



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

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GAMBLING LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs PRATT (Barambah—IND) (5.48 p.m.): Australians will gamble on anything, and that has been reflected on many occasions. Many foreigners watch in amazement as, on one of the most important days of our year, the day we honour and recognise the efforts of our Anzacs, we bet on a couple of obsolete coins in an illegal game which police turn a blind eye to on that special day.

I do not stand here today to condemn or praise those who choose to gamble, but the effect on many communities, families and individuals is and must be of great concern to each and every one of us. Nobody can play the ostrich and pretend there is not a lot of suffering out there because of gambling. I heard the member for Mansfield extolling the virtues of the gaming fund because it distributes money to communities to support various community projects. I personally do not see that distribution as a virtue but as an obligation. It is because of the support of many vulnerable individuals that they have the money to be so generous.

In saying that, I bring to the attention of the House one person who was very vulnerable; she is now dead. When her husband died she was 75. She sold her house to live with her daughter and son-in-law, and over the next eight and a half years due to loneliness she gambled away every last penny of her money on the social outings which she shared with a machine that whistled, screamed and played bells. That was her sad legacy in life. This is not an isolated instance, as the member for Cairns says. There are a lot of people out there in the same boat.

Having been involved in many charitable organisations and sporting clubs prior to the introduction of gaming machines, I can only reflect on the disastrous effect that they have had in many communities. I have seen the financial input by communities to sporting and charitable organisations cut dramatically. I have seen the numbers of volunteers and members of the many service and other charitable groups plummet. I have witnessed the increasing age of many members of clubs and heard many of those members speak of the fact that perhaps their clubs did not have a future.

The cost to organisations such as St Vincent de Paul, the Salvation Army and the churches has been enormous as they are called on more and more for assistance, whether it be for food, accommodation or protection, while at the same time they are receiving less and less to cope with it. When do we say enough is enough? When do we decide in favour of the community rather than introduce more and more machines under the mistaken belief that it is good for communities?

Many have said in this place today that it is good for communities. If we must have it, then let it be great. I would like to see much of this revenue used for the greater good by addressing more pressing needs in communities in the form of facilities to address those who are adversely affected because of an inability to control their gambling weaknesses. This would include their families as well. It could go to mental health, because a lot of people are driven to gambling through being abused or being in debt.

One thing that would bother me—and I think this would be a shame—is if we saw much of this revenue filling Government coffers. Are we getting to a stage where our Governments are surviving only on the gaming taxes? Are we at the stage where we are illegally stealing from the people and giving a pittance back—perhaps the modern-day version of Robin Hood: taking from the poor, the unwise and the vulnerable? I see nothing to be proud of in that.

It has been reported that Australia has approximately 22% of the world's gaming machines. That is something I do not believe we should be proud of, either. Gambling will be with us forever while there are individuals, groups or Governments prepared to support it. We are all given free will to pursue avenues of pleasure when the community as a whole encourages it or if there is the possibility to raise revenue or to become an instant millionaire. Smoking once readily raised a lot of revenue but is now socially unacceptable and Governments are endeavouring to curtail it. Only when the pain that gambling inflicts hurts the community enough will the people want greater restraint or even perhaps—but inconceivably—to end it. Internet gambling may be the catalyst to do just that. It is necessary to bring in strong laws to govern this bittersweet community disaster.

In saying all that, we must also recognise the benefit communities receive from clubs socially, financially and as work providers. That is why I describe this area of our communities as bittersweet. In smaller communities clubs have become the social centre, supplying most of the entertainment, the facilities for functions and the opportunities for employment in the hospitality industry—an industry which is becoming one of the fastest growing. Many small communities have benefited from the gaming fund and have sporting facilities and such that they may never, ever have necessarily got otherwise. I take nothing away from those clubs which contribute to our communities—and they are plentiful—but we in this House have responsibilities which we must ensure we meet.

I have always believed that it is the obligation of the strong to protect those who cannot protect themselves. Those who have a weakness to gamble to excess have the right to expect us to protect them, not subject them to greater temptations. I believe this Bill could go a long, long way further in controlling this fast-growing industry and its effect on individuals and the community. The cost in time may be greater than any one of us could ever have imagined.
