

Making Money

Tim Costello and Elena Campbell

The Victorian Government is reigning over a breathtaking shift in values symbolised by the Crown Casino.



"THE SPIRIT OF VICTORIA"

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Anyone who lives in Melbourne will tell you that the last five years has seen our city transformed. This transformation has not only been financial, but cultural and physical as well: the Melbourne landscape and city skyline have been irrevocably altered, and these alterations stand out as everyday reminders that Victoria is *On the Move*.

The most significant of these changes is, of course, the Casino — the 'Crown Entertainment Complex'. Physically, it dominates the Melbourne landscape, swallowing up Kings Way (a major thoroughfare out of the city centre); stretching out along the Yarra; blue lighting permanently illuminating nearby bridges. Its massive spotlight regularly sweeps the Melbourne skyline at night — visible from even the furthest outer suburbs — a regular reminder of Crown's domination of Melbourne's psyche.

A cultural shift

Of course, it is Crown's symbolic power — the cultural shift it represents — that is the most significant. To the State Government it is, in Premier Kennett's words, Victoria's 'beacon of hope' and, certainly, a great many Victorians have been caught up in the fervour of such a lavish 'entertainment' venue. The million dollar pillars, the sea of upmarket restaurants, the glamorous and pricey boutiques and the 24-hour cinema: expensive, new and shiny — drawcards for any self-respecting public. However, the extent to which the Casino has been embraced by the majority of the media and Melbourne's celebrity set is nevertheless astonishing. Melbourne ground to a screaming halt on the night the permanent Casino opened. Melbourne's media, entertainment and social set turned out in full force — even previous sceptics were determined not to miss a berth. It was *the* event to be seen at, and to be seen to be talking about. Sydney television programs hosted special editions in Melbourne that day; news stations interrupted regular programming to post special bulletins ('five hours till opening time...') and chat shows and talkback radio were abuzz. Since the opening day, almost every significant event in Melbourne's mainstream calendar has had something to do with the Casino: the Logies and the Brownlows gave us an opportunity to glimpse the splendour of Crown's main ballroom, officials have been housed and fed there, and of course sporting heroes and overseas entertainers have made regular paid appearances to keep the crowd rolling in.

Casino culture mythology

So why has such a significant proportion of Melbourne's population embraced a Casino? Why is this city celebrating an institution which previous generations considered to be a vice? Part of the reason comes from the mythology surrounding our new casino culture: a mythology which has enabled such a breathtaking shift in values to occur almost seamlessly.

Myth 1

The first such myth is that the people of Melbourne wanted a Casino. While gambling was legalised under the Kirner Government and trips to the pokies in Albury were a favoured outing of some Melburnians, there was no Casino lobby group in existence, nor any public agitation for a Casino. Unlike lobby groups for a public library or the legalisation of marijuana, the Casino was not born out of public demand. Rather, it was a powerful convergence of the financial interests of the gaming industry and the financial plight of the Kirner State Government. The current government has certainly benefited, with huge gambling tax windfalls which constitute the third largest source of Government revenue. Government dependency on gambling (now 15% of all revenue) is graphically illustrated by the fact that the Minister for Finance is also the Minister for Gaming.

Myth 2

A second myth is that the Casino will bring economic revitalisation and jobs. Certainly, the construction of the Casino and its early days have brought extra jobs, but the experience in the United States is sobering. Atlantic City saw casinos gross a total of over US\$33 billion from their introduction in 1978 until 1993 — an amount equivalent to a million dollars for every person (including children) in that city. However, in the same period there was a loss of 40% of the city's independent restaurants. Only four years after the introduction of casinos in Atlantic City a third of the city's retail businesses had closed. Atlantic City's unemployment rate was 30% higher than the State average and by 1993 it was double the State average. The crime rate tripled. Thanks to the most recent Victorian Break Even figures, we now know that 30% of gambling addicts in Melbourne finance their habit from crime. In Atlantic City the expansion of casinos had a drastic effect on real estate values, creating a windfall for some property owners but serious problems for many others. Crown Casino, which has a floor space five times larger than that of the largest shopping centre in Australia, has already created similar economic imbalances. The Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Cr Ivan Deveson, has warned that parts of Melbourne will economically die because of Crown's dominance, and already newspaper reports indicate that restaurants not attached to the Casino are losing up to 50% of their trade on weekends.

