



Speech by

**Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM**

**MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE**

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Hansard 7 December 1999

**GAMING MACHINE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL (No.2)**

**Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM** (Gladstone—IND) (4.11 p.m.): I commend the Minister for the provision in the Gaming Machine and Other Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 2) that is intended to restrict the location of gaming machines. In July this year it was reported that Queenslanders spend \$1.8 billion a year on gaming—nearly five times the amount spent a decade ago. Much of the growth is attributed to poker machines. Queenslanders have not only been gambling more across-the-board; increased access to poker machines has seen the expenditure of gambling dollars grow exponentially. Problem gamblers account for almost a third of the total, on average losing about \$12,000 a year. A problem gambler loses what is for a lot of people in our community about an entire year's income. On average, non-problem gamblers lose \$625 a year. Those who have a problem significantly affect not only themselves but also their family, if they have a family and children. The statistics tell us that 80% of Australians gamble at least once a year. No doubt that would include the Melbourne Cup. Some 40% are weekly gamblers. However, problem gamblers tend to use gaming machines, or pokies, casino tables and the TAB.

Overwhelmingly, in regional Queensland the game played by problem gamblers is poker machines, which have become readily accessible in pubs and clubs. Some gamblers follow a pattern and go to the pub or club on a regular basis. Others are more opportunistic. I commend the Minister for the proposed restriction on gaming machines in shopping centres. If we wanted young people to develop a gambling problem, we would make gaming machines readily accessible in shopping centres, because that is where they hang around with their mates. Any attempt to constrain the growing problem of gambling, particularly in respect of our young people, is to be applauded. I am sure that this move would be supported by groups such as Gamblers Anonymous. The closest such group to Gladstone is based in Rockhampton. People from Gladstone came to my office to protest about that. They were concerned about either their gambling problem or that of a family member. They are experiencing difficulty in accessing support. Our face-to-face Lifeline counsellor has been defunded. That is another person who is not available. The St Vincent de Paul and the Salvos cop the brunt of these problems, particularly at this time of the year. On behalf of the people in my community, I commend the Minister for his intention to restrict gambling in shopping centres.

I commend the Minister for a comment in his second-reading speech that it is not appropriate to allow the expansion of gaming facilities into shopping centres and other public areas and that they ought to be available to meet demand, not flaunted to create it. That is a comment of which the Minister can be justifiably proud. When gaming machines were introduced, they were intended to be another string to the bow of entertainment and recreation available to the community. They have certainly grown well beyond that and we now recognise that problem gambling is a significant social problem that, unless curtailed, will continue to grow.

I am concerned that through clause 93 the Minister is intending to remove the restriction on minors being employed in the gaming industry. There is nothing in the Explanatory Notes about this clause. We are told that clause 93 omits section 117, but no explanation is given for that omission. I can only see exposing young people—presumably anyone under the age of 18—to gaming machines as adding to the problem. I cannot understand why the Minister has made that omission and what its purpose is. I understand that the Minister might be able to argue that it would open up employment opportunities in casinos in Brisbane for university students and others. Ultimately, in my view, greater

problems would be created by making gaming accessible to young people. If they were permitted to work within the industry, they would get a taste of the ethos, the culture and the lifestyle. In my view, it would only have the potential to add to future social problems rather than solving them.

I ask the Minister to clarify the reduction in the penalties imposed. The maximum penalty was 1,000 penalty units or \$75,000. It is proposed to decrease that to 200 penalty units. No clear reason seems to have been given for that reduction. What was the Minister's rationale for that? It certainly cannot be held up as being a deterrent, because the amount of the penalty is being reduced. I would like to understand the Minister's purpose in legislating for that significant reduction.

On behalf of my community, I commend the Minister for taking this action. I am sure there would be those within the industry who would be looking to see gaming machines in certain public places so as to encourage patronage from passing traffic. In spite of my points of opposition, I commend the Minister for taking a stand.

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