

## Premiers admit they were wrong about pokies

Former Liberal premier Jeff Kennett and former Labor premier Joan Kirner, who were responsible for the roll-out of poker machines in Victoria, now believe they almost certainly should have restricted the machines to Crown Casino only.

Victoria has 30,000 poker machines - 2500 based at the casino and 27,500 in hotels and clubs across the state.

Mrs Kirner's Labor government introduced poker machines in 1992, distributing about 10,000 before losing power in October of that year.

The Kennett Liberal government continued the roll-out after it was elected - finally capping poker machine numbers in 1999, after years of community outcry about problem gambling.

Now both former premiers think very differently about poker machines, which have grown to a \$2.3 billion a year habit for the state's gamblers.

Mr Kennett told The Sunday Age last week that in retrospect, he would strongly consider limiting poker machines to the casino - thus banning them from other venues.

Mrs Kirner agreed, saying that the casino-only restriction "would be a really good idea".

Mr Kennett said he would consider the Western Australian model of regulating poker machines.

WA is the only state that restricts poker machines to its casino - Burswood Casino in Perth - and the state boasts the lowest rates of gambling addiction in Australia.

"It's easy to make comments in hindsight but you asked the question," Mr Kennett said.

"I would certainly think about doing it very differently."

Mrs Kirner said it was time for a review of what "Jeffrey's government and my own government decided".

"Restricting them to the casino alone is a remarkably good idea.

"It is time for tighter controls - but that's a matter for the Government," she said.

The comments by Mrs Kirner and Mr Kennett were welcomed by the chairman of the Interchurch Gambling Taskforce, John Dalziel, who described the former premiers' statements as "brave and courageous".

"Well done - it takes big people to admit they were wrong. I absolutely applaud their courage in making these comments.

"You don't get people making such strong comments without them being horrified at the terrible danger to communities and individuals that has occurred," he said.

The chief executive of the Australian Hotels Association, Brian Kearney, said putting poker machines in hotels and clubs had made them available to ordinary people in a responsible gaming situation.

He said the best place for the general public to use the machines was in hotels and clubs.

He said the WA model, with poker machines in the casino only, was "elitist" and denied the machines to the general public. He said problem gambling was an issue for the government and the whole community.

Mr Kearney said, however, that he believed hotels in Victoria could survive without poker machines.

Anti-gambling crusader and former head of the Interchurch Gambling Taskforce, Tim Costello, said the former premiers' statements were "deathbed repentance".

"It's a bit late - we tried to tell them at the time but they ignored us.

"Being a churchman I have to honour repentance at whatever stage of the life cycle it occurs. I will congratulate them," Mr Costello said.

Section: News

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**Sunday Age, Page 3**

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