

We are now in the depths of winter and much focus this week will be rightly on the two rugby codes. It is almost a festival atmosphere as we organise joint screenings with friends and family to see the Maroons or Queensland Reds do battle. As the Origin season ends the National Rugby League (NRL) gets down to the business end of the fixtures a new advertisement campaign will be thrust in front of footy fans. The NRL has joined forces in the campaign against poker machine reform.

I haven't seen the ads yet but they will use former legend Steve Mortimer to tell you that the proposed changes will kill rugby league. On the weekend NRL Chief Executive Officer David Gallop argued that in 2010 clubs ran 1,130 junior rugby league clubs, and donated \$40 million to help fund the purchase of football jumpers, shorts, socks, trophies, insurance, medical kits, referee outfits and ground development. All of this may be true but the proposed changes are not about undermining club or community spirit – they are about minimising the hard done to communities by addiction to poker machines.

Now I am as guilty as the next person in using the “community” card in mounting an argument – but when it comes to pokies we really need to ask ourselves how our state governments allowed us to get into a position where charities, sporting clubs and community organisations rely on gaming machines for vital support. We also need to be very clear that just over 1 percent of the total amount of money spent on gambling comes back to the community through the Community Gambling Benefit Fund.

And for everybody involved except for problem gamblers it is easy money. In March of this year net gambling revenue in Toowoomba was \$4, 870, 547. The recent inquiry into poker machines by the Productivity Commission found that conservatively 40 percent of this money comes from problem gamblers. In other words \$1.948 million dollars a month or \$23 million a year is made from around 1180 problem gamblers in Toowoomba. That means a monthly loss of \$1642 per person at an annualised rate of loss of \$19 700 per problem gambler in Toowoomba each year.

If you speak to somebody from the organisations that support problem gamblers they will tell you that the cost is far greater than just money. Relationships are damaged, families are broken apart and children's education and welfare is severely impacted upon.

The Federal government's proposal is to require players to set loss limits before they start playing poker machines. Once they are over that limit, they are locked out of further play from all machines. It gives them back control by forcing them to not just chase their losses or believe they are just one win away from not having a problem. Clubs and pubs know that 40 per cent of their revenue comes from problem gamblers and do not want their revenues affected by giving players more control.

The gaming industry along with clubs and pubs will argue that those advocating change are wowsers or prohibitionists. Indeed they have pulled out the old ace in the pack and branded the proposed changes as “Un-Australian”. What is Australian about relying on problem gamblers as a key part of your business model? As World Vision head Tim Costello points out there would be community outrage if alcohol outlets relied on alcoholics to make 40 percent of their profit. The Productivity Commission found that poker machines are mostly used by lower socio-economic communities.

So when we hear about the footy socks, the jerseys and the trophies paid for by pokies we need to acknowledge that a large proportion of the money came from those who could least afford it. And also let's not forget that the country's biggest pokies operator is not the local bowls or league club – it is Woolworths through its joint venture ALH. So we have one of the richest companies in the country making profits from some of our poorest and most vulnerable citizens – a bit like Robin Hood in reverse.

Of course it wasn't always like this. It wasn't until the 1990s that poker machines came to Queensland pubs and clubs. I assume that sporting clubs, charities and community organisations functioned quite well up to that point. Nobody is arguing that we return to those days – what is being proposed is that if you wish to play a machine on which you can lose thousands of dollars in an hour – you will need to sign a pre-mandatory commitment.

The majority of people playing poker machines don't play for more than a dollar a spin and so the changes will not affect them. Political parties, state governments and some community organisations have become reliant on poker machines and the revenue that they send our way. The proposed changes represent an opportunity for us to wean ourselves off funds that have been made through the misery of a small number of people. Sport and recreation (including responsible gambling) are a vital part of our community. Minimising the harm done to problem gamblers is not too high a price to pay for what is after all supposed to be a game.