

An Australian tragedy: mother charged over son's death at poker machine venue

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A baby boy, 19-month-old Brian Yu, recently died tragically outside a poker machine venue in the outer Melbourne suburb of Ferntree Gully. The child's mother, 39-year-old Jie Hua Yu, has been charged with manslaughter. She allegedly left her son unattended inside the family car in the Ferntree Gully Hotel car park.

Jie Hua Yu parked her car at 9.30 in the morning. Her husband arrived two hours later to find his wife inside the hotel. Both parents went to the car and, unable to revive their unconscious son, rushed him to the nearest hospital. Brian, one of three children, was in a coma under intensive care for five days before his death on February 22. It is believed that he suffered extensive brain and liver failure in the extreme temperatures inside the car during a summer heat wave.

The media's immediate response was to vilify Jie Hua Yu. Prime Minister John Howard joined the attack, denouncing her for being "careless and indifferent". The Melbourne *Herald Sun* editorialised, "In a free country, the choice rests with the gamblers: all the government can do is protect them from themselves."

But those in the political, media and business establishment who are loudest in their condemnation are the very ones who have helped create the social conditions in which the baby boy died. No media commentator has asked what attracts a mother of three, and tens of thousands of others, to gambling venues every day. Nor have they asked who profits from the resulting social misery.

Throughout Victoria and across the country, the frustrations, anxieties and problems of millions of working people who have been devastated by economic restructuring are daily being exploited by gaming operators. Those left with few prospects of a decent life as a result of industrial downsizing and government spending cuts are bombarded with advertising promoting the illusion that they can be "the lucky one" and win a jackpot that will transform their lives.

What happened at the Ferntree Gully Hotel, 34 kilometres from the centre of Melbourne, typifies these processes. Once a popular venue for live bands, it was turned over to poker machines in 1993, like many others. In the adjacent local

government area of Monash, 19 out of 20 hotels have been transformed into gambling facilities. These suburban venues are aggressively marketed. Supermarket dockets with \$3 gaming vouchers, free tea and coffee, children's play areas and subsidised meals are all offered as inducements. Women and pensioners are particularly targeted.

Across the state of Victoria, virtually every hotel and auditorium that previously provided live entertainment, including town halls and sporting clubs, now houses poker machines. Once people are enticed into these premises, immense psychological pressure is exerted on them to remain. Flashing lights designed to quicken the heart rate help create a sense of anticipation and excitement. The opening bars of "Hallelujah" herald each win. Intermittent lucky machines and other prizes are announced.

Recent research conducted by the Council on Compulsive Gambling in the United States found that male gamblers responded primarily to the adrenaline rush of winning. Women were more susceptible to the hypnotic, soothing, calming effects of the repetitious motions involved with poker machines. Other concerns and worries receded as they become absorbed by the machines. The report likened this to the numbing effect of tranquilizers.

Many media reports on the tragedy in Melbourne presented gambling as a particular problem in the Asian community, given that Jie Hua Yu migrated from China 12 years ago. Far from being a problem of any particular ethnic grouping however, gambling is a symptom of the generalised social and economic devastation that has hit working class areas.

Assisted by the state government, gaming operators have established the heaviest concentration of poker machines in the most disadvantaged areas. Suburban Maribyrnong, the state's poorest municipality, has 126 poker machines per 10,000 residents while one of Melbourne's wealthiest suburbs, Brighton, has only 32 machines per 10,000 residents. In 1998/99 alone, \$1,144 was lost per adult in Maribyrnong.

Since the first poker machines were introduced in the state in 1992, Victorians have lost a total of \$8 billion to them, in addition to losses due to racing, lotteries and the casino. The suburbs with the greatest gambling losses are all former industrial areas suffering chronic unemployment. Industry after industry was shut down, schools and hospitals closed, government services gutted.

As a result, more than 300,000 people nationally have serious gambling problems. As a Howard government report acknowledged last year, a further 1.5 million people are directly affected through bankruptcy, family breakdown, divorce, suicide, and workplace problems.

The only real beneficiaries have been governments and gambling companies. Australia is home to over 20 percent of all the poker machines in the world. With declining tax revenue from industry and business, governments have turned to gambling to fill their coffers. Last year the gaming industry produced over \$1.3 billion, or 14 percent of Victorian state government income. Gambling has become the third largest source of official revenue.

Of the 30,000 poker machines in Victoria, 27,500 are operated by two private corporations, Tabcorp and Tattersalls. The remaining 2,500 are housed in the Crown casino. Each machine costs less than \$15,000 but is expected to return nearly \$80,000 per year. The profits are split three ways. Roughly one third goes to the government as tax, one third to Tattersalls or Tabcorp and the remaining third to the venue owners.

The Ferntree Gully Hotel's 90 poker machines are under Tattersalls' control. Tattersalls and Tabcorp constantly relocate their machines wherever they can get the best returns. Thus venues stay open 24 hours per day and do everything they can to drag gamblers through their doors rather than lose them to the competition in the next suburb.

In last September's state election campaign the Victorian Labor Party promised to introduce reforms. But Labor's policy platform commits it to maintaining the profitability of the gambling operators. "Labor is not opposed to gambling or the casino industry in Victoria," it reads. "It was a Labor Government that first recognized the potential benefits of these industries and laid down a basic framework for their introduction and development. So, in adopting a cautious but tough approach to gambling in Victoria, Labor is as much concerned to ensure the future health and viability of these industries...."

In the immediate aftermath of Brian Yu's death, the Bracks Labor government introduced its Responsible Gambling Bill, presenting it as an answer to gambling's problems. The only change, however, is to require venues outside the metropolitan area to shut down for four hours each day. New and existing metropolitan venues will still operate around

the clock, on the grounds that the 24-hour Crown casino would otherwise enjoy a competitive advantage.

The government also released a consultation paper and invited submissions by April 15. The paper suggests requiring poker machines to display how much money a gambler has lost and how long they have been on the machine. Restrictions on automatic teller machines at gaming venues, windows to allow natural daylight and the display of clocks are also canvassed. There is no proposal to reduce the number of machines.

These measures are designed to protect the government's revenue while promoting a climate in which individual gamblers will be blamed for their losses. Labor's "tough" approach to gambling seeks to ensure that the government and the poker machine operators will be seen as "responsible" while the individuals caught in the desperate and futile endeavour of trying to win their fortunes will be labelled as "irresponsible".

The poker machine operators are confident that the government will not harm their profitability. Two days after Brian Yu's death, the *Age* newspaper's business pages reported on Tabcorp's rapid profit growth and soaring share price. "The market seemed to like both the profit result and the outcome of Wednesday's meeting with the Premier, Mr Steve Bracks, adding \$185 million to Tabcorp's market capitalisation," it said. Tabcorp welcomed the Labor government's pledge to honour all contracts established under the previous Liberal government.

Tabcorp and Tattersalls donated \$30,000 and \$100,000 respectively to the Victorian Labor Party in 1998-99. They were the two largest corporate donors. Within weeks of winning the state election, the Labor Party hosted a \$1,000-a-head fundraising dinner. Tabcorp and Tattersalls were well represented, each paying for a table of 10.

Bearing a terrible personal loss, a mother of three now faces criminal charges and the ordeal of a highly publicised trial. The state and federal governments and gambling businesses may not have locked Brian Yu in the car, but they are responsible for the social conditions that led to his death.



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