— Rear Window

Still plenty of smoke in the vaping wars

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Last year the Australian Retailers Association's newish chief **Paul Zahra** spectacularly tore up a contract tied to the group's lobbying for the legalisation of ecigarettes. It was "the right decision", he later told this newspaper

[https://www.afr.com/companies/retail/australian-retailers-association-cancels-secret-tobacco-contract-20210219-p5740g], and he had "no regrets".

Anyway, the somewhat niche issue wasn't worth his members' time. Even if it came with a \$250,000 payment every six months, secretly sourced (through a PR firm) from Philip Morris International.

That left a gap in the market, almost immediately filled by the smaller (and rival [https://www.afr.com/companies/retail/retail-association-merger-talks-come-to-abrupt-end-20190813-p52gh5]) National Retail Association.

Its CEO, **Dominique Lamb**, was soon lobbying politicians [https://www.afr.com/rear-window/michael-wooldridge-a-rare-winner-in-greg-hunt-s-vaping-mess-20200928-p55zyx] about how her members (being mostly nicotine-dependent convenience stores) weren't allowed to make money off the "less harmful" nicotine vapes.



National Retail Association chief Dominique Lamb: anti-smoking campaigner. Attila Csaszar

It's never been confirmed whether the NRA is now the recipient of the ARA's spurned contract (it's "confidential"). But the relationship – whatever its specifics – between the nation's small retailers and the local outfits of the world's international tobacco giants appears closer than ever.

Ahead of World No Tobacco Day, the Australian Medical Association on Sunday gave out its annual Dirty Ashtray Award, jointly to Philip Morris Australia, British American Tobacco Australia, Imperial Tobacco Australia and the National Retail Association.

The first three go without saying. But the last earned the opprobrium for "consistently promoting the policy position of the tobacco industry to make nicotine e-cigarettes available as an ordinary consumer item".

"The AMA is highly concerned about the uptake of these products among young Australians," the "award" citation continued, noting that Philip Morris, British American Tobacco, and Imperial Tobacco all own e-cigarette brands.

It might have been a weekend, but it took the NRA only three hours to respond.

In a release that referred to the NRA as Australia's "peak retail industry body", it announced its own inaugural Dirty Mirror Award, for "breathtaking hypocrisy in public affairs".

"Doctors are set to make a lot of money from prescribing nicotine products for vaping, and then sending customers on to pharmacies so they can get a slice of the vaping action," Lamb said, in a reference to recent and controversial law changes that will allow nicotine vapes to be sold from pharmacies with a (quarterly) doctor's prescription.

Allowing retailers to sell less harmful nicotine vapes — which many doctors (and in most situations [https://www.afr.com/rear-window/michael-wooldridge-a-rare-winner-in-greg-hunt-s-vaping-mess-20200928-p55zyx] the health minister) fear are a gateway to proper smoking — was a way for retailers to "transition away from selling cigarettes".

So the self-interest of doctors in stopping this was "so breathtaking", Lamb continued, she had to wonder if the AMA "had taken a Hypocritic Oath".

Just as well Lamb has taken up the "anti-smoking" fight (her words). We don't think puns were ever Zahra's style.