

Response to the Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform Archdiocese of Hobart

Introduction:

This submission is prepared on behalf of the Catholic Church of Tasmania which is headed by the Archbishop of Hobart, the Most Reverend Adrian Doyle DD AM.

Collectively the Catholic Church of Tasmania is the largest non-government employer in the State, employing approximately 5000 staff and providing services to around 70,000 Tasmanians annually – many of whom are marginalised and disadvantaged.

The Catholic Church in Tasmania is broadly represented by:

1. The Office of the Archbishop
2. Catholic Development Fund
3. Catholic Education Tasmania
4. Centacare Tasmania
5. Willson Training
6. Mary's Grange Aged Care
7. Blueline Laundry
8. Blueline Employment
9. St Vincent de Paul Society
10. Calvary Health
11. Southern Cross Care
12. Catholic Parishes
13. Religious Orders
14. Caritas Australia
15. Tasmanian Catholic Justice and Peace Commission

The Catholic Church in Tasmania is supportive of the Federal Government's exploration to design and implement a pre-commitment scheme for gaming machine players and is appreciative of the opportunity in making this submission to the Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform.

However, it is clear that this is the time for the Federal Government to act on a problem which is costing Australia billions of dollars each year. It is generally the non-government agencies which deal with the impact of gambling and it is the

position of the Church that there is the momentum and will in the community and in the parliament for action to be taken.

Historically, the Church has long supported rights for the marginalised and disadvantaged through social justice – an expression of the mission of the Church over the past 2000 years which forms the basis of the work of the Church

The Church has been involved in the lobbying of Tasmanian Legislative Councillors through a cooperative of interested groups including the Tasmanian Council of Social Services and Anglicare but recognises that to obtain any long term change in the gambling industry, a national approach is required.

In essence, this submission relates to the electronic gaming machines as this form of gambling is more impacting upon Australian society than any other aspect of the gambling industry as the result of being more addictive.

In making this submission, the efforts to reduce problem gambling by those providers within the gaming industry must be acknowledged as many have taken responsibility and have worked with respective State or Territory Governments to reduce these incidents. And, as these providers are generally major employers, it is essential that jobs are protected in any outcome and there is recognition that this is a fine balance.

What is paramount is the overarching requirement to protect the vulnerable – those on low incomes or addictive gamblers – while at the same time keeping an industry viable as a significant Australian employer. In small communities often the “club” is often the main social centre so it is imperative to ensure that there isn’t a major impact on these communities.

The accepted Catholic view of the act of gambling is that it is not in itself, immoral or wrong as it is a legitimate, recreational pursuit.

Even with the electronic gaming machines, there are some positive outcomes which must be acknowledged such as Returned and Service League clubs in Tasmania using the profits to fund welfare services for veterans, as indicated by Mr Tony Scott of the RSL during the recent House of Assembly (Tasmania) Select Committee On Gaming Control Amendment Bill 2010 hearings.

It was also noted that the RSL in Queensland, who are a major provider, has a number of measures include a pre-nominated bet limit which are working well.

However, Catholic social teaching informs us that, as a society, we can do much better than this; that it is not acceptable that the good of some sections of the community is achieved at the cost of others, particularly the vulnerable, marginalised or disadvantaged.

As providers of a range of counselling and support services including financial counselling, Catholic agencies have identified through their client profiles that electronic gaming machines have caused people who did not previously have gambling problems to become addicted to what they initially believed was a harmless, recreational pursuit.

Sadly, many others turn to this form of gambling out of loneliness, making these venues also popular haunts for people with intellectual disabilities, other addictions and mental illness, partially due to the machines and venues requiring little or no engagement with other people.

The imbalance that exists today along with an almost carte blanche approach by the industry, including the proliferation of gambling venues with electronic gaming machines within lower socio-economic areas, indicates that further action is urgently needed.

The broad impact upon families, communities, the court and prison system and government is very much of concern to the Church in Tasmania . This concern is inclusive of the gaming machine environment which is deliberately created to draw the client in, particularly those who are lonely, with inducements or rewards for “frequent customers.”

The stories of those who have destroyed their lives through gambling on the electronic gaming machines abound in our media – especially when employers are defrauded for large amounts of money and the addicted gambler goes to jail. In one case in Hobart, a woman was murdered for her purse because the offender had lost his money on the electronic gaming machines.

The income gained by governments through the electronic gaming machines is under-pinned by poverty, theft, family violence and suicide which, in turn, requires governments to channel large amounts of money into attempts to address these issues. One must seriously question the validity of government income obtained at the expense of the vulnerable in our community.

The hardships caused by problem gambling are far reaching and St Vincent de Paul, like many charitable organisations, are often assisting those affected by gambling caused poverty along with other Catholic agencies such as Centacare, which provide specialised support services. Addictive gambling through

electronic gaming machines is a cost to our nation of near \$5 billion a year – an indication that problem gambling is a significant national issue.

While the Church is generally involved with the assistance of addictive gamblers, it is through ongoing research and engagement with other non-government providers in the State, the Catholic Church in Tasmania proposes the following as desired outcomes for harm minimisation:

- Regular breaks in play should be encouraged with no refreshments served at the machines;
- Reduction in inducement or reward programs for frequent customers;
- Winnings over \$100 to be paid direct into bank accounts – taking over 24 hrs;
- Staff to be better trained in management of problem gamblers including the offering of inducements to leave machines – free coffee/tea/meal vouchers etc;
- Restricting EFTPOS and ATM access at venues plus the use of credit for gambling;
- Reduction of numbers of electronic gaming machines in venues located in lower socio-economic areas;
- Management of betting limits through smart card;
- Reduction to a \$1 bet limit with increased spin timings (this may conflict with the smart card option);
- Reduced opening hours (some venues open at 7 am);
- Limits in advertising of all forms of gambling across all media, more so the electronic gaming venues which is continually portrayed as premises as providing a socially engaging atmosphere – thereby drawing in the lonely and vulnerable;
- Improved signage in premises on issues of problem gambling and contact details of gambling support services; and
- Continual assessment of harm minimisation programs is also mandatory.

Conclusion:

With regard to its position as a major welfare provider the Church can only make recommendations but it expresses the viewpoint that the industry should be encouraged to self-regulate where possible.

However, it is now time for respective State, Territory and Federal Governments to take positive action on the issue of problem gambling. There is no easy

approach or outcomes but it is only through a comprehensive response package that true harm minimisation can be achieved.

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, it is never acceptable that the good of some sections of the community is achieved at the cost of others, particularly the vulnerable, marginalised or disadvantaged.

The Catholic Church of Tasmania hopes that these points may aid the Joint Select Committee in its deliberations. We look forward to making further contributions in the future.