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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Social Services and Other
Legislation Amendment Bill 2013**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 4 December 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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| Speaker | Bandt, Adam, MP | Question No. | |

Mr BANDT (Melbourne) (11:59): The Social Services and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2013 does many things and many of those things are very bad. I just want to focus in my contribution on two of those. One concerns gambling. About this time last year I was able to stand up in this chamber and speak in favour of the National Gambling Reform Bill. That was flawed legislation. It did not go nearly far enough in fighting the harm that pokies cause in our communities. It was clearly the result of a process that was hopelessly compromised by special interests. The gambling lobby's voice was loud and the voice of those whose lives had been ruined by poker machines was muted. However, the bill made some modest reforms and represented progress. It set the precedent of bringing the industry under Commonwealth regulation for the first time.

Simple measures such as limits on ATM withdrawals at pokies' venues have real potential to slow down the losses of problem gamblers. The linking of poker machines and the fitting of precommitment technology opened the door for mandatory precommitment to be switched on in the future. And the creation of a national regulator provides a framework for future, more meaningful reform.

Now, we are only days into the government's legislative agenda and here we find the misleadingly-named Social Services and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. It would be better called the 'Poker Machine Industry Christmas Present Bill' because it is a pure gift to the gambling industry. I would personally be very surprised if the industry did not have a direct hand in drafting this bill. It winds back every substantial reform that was achieved, after such a struggle last year. The national regulator—gone! ATM withdrawal limits—gone! Fitting machines with precommitment technology and networking them together—gone! This bill replaces hundreds of pages of careful regulation with a single motherhood statement about working with the states on voluntary precommitment.

I challenge any member of this House to bring up the issue of pokies with their constituents. Pokies are a blight on Australia. People know it and they will tell you so. Wherever there is disadvantage and social exclusion the pokies are to be found in abundance. They suck money out of the communities that cannot afford it. They draw parents away from families. They are designed to be addictive and they are. Addiction destroys lives, but it also raises revenue. The clubs and hotels that host the poker machines are themselves addicted to that revenue and they want it, no matter what the cost to the community.

Problem gambling is a serious issue in this country. Australians are amongst the world's most prolific gamblers. Billions go through poker machines every year and it is estimated that 40 per cent of it comes from problem gamblers who can ill-afford the losses that they are incurring. The Productivity Commission estimated the social costs of problem gambling to be at least \$4.7 billion a year nationally. A recent report estimated the social and economic costs in Victoria—my state—were between \$1.5 billion and \$2.8 billion in 2010-11. I would suggest that those numbers really do not capture the harms of family disintegration, of people who turn to crime to feed their addiction or of people who commit suicide.

So I ask the House: how does it serve the community to unwind even the modest reforms that we were able to put in place last year? Who benefits if poker machines are, once again, free of any constraints on who can play and for how long? Who benefits if venues are free to remove ATM limits? It is not the people of Melbourne. It is not the people in the community who voted for all of us here. They do not benefit from poker machines that can take more of their money faster and without limits.

The pokies lobby waged a ferocious campaign against reform by the last government. It was based on scaremongering, exaggerated claims and outright lies by the dozen. I regret to say they were largely successful in scuttling meaningful reform. But they are never satisfied. And, with such a good friend now in The Lodge, who can blame them? This bill gives them all they could ask for and more, and it completely sidelines our civil society who were so engaged in this issue.

Last year's reforms were hard won. They came at the end of a long and detailed national debate. They required careful consultation with the Greens and my colleagues on the crossbenches. Clubs, manufacturers, churches, gambling reform activists and individuals who had suffered from addiction all had a say in the debate. Although the end result was far short of where it should have been, Australians knew their parliament was tackling the problem of pokies harm.

But what about the bill before us? To whom did the government flag this major change? Who knew this was coming, hidden as it is in an innocuous-sounding omnibus bill? This can only be described as a transparent attempt to sweep a major reform under the rug, perhaps to get it done in the rush before Christmas and in the hope that no-one notices.

If the government are truly proud of this change, this sop to industry, then let them come out and announce it. Let them stand there alongside the pokies lobby and proudly announce that they are winding back every step that was taken towards putting some checks and balances on poker machines. Let them face affected members of the community and people in their own electorates who have suffered as a result of the unchecked proliferation of minicasinios throughout the country.

The Greens are proud to stand for tougher action on pokies because they affect people's lives and hurt our communities. For that reason alone, we will be voting against this bill. If the government are proud to take such a stand against pokies reform, if they want more pokies taking more money, more quickly, from our poorest communities, then they should at least have the guts to come out and say it.

But it is not just that that one finds in this bill. The second area that I want to pay attention to is the scrapping of the Student Start-up Scholarship—student start-up loans—and the significant impact that that will have on people's ability to attend university.

The National Tertiary Education Union has made the point that these changes will impact most significantly on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. By definition, the only students eligible to convert student start-up scholarships to loans are those eligible for some form of student income support in the form of youth allowance, Austudy or Abstudy and are already financially disadvantaged.

As I said yesterday in this place, my father was lucky enough to be able to go to university because there was no financial barrier to him doing that. That was significant because he came from a family where his dad worked in the post office all his life and his mum did not earn a wage. My dad was able to go to university because there were no financial barriers in place. It was possible for someone from a working-class background to go to university and know that they were not going to face crippling debt and that the fees were not so high that it was a barrier to them entering. That is a crucial part of Australian society that we should defend. Everyone should have the right to go to university no matter how much they earn and the public, if they believe that, should have a role in supporting people to go there.

What we know is that people are in crippling debt. There are an enormous number of students in my electorate at the moment who are facing the kinds of challenges that not even I faced when I went to university. The cost of renting in inner city Melbourne can be more than the amount of your youth allowance alone. People are already working 15, 20, 30 and sometimes 35 hours a week just to make ends meet and they are reliant on government support. On top of that, many people are graduating from their degrees with something akin to a small-sized mortgage and it is no wonder that, while they are at university, the personal debts in which they find themselves in order to make ends meet are growing and growing. So we should be doing everything we possibly can to stop students falling further into debt and to relieve the pressure on students, not taking the measures that this bill takes.

There are a number of other objectionable measures in this bill and my colleagues will deal with those when the bill proceeds to the other place. But, as this bill is one nicely giftwrapped present to the pokies industry just before Christmas, I and the Greens will not be supporting it.