



Speech by

Hon. Andrew Fraser

MEMBER FOR MOUNT COOT-THA

Hansard Wednesday, 13 February 2008

GAMBLING LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. AP FRASER (Mount Coot-tha—ALP) (Treasurer) (3.45 pm), in reply: I thank all members for their contributions to the Gambling Legislation Amendment Bill, which was originally introduced into the House by the former Treasurer and current Premier, Anna Bligh. I thank members who have made very constructive remarks about the facets of the bill. In making some concluding remarks about those contributions, I note that for the most part there was little disagreement about the nature of the bill or the proposals that are contained within it. But aside from that, there was some fairly expansive commentary about the nature of gambling more broadly. I will make some remarks about that. At the outset I table the explanatory notes for the amendment that I will move later in the consideration in detail stage.

Tabled paper: Explanatory notes for amendments to the Gambling Legislation Amendment Bill.

I will answer a couple of the substantive points that were made by members of the opposition. The member for Currumbin asked about access to wagering for minors. In response to that, I can advise her that it is an offence for an operator of a wagering system to take a bet from a minor. The penalty for that is \$3,000, or 40 penalty units.

The member for Lockyer, who is in the House, asked about research initiatives for young people in particular and at schools. I advise him that, through Gambling Research Australia, which is an organisation that we fund along with the other states, two projects directly addressing that point are underway. The findings from that research should be available in about 12 and 24 months respectively. We anticipate that those findings will shed some light on that fact in terms of to what extent we can identify those issues early and to what extent it might have an effect.

The member for Burdekin spoke about bingo, which remains at the cultural centre of some communities. In that regard, there is an exception. It is something that has been reviewed in the past but there is no available evidence to us or any reason for us to seek to revisit that at the moment. Obviously, if that situation were to materially change then that is something we would revisit.

The member for Currumbin also asked about the training provided or supervisor training for casino employees. Obviously, casino employees have to have either a casino employee licence or a keno employee licence. Under those licensing arrangements those employees undertake training that is appropriate for their duties.

Finally, in relation to issues raised by other members during the debate, I would remark upon the contribution of the member for Ipswich, who I think quite eloquently pointed out some of the essential facts about the history of gaming in this state and, more pointedly, pointed to some of the issues that arise in some of the positions now advocated by people from the same stripe of politics. I might come back to the general point about shifting opinions later on and the ability for people to hold one position while, in fact, undertaking tasks that are directly disproportionate or opposite to it.

Many members of the House mentioned the Gambling Community Benefit Fund—the GCBF—which, as members of this House, we all know. I flag that I am currently considering and proposing to accept a recommendation from the Gambling Community Benefit Fund committee, which is the community representative group that makes allocations from the Gambling Community Benefit Fund. At present, the

fund closes on 31 March, 30 June, 30 September and 31 December. All of us know that too well, because there is always a flurry of letters of request at those times of the year. One of the real issues is that it is pretty hard to deal with those requests at 31 December, 30 June is the end of the financial year and otherwise the dates generally align with school holidays, and those dates can be very difficult for community groups. The Gambling Community Benefit Fund has put a proposal to me to amend the dates of closure to 31 August, 30 November, the end of February—28 or 29 February, obviously—and 31 May. I think that proposal has a lot of merit. I am proposing to implement that change. That would mean that the next closing date after 31 March would not be 30 June but 31 August. So there would be only three allocations this year, but the amount of money that we would allocate over those three allocations would be exactly the same as if there were four allocations. I think that idea has merit and we are proposing to put that forward for adoption.

I will make some remarks about gambling in general. There were a lot of remarks made, particularly by members opposite, about the nature of gambling, the nature of problem gambling and the nature of gaming machine revenue. For the sake of the record and for the benefit of this debate, I would like to put forward some facts. Firstly, let me say that, as to the somewhat muddle-headed argument about the nature and the amount of money that goes back to the community from gambling, every cent of gaming taxation revenue that we collect—in fact, every cent of all taxation revenue that we collect—goes back into the community. It goes back in a number of ways. Some of the gambling taxation revenue goes back through the Gambling Community Benefit Fund and through other ways. There is the health services levy as well. But every last red cent of gambling revenue goes back into building schools, hospitals and roads. There is no false read here, there is no false way of being able to say that the gambling revenue that comes from place 'X' does not go back into place 'X'. It might go back through Gambling Community Benefit Fund allocations, but it also pays for the schools, it pays for the hospitals—

Mr Messenger interjected.

