

Speech by Health and Aged Care Minister Mark Butler

10TH ANNIVERSARY OF TOBACCO PLAIN PACKAGING

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I want to acknowledge first of all that we're coming together on the land of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, and pay my respects to Elders both past and present. In that vein, particularly welcome Tom Calma here, who is just such a giant of the Australian community, particularly in this particular policy space. So thank you Tom for joining us today and for all the work that you do.

I'm delighted to have Ged and Emma with me, two Assistant Ministers in the Health Portfolio. Emma's only the first female pharmacist ever elected to Parliament, only the eighth pharmacist in the 120 years of Parliament. I think Victoria sends well more than eight lawyers to this Parliament every single election.

And Ged, as everyone knows is just an absolutely terrific visionary leader in the health sector as a qualified RN and nurses leader. So, it's just such a pleasure to have them working in our health team.

But I particularly want to welcome Nicola here, I was remembering, I think it was in this room that she launched the plain packaging laws and it's such a pleasure to have you back here. Both at a professional level and a personal level, I had the honour of working for Nicola as her Junior Minister for two and a half years.

And it was one of the absolute highlights of my professional life, it really was. I can't imagine a smarter, more generous person to work with as a leader. I learnt an enormous amount from her, and hopefully am applying some of that in the portfolio that I have the pleasure of having here now. So, it's just an absolute pleasure to welcome you back here, Nicola, at a personal level, and I think entirely proper, that we welcome you back here at a professional level to recognise the scale of the reforms you drove 10 years ago, the impact that it has on the community. And the responsibility now that we as the current generation of people with our hands on the policy levers have to build on that - the responsibility we have to build on that. So thank you.

Can I also acknowledge so many guests here from the tobacco control sector, it looks like Nicola getting the band back together, a little bit. Some of you who have been playing this song for a long time, in spite of your extraordinarily youthful looks,

Mike, Simon and Melanie, and others who have just worked so hard to put Australia at the forefront of tobacco control. And I know Nicola would be the first to say, just the importance of the role that you played leading up to the reforms that she drove through the Parliament. And so welcome. Welcome back to Parliament, welcome back to the room where such a momentous reform was launched 10 years ago.

I also want to pay tribute to the public service people who work so hard to put the details of this reform together, and who, as objective, public servants have nonetheless been passionate drivers of good public health policy and this is startling example of good public health policy. Some of them are here today. Some, like Jane Halton, who worked so closely with Nicola as the Secretary of the Department of Health can't be with us today but, but also played an extraordinary role.

Tobacco plain packaging was bold policy achieved in the face of some often savage legal and rhetorical assault, but it was imaginative policy. And it was world-leading policy. We know that because 26 countries since then have followed Australia's example. And it's a policy that has saved lives and will continue to save lives.

10 years ago, when Nicola launched this reform, around 16% of Australians smoked, and today that rate is down to just under 11%. A 5% drop in smoking rates is equivalent to 1 million fewer Australians smoking. The health impacts of that are just enormous. Thanks to a comprehensive strategy involving tobacco plain packaging and graphic health warnings, rolling tobacco excise increases, advertising restrictions, public health campaigns, and quit smoking support, those fewer people are smoking today.

Tens of thousands of families that might never struggle through the tragedy of lung cancer, and the vast range of other diseases caused by tobacco smoking. Countless lives saved. And yet powerful forces lined up to block this life saving reform.

The tobacco industry had deep pockets and powerful friends. The then opposition leader Tony Abbott, himself a former Health Minister who should have known better, would often denigrate these reforms by saying they weren't health policy, but tax policy. In 2009, the same year that the Coalition raked in nearly \$300,000 in donations from Big Tobacco. The Shadow Health Minister Peter Dutton said that these world leading lifesaving reforms were in his words, 'a bridge too far'.

A bridge too far.

Just imagine where we would be if Peter Dutton had managed to block Nicola's reforms, imagine where those 1 million Australians would be. Thankfully, Nicola prevailed. She dragged the Coalition kicking and screaming to support this policy,

aided it must be said by some farsighted members of the Coalition who spoke up bravely in support of the plain packaging reforms.

In particular, I want to mention Mal Washer, a GP who played a pivotal role in forcing the hand of Mr Abbott and Mr Dutton to ensure that the legislation passed the Parliament and was then able to be implemented by Nicolas's successor after she'd moved to the Attorney General portfolio, Tanya Plibersek. And when the Coalition came to power, Australia, I think people in this room would acknowledge, was a world leader in tobacco control. But after a decade of really nothing else happening, we're now a laggard.

Tobacco smoking remains the leading cause of preventable death and disability. In my lifetime, as young as I am, in my lifetime smoking has killed more than a million Australians. Every year, tobacco still claims the lives of more than 20,000.

The gains of Nicola's world-leading reforms has stalled for 10 years. And it is the poorest and the most marginalised Australians that have paid the price. In both health and economic terms, disadvantaged groups are hit more than three times harder than others in the community. So it's not just about quality of life, but length of life too. We know that long term smokers died 10 years earlier than non-smokers, 10 years, it's a decade of lost time with friends with family and loved ones.

And we cannot close the gap in health outcomes between First Nations communities, and other Australians without addressing smoking. 23% of the gap in health outcomes is driven by smoking is the most significant modifiable risk factor in the Closing the Gap Initiative. First Nations peoples and disadvantaged Australians are disproportionately paying the price for the past 10 years of inaction.

