***[This man could cull the number of ‘misery machines’ in NSW. But he won’t](https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/this-man-could-cull-the-number-of-misery-machines-in-nsw-but-he-won-t-20250801-p5mjkb.html)***

[**Peter FitzSimons**](https://www.smh.com.au/by/peter-fitzsimons-hvemu)

Columnist and author

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**David Harris is, among other portfolios, the NSW Minister for Gaming and Racing. After last week’s interview with anti-gambling lobbyist and former victim of pokie machines Kate Seselja, I talked to him in his Martin Place office on Thursday.**

**Fitz:** Minister Harris, thank you for your time. If I’m opening the bowling from the Randwick end on this issue, and you’re taking strike for the Minns government, we should get to know you a little? What brought you into politics?

**Gaming and Racing Minister, David Harris.**

**DH:** Yes, I was a school teacher and principal for 23 years, and had a huge interaction with many communities on a whole range of things. And that got me really passionate about politics, to the stage to where I said, “Well, I can complain about stuff, or I can get involved”. So I got involved, and was elected to the seat of Wyong 16 years ago.

**Fitz:** And did Premier Chris Minns, the day after his victory in the 2023 election, call you up and say, “How would you like to be, among other things, Minister for Ripping People’s Money out of their Wallets?”

**DH:** He didn’t quite use those words, but, yes. I said “Why me?” and he said that “It will take quiet, sober, sensible thinking”, and he knew that I would make decisions based on evidence, not on pressure.

**Fitz:** For this interview, my focus within your portfolio is pokies. As a serious question, do you accept that pokies are “misery machines,” and that the more there are in a community, the more amount of misery results?

**DH:** We accept that for some people it creates massive problems, right? We absolutely acknowledge that. But not for most people. It is legal; one of my roles is to make sure that if it’s a legal activity, it’s done in the safest possible way.

**Fitz:** Sure, but I return to the question. Do you accept, without prevarication – as a community man yourself – the more poker machines in any overall community, the likelihood of misery in this community increases, yea or nay?

**DH:** Well, the stats don’t necessarily demonstra...

[**Whether it’s Liberal or Labor, the people in charge are beholden to the pokies industry**](https://www.smh.com.au/politics/nsw/whether-it-s-liberal-or-labor-the-people-in-charge-are-beholden-to-the-pokies-industry-20250724-p5mhig.html) [Peter FitzSimons](https://www.smh.com.au/by/peter-fitzsimons-hvemu)Columnist and author

**DH:** Well, it’s not a yes or no question.

**Fitz:** I’m giving it as a yes or no question. I’m asking for a yes or no answer.

**DH:** There are different impacts in different communities. So in some communities, in tourist areas, etc, the impacts on the local community may not be as much. In some specific communities in NSW, it might be an issue, and it might not actually be an issue of the number of machines. It might be an issue of the number of venues.

**Fitz:** With the greatest respect, this *is* prevarication/evasion. Let’s have a mind experiment. There are two communities of 10,000 people. One’s got no poker machines, the other has got one pokie for every 47 adults, which is what the situation is in the Sydney suburb of Fairfield right now. What would be your expectation of the net amount of misery in those two communities when compared?

**DH:** What’s your definition of misery?

**Fitz:** Start with domestic violence, bankruptcies, depression, suicides, depression, etc.

**DH:** But are you taking into account alcohol, are you taking into account unemployment and other factors?

**Fitz:** [*Frustrated.*] No. All else equal. In the Fair Dinkum Department, in the No Bullshit Department, which one do you expect will be happiest?

**DH:** I can’t definitively say because it’s not black and white.

**Fitz:** Talk about playing with [a dead bat!] Look, Minister, NSW has [37 per cent](https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/news-south-wales-needs-to-end-its-addiction-to-the-pokies/) of the world’s pub and club poker machines! But we’ve only got 0.1 per cent of the global population! Surely this strikes you as a problem! With your job being to help fix it!

**DH:** Gambling overall is a problem, but so is alcohol. We regulate alcohol to make sure that where possible, people are safe. So in gambling, we’ve got to do the same thing. We recognise that there are issues and that where people experience harm, governments have to do better at helping them, and put in place guidelines to make sure that people don’t get into harm in the first place.

**Fitz:** [*Politely incredulous.*] OK, but *ipso facto*, it doesn’t strike you as: “Jesus wept. This is an enormous problem! This is batshit crazy!”

