



## **REAR WINDOW; Chalmers, Labor leave bookmaking giant in cold**

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**Byline:** MARK DI STEFANO and HANNAH WOOTTON

### **Body**

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Business figures and lobbyists filed down Melbourne's Bourke Street last week for a closed-door fundraiser with Jim Chalmers. It was at SEC Newgate's office and billed as a private dinner with the federal treasurer, with proceeds flowing to Victorian Labor.

Before the event, Responsible Wagering Australia's Kai Cantwell got a call telling him he wouldn't be allowed in the room despite paying for a ticket.

Sure, Cantwell is a former Nationals adviser (and his boss is Liberal greybeard Nick Minchin) but lobbyists across the party divide attend these cash-for-access do's. That's what the money is for.

Could it be because the RWA's key client is Sportsbet, the foreign-owned bookmaking giant sweating the most on mooted changes to gambling advertising laws?

To be blackballed from one event might be seen as unlucky. But word's gotten out among gossip-hungry lobbyists the RWA has been shut out of several Federal Labor Business Forum events. One featuring Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, another starring Communications Minister Michelle Rowland.

How both parties run their business forums is a galling exercise in regulatory runaround. Annual disclosures released this week plainly show the individuals like billionaire Anthony Pratt who stump up large party donations.

But business donations through annual subscriptions to the forums are kept fuzzy. Millions of dollars in cash dumped into a washing machine. It's up to journalists to piece together exactly who is forking over the suitcases that give them privileged access to the country's elected officials.

RWA is a paid subscriber of Labor's forum. Those subscribers usually pay something like \$60,000 annually, and in return get a wad of tickets to budget night and passes to other talkfests. That's a fair wedge, to not be getting anything for it.

One possible reason for its exclusion is that, given the government is apparently at the pointy end of developing its bookmaker ad ban policy, it would be inappropriate for RWA to be in the room.

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And that sounds well and nice, but what of all the other blue-chip companies whose commercial futures are influenced by any pending government policy? Do you reckon Resources Minister Madeleine King is being shielded from BHP and Rio's lobbyist operations? Does Chalmers have the discipline to screen late-night calls from CBA's Matt Comyn? Of course not.

Perhaps they have wised up to the not-a-good-look factor of going off-record with bookmakers.

In 2023, this masthead revealed the RWA (then on behalf of Sportsbet and Entain) picked up the tab for a private steak dinner for Rowland the year prior. This was later excused as a "policy briefing", which coincidentally fell on her birthday. She faced calls to resign.

In 2022, Sportsbet also footed a \$8960 bill for a dinner to support Rowland's election campaign at Rockpool. She was then the shadow minister in charge of online betting. The Minister for Sportsbet tag has stuck.

Any wonder Labor is running around blacklisting the bookmakers. If it is serious, it can give the subscription money back.

Tech visa lobby foots bill for Bragg's bash

Liberal senator Andrew Bragg's 2023 Christmas party was a glitzy affair, sponsored by Sydney's billionaire party king Justin Hemmes. It had the venue (not disclosed), drinks and canapes you'd expect of a Merivale shindig.

His 2024 Christmas bash was a less glamorous affair, according to Bragg. The venue (not disclosed, again) was somewhere in Barangaroo and the senator's parliamentary disclosures show the sponsor was the Australian Computer Society.

Who doesn't want to talk about IT over an eggnog margarita?

Given the ACS's financial stake in several policies that could become key election issues, footing the bill for a Christmas party for Liberal Party operatives may prove a smart investment.

The organisation pitches itself as a "leading professional association representing Australia's technology community, across industry, government and education". It has nearly 50,000 members and releases reports on professional skills and trends.

But it is also an accredited provider of skilled migrant assessments for IT professionals hoping to move to Australia.

Another revenue stream is its "ACS Professional Year", which it pitches as "a job-readiness program that bridges the gap between full-time study and employment in Australia's tech sector". Graduates can claim an additional five points towards visa applications.

If only there was an event where the ACS could speak to politicians about the important issues of skilled migration and international student caps in the lead-up to Christmas ...

On the ACS front, a spokesman says the party was "part of our regular government relations outreach program". It spreads its Christmas cheer without partisanship too: "We do it with politicians from all parties and the independents as well," he says.

From Bragg's end, he says he was just keen to celebrate Christmas in Sydney as, in his view, the city's Lord Mayor Clover Moore had tried to shut it down. "Clover Moore hates Christmas, I love Christmas," he says. "I think it's good to celebrate, and I'm grateful to the ACS for putting on a nice event where I can thank my long-suffering supporters."

At **Fortescue**, you really can ask anything

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All-staff meetings are fertile ground for workplace drama, especially when the floor is opened for questions to management. Never one to back down from a fight, Andrew Forrest's **Fortescue** has instituted a permanent "Ask Us Anything" portal.

Rank-and-file staff post anonymous questions to management, which are then posted in a public forum. They can be "liked", with the most popular then answered in a weekly meeting. It also includes any written responses from the bosses.

Unsurprisingly, some silliness has ensued. In one post, an employee asks for an in-house lottery; 81 staffers back the request, which bears a striking resemblance to Gina Rinehart's in-house loyalty program. "For each year with FMG, can we be given a token that is placed into a barrel and have ten tokens drawn out yearly with the winners get [sic] 100k prize," the **Fortescue** workers asked.

Given Twiggy is convinced Rinehart has spent her life copying his ideas, we don't reckon there is much chance he will return the favour by replicating her annual Christmas cash giveaway, in which random staff members are gifted \$100,000.

Other requests included table tennis and a pool for FMG's new corporate digs on St Georges Terrace in Perth. "Would be lovely to have a quick dip during breaks or after a hard day's work," one staffer said.

"Can males wear formal shorts to the office on hot summer days please?" was another plea. Some decorum, please!

The raffle may not be flying, but other FMG "troops", as Twiggy calls them, have had more luck in getting action from managers. Some correspondents used it to complain that FMG's recent austerity drive had robbed them of biscuits and fruit in staff kitchenettes, and tampons in the toilets. The tampon question was especially popular, with 184 likes.

A **Fortescue** spokesman assured us that those essentials were on the way back, with an alternating roster between fruit and biscuits. Tampon dispensers are also in the works.

Some of the questions have a lot more edge. A common theme in many submissions has been frustration at **Fortescue's** diversity policies. The company has been an industry leader in improving diversity within its workforce and is one of the few ASX20 companies to publicly stand by its approach since Donald Trump's anti-inclusion push.

Yet many of the questions posed on the Ask Us Anything portal suggested that women and ethnic minorities were winning promotions undeservedly. Those questions have upset some staff.

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