Myth 3

A further myth is that the Government can promote and regulate gambling at the same time. Because of its over-reliance on the gambling dollar, the Government has failed badly in its regulation of gambling. Crown, as a monopoly, has a privileged place in a society in which every other business has to compete. Why does a monopoly have to be so aggressively advertised? Notwithstanding the millions of dollars it spends on its own self-promotion, the Premier has helped the casino along with descriptions of it as 'the spirit of Victoria', coming to its aid on numerous occasions. As Crown's spokesperson, Gary O'Neill, said in the *Herald-Sun* earlier this year (25 April 1997), 'it's always been Kennett's show'.

The Government failed to charge Crown an extra \$174 million for its additional gaming tables. It allowed Crown to put its logo on our street signs in defiance of the Road Safety Traffic Regulations and to have 52 bright blue signs around Melbourne, again in defiance of the same regulations. The Government discontinued gambling harm minimisation TV advertisements which were so effective in the short time they

were allowed airplay. The only response to criticism from the Victorian Council of Problem Gambling, who made the advertisements, has been to defund the Council. The Minister for Finance and Gaming dissolved his advisory committee on problem gambling when churches insisted on their right to nominate their own representative to it. Far from properly regulating gaming and authorising a sustained advertising campaign, the Government has proven to be the biggest gambling addict in the State.

Myth 4

The final and perhaps most insidious myth is that the Casino is not just a Casino, but a 'family entertainment complex'. The catch cry of the Premier is that gambling is entertainment and a matter of consumer choice. As an ex-advertising man, he knows that when advertisers like Crown are spending \$20 million a year on promotion they are not wasting their money. They are manufacturing and manipulating choice. Despite the claim that the Casino is targeted at overseas 'high rollers' (from whose losses Victoria will benefit), this advertising is directed at Victorians, who make up 85% of visitors to Crown. Five years ago, Victorians spent only \$1.00 in every \$75.00 of income on gambling. Now, as the highest gambling State in the country, we spend \$1.00 in every \$30.00. Every welfare agency has seen a stunning rise in gambling-related poverty and gambling addiction. Broken marriages, suicide and a huge increase in the number of pawn brokers are its legacy.

Literally, all roads now lead to Crown. The kids' football heroes are paid appearance money to be there. Crown's niche shops, its fifteen 24-hour cinemas, its 40 restaurants and its host of virtual reality games completely blur the boundaries between family entertainment and gaming. The South Eastern freeway runs into Crown's carpark (the biggest in the Southern hemisphere). There is a special entrance from the new City Link Freeway into Crown and it is a difficult task to approach the city from the South without unwittingly careering off into the Casino on one of the three lanes which merge into exit roads straight into the Crown carpark on King's Way.

While Crown openly admits that the temporary Casino cornered the lower socio-economic market, as well as a significant proportion of Melbourne's Asian population, it is now attempting to conquer the field. With the nasty word 'casino' dropped from the Crown Entertainment Complex, Crown is seducing the Anglo middle class by offering 'family entertainment'. And so the families flock in, and while the gambling facilities at Crown are only 5% of its total floor space, they will earn 81% of the \$1.3 billion Crown will make next year.

Whose responsibility?

While a significant number of people oppose the Casino and working to mitigate its damage, it is exceedingly difficult to get their objections heard. Certainly the Government has shown a hearty lack of interest in the indisputable evidence of the severe harm that gambling is causing our community. This is, at a guess, probably because of the overriding and pervasive mythology under which Victoria operates; that 'at least Kennett is doing something', that the sweeping and undemocratic changes to Victoria are 'at least getting us out of debt'.

This line is the Government's rationale for all its actions (if indeed it feels it needs to provide a rationale). Elected in

1992 at a time of severe (but many suggest exaggerated) financial difficulty, Kennett has since insisted that he has a mandate to make money for Victoria. His re-election was, not surprisingly, seen as a vindication that this was the priority for the majority of Victorians. This mandate, it would seem, is implicitly a mandate to do whatever it takes — a mandate of absolute power and sweeping change to achieve a singular goal.

