




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

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CASINO CONTROL AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mrs GERBER** (Currumbin—LNP) (4.15 pm): Queensland's casino industry must be above reproach. As it stands, the Casino Control and Other Legislation Amendment Bill aims to increase the regulatory scrutiny of casinos and ensure they operate with a high standard of integrity. This is absolutely imperative and I will always support legislation that is modern and informed by best practice and evidence. However, this bill was spurred by revelations of misconduct in New South Wales that saw the government belatedly commence an inquiry into the operations of the Star Entertainment Group Ltd in Queensland. New South Wales announced their review of the Star Entertainment Group late last year. In Queensland, our government did not take action until mid-June this year. That is despite months of serious allegations of misconduct, including from the lawyers for the New South Wales inquiry stating that Star was not suitable to hold a casino licence back in May. That delay is unacceptable.

As parliamentarians, it is our responsibility to do everything in our power to thwart criminal activity and money laundering. I know how insidious crime syndicates and organised crime can be. I started my career as a federal prosecutor, confiscating proceeds of crime from underworld criminals. We know there is a real risk of money laundering, the washing of proceeds of crime, through casinos. But this bill has been rushed and is a missed opportunity to make meaningful improvements in this area.

There is still a lot of work to be done. After being so slow to act, now we see the state government is forced to rush this bill through and, sadly, it represents a missed opportunity to enhance Queensland's casino regulatory framework. When drafted, this bill draw on recommendations from the Finkelstein inquiry. We on this side of the House called the bill out as premature, given that at that time the New South Wales Bell inquiry and our Queensland Gotterson review into the Star Entertainment Group had not yet been completed. Not two weeks ago, the Gotterson review was handed down and contained findings that the Star Entertainment Group is unsuitable to hold a licence, with findings of serious misconduct on their behalf.

Regrettably, the hands of the Hon. Robert Gotterson AO, KC were tied in this review. The terms of reference were so narrow that he could not fully investigate the role of the regulator, the Office of Liquor and Gaming Regulation. He could not investigate what they knew. He could not investigate what they did not know. He could not investigate what they acted on or, more importantly, what they did not act on. Gotterson was also unable to consider the undue influence of a minister and, given the close connections that have been publicly reported between the Labor Party and Star Entertainment Group, that is very concerning and no doubt deliberate by the Labor Party.

Let us go through some of what has been publicly reported. On 14 June 2022, the *Australian* reported that a Labor lobbyist behind the Premier's re-election had been secretly working for Star Entertainment Group. The *Australian* also revealed close backroom ties between senior Queensland Labor figures and Star, which has both hosted and paid for fundraisers for Palaszczuk government ministers.

It is reported that Star Entertainment Group hosted and covered the costs of a Labor fundraiser at its Brisbane casino hotel for the former Queensland attorney-general and now embattled health minister. At the time, as attorney-general she regulated the gaming industry and was in the process of considering the approval of the gambling giant's master plan for its Gold Coast operations. It was a fundraiser held in a private dining room at the Treasury Hotel in the Brisbane CBD in the lead-up to the 2017 state election, with food and alcohol also paid for by the listed gambling company. It is understood that the fundraiser, billed as 'The great debate: lawyers make the best politicians', raised tens of thousands of dollars for the former attorney-general's campaign.

It is completely inappropriate for Labor's attorney-general at the time—now the embattled health minister—the key decision-maker for casinos, to be accepting political donations from Queensland's main casino operator. At the time, this raised significant questions about the government's refusal to appoint an external investigator for review of the company's fitness to operate our state's two biggest casinos as well as its flagship \$3.6 billion Queen's Wharf being built just across the road from 1 William Street.

Now, just months on from Professor Coaldrake's review, which raised significant concerns about the influence of lobbyists, the state government chose to make sure the terms of reference for the Gotterson review were not broad enough to review the links between Labor and lobbyists. It is extremely disappointing but it is what we see time and time again from this state Labor government, a government that is more concerned with how things look than actually getting to the root of problems and with saving its own political bacon than actually caring about people.

We know that the state casino regulator, the Office of Liquor and Gaming Regulation, is still investigating organised crime links associated with the key backer of the Queen's Wharf casino following revelations by the ABC in August. The Attorney-General stated that she will release those findings, but do not hold your breath. However, again in the terms of reference here was a missed opportunity. The Queensland Gotterson review had no compulsory powers to investigate the shareholder and close associate of Star alleged to have organised crime links as part of the review.

The Gotterson review made 12 recommendation pertaining to carded play, cashless gaming, limits on gambling, collections of carded play data, availability of carded play data, terminology of the Casino Control Act, a code of conduct for safer gambling, supervision levy, periodic review requirements, interstate gambling exclusions and the provision of a special manager. The government has in principle accepted all of these recommendations.

Given this acceptance and the turnaround time of the Gotterson review, there is no good reason why—having failed to take action for so long—the government needed to hastily rush this bill through the committee process without the benefit of the Gotterson recommendations or even the recommendations from the New South Wales Bell inquiry. We need casino operators to operate with the utmost integrity. For that, we need a regulator that is proactive and effective in its role. To get this legislative protection, the terms of reference of the Gotterson review needed to be broader. They needed to be wideranging. The committee inquiry into the bill needed the benefit of that report to take into consideration when inquiring into the bill.

As deputy chair of the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee, the committee that conducted the inquiry into the bill, it is extremely concerning to me that we did not have the benefit of the Gotterson review before our committee tabled its report. It is yet another example of this state government avoiding scrutiny. Now we see the amendments to this bill being moved in consideration in detail again without the opportunity for scrutiny and without going through the committee process. There are amendments that we in opposition have only just been shown. The committee has not had the opportunity to review and scrutinise. This is not how good government should operate. That is not consultation.

Another issue I want to touch on, separate from the casino integrity issues, is that throughout the committee process we heard from submitters that our Queensland fundraising legislation is significantly outdated. As such, a review into the legislative framework for charitable fundraising needs to be completed as proposed by the bill. The Queensland Law Society stated in its submission to the committee—

We also renew our repeated requests for a complete review of fundraising legislation in Queensland and its harmonisation with other jurisdictions. The current initiative will involve charities, but there are many community organisations that do not qualify for charitable status, such as sporting bodies, service clubs, neighbourhood centres and interest associations that are not regarded as charities, even though they are not for profit ...

Given this submission from the state's peak professional legal body for legal practitioners, I encourage the government to conduct a review into Queensland's fundraising legislation.

The bill proposes to implement a range of reforms. I will always support reforms that mean we reduce the harm caused by gambling and the harm caused by gambling in our communities. As such, I support the measures proposed in this bill; however, I reiterate my concerns that this bill is a missed

opportunity. The fact that it is being put through parliament so hastily and being rushed through the committee process when the state government has done nothing on this issue for years demonstrates the absolute dysfunction and chaos within the state government right now.

This is why I will be supporting the shadow Attorney's amendments which will allow the Office of Liquor and Gaming Regulation to release its prosecution statistics against casinos, because the public should be aware of what the Office of Liquor and Gaming Regulation is doing in order to protect them. That is its job. The fact that the Gotterson review was not broad enough to look into that or into the links between Labor lobbyists and Star casino and casinos in general is a disgrace. That is a complete missed opportunity by this bill. I have no doubt that it was by design. I have no doubt that the limited terms of reference of the Gotterson review were completely by design so that this state Labor government could avoid scrutiny and avoid what good government should do, which is to be open, honest and transparent. They have failed in that in every respect.