Mr FRASER: It pays for the coppers who roam the streets of Bundaberg to make sure that the streets of Bundaberg are kept as safe as they can be.

Let me make some remarks about the number of poker machines. At the end of 2001 in Queensland, there were 0.014 poker machines per head of population. At the end of 2002, that figure was 0.014. At the end of 2003, it was 0.014. At the end of 2004, it was 0.014. At the end of 2005, it was 0.014. At the end of 2006, it was 0.014. At the end of 2007, it was 0.014. There is no accelerating density of poker machines out there in the community, despite the argument that was attempted to be prosecuted by the member for Moggill in the second reading debate. That figure is not per man, woman and child; that figure is per Queenslanders over the age of 18.

The problem with the argument being advanced by the opposition on this front is that, I am afraid, the facts do not support it. Queenslanders spend less than the national average on poker machines. In fact, Queenslanders spend less than people in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Expenditure on poker machines accounts for 1.66 per cent of household income—a very low proportion by anyone's measure.

However, the real test is this: how many problem gamblers are there out in the community? In 2001, 0.83 per cent of people were problem gamblers. In 2003-04, that percentage was 0.55 per cent. So the percentage of problem gamblers has fallen to 0.55 per cent—below the level in New South Wales, below the level in Victoria, below the level in Tasmania and below the level in the Northern Territory. When we look at the facts of the matter we see that there is no accelerating density of poker machines in the community and, more to the point, 99.5 per cent of people gamble responsibly. To me, that does not seem to build a case to advocate the policy position that was being put forward—I think, as far as I could tell—by the opposition in the second reading debate.

In relation to taxation revenue, from the latest Australian gambling statistics that are available for comparison, Queensland tax per capita for gambling is \$264. I ask members to compare that figure with that of Victoria at \$345, of South Australia at \$334, and of the Northern Territory at \$295. Queensland's figure is roughly commensurate with the tax per capita in New South Wales, which is the state that has far and away the highest density of poker machines.

In relation to taxation, let me make these remarks. In 2005-06, the Queensland government collected \$551 million from poker machine revenue. In 2006-07, that figure was \$520 million. I will say those figures again: \$551 million in 2005-06 and \$520 million in 2006-07. At budget time for 2007-08, the figure was \$548 million, which I note is below the figure for 2005-06. So in that regard I make the very clear point that that revenue represents less than two per cent of the Queensland budget.

No-one is ever going to suggest reasonably that \$550 million in round terms is not a significant amount of money. Of course it is. But the case being made, or attempting to be made, by the Leader of the Liberal Party—sorry, the shadow Treasurer, because we all know the reason the Leader of the Liberal Party cannot be the shadow Treasurer—is not borne out by a more truthful and complete exposition of the circumstances and the facts that underlie it.

Why did that figure fall in the last financial year? It fell because of our implementation of smoking bans. The government undertook to do that because it was the right thing to do by the community. That is the point I have made in relation to smoking and it is the point I have made in addition to our proposals about reducing the operating hours for clubs and pubs. We believe that the provision for early opening hours is now out of step with the original rationale and community standards. Whether it be in relation to smoking or early opening hours, if the state believes that either community standards or community wellbeing would benefit from a change we are prepared to factor that into our budget calculations and absorb any loss of revenue. That is the point I made last year and it is the point I made on the weekend.

At the same time, I say very clearly that because 99.5 per cent of people gamble responsibly there is no case to be made to abolish 100 per cent of poker machines. If we did that, the government would need to raise \$550 million to pay for the schools, hospitals and other services that that money is currently spent on. There is no magic pudding when it comes to government budgeting, despite that being the essential starting point of the philosophy of members opposite.

There is no proposal to raise the level of gaming taxation or any other rates despite the attempt by the shadow Treasurer to start that rumour rather than report to the House that he heard that rumour. I say to him that, as I reported earlier, we believe that gambling revenue is recovering and will soon be at levels similar to those of the past.

Before making some other remarks I wish to refer to the contribution of the member for Nanango.

Dr Flegg: Not the member for Mansfield?

Mr FRASER: The member for Mansfield has long held a clear view about what he believes is an appropriate level of gambling within the community.

The member for Nanango made reference to an article on the front page of today's *Australian* newspaper, and it continues inside, about the gambling conglomerate Tattersalls. For the benefit of the House, I table that article.

Tabled paper: Copy of an article from The Australian, dated 13 February 2008, titled Screw problem gamblers: Tatts.

