

Kate Roberts – Gambling Impact Society (NSW)
opening address to the Senate hearing into Social Services and Other
Legislation Amendment Bill 2013, on Monday 9th December 2013

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Most "Responsible Gambling" literature opens with the normalisation of gambling in Australia and then goes on to identify the difference between perceptions of "recreational gamblers" (implied-"normal people") who gamble in an un-quantifiable "responsible" manner and others who apparently fail to maintain personal control and recklessly damage both themselves and others close to them. To quote a section of a recent paper by Professor Linda Hancock:

"With mounting evidence on the harms caused by gambling, many jurisdictions have responded by emphasizing —harm minimization and —responsible gambling; but frequently frame this in terms of individual responsibility (—take control of your gambling); rather than industry/government/regulatory responsibility for prevention of avoidable harms." (Hancock December, 2013)
<http://regulation.huji.ac.il/papers/jp%2059.pdf>

The original concept of RG was according to Professor Jan McMillen:

Responsible gambling is the provision of gambling services in a way that seeks to minimise the harm to customers and the community associated with gambling.
(http://www.aic.gov.au/media_library/conferences/gambling00/mcmillen2.pdf)

However, the term Responsible Gambling, as used today, is stigmatising, leads to victimising and not only fails to support those affected but actively works against them reaching out for assistance (see latest ANU Research Report into Gambling and Stigma, Annie Carrol, 2013)

"It puts all the onus on the person to gamble responsibly rather than admitting that gambling products, like alcohol and drugs, are innately risky products to use," Dr Carroll said. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-11-18/fear-of-stigma-stops-problem-gamblers-seeking-help/5098624>

We are here to challenge that RG concept and place the "irresponsible provision" of gambling services firmly back in its place as a case of regulatory failure.

The ongoing depiction of ourselves – people affected by problem gambling (by both governments and the gambling industry) as irresponsible "sick individuals" serves only to disguise the facts, and protect the vested interests who ultimately benefit from our demise.

The concept of a gambling sickness goes deep into the belly of the institution of community gambling in Australia particularly poker machine gambling. This is an area where conflicted State/territory governments have consistently failed the population and failed to protect those most vulnerable to gambling harm.

We are here today to provide a voice on behalf of those 5 million Australians affected by problem gambling. These are people hidden by stigma, shame and stereotyping, who are facing yet another betrayal.

We are here to tell you about our view on this "sickness" in an effort to stop what we see as the door to meaningful National social, structural and regulatory reform slamming in our face once again.

- We are sick of being labeled as aberrant irresponsible deviants by both governments and industries who ultimately gain from our so called recklessness.
- We are sick of the term Responsible Gambling when no-one can define the dose parameters and hence it becomes a perjorative weapon to further disempower us.
- We are sick of having our concerns silenced by powerful lobby groups with vested interests who seek to minimise our existence and discredit our right to be heard.
- We are sick of being used as political footballs between government parties and the "big business" and taxes they seek protect.
- We are sick of supporting over a decade of research, prevalence studies and public enquiries which are ultimately ignored and thus fail to contribute to meaningful prevention of gambling problems or effective policies on this issue.
- We are sick of the lack of clear Federal leadership on this issue, when States and Territories are so overtly compromised.
- We are sick of witnessing poor governance structures set up to regulate this industry, who with their massive conflicts of interest, fail to provide effective public policy.
- We are sick of witnessing a well resourced (with our money) industry game plan similar to that used by the Tobacco industry to maintain profits at all costs to the health of the public.
- We are sick of being presented with arguments from those with massive vested interests suggesting we represent only 1% of the population when we are the industry's most dependable customers according to their own 20/80 customer to product ratio guidelines.
- We are sick of having the damage to our families ignored and the social costs of "disordered gambling" outweighed by the so called social benefits of gambling venues in our communities.
- We are sick of the sight of poker machines on every street corner and the fact that our social clubs in NSW have become effectively local pokies casinos.
- We are sick of the sight and sound of Tom Waterhouse and his bookies bag.
- We are sick to our stomachs as to what is likely to happen with the next wave of new gambling products when as a Country we have failed to safely manage the old ones.

- We are sick of having to turn to marginalised services for support and not having our gambling problems recognised as a legitimate health disorder, placed on the National Health Outcomes agenda and serviced by our State Health institutions.
- We are sick of hearing that self-exclusion, individual counselling and education should be the primary focus to address these problems in preference to technological change.
- We are sick of seeing \$19 billion each year come into industry and government coffers from gambling and such pitiful amounts go out to address its harms.
- We are sick of yet again standing here today fighting for what we consider a basic right for a duty of care, consumer protection and a comprehensive public health framework along with an effective national regulatory response to prevent and reduce problem gambling in Australia.
- We are sick to death (literally) of regulatory failure in the face of these products of Dangerous Consumption.

So yes we are pretty sick of this latest move to undermine effective change.

This hearing has come at a time of major loss for the world as we say goodbye to a great statesman - Nelson Mandela. I only wish I had his eloquence in raising the voices of those oppressed by powerful institutions. But in reverence to his legacy I will share some of his words that came to mind in preparing for today's appearance:

“What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead.”

We from the GIS are here today to entreat you to make a significant difference to our lives and the lives of our future generations....

What we want to see at a national level is:

- A National Public Health framework on gambling and problem gambling.
- Enhanced consumer protection as recommended by the PC 2010 including \$1 bets and lowering jackpots.
- National Health and Safety/Harm Reduction standards with regards Poker machine technology and other internet/computer/mobile phone gambling products.
- National Health Outcomes for Problem Gambling to guide States and Territories.

- A National Peak Body on Problem Gambling for consumer information, education, training, support and advocacy.
- A National Public Health Summit on problem gambling to guide new directions on addressing gambling harms.

Consistent with these aims, we ask you to demonstrate your leadership on this issue by:

- Rejecting the proposed repeal of the National Gambling Reform Acts.
- Rejecting the Government's proposal to introduce so called "responsible gambling measures" with its primary focus upon individual interventions to the exclusion of any meaningful prevention.
- Recommend a strengthening of National prevention, consumer protection and population-based, public health strategies on gambling and problem gambling in Australia.
- Rejecting this current process of "bundling" gambling legislative changes in order to achieve political goals.
- This process denies the issue full and considered judgment by our elected members and prevents the opportunity for public debate. It hides important legislative change amongst other non- gambling related issues, thereby diminishing its importance. In doing so it fails the people of Australia and maintains an ongoing betrayal of those affected by problem gambling and their families. It is fundamentally undemocratic and poor governance.

In summary we entreat the Senate to deliver social justice for over 5 million Australians affected by problem gambling.

We ask you to deliver effective legislation and policy based on 14 years of consistent research which has evidenced the need for National gambling reform and the overwhelming public support for reforms to poker machine gambling.

We call upon you to demonstrate what over 14 years ago the 1999 PC report recommended as "good governance" on this issue.

We implore you to step up to your own Mandela moment in history.

Kate Roberts
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 9/12/13