian politician.

What's next?

The government has asked consultancy firm Deloitte to look at how the card would impact the state's hospitality industry, with anti-gambling advocates concerned that is part of a plan to water down the measures.

The man behind Tasmania's promised cashless gaming card says the "backbone of every MP is under pressure" due to a concerted campaign against it by the state's

hospitality lobby.

Former deputy premier Michael Ferguson proposed a nation-leading mandatory cashless gaming card as the state's finance minister in 2022, with default limits of \$100 per day, and \$5,000 a year.

The government insists it is still committed to the card but has not guaranteed it will be mandatory or that the default limits will remain in place.



Michael Ferguson was the main driver behind the cashless gaming card but is now on the backbench. (ABC News: Jonny McNee)

It has commissioned a report from consultancy firm Deloitte into the card's impact on the state's hospitality sector, with Premier Jeremy Rockliff saying earlier this week that a "more moderate approach" was required.

The Tasmanian Hospitality Association has lobbied fiercely against the card, with chief executive Steve Old claiming on Monday that it would lead to the closure of up to half of Tasmanian venues with poker machines and accusing Mr Ferguson of lying to the industry and guaranteeing there would not be a cashless gaming card.

In an opinion piece in The Mercury newspaper, Mr Ferguson wrote he had been "restrained" as treasurer from "being frank in my assessment of Mr Old's various claims over the past two years".

"Now, I am not prepared to sit idly by and allow the genuine public interest to be defeated just to appease those venues who are massively profiting from the misery of Tasmanian families."

"We should be alert to sectional interests trying to undermine Tasmania's nation-leading approach."



Michael Ferguson told the Hobart Mercury "I for one will not be buckling, nor do I feel the need to". (ABC News: Ebony ten Broeke)

Mr Ferguson claimed the reforms would put "real power back into the hands" of poker machine players, allowing them to choose in advance how much they were prepared to lose, and said he was confident every other Australian state would follow once it was adopted in Tasmania.

"It's pro-freedom to play, pro-family and pro-business," he said.

"The only players who might be inconvenienced are perhaps the problem gamblers who will find the machine stops working when the loss limit is reached.

"Anyone who truly wants to lose more than \$5,000 will be able to do that by simply applying for a higher limit and showing capacity."

Claims card would make venues unviable 'very surprising'

Mr Ferguson said Mr Old's claims the card would make venues financially unviable were "very surprising", given data he'd seen showed profits "for the vast majority of pubs were up by between 40 and 60 per cent" in just one month following gambling reforms passed by the state parliament last year.

"The highest additional retained revenue was an additional \$73,000 in one month alone, in just one venue," he said,

"With so much extra profit being made right now, thanks to Liberal reforms, there is room for genuine harm reduction if we care for the public interest."

The Tasmanian Hospitality Association has been contacted for comment.

Independent Upper House MP Meg Webb said Mr Ferguson's opinion piece provided a "clear acknowledgement" the hospitality industry was "determined to kill the pokies card and have been working towards that behind the scenes for quite some time".

"[Mr Ferguson] has posed a challenge to all members of parliament, a moral challenge, to resist the undue influence of sectional interests like the pokies industry," she said.

"It's been clear, to not just Michael Ferguson but the members of parliament and the Tasmanian community over the last couple of weeks, that the government is trying to backpedal on the card, they are trying to find an excuse and a reason to back away from it, they've commissioned a rigged report in order to give them that excuse.

"We have such a history of our state government being captured by the poker machine industry, who dictates its own rules: this is our chance to end that history."

"This card is an opportunity to go forward with something that will work to genuinely reduce harm."



Kristie Johnston wants MPs to have a conscience vote on the matter when parliament resumes. (ABC News: Kate Nickels)

Independent Clark MP Kristie Johnston said it was "very significant" that Mr Ferguson had spoken out.

"They're walking away from the commitment which would minimise the harm caused by poker machines. It's important this government's policy remains strong," she said.

Ms Johnston will call on the government to commit to the mandatory cashless gaming card when parliament resumes next month and has asked the premier to provide his MPs with a conscience vote, where they can vote how they see fit, rather than on party lines.

"It's important to allow, particularly on this issue where we know immense harm is caused in our community ... that members of parliament can vote according to their conscience, rather than on party line," she said.

Government minister Nick Duigan denied that the government was crumbling under pressure from the THA to abandon the mandatory cashless card.

"What the government has to do is remain as it is, committed to harm minimisation from electronic gaming, we've said that all along and that's our position, we're committed to harm minimisation," he said.

"What we need to understand is what are potentially impacts to industry, because there are some of those things that government needs to be cognisant of, so having the full picture, having all the information, will allow us to make the best decision possible for all aspects."



The wife of Steve Old (pictured) is employed as an adviser in the office of Finance Minister Roger Jaensch. (ABC News)

Questions over minister's staff

Greens Leader Rosalie Woodruff claimed the THA had impacted the policy positions of both major parties for a decade.

She also said she was seriously concerned about Mr Old's wife, Lisa Free, being employed as an advisor to Roger Jaensch, who was appointed finance minister late last month.

As finance minister, Mr Jaensch is responsible for rolling out the card and overseeing the liquor and gaming industry.

Mr Jaensch is also minister for children and youth, mental health and wellbeing and community services.

"There's no way you can have the finance minister's senior ministerial advisor married to the head of the THA, when he's meant to be introducing nation-leading pre-commitment reforms. That is wrong by every measure," she said.

"There is obviously the serious potential for conflict of interest here, information going both ways, that is not OK and he needs to do something about it straight away"

A government spokesperson said systems were in place to ensure any perceived conflict of interest was being managed appropriately.

[Mr Jaensch this week sold shares in gaming and hospitality](#) giant Endeavour Group to avoid a conflict of interest, on the same day the ABC contacted him about them.

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