The member for Noosa in particular suggested that it was his side of politics that had right and might on its side when it came to advocacy about gaming interests. The member for Ipswich quite skilfully filleted that debate and left it sitting on the table. The fact is that when the coalition was last in government, it went hell for leather trying to free up the number of gaming and poker machines in both pubs and clubs. They proposed allowing 300 machines in pubs and 45 machines in hotels, which would have led to an extra 16,000 poker machines across Queensland. Let us fast forward to the present when, from the luxury of opposition, they have had a moment of enlightenment and now take a radically different view. Unfortunately, as we heard earlier, actions speak louder than words.

In that regard, it is important for me to advise the House that when it comes to the position being advocated by the member for Moggill on this matter, essentially I discount his views. I devalue them and, in fact, I find them dissembling and verging on offensive. The reason is this: members of this House will recall yesterday's address to this parliament by the member for Moggill. He is a member of the Liberal Party, which is the author of WorkChoices, so members will recall him voicing his concerns for people from a lower socioeconomic background. However, the fact is that, while the member for Moggill says that the prevalence in the community of gaming and poker machines and gambling generally is a problem that must be addressed, if we check the register of members' pecuniary interests we find that the member for Moggill is a shareholder in Tattersalls and Coles Myer. Therefore, I find the contribution in this House by the member for Moggill dissembling, dishonest, disingenuous and unbecoming for a shadow Treasurer.

Dr FLEGG: I rise to a point of order. I find the minister's comments offensive. They are incorrect and inaccurate. I ask that they be withdrawn.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: The minister will withdraw.

Mr FRASER: I withdraw, but at the same time I table an excerpt from the latest pecuniary interests register. Under 'Flegg, Bruce (Moggill)', and the seventh subheading of 'Investments or beneficial interests of any trust listed in (6) above', it lists a whole series of companies including Tattersalls and Coles Myer. I defy the member for Moggill—

Tabled paper: Extract from the Twentieth Report on the Register of Members' Interests, as at 3 August 2007, pages 11-12.

Dr FLEGG: I rise to a point of order.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order, both members! Member for Moggill?

Dr FLEGG: The minister's comments are offensive. They are incorrect. He is not holding the latest Register of Members' Interests because I have the latest register of members' interests showing that I hold no shares in Tattersalls and no shares in Coles Myer, and that in fact I disposed of them because of my concerns about gambling matters.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order!

Dr FLEGG: I ask that he withdraw those comments.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Member for Moggill, resume your seat. You will not push me around. If you find those words offensive, the appropriate way to deal with that is to rise to your feet and ask that they be withdrawn, or you can rise tomorrow morning on a personal explanation and explain that. This is not the place or the time to debate the issue. Please show me respect when I call for order in future. You have stated that you find those words offensive. I direct the minister to withdraw.

Mr FRASER: I happily withdraw. I was quoting from the 20th report of the Register of Members' Interests, last tabled in this House on 3 August 2007. If the member for Moggill has disposed of those shares, I can only welcome that and accept what he says at face value. However, I make the point that it is interesting that while pretending to have a concern he was happy to put the filthy lucre in his back pocket. The fact is that even beyond those particular shareholdings this shadow Treasurer would be hopelessly compromised should he ever sit in that seat. He would be impossibly conflicted. He has no proposal to put to the people of Queensland on how he would manage extensive shareholdings that cross a range of industries while dealing with state finances on a daily basis.

Those who aspire to high public office in this state have a responsibility to demonstrate to the community and the parliament their ability to manage such conflicts of interest. I defy anyone to explain how the shareholdings listed in the members' interests register under the name of the member for Moggill could ever provide him with an ability to fairly, without conflict and without raising the perception of conflict, discharge the office of Treasurer. I invite him to take the advice of the Integrity Commissioner—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Treasurer, I believe that you are moving away from the exact nature of the legislation. I would like you to come back to the legislation, please.

Mr FRASER: Absolutely, Mr Deputy Speaker. Given the way that the debate has been conducted over the past two days, I thought it was important that members of the House have that information before them. It is very clear that there is a task before the member for Moggill.

I thank all members for their contributions to this bill, which was originally put before the House by the former Treasurer and now Premier. It makes a number of important and agreed-upon reforms to the framework for the conduct of gambling in this state. This afternoon I say very clearly to the House that I believe that there are real questions about the way in which opposition members have conducted this debate and they should stand ready to answer those questions.