

Poker machines: a curse we can well do without

Peter Holmes a Court
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When leagues clubs were given poker machines in 1956, the goal was not to have more casinos. The goal was to provide leagues clubs with the funding to do positive things in the community. The goal was to help Australians in the healthy pursuit of playing football and for a district to feel good about itself by having a first grade side.

Fifty-one years later, the machines have an undeniable social cost. We know there's a disproportionate number of machines in lower income areas in the state. I would point out there are no machines in the bloody nice suburb in which I live. We know that 30 to 70 per cent of the money that goes through poker machines, depending on the study that you read, consists of welfare payments. We know 30 to 50 per cent of the gamblers on poker machines are people who are gambling more than they want to. It is not a matter of judging them: *they* are the ones who don't want to gamble that much.

I want to make it clear that I'm not judging any other clubs or people who enjoy a sensible flutter. I enjoy a wager from time to time and my maximum bet is usually 25 cents. But there is no doubt that all the research shows an enormous amount of damage is done by the preponderance of gaming machines.

We believe it makes good business sense for South Sydney Leagues Club to reopen from renovations next year without pokies. We've been told by our members and our sponsors that they want to be involved in a different type of club. The overwhelming response since the announcement has been to support it.

Our vision for Souths is to see the community at the heart of the Rabbitohs and the Rabbitohs at the heart of our community. We've got a job to turn around a football club and it's really important that our whole area turns around, starting in Redfern. It doesn't make sense to put a high number of machines into a high unemployment area. We want to have a positive effect on the community.

A football club exists in the community in a symbiotic relationship. We're there to represent the community on the field and we exist because of their support. We survive today because of the support of average Australians who buy membership, merchandise and tickets to support their club - and the support of companies, large and small, which sponsor the club. When it comes to corporate social responsibility, our sponsors, from the local print shop to Virgin Blue, are telling us the more that we do in the community, the more they'll support us; and our members are saying the more that you do in the community the more that we want to support our club.

People ask us how we're you going to make money without pokies. There are entire countries where pubs and clubs do not have poker machines yet they make money. We have a lovely state to the west, which I am from, which has resisted poker machines. Western Australia has plenty of great pubs which make very good profits.

There is no reason to believe that the only thing that makes clubs profitable is gaming machines. We want to attract more people to the club by creating a family environment with good food and

opportunities for fans to meet and greet our players. A lot of people find that difficult to really enjoy a cleansing ale when they see someone in the background putting money into a machine.

I believe most of the community want to help those who have gaming issues and the way to do that is to support clubs and pubs which don't have machines.

As for the funding of junior sport, the Government should support it directly rather than via pokies. Junior sport should be supported more than it is today. We know with junior sport that if you get kids into the rigour of turning up, training hard, learning discipline, learning disappointment when they lose, how to work as a team, we know it has an incredibly positive effect on the community.

The Government should support junior sport because it makes better citizens and better learners.

This piece was dictated by Peter Holmes a Court, executive chairman of South Sydney Rabbitohs, from a lounge at Sydney Airport.

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