



Speech by

JEFF KNUTH

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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GAMING MACHINE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr KNUTH (Burdekin—IND) (5.20 p.m.): I ask honourable members to imagine that the Government passed legislation that dropped the blood alcohol limit to 0.02%. Imagine if the new law was made retrospective to 1995 and everyone who previously recorded blood alcohol readings between 0.02% and 0.05% was fined or put before the courts. How crazy would it be to be punished by a law which did not even exist when these readings were recorded? The public outrage would be deafening and the Government would be rightly ridiculed for years to come. I ask honourable members to now turn their minds to the Bill now before this Parliament, which flags changes to the Gaming Machine Act 1991.

Tabled on the last sitting day of Parliament last year, the proposed amendments will make illegal some funding agreements which licensed gaming operators have forged with clubs that pour thousands of dollars into organisations such as lifesaving associations and the Returned Services League. These changes will outlaw the arrangement whereby a gaming operator takes a percentage of the cash box rather than impose on clubs an array of charges such as machine rental and monitoring fees.

It has been suggested that the move will close a loophole, an oversight, in Bills passed in 1997 and March 1998 designed to shift the gaming machine rental from the Queensland Office of Gaming to licensed gaming operators. I do not object to closing this loophole, even though clubs and gaming operators which have taken advantage of the loophole stand to lose tens of thousands of dollars in revenue and put on hold club expansions that would create jobs.

In my own electorate, a club with just over 20 full-time and casual staff was planning to add more gaming machines through a cash box deal with TABCorp. The proposed changes will freeze these plans—plans that management believes would increase its staff by more than 50% by creating four full-time and 10 casual jobs. News of these proposals left three gaming machines lying uninstalled and useless at this establishment over the busy Christmas period. Another 25 wait in a warehouse, their installation dependent on this Government's decision. Income and jobs go begging. Let me make this very clear: these changes will cost even more jobs, and affected clubs will have to rebudget to compensate for lost projected revenue.

My concern lies with the fact that these changes, if passed, will create a law that will be retrospective to 1997 and affected clubs may be faced with fines of up to \$75,000. How can we pass legislation that can fine clubs under a law that did not exist when they negotiated contracts with the gaming providers? The referee shifting the goal posts during the second half of the game is one thing, but fining teams for goals scored during the first half is simply outrageous.

Governments cannot expect clubs and the many charities and community groups they donate to to be branded criminals and wear fines because of the shortcomings of those who drafted the initial Bill and the amendments of subsequent Governments. Is there some sort of a virus affecting the Labor Party and the office of the Honourable Treasurer which saps commonsense and equity from the process of drafting such a Bill?

The future of our business community is uncertain enough without papers such as this casting shadows over past decisions. Are we to constantly expect others to pay the price for the blunders of legislators? Wake up and smell the concrete! To make this Bill retrospective is irresponsible,

unprofessional and a slap in the face for clubs who have invested significant time and money finding and signing to a gaming provider which best serves their patrons and the communities they donate to. By all means seal a loophole, be it gaming, tax or social security, but do not make it retrospective and mar the good name of decent, law-abiding businesses.

Queensland clubs already face renegotiating arrangements with gaming machine operators. Clubs which did not forge cash box deals did so because it represented the best affordable deal to bring pokies to their patrons. The Honourable Treasurer proposes to take away this option. The affected clubs are obviously disappointed about the potential cut in their options. To be faced with a potential fine because of a legislation backflip is even more disheartening, undermining and downright outrageous. If the House must enact these changes, it should scrap the retrospective nature of this Bill and let commonsense prevail.

I have in my hand a petition from the Ayr Surf Life Saving Club. The petition states—

"The Petition of the citizens of Queensland draws to the attention of the House the retrospective gaming legislation which places an \$85 million investment package and more than 1500 potential jobs for Queensland in jeopardy."

Mr Hamill: That sounds like the same petition that was tabled by somebody else.

Mr KNUTH: It is different. It comes from my electorate. It comes from Ayr. Ask the member for Logan. He knows where Ayr is. Sugarcane grows 15 feet high in the Burdekin electorate; he should know where it is. The petition continues—

"The Surf Life Saving movement, the State's largest volunteer organisation, will also be severely affected after entering into a number of contracts with TABCORP in good faith and following extensive consultation with the government.

The retrospective legislation will:

jeopardise millions of dollars of planned investment in Queensland;

endanger 1500 jobs;

eliminate training and employment opportunities for young Queenslanders;

threaten the surf lifesaving movement's ability to meet annual costs of \$20 million for the facilities and services; and

unnecessarily increase the movement's dependency on community and government funding.

Your petitioners therefore request the House to reject this legislative change."

I have spoken against this Bill on behalf of constituents who have visited my office to protest against this proposed legislation. However, I have also let many of my constituents know of my grievance that these machines were ever introduced to Queensland in the first place. I believe that great man and Premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen had the wisdom to see the potential social problems that these machines would cause in relation to families in Queensland and I commend the Treasurer for seeing this also. However, this problem lies with us, and I believe that it is up to all of us to find a solution that will alleviate social degradation while giving entertainment and community associations much-needed financial income. Nevertheless, I do not support this proposed change to the legislation.