**DH:** Absolutely, it’s a problem, but it’s an environment that’s grown up over 30 years. And previously there was little will to make a difference, to change the environment. We’re in a different environment now, and we are actually doing a whole lot of things to make that difference.

**Fitz:** I respectfully submit, you’re doing a lot of window-dressing. Before the last election Chris Minns promised to remove 9500 poker machines through a buyback in forfeiture scheme. But just this year [this commitment](https://www.smh.com.au/politics/nsw/the-key-election-promise-nsw-labor-has-walked-away-from-20250305-p5lh3l.html) was abandoned.

**DH:** No the forfeiture scheme is still there. So the 9000 machine reduction, technically, is still being reduced year on year. What we did was we actually looked at the fundamental sums when it came to the buybacks. We appointed an independent panel to look at it, and they said it was ineffective. We said we’d buy back 2000 machines at $30,000 a machine. So that’s $60 million. More than two thousand venues across the state would remove one machine from each venue. And the recommendation from the panel was, if you want to spend $60 million to reduce harm, there are better ways to do it than this.

[Earth to Macquarie Street: How much more evidence is needed on dirty money and pokies?](https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/earth-to-macquarie-street-how-much-more-evidence-is-needed-on-dirty-money-and-pokies-20250731-p5mj8t.html)

[The Herald's View](https://www.smh.com.au/by/the-herald-s-view-p4yviq)Editorial

**Fitz:** OK, but the bottom line is that, and on this panel, you had Clubs NSW and the Australian Hotels Association. Did you really think they’d put their hands up and say, “Great idea! Let’s reduce the numbers of misery machines”? It seemed to me you’ve got Dracula advising on how we should organise the blood bank.

**DH:** Actually the independent panel comprised a mix of industry representatives, harm-minimisation experts, law enforcement authorities, academics, community organisations, and a person with lived experience of gambling harm. It included Wesley Mission and the NSW Council of Social Service. All agreed with the recommendation to not buy back machines because any sensible person would say, “if the government’s going to spend $60 million of public money, they’d want it to make a difference”.

**Fitz:** But the bottom line remains. Do you accept the fact in the auditor-general’s report, highlighted by the Wesley Mission that overall, since the Minns government came in, there are 1000*more* machines operating in NSW?

**DH:** No, because people get confused about entitlements and number of machines operating. There are entitlements that are owned by venues, and they will move machines in and out depending on their particular needs. So, technically, there can be more machines, but we’ve actually reduced the entitlements – by approximately 3000 so far. So the number of machines actually doesn’t matter. It’s the entitlements that matter.

**Fitz:** As a former school teacher, can you put it in simple language for me, the dumb kid up the back? When you took over, there were 90,000 machines operating. Forgetting entitlements, forgetting everything else, right now in NSW – *let the transcript show [journalist thumps table]*– are there more than 90,000 operating? Or are there fewer than 90,000?

**DH:** There are fewer entitlements. You can’t separate them because the value to the industry is the entitlement, not the machine. So if you really look into the research, which I have, it’s not number of machines, it’s actually intensity of play that counts. It is worth noting that there are different classifications of areas based on gambling risk that are taken into account by the regulator when machines are traded.

**Fitz:** All right. But the other issue is accessibility, and the woman I interviewed last week said that as she was growing up, there were 20 venues in her suburb alone where she could play. The accusation is that for all of your window dressing, for all of your tweaking around the edges, the net number of machines has gone up and the problem has not been remotely affected. Do you accept that?

**DH:** No. Because the expectation is that this government can come in and in two years change what has taken 30 years to create. A lot of what we’re doing is based on research about behaviour. And we have brought in measures like banning gaming-related signage; having mandatory Responsible Gambling Officers who can intervene; keeping gaming registers and plans of management; moving ATMs away from gaming machines, and banning placement of gaming machine signage visible from an ATM. All of those things will not make an *immediate* difference. It’s about behaviour, and this is the issue. If you bring in proper regulation about how many hours venues can operate, how much cash they can actually put into them, all of those sorts of things, then you can start to make a difference.



**NSW punters lost $2.17 billion on poker machines in the first quarter of 2025.**

**Fitz:** OK, let’s try net amount of money lost as the key indicator. When the Minns government came in, in 2023, total pokie losses were $8.129 billion. And after all your tweaking of entitlements, your changing of signage, mandatory gaming Officers and all that, in the first quarter of 2025, NSW residents lost $2.17 billion to poker machines. *Dot three, carry one, subtract two and multiply by four*, that says we’re nudging towards $8.7 billion this year! Therefore, by that measure, things are worse under your government! Do you accept that?

