

Australian parties snub tobacco money

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Australia's ruling Labor party pledged a ban on tobacco company donations if returned to office Thursday and the conservatives followed suit, ordering an end to campaign funds from cigarette firms.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said, if re-elected on September 7, Labor would amend Australia's Electoral Act to ban donations from big tobacco to political parties and candidates.

"Tobacco companies themselves have admitted they only donate to political parties to try to influence policy," said Rudd.

It follows Australia's world-first introduction of plain packaging for [tobacco products](#) last December, following a landmark victory in a High Court legal battle with major cigarette firms.

Labor said it would also move to "end tobacco investments across government", including a ban on public superannuation funds investing in tobacco shares.

The Australian government's pension fund for public servants sold off Aus\$222 (US\$200 million) in tobacco holdings earlier this year, citing the product's "damaging health effects, [addictive properties](#) and that there is no safe level of consumption".

Centre-left Labor stopped accepting tobacco company donations in 2004, but said the conservative opposition had continued to reap some Aus\$2.1 million since that time from Philip Morris and British

American Tobacco.

Opposition leader Tony Abbott was quick to follow suit, announcing that he had instructed his Liberal-National coalition "to accept no further donations from [tobacco companies](#)".

"I don't want Mr Rudd's distractions," said Abbott when asked about his change of heart on the issue.

"I don't want furphies like this to distract people's attentions from the main issues of this campaign," he said, using Australian slang for gossip or unimportant topics.

Abbott has been an outspoken critic on Labor's anti-smoking policies, voting against plain packaging on the grounds that there was "no credible argument" that it works.

Health Minister Tanya Plibersek called on Abbott to return the donations received in the past decade, including more than Aus\$1 million "shamefully " accepted during his tenure as health minister in the previous conservative government.

Abbott would not commit to returning funds already received from tobacco firms nor to banning state branches of his party from continuing to accept such donations.

Smoking is estimated to cost the Australian economy Aus\$31.5 billion a year in health and lost productivity and there are 15,000 deaths nationally each year from [tobacco](#)-related illnesses.

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