



Speech by

KEN TURNER

MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA

Hansard 8 November 2000

GAMBLING LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr TURNER (Thuringowa—IND) (4.24 p.m.): The odds of winning Powerball are 54,879,155 to 1. The odds of winning a \$5 Lotto are 140,000 to 1. The odds of a person's marriage ending in divorce are 2 to 1. Australians love to gamble.

The Minister states that this Bill addresses the social and economic impacts of gambling occurring mainly from the recent rapid growth in gaming machines in Queensland. The Minister states that the reforms will ensure that gaming develops in a balanced and socially responsible manner. However, does this Bill go far enough? I understand that further amendments will follow to complete the Government's policy. However, I must still ask: does it go far enough? Does this Bill suitably address bad decisions made by Queensland Governments over the past 10 years?

Over the past 10 years Queenslanders' spending on gambling has quadrupled, mainly due to the increase in gaming machines at more accessible venues such as hotels. The Minister acknowledges that the majority of gambling problems come from gaming machines. Already hotels account for three-quarters of the growth in gaming machines in the past few years. Yet since the Beattie Government came to power, the maximum number of gaming machines for hotels has increased from 30 to 40. The Minister stated in his second-reading speech that provision is being made for greater community input in regard to gaming machine applications, yet public comment will be sought only on applications for "significant" increases, which means an increase of 20 or more gaming machines at a club or 10 or more gaming machines at a hotel.

I believe that any increase is significant. In other words, average hotel gaming machine numbers will be able to effectively double in the next two years without any community consultation. The community should be consulted for any new applications for gaming machines. The Minister stated further that the Queensland Gaming Commission's powers are being expanded significantly. He stated further—

"... the commission may choose to issue guidelines outlining its views on the location of gaming machines in a site or the proximity of gaming machines to ATMs."

Or it may choose to issue guidelines about the commission's position on the proximity of gaming machines to schools, shopping centres. This industry does not have a good reputation for self-regulation. These matters must be governed by regulations and not dealt with in such a wishy-washy way.

The Bill recognises that many larger clubs are no longer maintaining their focal point of funding charity, sporting and community projects. I welcome the inclusion of the annual community benefit statement for clubs with more than 50 gaming machines. Shouldn't all community clubs be accountable to the community supporting them?

Under Part 4 of the Bill, the Community Investment Fund will be distributed into three activities. The destination of these levies is very unclear. The Gaming Machine Community Benefit Fund was designed to compensate communities for some of the damage done in our society by having gambling establishments. This compensation is set at 8.5% of the taxes received from gaming. Could the Minister advise the House what proportion of the 8.5% of the total taxes received from gambling will go back to the public for their community projects?

While the majority of Queenslanders engage in some form of gambling without suffering any harm, a minority of people—2%—gamble to the extent that they encounter significant financial difficulties as a result of their losses. Those 65,000 people have serious gambling problems. It has been estimated that each of those gamblers affects 10 to 15 other people. Their spouses and children suffer emotional damage such as stress, grief and the breakdown of family relationships as well as financial damage such as loss of income. Those people also impact on the community by causing loss of productivity and pressure on social services.

The gamblers who spend more than \$1,000 a year on machines account for more than 25% of a casino's total income from gaming machines. The 13% of gamblers spending more than \$1,000 on table games account for more than 50% of the total income from table games. It stands to reason that providers of gambling services would face significant revenue losses in the absence of heavy gamblers. Clubs and hotels advertise extensively to attract patronage. We need determined policies to curb advertising that entices heavy gambling.

The Government needs to play a leading role in ensuring that responsible gaming practices are adopted by gaming venues and are monitored by independent bodies. It is not responsible government to allow the gaming industry to write and monitor its code of conduct. Gaming practices must not be left to choice by gambling venues. This lack of responsibility is very apparent with windowless rooms with no clocks and no natural light that are clearly designed to create a timeless atmosphere so that patrons are encouraged to gamble continuously. All gambling venues should be required to display clocks and, where possible, to admit natural light.

We must have strong codes of conduct with independent bodies to monitor the effectiveness of these practices. Will the Minister advise the House of what portion of the 8.5% of the total tax received from gambling will go to dealing with social issues arising from gambling such as research on the impact of gambling in the community and harm minimisation? Will the Minister also advise the House what portion of the 8.5% of the total taxes received from gambling will go to support welfare and church organisations to meet demands placed on their services due to problem gambling?

The third activity for distribution of a portion of the 8.5% of the total taxes received from gambling is for programs such as job creation and crime prevention. Isn't this another term for consolidated revenue? Is this third activity just a smokescreen? Is the Government simply returning a portion of the 8.5% to consolidated revenue? Will the Minister advise the House what portion of the 8.5% will go to this third activity?

In summary, providers of gambling services should be required to act in a way which minimises problem gambling. Advertising should be prohibited. Venues should be required to display clocks and, where possible, to admit natural light. Services to assist problem gamblers should be expanded and financed from gambling taxes. New forms of gaming should be subject to social impact studies. Public comment should be sought on any application for increases in the number of gaming machines. With this Bill, the Government is only scratching the surface of the problems created in our society by gambling. This Bill is inadequate in addressing the social and economic impacts of gambling. It does not balance the benefits and damage to our society.

Gambling is here to stay, but will gaming machines remain our worst nightmare or will Internet gambling soon become our worst nightmare?
