Cartel Criminalisation as Cultural Change
A report from findings of a survey of the Australian public

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This presentation is based on research undertaken for a major Australian Research Council-funded project over three years into cartel criminalisation in Australia. Information about the project is available at www.cartel.law.unimelb.edu.au. The statistical assistance of Chris Platania-Phung is gratefully acknowledged.
About this presentation

• The Melbourne Law School Cartel Project
• Cartel criminalisation as cultural change
• The ACCC campaign to criminalise cartel conduct
• Survey findings
  ➢ General awareness and support for competition law
  ➢ Views on treating cartel conduct as a crime
  ➢ Views on penalising cartel conduct
• Reflections
• **Aims**
  – investigate how and why cartel criminalisation has taken place in Australia
  – assess the likely impact on deterrence and compliance
  – compare policy and experience overseas (esp. US and UK)
  – elicit possible insights for other jurisdictions and other forms of business regulation

• **Empirical components**
  – interviews with stakeholders
  – interviews with prior offenders
  – public survey
• The MLS Cartel Project Survey
  – online survey
  – 1,334 randomly selected respondents
  – representative of the Australian public
  – multi-stage design to test accuracy and validity
  – wide ranging scope to cover views on how the law should respond to cartel
    conduct and how legal sanctions are likely to affect deterrence/compliance
  – use of simple factual scenarios to elicit views while avoiding technical and
    leading language
  – results will be relevant in various ways, including to the design of outreach and
    enforcement strategies
  – data phase completed in July 2010; full set of results to be available in December
Cartel criminalisation as cultural change (1)

- Global movement in favour of tougher laws and sanctions for ‘hard-core’ conduct since late 1990s
- Heavy emphasis on individual deterrence through criminal sanctions, particularly jail
- Influence of US experience – record level of criminal cases, convictions and jail sentences over last 10-15 years
- More than 20 countries have now adopted a form of criminalisation
- But most of these regimes are relatively new, the criminal enforcement record is patchy and, beyond US borders, the debate as to the merits of criminalisation is still active
“Criminalization and similar major adjustments in a legal system do not ‘occur in a vacuum.’ Social and political acceptance for robust criminal antitrust enforcement will vary across nations depending on each country’s legal framework and sensibilities. It is unlikely to emerge automatically on the day a criminal statute becomes law. Existing norms that disfavor criminalization of antitrust offenses need not be immutable, but a careful analysis of existing conditions is necessary to understand what must be done to gain acceptance for criminal punishment.”

W E Kovacic, ‘Criminal Enforcement Norms in Competition Policy’, 2010
Cartel criminalisation is not just about changing the law. It is about changing socio-cultural norms.

A range of stakeholders must be engaged and persuaded, including:

- politicians
- the legal profession, including prosecutors and judges
- members of the general public as taxpayers/voters and jurors
- the media and other commentators
- (most importantly) the business community

It will be a slow process – in the US it has taken over a century.
The ACCC campaign (1)

- Chairman Allan Fels floated the idea in 1994

- ACCC made a formal submission to an independent review in 2002 and won support

- Conservative government fell into line in 2005

- Victory in Visy case in federal election campaign in late 2007 – record breaking penalties against high profile defendants

- Newly elected Labor government introduced draft legislation in January 2008

- Reforms passed in June 2009 after protracted consultation over drafting
The platform for the ACCC’s criminalisation campaign has been building for over 20 years.

From the early 1990s the agency began to establish itself as a politically powerful, committed and effective enforcement agency.

‘Cracking cartels’ has been its top priority for at least the last decade.

The policy has been to bring penalty proceedings, <90% of which have been won by the agency, mostly without a contest.

Penalties have not been high by US or EU standards but collateral and reputational costs have been ‘leveraged’.

At the same time there has been considerable investment in educating the business community about the harms of cartels and promoting the benefits of voluntary compliance.
### Survey findings
General awareness and support for competition law (1)

#### High level of awareness of competition / cartel-related topics

9 in 10 respondents had heard or read of at least one of these topics

Highest levels of awareness amongst older people, men and managers, esp. from large businesses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heard or read of......</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Price fixing</td>
<td>79.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACCC</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case involving Richard Pratt and the ACCC</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case involving Visy and Amcor for price fixing</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allan Fels</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartels or cartel conduct</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graeme Samuel</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal penalties for cartel conduct</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haven’t heard of any of these</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Survey findings
General awareness and support for competition law (2)

High level of recognition of the economic benefits of competition

- **Competition as healthy**: 62%
- **Competition as harmful**: 18%
- **Neutral**: 20%

Almost two thirds of Australians view competition as healthy

- Competition as healthy
- lower prices for consumers
- better quality goods or services
- greater choice for consumers

**Competition as harmful**
- hard for small businesses to have a fair go
- cost-cutting and lower wages
- disadvantage in rural / regional areas
Survey findings
General awareness and support for competition law (3)

• ‘Price fixing’ scenario used in survey

There are two butchers in a town. In the past they have set their prices independently of each other. This has meant that if one butcher put up its prices, consumers could switch to the other butcher to find a lower price. The butchers have now reached an agreement with each other to set the prices they charge for the most popular cuts. As a result, they can charge higher prices because if consumers are unhappy with the price at one butcher, they are unable to switch to the other butcher for a better price.

