

SPEECH ON BEHALF OF DR MARISA PATERSON MLA

PMB – Online Gambling 1 June 2022

Intro

Thank you, Madame Speaker.

I wish to move the motion appearing in Dr Marisa Paterson MLA's name on the motion paper – to look at ways the ACT Government can reduce harm from online gambling in our community.

I know that Dr Paterson would be proud to be here herself today, to be able to bring together her former career as a researcher in the field of gambling, with her role as an MLA.

Dr Paterson's time as a researcher has instilled in her an unquestionable understanding of the importance of using a data-driven and evidence-based approach to inform policy decisions affecting our community.

On her behalf, I want to talk about the evidence of what has been occurring in the ACT and across Australia during the pandemic lockdowns with online gambling.

Online gambling during lockdowns

Australia has one of the biggest gambling markets in the world per capita. From poker machines to online gambling including sports betting and horse racing, we are a prolific gambling nation. Australia has the dubious and

unceremonious title of leading the world in annual gambling losses per capita – expected in 2021-22 to be over \$25 billion.

International gambling companies have described Australia as a ‘standout performer’ over the past two years of the pandemic – with global companies seeing massive increases in customer numbers and in revenue growth.

Sportsbet grew its average daily customer count by 86% over 2020. This was reflected in research from the Australian Gambling Research Centre that found one third of people surveyed opened a betting account during the lockdowns.

Sportsbet – the largest operator in Australia, with 50% of the market share – saw a 20% year on year growth over the past two years – reaching 1 million average monthly players in 2021 across Australia.

Companies are bending over backwards to get a share in the booming Australian gambling market – with News Corp set to announce the launch of its own online wagering brand in Australia. News Corp is owned by a consortium of international investors.

Our sports codes are beholden to these companies – AFL, for example signed a deal with Bet Easy for \$10 million a year for the next five years. The NRL has gone one step further this year by pocketing \$20 million through a deal to allow Americans to be able to gamble on the rugby league matches by the end of the year.

The Australian Alliance for Gambling Reform states that, and I quote: “a 13-year-old today doesn’t know a world without gambling ads. Three in four kids in Australia think gambling is a normal part of sport”.

We have normalised gambling through sport, while simultaneously banning smoking advertising through sport. How can this be??

Further, there is a major conversation coming in Australia around integrity in sport – but that’s for another day.

So, while we have the Australian Financial review publishing multiple articles on the booming wagering market that is Australia, very little care or concern is given to how this all plays out on the ground. In our community.

Pandemic lockdown statistics

COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns saw prolific advertising by the online gambling industry. Ad, after ad, on free to-air TV at prime-time news hours, ads on social media, and on You Tube, were excessive. Two to three ads in one ad break were gambling companies. All offshore, international companies that give nothing, owe nothing, care for nothing about this country or community.

And all these ads – are directly pitched to men. Young men. Men with mates. Salt-of-the-earth, Aussie men.

In 2019, in the ACT, 9.7% of our adult population bet on sports or special events in the last year, and 14.3% bet on a horse or greyhound race.

In the ACT, statistics show that those who bet on sports and special events are more likely to be male (80.2%), are more likely to be below the age of 45 (80.7%), more likely to be born in Australia (77.1%), and more likely to be employed full-time (78%).

The problem lies with the 38.5% of those people that were classified as at-risk gamblers, of which 3.2% were problem gamblers.

Being an at-risk gambler, or experiencing harm from gambling, is more than just losing money. It's about experiencing negative consequences as a result of your gambling in your everyday life. It's about your gambling impacting on your relationships, your mental and physical health, your financial situation, your work.

For example, if a fun afternoon drinks session at the pub with mates means that you cannot pay your rent that week, you are experiencing a level of harm from gambling.

If you placed twice as many bets last night on obscure sports because you just had to try to make that money back, you are experiencing a level of harm from gambling.

If you feel guilty about the fact that you have been lying to your partner about how much you have been spending on your gambling, you are experiencing a level of harm from gambling.

This data I have outlined is old, in the current context of bushfires, hailstorms, pandemics, now housing crisis and increasing cost of living that has occurred quite dramatically over the past three years.

What we do know about gambling harm, is that in stressful times, particularly financially stressful times, people turn to gambling. Yet we have no context in the ACT about how the environment has changed because we don't have any data. What is also concerning is that through this time of lockdowns and when people are less likely to go out and engage publicly, we know in every aspect of our lives – people have turned online.

