



Speech by

Mr ROB MITCHELL

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

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RACING AND BETTING AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MITCHELL (Charters Towers—NPA) (2.55 p.m.): I rise to speak to the Racing and Betting Amendment Bill 2000. Bookmakers have always been, and hopefully will always be, the characters of all codes of the racing industry.

Mr Schwarten: They've got a lot of money off you and me over the years.

Mr MITCHELL: Very much so. I was going to talk about that a little later. The previous speaker referred to placing bets with the bookies. That is the only way to bet.

Mr Schwarten: I remember a day in Hughenden they got some off you and me.

Mr MITCHELL: It was enjoyable, and it kept the bookmakers going.

Bookmakers are the main conduit between the racing public and the racing industry in general. Over the years, the character of the bookmakers has attracted many racegoers to the track, week in and week out. Each bookmaker has his own distinctive style, whether that be the wearing of pork-pie hats, their colourful manner or the way in which they sell a bet to a punter. Bookmakers have their own ways of attracting the public to bet with them.

Over many years, bookmakers have been dedicated to the industry. I know that the Minister for Housing will agree with me when I say that every time people ask a bookie what sort of day he had on the punt, the bookie would say, "Had a shocker, mate. Couldn't get a win even if my life depended on it", and many other unprintable comments, too.

Mr Nuttall: But they are back there next week.

Mr MITCHELL: That is what I was about to say. However, one bet a person could win is that the bookie would be the first one back at the track the next week or, in fact, at the very next meeting. Bookies give these answers to people when we know full well that not one favourite has greeted the judge all day and that they have had a very, very good day. Otherwise, the bookies would not be at the track. Like any other worker in any industry, if they were not making a quid, they would not have kept going back for the number of years that they have.

What would we do without bookmakers? They have been at the forefront of the racing industry for many years. However, over the past couple of decades since the advent of the totalisator we have seen a decrease in the number of bookies throughout the State. Betting at the totalisator is just not the same as betting with a bookie. It is a different style of betting: one just goes into the TAB and sticks a ticket into a machine to place a bet, not knowing at all the return on that investment until the horse has jumped, or sometimes not even knowing until after the race has finished.

There is nothing better—and I have done this on a few occasions, too, I might tell members—than attempting to get an extra point or two off the bookie for a horse. The bookie is always saying, "No way, I've got him long enough as it is. I'm not going to give you any more." If people keep hammering away at the bookie—and this is how people can really get a lot of joy in having a bet with a bookie—and make a couple more attempts and threats to go to another bookie, he will just say to his clerk or his bag carrier, "For God's sake, give this bloke his price and get him out of my hair." That is part of the fun of racing, and that is why I am right behind the bookies. That makes for a great day.

Mr Nuttall: You are betting too big. You are scaring them off.

Mr MITCHELL: I used to, but I cannot afford to do so these days. I thoroughly enjoy a day at the races, and I do not bet as much as I used to. It is an enjoyable day. The bookies make a day at the races. On many occasions I have watched bookies lay off to the other bookies when they have suffered a plunge on a certain horse. Some of them are pretty old blokes. I remember old Jack Close—

Mr Schwarten: Is he still around?

Mr MITCHELL: Regrettably, he passed away at Christmas last year. Because I was away at the time, I missed his funeral. He was a bookmaker for well over 50-odd years.

Mr Schwarten: You were flat out laying a bet with him; he could run like a hare.

Mr MITCHELL: That is right. If he wanted to lay off somewhere, he could go like greased lightning. He was about 60 or 70 years old even when I saw him a few years ago.

I believe the recent increases in the number of race meetings in the State have taken their toll on some of our bookies. As some members mentioned, racing now takes place in all of the different codes every day of the week, including Sundays. That takes its toll, because the bookies cannot keep up the pace.

As mentioned by other members, in recent times the number of country race meeting bookies has halved, because of the opposition from tote betting and other styles of betting, whether it be casinos or Keno in hotels. The ready access to TAB facilities in clubs and hotels has also had an impact, as has television coverage of all of the metropolitan meetings. That keeps a lot of people in the comfort of their home or in hotels, where they can lay a bet in no time flat. That is taking away a lot of the atmosphere of country meetings. The tyranny of distance associated with travelling to country race meetings also has an impact. This has been the downfall of a lot of our country bookies. There just is not the turnover there used to be many years ago. I pay tribute to present and past bookmakers in rural and remote Queensland for their continued service over many years. Some of these fellas travel between 200 and 1,000 kilometres a weekend to field at some of the meetings, and they take their clerks and bag carriers, who also add to the excitement.

I understand that the Bill before the House has been the subject of wide-ranging consultation over five years and that all of the stakeholders have had the opportunity to suggest any amendments. Over the past couple of weeks I had the opportunity to attend meetings at Charters Towers and also at Richmond. Unfortunately, Maxwelton was cancelled because of rain. That was unfortunate for the racing fraternity out there but good for the country in general; they had about an inch and a half in the downpour, which led to the races being cancelled. I had the chance to ask some of the bookmakers about their thoughts on the proposed amendments. Most were not worried. A couple had not even heard about them—obviously, they did not have too many concerns about this Bill. I spoke to them about my belief that in the future the QRI and other controlling bodies would take over the controlling role. They did not seem to have too many concerns about this; these guys are pretty easygoing. Most of them said that it did not make much difference, as they believed the Government would get their dough one way or another, anyway.

