



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR NUDGE

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GAMBLING LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr NEIL ROBERTS (Nudgee—ALP) (12.36 p.m.): In my contribution to the debate on the Gambling Legislation Amendment Bill I want to make a few comments about the measures that the government is putting in place to counter the adverse impacts of gambling which affect a small percentage but a significant number of Queensland individuals and their families. Like many members in this House, I do not mind an occasional bet or putting a few dollars through a poker machine. Like others, I regularly make a contribution to the benevolent bookies' fund and to the dividends received by TAB shareholders. Whereas that is not directly related to this issue, the issue of gambling is a problem for some individuals and it is something that can become an all-consuming passion. As a government we have a responsibility to put in place measures to try to address this issue. As I have indicated, unfortunately these problems do not just affect the individual who might have a gambling problem. These problems also directly affect their families and, as a consequence, the wider community.

I want to put on record a number of statistics about the gambling issue. According to the Queensland Household Gambling Survey 2001, about 0.83 per cent of the state's population experienced some level of problem with their gambling behaviour. By 'some level', we are talking about obviously the extreme where people have a major problem which affects theirs and their family's lifestyle to those who might just have a minor problem with gambling.

That figure statistically may not sound a lot but it does translate to about 22,000 individuals in Queensland, which means about 22,000 families are directly affected in some way or other by gambling problems. Of this group, the majority are male and in the age group between 18 and 34. Of more direct concern is the fact that of that group only around 19 per cent actively seek help to resolve their gambling problems.

Much of the blame for the difficulties being experienced in the gambling sector is often directly attributed to poker machines. For instance, in the *Cairns Post* on 26 July a front-page story was devoted to statistics about pokie addicts and the fact that around four and half million dollars had been put through the region's poker machines in that month.

However, the reality is that the link between gambling problems and the number of available poker machines may not be as high as one would think. According to an analysis of the Queensland and Australian gambling statistics carried out last year by the Research and Community Engagement Division of the Queensland Office of Gaming Regulation, the connection between the level of expenditure and the number of gaming machines in Queensland is quite tenuous. The division's report indicates that gaming machines are the most significant contributor to the large increasing gambling expenditure in all jurisdictions across Australia. However, with respect to the experience in Queensland, it says this—

Although out of the eight jurisdictions Queensland has the second highest number of gaming machines, it does not have a proportionate expenditure on gaming machines.

It further states—

Queensland ranks fourth in Household Disposable Income spent on gambling in Australia; fifth in Real Per Capita Expenditure on gambling in Australia; and third in share of expenditure in Australia.

So the question might be asked as to why is Queensland different from the experience in other states. The report goes on to indicate that some of the factors may be the demographic characteristics and geographic dispersion of the Queensland population and, significantly, the Queensland government's gaming regulatory policy which does not permit the easy movement of gaming machines between venues and regions. This bill strengthens this current regulatory regime by making some sensible and balanced amendments to enhance Queensland's improved performance in managing gambling problems, as indicated and recognised in that report.

The Deputy Premier and Treasurer pointed out in his second reading speech that these provisions are unique to Queensland and, more importantly, have been developed in consultation with a tripartite working group called the Responsible Gambling Advisory Committee which involves community, industry and government representatives. The amendments in the bill are twofold. They firstly provide for a self-imposed exclusion for problem gamblers and also for club imposed exclusions. Most gamblers soon realise that they have a problem when it moves to a position where it is taking over almost every aspect of their lives. However, as I indicated earlier, the concern that we have is that only 19 per cent of those gamblers actively seek help. These provisions allow those gamblers who wish to seek help to do so by providing notice to clubs to exclude themselves and in fact give gamblers some control over the rehabilitation process in their lives.

However, for those gamblers who are hell-bent on wrecking their lives and do not seek help—which unfortunately seems to be the greater number of those who have problems with gambling—the bill does allow clubs to initiate the action to have them excluded for up to a period of one year. The bill has some protections for excluded persons, and they can challenge or appeal such decisions by clubs through the Magistrates Court. Another feature of the bill is the ability for substantial fines to be applied to gambling providers for an employee who knowingly permits an excluded person to enter or remain in a gaming area or licensed premises, as the case may be. The model that has been outlined in this bill will be consistent across five of the seven existing gaming acts. It does not include the Charitable and Non-Profit Gaming Act and the Lotteries Act because the venues at which those products are sold do not lend themselves to the types of problems that are experienced in licensed premises—for instance, products sold in newsagents, shopping centres, et cetera. Overall, the bill presents a balanced approach to managing the problems experienced by a small minority of people who are unable to manage the opportunities for gambling in our state. Accordingly, I commend the bill to the House.