And the ease of which you can place a bet on your phone, online, any time of day or night is highly concerning. At the very least to play a poker machine you have to get yourself out of the house and to a venue – there are lots of decision-making points in that process, there are venue staff that engage with you, and in an ideal world there are fully implemented and high functioning Codes of Practice and self-exclusion schemes that are designed to protect people.

However, with the online gambling environment this is all significantly lacking.

Dr Paterson has had multiple engagements with people with lived experience of gambling harm from this online wagering industry since starting in this role as an MLA. She describes a sad world of people who have experienced great stress, mental ill-health over the past couple of years and have been suckered into the advertising. Dr Paterson suggests that when the

seriousness of the situation is exposed these companies offer minimal compensation (I.e. a customer loses \$140,000, these companies when they find out how distressed they are, offer them \$5,000 or so and a Non-disclosure agreement to keep quiet).

Poker machine vs online gambling response

On behalf of Dr Paterson, I commend the ACT Government for its many reforms to address the harm from poker machines across the Territory.

Unfortunately, we have not seen the same level of attention towards minimising harm from online gambling. This is largely because the regulation of online gambling is the responsibility of the Commonwealth government. The majority of betting companies are registered in the Northern Territory and are subject to minimal tax.

As a result of this, most Australian jurisdictions have, in recent years, introduced 'point-of-sale' taxes. In the ACT, this has been established as the 'Betting Operations Tax' - or B.O.T - which was introduced in 2019.

The B.O.T is a 15% point of consumption tax payable by all betting operators in the ACT. Betting operators across the country are responsible for determining where bets have been placed in Australia. This is a great start.

Minimising harm from online gambling

But we need to do more to minimise harm from online gambling. We need to start to focus on understanding what the ACT market looks like.

In recent decades, we have seen a strong policy approach to address the harm caused by the tobacco industry – heavy taxing of the industry, a ban on advertising and community preventative health messages and campaigns.

We can do the same for gambling. Indeed, we must. We need to treat gambling habits in much the same way as we have treated tobacco smoking. They have many similarities – including health impacts, whether these be physical or mental. And, of course, the financial toll of gambling losses is heart-wrenching. Family homes are lost, futures are lost.

ACT Government

Madame Speaker and colleagues, Dr Paterson calls on the ACT Government to address the harm caused by online gambling, for the benefit of our community.

She is calling on the ACT Government to continue to work with the Commonwealth and state and territory governments on the implementation of the National Consumer Protection Framework for Online Wagering. This is a framework which provides stronger consumer protections from online

gambling. It's a nationally consistent approach that was established in 2018 in response to government concerns that online gambling is three times higher than other types of gambling. The Framework consists of ten measures to empower individuals and to minimise harm, including prohibiting lines of credit, customer verification, restrictions on inducements, a voluntary opt-out pre-commitment scheme, consistent gambling messaging and a national self-exclusion register.

Further, Dr Paterson is calling on the ACT Government to conduct a review of what we know of online gambling in the ACT; what we know of the online gambling market advertising that ACT residents are exposed to; and what we know about the harm that stems from this. We know enough to know that the online gambling industry in the ACT is alive and well. Too well. We don't know enough to be able to form clear policies and actions to address it.

Dr Paterson calls on the ACT Government to investigate revenue sources that can be used for harm minimisation activities for the ACT community that target online gambling. I have mentioned already the ACT Government's Betting Operation Tax. Do we need to increase this tax and use the proceeds for harm minimisation activities? Are there other opportunities? These are the types of things Dr Paterson wants the ACT Government to explore. Are there ways that the industry itself can ameliorate the harm it causes?

Finally, Madame Speaker, Dr Paterson is calling on the ACT Government to consider ways to raise community awareness about the risks of online gambling, and to particularly target those groups in our community who are most targeted.

By taking these steps, we will be well on our way to devising and implementing a plan to address and mitigate the harm caused by online gambling.

Closing

To my colleagues in this Assembly, I hope you will support Dr Paterson's motion and, in doing so, support our community. I share Dr Paterson's knowledge that none of us here would wish upon anyone the harm that is caused by the gambling industry, and I commend her calling for action to reduce that harm and protect our community.

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