Earlier, the member for Toowoomba North mentioned the turnover tax and cited some figures. That revenue was used for track upgrades and training and the money went into a lot of the race clubs around Queensland. After the floods and so on, Townsville got a fair bit of that money to upgrade. However, I am concerned about whether we will be compensated for the removal of that tax under the GST regime. I do not know how that will work. The turnover tax was a State tax that went into State coffers. Will we be compensated or will that money have to come from other revenue sources in order to assist clubs with upgrades?

The member for Toowoomba North mentioned a concern that has been raised with me also. The bookmakers were a bit concerned about who would adjudicate for them in any appeal of rulings by any of the controlling bodies. It was mentioned that the Government could still play a part in this respect so as to give them a fall-back position and so that they were not left out on a limb if things were not to their liking and they wanted to appeal against a decision. It appears that very little has changed—only that the responsibility will be handed to the codes to administer all provisions of the Racing and Betting Amendment Bill 2000.

The Minister might correct me if I am wrong, but in her second-reading speech she stated that the proposed changes to the Racing and Betting Act 1980 do not remove any benefits currently enjoyed by bookmakers. Yet in the very next paragraph the Minister stated that the current arrangements vary in that the industry control bodies will further decide on future interaction between bookmakers and the wider racing industry and not the Government. The Minister can correct me if I am wrong, but does this not mean that the new controlling bodies could change the whole box and dice? I certainly hope it is not the case that they can decide straightaway to run it their way and not according to the existing regulations. If that is the case, the onus could be placed on a lot of people in the industry, mainly the bookmakers, about whom I am particularly concerned today. If that does happen,

they want to know what comeback they will have and to whom they can go for an adjudication on any of those decisions. I certainly hope that does not happen. My impression from the Minister's second-reading speech is that it could change. In the first paragraph the Minister indicates that nothing will change. However, he contradicted that in the second paragraph by saying that it is totally up to the boards whether they make variations straightaway.

I wish to touch on the problems of country race clubs. The country race clubs have always strived to meet the criteria required by the industry and set down in legislation or regulation. In recent years, clubs have been forced to adhere, firstly, to the five-by-five concept, because the Minister at the time—I believe wrongfully—condemned clubs for running boat races to please owners or trainers. The bar has now been raised again; it is a five-by-six—something all clubs have worked very hard to maintain so that they do not have to cancel any of their race meetings.

Over the past few weeks, it has been brought to my attention that, having met all the criteria over the years and after building up a reasonable number of race horses to be nominated for meetings, they are now let down by the availability of jockeys. We have gone from one extreme to another. They have built up a good base of race horses so that they can get the numbers up to meet the criteria for holding meetings, yet now there is a problem with respect to jockeys.

Many excuses have been put forward for why jockeys cannot attend a lot of rural meetings. One is that meetings were being held in other areas. The other week, when Charters Towers was to hold its race meeting, there were meetings at Cairns, Richmond and Mount Isa. The jockeys out there travel around a bit to get a ride. Some of us had to miss out. Unfortunately, it was Charters Towers. I will not dwell on this issue too long, because it is not covered under the legislation. However, I thought I had better bring it to the attention of the Minister.

Some of the jockeys would not come to the country race meeting, which is only 130 kilometres up the road from Townsville, because Townsville was holding a rich meeting the following week. In other words, there was better money for the jockeys at that meeting. They were frightened of getting suspended or even hurt if they raced the week before. Suspension was their main reason for not coming. I do not know what we can do about that. This is another concern for country racing. We have come into line with all of the criteria, and now we cannot get jockeys because they are getting more money elsewhere or for whatever other reason. Perhaps we can set down some criteria for jockeys. I do not know the answer. It is a problem.

At Charters Towers we have already put off two meetings this year, and we cannot afford to lose many more. The Charters Towers Jockey Club has written to the industry bodies both in north Queensland and also the whole State seeking assistance and advice. I thought I would bring this issue to the attention of the Minister. We have worked very hard to put everything together, yet all of a sudden another hurdle is being put in front of us. I thought I would raise this issue while I have this opportunity. The issue has been mentioned by other speakers. Racing is one of the largest industries in the State in monetary terms. It is one of the highest publicly attended sporting events on a regular basis. More people attend race meetings, because there are so many these days, than go to the footy each week. It is one of the most frequented sporting events in Queensland. I am confident that it can only continue to grow. As the member for Sandgate said, we should now keep working at it; if as we go along changes are needed, we have to do it step by step and not just let things hang in the wind. If they need change, we have to help them so that the industry can grow.

Although I realise that certain changes will be made because of this legislation, I believe that the current arrangements have served the Queensland racing industry well for many, many years. I hope that not too many changes will be made, especially to the bookmakers' participation in the industry. If the Minister could take those couple of things on board, maybe we can help eliminate some of the worries associated with some country race meetings.