And now terrifyingly, so are our children. We all read the horrifying stories earlier this year of a five-year-old, being hospitalised from vaping, after two seven-year-olds brought them to his Geelong Primary School. The vape had no labelling on it, and who knows what was in it. More than 50 children under the age of four, including eight babies still in their first year of life have been exposed to potentially toxic vapes in the past year according to Victoria's poisons hotline.

Primary School teachers are being forced to step in and educate grade five and grade six students about the dangers of inhaling nicotine from vapes. Children are buying and selling vapes in schools after buying them online or from illegal retailers. Principals have even reported some students being given vapes by their parents in the mistaken belief that they are safe. Alamanda College Principal Lynette Jobson, said kids at her Point Cook school, were telling teachers: 'I'm not smoking, I'm vaping'. Principals of primary and high school students are continually telling me and

my colleagues that vaping is their biggest behavioural challenge that they face in their schools.

The former government was frankly asleep at the wheel as vaping rates skyrocketed. The former Health Minister, to his credit, wanted to take action on vaping but was rolled within only a couple of days in his party room. And our children are paying the price today for that division and that delay.

Today I announce that the Therapeutic Goods Administration will kick off a public consultation process on nicotine vaping products. We need to understand where the current regulatory framework falls short, and what action governments can take to move the dial across four main areas:

Firstly, changes to border controls for nicotine vaping products to curb the unlawful supply of those products in Australia.

Secondly, pre-market TGA assessment of nicotine vapes to create a regulated source of products to encourage doctors to prescribe, and pharmacies to supply, and vaping consumers frankly, to purchase safer and quality assured products lawfully.

Thirdly, strengthening the product standard to make them unattractive to children and to adolescents by addressing things like labelling and flavours, learning from the lessons of the past 10 years in tobacco.

And fourthly clarifying the status of nicotine vaping products as therapeutic goods to ensure that any vaping product containing nicotine is captured by that regulatory framework.

That public consultation will be open until 16 January next year.

And that same month in January, I'll meet with Health Ministers from every state and territory to discuss how we can mount a coordinated response to this problem.

All Health Ministers have agreed that this is a priority area for us for strong action, but it will require coordinated action across a range of portfolios at both Commonwealth and state levels.

It's not just vaping. I'm determined to see Australia reclaim its position as a world leader on tobacco control because quite frankly, lives are at stake. Disadvantaged Australians are paying the price for Big Tobacco's profits.

Which is why today I announce that the Albanese government plans to introduce new legislation to drive down smoking rates. We've listened to the experts - many of whom were generous enough to spend a few hours with me in Adelaide a month or

two ago. We've also looked at what our international neighbours and friends are doing. And we're ready now to take action.

Australia's current tobacco related measures are split across as many as eight different laws, regulations, instruments and court decisions. The Government's legislation prohibiting certain forms of tobacco advertising is now 30 years old.

This convoluted patchwork of regulations with gaps, and smokers are falling through those cracks. The Government plans to bring together its current tobacco measures along with 11 new measures, which I'll outline in a second, into a single streamlined and effective Act of Parliament, which will reignite the fight against tobacco and nicotine addiction.

After nine years of inaction, the graphic warnings on cigarette packs that were once world-leading have frankly started to lose their impact. At best, those warnings are ignored, and at worst, they are mocked.

We will pursue measures to update and improve health warnings with new graphic warnings on all tobacco products. We know these warnings work. But when a smoker pulls a cigarette out of the pack, there is nothing at the moment to remind them of the harms that cigarettes cause.

Which is why for the first time, the Government will look to require individual cigarettes to be dissuasive by making them unattractive colours or printing warnings - like "smoking kills" - on every individual stick.

We will also move to remove the loopholes that have allowed tobacco companies to promote and market their products by firstly standardising the size of tobacco packs and products.

Secondly, preventing the use of specified additives and tobacco products including flavours and menthol. And thirdly standardising the design and the look of sticks and filters.

We will seek to limit the use of appealing names on products that, frankly, falsely imply that these products are less harmful things like organic or light. There is nothing light about lung cancer.

We will require health promotion inserts to be put into every pack and every pouch, and update advertising regulation to capture e-cigarettes. This Act will also require tobacco companies mandated to be open and transparent about their sales volumes and their pricing, their product ingredients, and their emissions, along with their advertising, promotion and sponsorship activities.

Australia was once a world leader on tobacco control, and we are now a laggard. The 11 measures in the Government's Reignite Tobacco Reforms will put us back into a world leading position alongside fellow OECD nations. So we're moving forward like New Zealand and Canada.

Today is an important first step in re-establishing our reputation as a global leader in tobacco control. We will continue to engage with the public and stakeholders on these important reforms before of course they are finalised. For the next generation, tobacco control reforms will work to achieve Australia's next tobacco strategy, which the Australian Government, before the election and since has been working to progress alongside states and territories as well as the public health sector.

This strategy will provide a new world leading framework to improve the health of the community by reducing tobacco use, and its associated health, social, environmental and economic costs and the inequalities that it causes and perpetuates. The aim is to achieve a national daily smoking prevalence of less than 10% by 2025, just three years, and 5% or less by 2030.

I'm prepared for the fact that just like Nicola's plain packaging reforms, these reforms will be hard fought, we wouldn't be doing our job if they weren't. The tobacco industry continues to have deep pockets and powerful friends. Since plain packaging came into effect, tobacco companies have given more than \$430,000 in donations to the Coalition.

This Government is up for the fight because we fight on behalf of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our society, who bear the brunt of these tobacco company profits. We're going bring the same spirit of courage, spirit of action, the same clarity of thought, and I hope the same conviction that Nicola Roxon brought to plain packaging reforms 10 years ago, and we're going to reaffirm Australia's reputation as a world leader in tobacco control.