While the changes to Victoria are vast and overwhelming, it could be argued that the Casino culture fostered by the government exemplifies this implied mandate; a ruthless pursuit of financial gain, and little or no interest in its effects on the community. Accordingly, though Kennett argues that he has a responsibility to keep Victoria *On the Move*, it seems that he is not prepared to take any other kind of responsibility as leader of this State such as a responsibility for the welfare of his constituents. It is at this point that an important question needs to be asked: what responsibility should a government take for the welfare of the community? Is it the Government's concern that despite the impact on Victoria's debt that the Casino has had, thousands of Victorians are suffering because of their or their loved ones' harmful addiction to gambling. If the debt is disappearing, is it the Government's concern that businesses are suffering all over Melbourne?

It is a curious contradiction of the cult of personality that exists in Victorian politics and the absolute rule that Kennett seems to have that he is only prepared to take responsibility for certain things. Even sovereigns with legitimate absolute rule were, at least in theory, responsible for their subjects. However, Kennett avoids any obligation by identifying the state as a business, and its constituents as consumers. Thus the only responsibility the Government has is to provide consumers with services and product choice. In the case of the Casino, the choice involved is to attend or not to attend. It is the ultimate and most invidious manifestation of liberal capitalism — we are all free and autonomous individuals, equally able to choose how and when to dispose of our income. In this way, the overriding guideline that Victorian citizens have is one of *caveat emptor* — buyer beware. If we 'choose' to consume the services and products offered to us by the privatisation of utilities or the monopoly of Crown, our welfare is our responsibility.

If we are unable to look after ourselves, it seems that the responsibility has been shifted from the state to the community. Thus, in Victoria, an already overburdened community sector is assuming responsibility for the devastating effects of gambling, just as it has done for so many of the other changes implemented by both the State and Federal Coalition Governments over the past two to five years.

Government accountability

Perhaps the most alarming element in this transition of Victoria from community to business venture is that of government accountability. To renege responsibility for the welfare of one's shareholders may not seem too controversial in the context of a business, a parallel that Kennett may find helpful. However, *most* businesses in Victoria are not in a position to make up the rules as they go along: to amend or bypass legislation when convenient and to use freedom of information restrictions to exclude examination of their procedures. Thus an additional question arises: does the obligation to make money for Victoria override the responsibility for accountable government?

It has become increasingly evident in Victoria that values and justice have a price: that considerations of community welfare are an impediment to profit which, it would seem, is the only objective for which our government is prepared to take responsibility. When so much of the effect of this shift in values falls on the shoulders of the community sector and legal profession, it is vital that we continue to ask: whose responsibility is it? Are consumer rights, and limited ones at that, the only rights to which Victorians are entitled? Similarly, we must look further afield and identify a corresponding trend in federal politics, that is, an abdication of responsibility for the human rights of a great many Australians.

Remember that rights are the first thing to be abandoned when conflict arises, and the most difficult thing to retrieve.

Springvale Legal Service, one of many organisations assisting people in their battle against addiction, has formulated a strategy which helps people take control of their problem. It has issued a kit, designed to be used in conjunction with professional counselling, which enables gamblers to legally and voluntarily exclude themselves from Crown and other gambling venues by applying for a self-exclusion order. The Self Exclusion Kit explains the process and is available from Springvale Legal Service: tel 03 9562 3144.

Court in the web

Websites which might interest Alt.LJ'ers

University of Minnesota Human Rights Library

<http://www.umn.edu/humanrts/>

A very useful legal research tool which will also benefit anyone interested in human rights in general. The focus is on primary materials including: treaties, United Nations documents, and other related documents. Also contains useful links.

Human rights

<http://www.hri.ca/>

This is a hub for the dissemination of materials and linking of interest groups on a variety of human rights issues. This site focuses less on primary materials and more on bringing interested parties together. It is particularly useful for linking to other related sites. A useful starting point for finding other forums on human rights.

Freedom of Information

<http://www.comlaw.utas.edu.au/law/foi/>

A good starting point for research. Contains abstracts from the *Freedom of Information Review*. Useful links to other sites, both Australian and overseas.