

Extract from House of Representatives Hansard 16 February 2004

COMMONWEALTH ELECTORAL AMENDMENT (PREVENTING SMOKING RELATED DEATHS) BILL 2004: First Reading

Mr KERR (Denison) (12.52 p.m.) – If the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Preventing Smoking Related Deaths) Bill 2004 becomes law it will deny public funding to any candidate or political party that accepts donations from the tobacco industry or from a person who derives substantial revenue from the manufacture, distribution or retail of tobacco products. This recognition of a legal and ethical anachronism in Australian political life is long overdue. The notion of 'substantial revenue' means the bill will not apply to those whose revenue from the retailing of tobacco is only incidental to their supply of other retail products – for example supermarkets, corner stores and petrol stations.

This bill has been moved by me, a member of the Australian Labor Party, and seconded, courageously and with a conviction which extends beyond party politics, by Dr Mal Washer, the member for Moore and a member of the Liberal Party. The procedures of the House will not allow Dr Washer to speak immediately but he will be doing so later this week in adjournment debates. And we now know that on both sides of politics many of our colleagues agree with us. Like us, they are uncomfortable that for so long we have all benefited from the financial largesse bestowed on us or our parties by companies which manufacture a product which kills many of the people who voted us into this place. At the government's last estimate, 19,000 Australians die each year because of tobacco related illness and the health cost is \$21 billion annually.

Since news of this bill first surfaced late last year, the anti-smoking lobby has actively campaigned to secure bipartisan support. The Australian Medical Association, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and Surgeons, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the Cancer Council of Australia, the Heart Foundation, Action on Smoking and Health and the Australian Council on Smoking and Health all voiced loud support for this bill.

ACOSH executive director Stephen Hall wrote in a letter to all federal MPs this month: This industry has based its fortune on over sixty years of deceit, duplicity and treachery.

He urges us to:

... not feel any obligation to this lethal industry that openly, destructively, painfully and at public expense kills off your constituents ...

Professor Alan Coates and Dr Andrew Ellerman from the Cancer Council of Australia have also written to all MPs urging bipartisan support. They argue:

This is an opportunity for our federal political parties to exhibit leadership and a commitment to addressing the smoking epidemic in Australia by rejecting any suggestion of a relationship with tobacco companies.

And Maurice Swanson, chief executive of the Heart Foundation of Western Australia, wrote:

Tobacco causes several cancers, cardiovascular disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, other respiratory diseases, asthma, low birth weight babies and sudden infant death syndrome.

We know the risks to human health. How can any of us continue to give implicit support to such a toxic industry?

Last month a watershed was reached in Australian politics when Labor's leader, Mark Latham, announced that the ALP will put public principle first and no longer accept donations from tobacco corporations. This announcement has changed the dynamic of a debate which will not go away until the last cent is handed over to a political party for the last time. Because of the Leader of the Opposition's announcement the coalition government now faces the political sharp edge of an issue on which it has more to lose ethically and publicly than it has to gain financially.

But there is pain in letting go. Tobacco donations have been a hugely remunerative source of funding for the major parties. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in gifts from tobacco corporations are extremely hard to refuse in the context of costly election campaigns. For that reason it was entirely predictable but disappointingly out of step with public sentiment when the Treasurer came out on the day of Mr Latham's announcement and said nothing would change because, in essence, the tobacco industry is a legitimate business selling a legal product. That was an unfortunate first response to an issue which goes to the core of the public's faith in its elected representatives. Mr Costello appears to have a tin ear. Such a response ignores the fact that no other legal product, when used exactly as intended, has the same potential to kill the user.

Why do cigarette manufacturers like Philip Morris and British American Tobacco donate money to political parties? Who is so naive to believe it is a gift, an act of benevolent support to electoral campaigns? In politics, as in life, there is no such thing as a free lunch. Cigarette companies belong to one of the most persuasive industries of the modern era. Much of their marketing to hold on to existing customers and to hook new ones is subliminal. An important part of their capacity to turn multi-billion dollar profits at the expense of human health is by looking legitimate through their sponsorships of public events and through the entirely respectable practice of donating money to political parties. These measures, carefully targeted and sold, help tobacco companies appear to be part of the ordinary fabric of public life.

While firmly against prohibition because I believe in the freedom of individuals to make their own choices, it offends my sense of citizenship that we have a political system which gives the appearance of allowing itself to be influenced by the producers and wholesalers of tobacco products. Once you take up cigarettes they are very hard to give up – I know that. Doing everything possible to discourage people from starting smoking is the key.

I table the explanatory memorandum and I commend the bill to the House.

Bill read a first time.

The SPEAKER —In accordance with sessional order