The legalisation of prostitution in Victoria was promoted as the solution to all the perceived problems surrounding the 'sex industry'. There would be regulation of brothels, control over conditions, restriction of drug use, compulsory health checks on prostitutes (now called 'sex workers') and a general 'cleaning up' of activities that had already existed even though they were illegal.

Legalisation occurred in stages. In June 1984 the Victorian Planning (Brothels) Act allowed prostitution in brothels that obtained a planning permit from the local council. The Prostitution Regulation Act (1986) said sex workers could work from home or be employed in brothels, escort agencies and massage parlours but brothels were still not legalised or licensed.1,6

The then Labor government wanted brothels to be spread across all suburbs, so they restricted the grounds on which local Councils and residents could object to brothels by stopping complaints based on community interest or moral grounds.2

Prostitution was legalised in Victoria in 1994 with the Prostitution Control Act, which required all prostitution service providers to obtain a licence, overseen by the Business Licensing Authority. Fees for licences are high and applicants undergo a police check of their finances, background and character. Brothels must also obtain a council permit; they are not allowed near houses or within 200 metres of churches and schools. The stated objective of the Act is to protect children from exploitation, lessen the impact on the community, remove the involvement of criminals and ensure that brothels are not located in residential areas.3

The prostitution system operates on three levels - licensed brothels, escort agencies, exempt brothels (owner operated with one or two workers) and single operators who may register to operate a visiting service. Prostitutes must have regular health checks and cannot work if infected with STDS or HIV.4 Some prostitutes, such as Sue Metzenrath, believe that they should not have compulsory tests because this 'stigmatises' them as being carriers of disease.5

The legalisation of prostitution carries an implicit government endorsement of such activities. In addition, government resources and finances are provided for regulation, licensing and supervision of the 'industry'. The Prostitution Control Board and an Advisory Committee, which include prostitutes and government representatives, regulate the industry. The Prostitutes Collective (recently renamed “Resourcing Health Education for the Sex Industry”), an industry group for prostitutes, receives government funding to support prostitutes and supervise health checks. The Victorian Health and Community Services Department provided $290,000 in 1995.6

What has been the result?

The legalisation of prostitution in Victoria has had many detrimental effects on society.

The number of legal brothels and businesses providing sexual services has escalated alarmingly. Large brothels with many workers have been established and the number of single operators has risen sharply over the past five years. Prior to legalisation, there were an estimated 50 illegal brothels. In 1999 there were 84 legal brothels, and authorities were considering an additional 90 applications.7 There are currently 85-90 brothels, numerous escort agencies and a growing number (estimated 1500) of registered single operators.8

The number of illegal brothels has also risen sharply. In 1999 police estimated there were more than 100 illegal brothels.9 The government changed the law to enable them to close them down. The police acknowledge that legalisation has not controlled prostitution. Chief Inspector John Ashby of the Vice Squad said “I suppose there was this utopian view that legalising prostitution would minimise street and illegal prostitution. It clearly hasn’t done that.”10

Researcher Barbara Sullivan says the large number of illegal brothels is partly due to the costs and restrictions imposed on legal brothels,11 whilst Fiona Patten, of the Eros Foundation, claimed that restrictions on advertising and the size of brothels were factors.7

The fact is, there has been a vast overall increase in the number of both legal and illegal brothels since legalisation. There has also been a huge increase in illegal street prostitution, especially in St Kilda, along with increased levels of rape and violence. This concerned local residents, who held a street march to protest and called for prostitutes to be removed from their streets. Whilst
some have called for police enforcement of the law, others have called for decriminalisation of street prostitution. Attorney General Rob Hulls established a Reference Group in February to consider the issue. The government may consider on-the-spot fines for kerb crawlers. But other proposals include the establishment of a red light district and safe ‘hotels’ to be used by street workers. In other words, more legalised prostitution and further progress down the ‘slippery slope’!

Many more young people are becoming involved in prostitution. The Save the Children group revealed in 1999 that at least 3,700 children under 18 were selling their bodies for sex - 1600 of them came from Victoria. Some of these children come from dysfunctional homes and are living on the streets; many of them enter prostitution to pay for drugs.

The owner of a Fitzroy brothel had her licence suspended in 1999 following charges of child prostitution and drug offences. Exploitation of overseas women still occurs. A Kew hotel owner illegally imported 20 Thai women to work in illegal brothels - they had to agree to provide the first 500 sexual services free in return.

New sexual services, such as table top dancing, have been introduced since the legalisation of prostitution. These have rapidly changed to include explicit sexual services and the government has attempted to control that through more legislation.

The legalisation of prostitution has meant that many people in the community have become immune to the fact that prostitution is damaging to individuals and to the community as a whole. The perceived stigma of prostitution has been removed. The annual SEXPO exhibition for sex businesses reflects the change in societal attitudes. Just last month *The Age Good Weekend* ran a story on ‘The Two of Us’ featuring a married man and the prostitute he has visited regularly for 20 years.

Legalisation of prostitution has not worked. In Victoria the ‘sex industry’ is mushrooming out of control - there are more legal brothels, more illegal brothels, more street prostitutes and increased numbers of people using prostitution. Child prostitution continues and women are still abused.

The real effect of the legalisation of prostitution on men and women is a lowering of integrity and self-worth, and a devaluing of our relationships with each other and with God.

### Endnotes:

1. Prostitution Regulation Act 1986
2. Administrative Appeals Tribunal Act 1984
4. Prostitution Control Act 1995, Section 20
6. Prostitutes Collective Victoria website
8. Business Licensing Authority, by phone, 30/5/2001

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**SALT SHAKERS - ‘Watchmen on the wall’**

SALT SHAKERS commenced in October 1994 following a three year battle to stop poker machines being placed in Forest Hill Chase Shopping Centre. We are now a national, interdenominational ethics research and action ministry.

We print a monthly Journal and ‘E-News’ email service. This gives us contact with Churches and Christians across Australia and across all denominations.

Our aim is to help Christians ‘understand the times’ in which we live, raise their awareness of the moral state of our nation and encourage them to take up the challenge to do something about it.

We also encourage Christians to be politically involved, pro-active in the community, and respond to what is happening from a Christian and family-values perspective.

Our vision is to ‘Turn Australia Around’ from the moral decay affecting every area of our society.

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You are the salt of the earth (Matt.5): The Oxford dictionary says this means - “People who make the WORLD a better place.”