

Australia has a strong hand to tackle gambling harm. Will it go all in or fold?

June 30 2023, by Charles Livingstone



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A ban on all gambling advertising within three years has attracted the [most attention](#) of the [31 recommendations](#) made by the Australian parliamentary inquiry into online gambling, which reported this week.

But equally significant are the recommendations to adopt public health

principles to prevent [gambling](#) harm, to appoint a national online regulator, and for Australia to lead the development of international agreements that "aim to reduce gambling harm and protect [public policy](#) and research from gambling industry interference."

If implemented, the recommendations will advance gambling regulation by several orders of magnitude.

[Preventing harm](#) is a better goal than the current practice of ignoring harms until they become overwhelming. Building a fence at the top of the cliff, rather than providing a fleet of ambulances at the bottom, seems sensible.

Many countries are grappling with regulating unlicensed [online gambling operators](#) registered in places like Curaçao and the Isle of Man. The only way to effectively address this is via [international agreements](#).

And as with many other harmful commodity industries, gambling operators [advance their interests](#) through political influence. They have enthusiastically utilized the tactics honed by the [tobacco industry](#)—[lobbying](#), [political donations](#) and influencing [research outcomes](#) through funding.

All these aspects need addressing. For example, the inquiry recommends imposing a levy on the gambling industry to fund research.

Phasing out advertising

The proposals to prohibit all inducements to gamble come in four phases.

The first would ban all social media and [online advertising](#). Radio advertising during school drop-off times would also be prohibited.

In the second phase, broadcast advertising for an hour either side of sporting broadcasts would be banned (as Opposition Leader [Peter Dutton has argued for](#)).

The third stage would prohibit all broadcast advertising for gambling between 6am and 10pm.

Finally, three years on, all gambling advertising would be gone from our screens.

Not many people will miss it. A 2022 survey by the [Australia Institute](#) found 70% support for such restrictions. The evidence suggests this would be beneficial to young people, since exposure to advertising increases the likelihood of gambling as adults, [with significant harm](#) for some.

Important precedents

The recommendations would set important precedents that can be readily applied to other forms of gambling. These include the principle of establishing a public health-oriented harm prevention policy, a national regulatory system, and enhancing consumer protections to potentially include a universal pre-commitment system.

If online gambling can be better regulated—and it can—why not casinos and pokies? Casino inquiries in [New South Wales](#), [Victoria](#), [Queensland](#) and [Western Australia](#) have certainly demonstrated the need. So has the [NSW Crime Commission](#)'s 2022 inquiry into money laundering in pubs and clubs. Notably, poker machines are estimated to be responsible for [51% to 57% of the total problems](#) arising from gambling. Race and sports wagering account for 20%.

Industry will resist

The [online gambling industry](#) will do all it can to thwart these initiatives, along with [broadcasters](#) and some [sports](#) businesses.

Certainly Australia's unenviable record of being world leaders in [gambling losses](#) will be threatened if the recommendations are implemented.

The report [acknowledges](#) wagering service providers have "successfully framed the issue of gambling harm around [personal responsibility](#) while diminishing industry and government responsibility."

"There is too much potential for the gambling industry to be involved in the development of gambling regulation and policy in Australia."

Submissions from the gambling industry reflected this.

For example, [Responsible Wagering Australia](#), which represents wagering companies such as Bet365, Betfair, Entain, Sportsbet, Pointsbet and Unibet, suggested the [industry was focused on limiting harm](#), and mindful of the risks of "problem gambling."

Indeed, the inquiry's original terms of reference were about "online gambling and its impacts on problem gamblers."

The committee changed this to the "impacts on those experiencing gambling harm." Its report reflects this change, and the majority of submissions and evidence given in [13 public hearings](#) overwhelmingly in favor of improved regulation of [online gambling](#) product

In the report's forward, chair Peta Murphy writes: "I am proud to say this Committee has delivered a unanimous report that says, 'enough is

enough."

Gambling harm imposes [enormous costs](#) on the community, and on those affected, including families. Examples of these effects are prominent in the committee's report. Many are harrowing.

There is some way to go before Australia joins Italy, Spain, Belgium and The Netherlands in taking action against gambling interests. But delay means more harm to more people.

The Australian government now has an excellent road map to demonstrate its commitment to the health and well-being of Australians. Adopting the inquiry's recommendations should be a high priority.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Australia has a strong hand to tackle gambling harm. Will it go all in or fold? (2023, June 30) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-06-australia-strong-tackle-gambling.html>

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