



1st of July, 2022

Hi there,

Thank you for your time. It feels like the political pace has only increased since the federal election, and now here in Victoria it's set to accelerate even more with the state ballot fewer than 150 days away!

There's been so much going on, and there's so much coming up (you'll be hearing from me!), but I want to limit my thoughts here to a few things:

- reducing the harm caused by tobacco smoking
- an international trip I've been on related to that and other crucial issues of particular importance to me
- a significant victory for the community in getting the Victorian Government to elevate the massive economic and social issue of loneliness to the ministerial level.

I've been on a work trip in Europe, including keynote participation in the Global Forum on Nicotine, an annual conference about reducing the harm caused by smoking tobacco.



VAPIN'

The harm reduction truth behind the vaping smokescreen

Vaping was, of course, central to the harm-reduction conference, which was held in Warsaw.

There's a lot of misconception around about vaping here in Australia.

There is insufficient attention paid to the harm reduction benefits of vaping for adults addicted to tobacco smoking, the biggest preventable cause of illness and premature death in our society.

It is absurd black market or any vapes are available to young people. Far more effort and resources should be deployed to apply laws designed to prevent this crime. Vaping is not risk-free and children should not have access to these devices.

It is equally absurd that smokers desperate to quit are being denied access to a harm reduction product adopted in so many other countries because of its proven efficacy. Vapes are found to be 95 per cent less dangerous than tobacco smoking.

In the name of health Australian governments are making a policy error so fundamental it will kill Australian citizens. What a sad and silly irony.

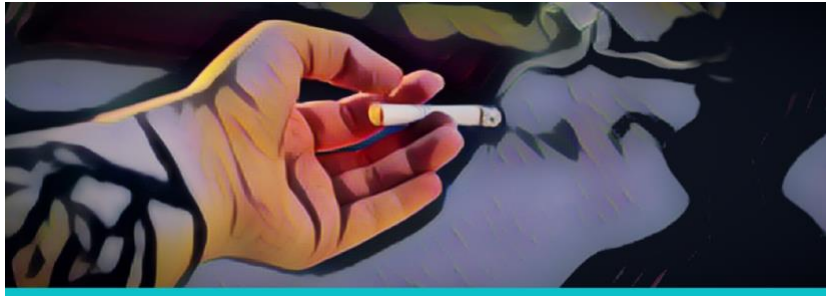
Australia is taking an ill-advised, unethical path away from reason towards supporting a black market and the ongoing rampant death of people desperate to quit tobacco.

Here's a news story on it

Here's an article I wrote about it

It's curious that Australian governments are prepared to block access to a harm-reduction device that cuts demand for cigarettes, an insidious killer product that provides fully half of the annual cost of Medicare.

Vaping is to tobacco what methadone and hydromorphone are to heroin. These measures reduce harm and open a route to recovery and a better life. It's that simple.



Memo Australia: policy health warning

Australia prides itself on being an enlightened international player but is utterly and shamefully off the pace on this issue.

With vaping policy, as with every legislative and regulatory decision, there are risks and benefits to balance. In this case, the calculation by those supposed to be operating in the public interest borders on criminally negligent.

The UK medicines regulator has approved vaporisers which can be prescribed on their PBS.

Japan has cut its smoking rate by 32 per cent since the introduction of vaping, whereas Victoria has reduced its smoking rates by only one per cent in the same period.

New Zealand aims to be a smoke-free country by 2030, and they are on track. How? They are using vapes and they are finding incredible success.

At least 64 scientific studies now demonstrate that smoke-free products like vaporisers are less harmful than traditional cigarettes, or are an effective way to quit for good.

These studies include a publication in the prestigious peer-reviewed New England Journal of Medicine, which demonstrated that a one-year abstinence rate was 18 per cent in the vaporiser group, compared to 9 per cent in nicotine-replacement therapies.

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, and The Royal Australasian College of Physicians now all support vaping as an option for quitting smoking.



TRIPPIN' My public policy nerd trip

The Warsaw anti-tobacco conference was a core element of my trip.

Other issues I've been discussing, in Malta and the UK, with policymakers and lawmakers include:

- Public and social housing
- Cannabis legalisation
- The effects on children of their parents being gaoled
- The gig economy

It was humbling and pleasing that while in Scotland, their First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, agreed to introduce safe access zones, like those I introduced here in Victoria, enabling people to access abortion clinics without being harassed.