**DH:** No, you have to look at the economic conditions.

**Fitz:** You mean, you’ve made it a better economy, so the people have got more money to lose.

**DH:** No, it’s what drives people to go and play the machines. Why are people making that choice, and what’s the reason to go and play?

**Fitz:** It’s not screamingly obvious to you, when the numbers have gone up in terms of machines played, and losses made, that the measures that you have taken – reducing the statewide gaming machine entitlement cap; banning political donations, reducing the cash input – is just tweaking around the edges and not having any effect?

**DH:** No, what we’re doing is putting in place changes that will have an effect over the longer term. It’s about changing people’s behaviour. People are adults, and they have a right to choose how they spend their money. And we can’t move too fast. Look what the previous government did with the heavily regulated taxi industry. The government said ‘we’re going to deregulate the market overnight’. They did that, a lot of drivers went broke, lost their superannuation and lost everything because the government did a major change in policy and devalued the value of their license. So what people need to understand is that if we’ve had a market that’s been operating one way for decades, we can’t just change it overnight. And if we did shut down the pokies, you know what happens? Then potentially people will choose other forms of gambling, including online, where there is little regulation or supervision.

**Fitz:** But I put it to you, Minister, respectfully, when 37 per cent of all the pokies in the world are in NSW, it’s time to sound the alarms. You’re the bloke who’s in the nerve centre. It’s for you to pull the levers and stop the devastation.

**DH:** We’ve acknowledged that, but we can’t change that overnight. And, as the premier said, we’ve got to be careful about being the nanny state, telling people what they can and can’t do. If you’re betting on horses or NRL on the weekend, is that any worse than a pensioner putting $40 in the poker machine on a Thursday?

**Fitz:** So you don’t accept the [auditor-general’s recent report](https://www.nsw.gov.au/ministerial-releases/auditor-generals-report-into-regulation-of-gaming-machines-from-2019-to-2024) that the “NSW government regulatory strategy lacks a clear understanding of gambling harm levels and does not include benchmarks, targets or performance measures to assess harm minimisation outcome.” It noted that “compliance programs have not been evaluated for their impact”. Translated, it says when it comes to harm minimisation from gambling, NSW government’s done three-fifths of F-all.

**DH:** No, because most of what the auditor-general looked at was the policies up to the previous government. When it comes to the effectiveness of our policies, it’s too early to tell. Also, alongside harm minimisation, one of the objectives of the Gaming Machines Act is to facilitate the balanced development of the industry, and the auditor-general’s report did not look at this objective that we, as a government, have to meet. We have to strike the balance between minimising harm with ensuring the sustainability of an industry that is responsible for the livelihoods of around 150,000 people in NSW that pumps billions annually into the state’s economy. Also, licensed clubs throughout NSW are massive contributors to their communities in many ways.

**Fitz:** I accept that. But no one can deny the damage done by pokies either.

**DH:** And we’re now looking at other reforms, which will likely include setting up a system where all pokie machines can be connected to a centre that can have two-way communication. Pokie machines in Victoria – where they are about to start carded play trials – have what’s called two-way communication, so the machines talk to the centre, and then the centre talks to the machines, which makes upgrading machines a lot easier because you don’t have to do every machine individually – it’s a software upgrade. That’s a huge thing that will take a number of years to be able to do that in NSW. When you’ve got that system in place, then you can bring in the next reform.

**Fitz:** Sure. But the auditor-general’s report said that the way you’re moving, at the current rate of reduction is, it’ll take 55 years before you get to the Australian average of population per pokies.

**DH:** Well, there has not been, and there isn’t a policy in NSW to have parity with other states.

**Fitz:** Shouldn’t there be?

**DH:** But why?

**Fitz:** Because they’re misery machines!

**DH:** But that’s your view. And they are for a minority of people, but not for everyone. The [2024 NSW Gambling Survey](https://www.gambleaware.nsw.gov.au/resources-and-education/check-out-our-research/published-research/nsw-gambling-survey-2024) found that just under 1 per cent of the NSW population are experiencing high-risk gambling harm and a further 3.1 per cent are experiencing moderate-risk gambling harm. We are committed to helping these vulnerable people with the reforms we have implemented and are continuing to implement. I encourage anyone experiencing gambling harm to make use of our GambleAware services: [gambleaware.nsw.gov.au/i-need-support](https://www.gambleaware.nsw.gov.au/i-need-support).

**Fitz:** Thank you for your time.