



Speech by

GORDON NUTTALL

MEMBER FOR SANDGATE

Hansard 17 August 1999

INTERACTIVE GAMBLING (PLAYER PROTECTION) AMENDMENT BILL

Mr NUTTALL (Sandgate—ALP) (10.46 p.m.): The Bill that is before the House today is not about conspiracy theories or protecting people. It is about enacting a clear and open mechanism to ensure that the utmost public confidence is maintained in the integrity of the licensee and the elected officials and associated persons who are involved with such licences either directly or indirectly. As we all know, politics is about perceptions. The perception of the public is that the process that we are involved in must not only be honest but must also be seen to be honest, and that is simply what this legislation is all about.

The existing Gocorp licence will be revoked if its association with Navari Pty Ltd, Topki Holdings Pty Ltd or any disqualified person continues. Gocorp has 30 days to ensure that such people are removed from its shareholdings. Clause 4 of the Bill simply sets that out. We are making that very clear so that the public of Queensland can see that there will be no link between the Government, Gocorp and people associated with the company in terms of this licence.

As we know, anyone with access to a computer and a modem can have their own personal casino by accessing the Internet gambling sites in Australia or anywhere in the world. The reality is that virtual casinos, the online sports betting industry and online lotteries have begun to proliferate in Australia and throughout the world. Gambling is a very important industry in its own right and in Australia it employs many thousands of people. Of course, gambling has become an important source of revenue for all Australian States and Territories. That is a reality of life.

The advent of Internet gambling has brought about a proliferation of gambling opportunities that were previously unimaginable to us as a community. If we have a look at gambling in the digital age, we see that it is a growing trend. Recently, the Australian Institute of Criminology wrote an article which states—

"Today, anyone with a personal computer and a modem can access Internet gambling sites in Australia and around the world. A quick web search with any standard search engine using the term 'Internet gambling' will yield an abundance of gambling sites, through which one can play a variety of games such as blackjack, baccarat, and roulette, as well as wager on the outcome of sporting contests and participate in lottery draws. In only a matter of months, with the advent of interactive television, the potential will exist for any Australian to have all these forms of gambling in their home.

The emerging interactive gambling industry has demonstrated the enormous commercial potential of new technologies. Estimates of the potential market for online gambling services vary widely, but there is little doubt that it could entail billions of dollars annually by the turn of the century. Notwithstanding the current Asian economic crisis, there are tremendous profits which await those entrepreneurs who can meet the gambling demands of the emerging Asian middle class, whose own governments may discourage gambling on their own soil. Similar market opportunities exist in America and Europe."

As a Government, we have three options in relation to the Internet gambling issue. In my view, they are as follows. We can have a prohibition on online gambling. In reality, that simply cannot be policed. It is an option that we could not enforce. Another option is a do-nothing option, that is, sit back,

pretend it does not exist and let it pass us by. Then we risk the opportunity of missing out on enormous revenues. The third option is the option that we as a Government have chosen to take, and that is the regulatory model. We have chosen to go down that path simply to ensure that Queensland does not miss out on its share of revenue from Internet gambling.

In May 1996, at a meeting of all Australian gaming and racing Ministers, agreement was reached on a set of principles for a draft national regulatory model. They related to new forms of interactive home gambling products. In 1998 Queensland enacted the first major efforts to legalise, license and regulate Internet gambling. We did this along the lines of the draft model proposed at that ministerial meeting. This included a number of basic principles, which I will not cover in my contribution tonight. Simply, we introduced the Interactive Gambling (Player Protection) Act.

Again, in its article the Australian Institute of Criminology stated—

"As far as Internet gambling is concerned, the genie is out of the bottle. Whatever actions Australian governments take, gambling opportunities will proliferate in cyberspace. By providing a basic regulatory foundation which would ensure the integrity of domestic online gambling enterprises, Australia is poised to become a world leader in the provision of online gaming services and the technologies and applications to support it. Consumers from around the world should be confident that they will get a fair deal in all Australian jurisdictions.

Australia can take the lead to foster an industry based on state of the art technology, and with a worldwide reputation for integrity."

If we look beyond the muddying of the waters that is taking place in this debate tonight, we see that that is part of what this legislation is all about. We are not trying to cover up anything or protect anyone. In respect of this issue, the behaviour of both the Premier and the Treasurer has been impeccable. They have encouraged and welcomed the inquiries by both the Auditor-General and the CJC, and they have both offered those inquiries the full support of the Government and themselves as individuals. I applaud the Treasurer, the honourable member for Ipswich, for his behaviour in this matter. I believe the Treasurer actions have been beyond reproach. If we have a look at his behaviour in this Parliament since he was elected, we see that no-one could stand up in here and say that his behaviour has been anything other than impeccable. The Treasurer, the honourable member for Ipswich, David Hamill, has always acted with the utmost integrity.

It is very easy to throw stones when in Opposition. I ask the Opposition: if it was in Government and if Gocorp, under its current structure, had applied for that licence, would it have approved that licence? It would have stood aside and taken the advice of the bureaucracy, as did the Treasurer. The Honourable Treasurer looked at that advice, stood back from it and behaved in an impeccable manner. It is unfortunate that he has been caught up.

Today the Opposition is making a mountain out of a molehill in relation to this issue. I sincerely hope that both the Treasurer and the honourable member for Woodridge will be cleared of any wrongdoing. It is not as if anyone has deliberately tried to hide their involvement in Gocorp. It is not as if the Treasurer has tried to hide behind any mask. As I said, in my view the Treasurer has acted impeccably. The honourable member for Woodridge has never tried to hide the fact that he was involved in Gocorp. Indeed, we understand that the former member for Ipswich West declared his interest on the pecuniary interests register. It is clear to the public that these members have acted in an honest and open fashion. The legislation before the House tonight simply shows to the Queensland public that we as a Government are acting as expeditiously as we can to ensure that our integrity as a Government is maintained.