The Maltese falcon has landed

I also spent some time in Malta, which has recently become the first EU nation to legalise cannabis. As you might know, I've been fighting for sensible, harm-minimisation drug law reform for a long, long time. (I've still got a lot of energy left, fear not!).

In Malta, adults will be allowed to carry up to seven grams of cannabis, and grow no more than four plants at home. Smoking it in public or in front of children will be illegal.

Other nations including Germany, Luxembourg and Switzerland are preparing similar progress. Others tolerate cannabis use in some circumstances, The main point is that change is coming because prohibition has been proven to increase harm, not reduce it.

Uruguay was the first country in the world to legalise cannabis for personal use in 2013, followed by Canada in 2018. It's clearly the direction of drug law reform the world over.

We can lead, or we can follow. But it is there that we will go, for the health evidence is compelling.

[Here's a little blog](#) I wrote about my time in Malta.



CONNECTIN' **Joining the policy dots & people**

It is equally humbling and pleasing the crucial economic and social issue of loneliness has been elevated to ministerial level, a change I have long sought for, which I moved a motion in Parliament late last year.

In the new ministry, Tim Richardson become Parliamentary Secretary for Mental Health and Social Inclusion.

Tackling the loneliness epidemic will save lives and taxpayers' money. I welcome that the Government has listened to me. And I welcome Mr Richardson's appointment and will endeavour to work with him in the public interest in developing evidence-based policies.

An epidemic of loneliness, worsened by the Covid pandemic, is causing preventable deaths in the same magnitude as does obesity or smoking 15 cigarettes a day.



Not only the lonely

In stark contrast to Australian authorities' treatment of vaping, the move follows international best practice. It emulates the conservative UK Government, which set up such a ministry several years ago. Japan, also a conservative population, has done likewise.

Others will follow because it makes sense to progressives and conservatives alike.

The antidote to debilitating loneliness is connection with people, places, ideas, and

communities. It is my hope Mr Richardson will help achieve this, and I'll give him all reasonable support to reduce the harm of this economic and social scourge.



Losing our religion

Census data shows the time has come for two of my policies that have previously sparked undue controversy and resistance – freedom of religion in Parliament and ending the exemption of profitable religious operations from taxation.

I have moved a motion to end the mandatory recitation of the Lord's Prayer at the start of each Parliamentary day, out of respect for the diversity of our community, and am also pushing for the removal of tax exemptions for corporations set up under a dubiously broad definition of 'religious purpose'.

In response to my Lord's Prayer motion, the current government earlier indicated it would replace the recitation of this prayer with a moment's faith reflection and perhaps a secular statement about the pre-eminence of public interest in Parliament.

In the spotlight of the census data, I call on the government to affirm this commitment to replace the Lord's Prayer in both houses in the early months of the next Victorian Parliament. And I call on the Opposition, as the alternative government, to declare openness to ending this inappropriate and archaic practice should they form government.

The census was stark. The proportion of people choosing "No religion" increased from 29.6 per cent in 2016 to 38.4 per cent in 2021, the biggest ever increase. Christianity was the stated religion of as many as nine in 10 of Australians until 1966.

It is the first time the number of Australians declaring a belief in Christianity is less than half.

It's unsurprising in a nation where half of us have at least one parent born overseas and where one on four of us was born overseas.



No religion should be given special taxation or any other regulatory treatment – or an unduly privileged place in Parliamentary proceedings.

Let us pray. Or not. Everybody has the right to religious faith. Nobody has the right to impose their religious faith. No religion has a spiritual or moral monopoly.

Nor a right to special taxation treatment. Research done at my behest by the independent Parliamentary Budget Office found that removing land tax breaks would save taxpayers \$13.7 million across 2021–22 to 2024–25 and as much as \$71.2 million across 2021–22 to 2031–32.

That's an unholy situation when one considers what else could be done with that money to make things a bit better and fairer for people.



I will keep you posted.

Go well,

Fiona

P.S. the election is 148 days away (but who's counting). If you want to see effective, progressive people and evidence-based policy continue to be implemented in Victoria, then why not get involved in our campaign? You can volunteer [here](#).