

# A LICENCE TO NANNY

A nebulous ‘social licence’ nearly destroyed NSW’s greyhound racing industry, but **Evan Mulholland** fears worse is to come.



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In July 2016, the New South Wales government announced a ban on greyhound racing and subsequently sought to shut down the entire industry. When making the decision, Premier Mike Baird said ‘a sport which utilises animals cannot operate without a social licence.’

Three months later, in the face

of an unprecedented backlash by country voters, and a pending by-election in the safe Nationals seat of Orange, the Baird Government reversed its decision, arguing the industry deserved one last chance to reform.

The idea that governments hold a ‘social licence’ is increasingly popular amongst the political class. This concept, however, presents an arbitrary and damaging method by which to impose moral views through the state. Such a trend cannot remain unchallenged.

Supposedly, a social licence to

operate is the set of conditions that society places on a company or industry to exist and grow.

Many claim it is a legitimate tool for government decision-making—providing a mechanism to regulate the obligations and operations of industries. But if these rules do not actually exist in the first place, who governs them? Who determines what they are? In reality a government’s social licence is simply another tool it can wield to impose a particular politically popular moral world view upon society.

Prime Minister Malcolm

Turnbull used the term recently to justify a new parliamentary show trial for banking executives: 'They operate with a very substantial social licence and they owe it to the Australian people and their customers to explain fully and comprehensively why they have not passed on the full rate cut and they must do so.'

To be clear, banking executives are not department heads. Executives have responsibility to their shareholders and customers, not the Government. Hauling them in before a parliamentary committee for decisions made on behalf of their shareholders is incredibly bad public policy.

It also sets a terrible precedent. The established view of a western democracy is to ask the electorate to endorse a certain set of values and policies at an election. It should not be imposed through the arbitrary judgement of politicians in the heat of a debate.

Now suddenly, a new, dangerous term has managed to creep into vernacular of Australian political life almost unnoticed and unchallenged.

The greyhound example is particularly bad. Greyhound racing is a battler's sport. Former NSW Premier Jack Lang described greyhounds as 'the working man's racehorse'. He was right. Many Australians can't afford a share in a thoroughbred racehorse, so they will invest in a greyhound as a hobby. It is the main social community activity for many regional towns.

The overwhelming majority of greyhound owners are hard-working Australians. Anyone who has been around greyhound racing knows that the majority of people involved have nothing but affection for their dogs. They treat their greyhounds like family, and devote their lives to looking after them. Where were the moral arguments for their

livelihood?

Towns like Dapto, Lismore and Albury were on the verge of suffering significant job losses as a result of this rushed decision. More than 1000 people are directly employed by the industry. The industry simply does not have the financial might nor well organised activists to defend themselves.

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It took a grassroots campaign of country people to stand up to this paternalistic decision. Inner city animal activists might fire off a tweet of support when you announce a policy like this, but did they jump to the Government's defence when Mike Baird suffered the biggest drop in poll numbers in the history of Newspoll?

This greyhound racing saga is truly a case of the working class versus the smirking class.

Moral and social licence views get used across the country by politicians pushing agendas on pet issues.

In Victoria, the former Napthine government was bitterly opposed to mixed martial arts, following the rising popularity of Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). This is a sport that attracts millions of views worldwide. Last year a UFC event sold out Etihad Stadium in what was a massive economic success for the state. The Andrews government was right to lift the ban.

The Turnbull government's decision to keep a ban on in-play betting is another example of the government imposing its own moral view of a popular practise onto the

everyday punter.

A government minister claimed that the practise should be banned and heavier regulations introduced because of a personal story of a constituent who had lost money on a Sportsbet app.

While gambling may seem unsociable to some, it is undeniably a core element of Australian sport, and indeed maintains the financial viability of most sports.

Furthermore, the evidence that in-play online betting increases the likelihood of problem gambling just isn't there. According to Betfair, as they noted in their submission to government: 'For many punters, this type of betting is crucial for hedging bets to minimise their exposure or enable a guaranteed return from an event.'

The NSW Government lockout laws have to be considered one of the worst public policy failures in recent years, and it seems Mike Baird may be on the verge of common sense in considering a reversal.

Pubs have closed. Young people have lost jobs. Sydney has lost its character. These things happen when a decision is made as a result of moral panic and media campaigns with little empirical foundation. Ordinary Australians are prevented from going out for a drink—punished for the actions of a small minority as a result of a social licence having been lost.

Common sense and due diligence must be at the forefront when considering these types of public policy issues. Otherwise these creeping victories of nanny statisticians will only embolden activists to target other freedoms that many enjoy. 

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Note: On 11 October, 2016, the NSW Government announced it would not proceed with the ban on greyhound racing.

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