‘agreement between competitors on prices’

• Similar scenarios used for market allocation and output restriction
**Survey findings**
**General awareness and support for competition law (4)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conduct type</th>
<th>Yes %</th>
<th>No %</th>
<th>Not sure %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Price-fixing’</td>
<td>70.9</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Market sharing’</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Output restriction’</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

High level of support for treating cartel conduct as against the law

Positive association with view of competition as healthy
Survey findings
Treating cartel conduct as a criminal offence (1)

Agreement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conduct type</th>
<th>Yes %</th>
<th>No %</th>
<th>Not sure %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Price-fixing’</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Market sharing’</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Output restriction’</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A large proportion of the public do not think that cartel conduct should be treated as a crime.

But support for treatment as a crime increased with level of cartel awareness.

Men and managers, esp. from large businesses were most likely to support treatment as a crime.
The ACCC advocated several reasons for criminalisation:

- Economic harmfulness of cartels
- Need for greater deterrence
- Cartel conduct is akin to other crimes, e.g., theft
- Such conduct warrants moral opprobrium
- Major trading partners have criminal sanctions
### Survey findings

**Treating cartel conduct as a criminal offence (3)**

#### Reasons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Most common response</th>
<th>Most common response (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Because the conduct involves <strong>deceiving</strong> consumers</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because the conduct is <strong>dishonest</strong></td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because making it a criminal offence will <strong>deter</strong></td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because the conduct will <strong>harm competition</strong> or the free market</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because making the conduct a criminal offence will allow for <strong>punishment</strong></td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because consumers may have to <strong>pay more</strong></td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because the conduct should be seen as the same as <strong>theft</strong></td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because the conduct may <strong>harm</strong> or be unfair to <strong>other competitors</strong></td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Moral reasons had highest % of strong agreement**
Survey findings
Treating cartel conduct as a criminal offence (4)

*Reasons*

- Morality was also a consistent theme in respondent comments eg:
  - ‘it is a fraudulent and dishonest practice’
  - ‘nothing more than theft by another name’
  - ‘it’s not fair for the consumers’
  - ‘it is morally wrong, regardless of what the law says’
### Survey findings
**Treating cartel conduct as a criminal offence (5)**

*Relative to other crimes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As compared to price fixing ...</th>
<th>Most common response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A person stealing another person’s property is...</td>
<td>Just as serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An insurance company denying a valid claim to save money is...</td>
<td>Just as serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A company director using their position dishonestly to gain personal advantage is ...</td>
<td>Just as serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A company evading government income taxes is ...</td>
<td>Just as serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person using inside information in deciding to buy or sell shares is ...</td>
<td>Just as serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person killing another person is ...</td>
<td>Alot more serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person sexually abusing another person is ...</td>
<td>Alot more serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A company misleading consumers about the safety of goods is ....</td>
<td>Alot more serious</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Just as serious’ comparators also reflect ACCC’s moral message.
Survey findings
Treating cartel conduct as a criminal offence (6)
Acceptability of immunity policy

Do you agree it is acceptable to give immunity to the first company to report?

Only 26.3% agreed that immunity policy was acceptable in a case of price fixing.

Lack of support for immunity policy could also suggest moral concerns.
Survey findings
Penalties for cartel conduct (1)
*Individuals*

Support for jailing individuals increased with level of cartel awareness

Men more likely to support jailing individuals than women

Low support for jail as a cartel sanction
Survey findings
Penalties for cartel conduct (2)
Companies

Strong support for fines and naming and shaming also of companies

Highest support was for a fine 3 times the profit made from the conduct
### Survey findings
Penalties for cartel conduct (3)

#### Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of the conduct</th>
<th>Most common response</th>
<th>Most common response (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The companies involved in the conduct were small businesses</td>
<td>Just as serious</td>
<td>80.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The profits from the conduct were used to make products that are environmentally friendly</td>
<td>Just as serious</td>
<td>79.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prices did not go up as a result of the conduct</td>
<td>Just as serious</td>
<td>58.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The reason for the conduct was that it would prevent factories from closing and would save jobs</td>
<td>Just as serious</td>
<td>49.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The conduct included bullying another company into joining the agreement</td>
<td>More serious</td>
<td>82.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaborate steps were taken to make sure the authorities did not find out about the conduct</td>
<td>More serious</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lack of support for mitigating factors + coercion and concealment seen as aggravating – reflective again of moral emphasis
Survey findings
Penalties for cartel conduct (4)

- Comments again bear out concern with moral character rather than effects of conduct
  
  - ‘I don’t believe the end justifies the means’
  
  - ‘there can be no excuse for price collusion whatsoever’
  
  - ‘if something is wrong it is wrong doesn’t matter how you dress it up’
  
  - ‘the plea of environmentally friendly is rubbish’
  
  - ‘a law cannot be this flexible otherwise it would be the chance for people to come up with excuses for their dishonest actions’
  
  - ‘a crime is a crime regardless of why ... there are always reasons’
Reflections

There are solid foundations in terms of awareness and support for competition policy and enforcement amongst the Australian public.

The ACCC campaign to ‘sell’ criminalisation over the last 10 years has yielded strong results – 42% of Australians agree that cartel conduct should be a crime.

Its message that such conduct is morally wrong (as well as economically harmful) appears to resonate.

But there is still a long way to go in persuading people that it is conduct for which individuals should go to jail.
Questions?

For more information:

see [http://www.cartel.law.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.cartel.law.unimelb.edu.au)