




Speech By  
**Laura Gerber**

**MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN**

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Record of Proceedings, 19 March 2024

**CASINO CONTROL AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mrs GERBER** (Currumbin—LNP) (6.36 pm): The Casino Control and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2023 proposes to give effect to recommendations 1 to 11 of the Gotterson review including around carded play, cashless gambling, limits on gambling, amendments to the code of conduct for safe gambling, imposing a supervision levy, periodic review, and to give effect to interstate police commissioner directions in relation to exclusion directions. I want it noted that these amendments have been waiting to be implemented since 2023 and since the Gotterson review was tabled in this parliament. Further, I note that many of the proposals in this bill will take some months to come into effect, with DJAG stating in the committee hearing that they hope to have the regulation for precommitments by December 2024 at the latest. That is almost three years of delay. This is a government that has absolutely no sense of urgency when it comes to properly regulating gaming and the casino industry.

When looking at this bill, to properly understand its provisions we need to understand not just the backdrop of the Gotterson review and what that entailed but also the previous six years of investigations into casinos and casino related misconduct in various states, because that was the reason we had the Gotterson review. Over the last several years from state to state there has been inquiry after inquiry. However, here in Queensland it was only the revelations of misconduct in New South Wales that finally forced Labor to belatedly commence an inquiry into the operations of Star Entertainment Group in Queensland. The serious allegations included secretly bringing illegal Chinese junket operators and their clients to casinos. The junket operators found wealthy operators lent them cash and Australian casinos did business with them. The junket operators had well-known criminal links to Asian criminal gangs, and the casino provided customers with China UnionPay facilities that worked around Chinese regulations to facilitate the gambling of around \$900 million deceptively masked as 'hotel expenses'. It is against this very serious backdrop that we are looking at this bill today.

Gotterson's findings included that the Star actively encouraged persons excluded at the direction of the police commissioners in New South Wales and Victoria to gamble. He observed that Star was, at worst, deliberately misleading about its use of China UnionPay facilities to disguise gambling withdrawals as 'accommodation costs'. However, what we do not see in the Gotterson review is a full investigation into the role of the regulator. Why do we not see that? Why do we not see this Gotterson review able to fully look at the role of the regulator and what the regulator could do and did not do? That is important because we have a regulator in Queensland, so how could this conduct have happened under the regulator's nose?

I will tell members why. It is because the terms of reference set by this government for Gotterson's review were so narrow that he could not fully investigate the role of the regulator. He could not investigate what it knew, he could not investigate what it did not know and he could not investigate what it acted on or, more importantly, what it did not act on. Gotterson had no power to compel evidence and he had no power to call for statements. He had no powers to protect people. These are the powers that the independent inquiry in New South Wales was given in the Bell inquiry. However, in Queensland we see this constrained, hamstrung review that is tightly shrouded in secrecy and tightly constrained.

If the government was serious about bringing integrity and sunlight into the operation, surely the body tasked with setting the standards would have been part of the review. Further, the terms of reference set by this government were also so narrow that Gotterson was also not able to consider the undue influence of a minister. Given the close connections that were publicly reported between the Labor Party and the Star Entertainment Group—including that Star secretly engaged Annastacia Palaszczuk's former deputy chief of staff, Evan Moorhead, to give the Star advice on how to deal with the government—that Gotterson was precluded from looking at this relationship as part of his inquiries remains very concerning and tells us everything we need to know about this secretive Labor government that operates in the shadows.

The LNP called for a wideranging review with powers to ensure that Queenslanders got a casino industry that was regulated beyond reproach. That would have ensured that any form of money laundering and any form of corruption could be stamped out, but this third-term government refused to do it. It is a missed opportunity in this bill and it needs to be called out for what it is. Why did we call for a well-regulated industry? Part of the reason is the important role that Star plays in our community, particularly on the Gold Coast. It would be one of the biggest employers after council. There are around 8,000 team members based throughout Star. There are thousands of men and women who turn up to work there every day who have done nothing wrong, who deserve to be paid well and who are working through the ranks and have the opportunity to work through the ranks and receive promotions and where, importantly, they offer an incredible tourism product. All of this is something that our community should be proud of and why the industry has to be administered beyond reproach but, sadly, unless this third-term Labor government changes its behaviour to put the microscope on itself Queenslanders cannot have confidence that we will not see a repeat of the findings against Star.

We need casino operators to operate with the utmost integrity. Queenslanders expect and deserve nothing less. We in the LNP will always support any measure to reduce gambling harm and therefore those elements of the bill are something that we should all embrace and work together on. Let us not forget that we also have the Auditor-General's findings regarding minimising gambling harm which were released in early February this year. These findings demonstrate that in fact this Labor government is not serious about minimising gambling harm and has been asleep at the wheel when it comes to preventative strategies. The Auditor-General noted that work undertaken by this government lacks sufficient productive preventative initiatives, lacks adequate targeting potential for harm and lacks being tailored to the needs of at-risk groups. While the government receives taxes and levies from gambling activities, a disproportionately small amount—0.62 per cent—is funded back to the department to deliver harm minimisation services.

Further, at the time of the audit the implementation of the programs and initiatives was significantly behind schedule and has been subjected to limited oversight. Over the past five years the funding for harm minimisation by this government has not kept pace with the significant increase in gambling revenue and the significant increase in problem gambling. In 2022-23 gambling losses totalled \$6.1 billion—that is up 36 per cent since 2018-19—and the government's taxes and levies were up too. They are up 43.4 per cent. However, despite this, the government has only given additional funding of a one-off \$3.4 million injection, and a real direct lack of funding has prevented the department from undertaking comprehensive research or further studies. In fact, the department has not conducted any targeted research specific to gambling in Queensland for over nine years, resulting in Queensland having an outdated understanding of gambling prevention and risks.

For all these reasons—that honest Queenslanders deserve honest casinos, that the many employees who work in our casinos deserve a workplace that is beyond reproach, that our tourism industry deserves a casino that we can be proud of—I support properly regulating casinos. That is why we will not be opposing this bill, but I want it on the record that this government is not treating this issue with sufficient urgency. This government has had extensive delays in being dragged to the table kicking and screaming to even conduct the Gotterson review in the first place, and then it did not take it seriously enough by not giving Mr Gotterson KC the parameters needed to look at the regulator and the parameters needed to look at the relationship between lobbyists and government and the relationship between the government and Star. If the government was serious about regulating casinos properly, if it was serious about harm minimisation and if it was serious about ensuring casinos are beyond reproach, then it would have ensured that there was a full inquiry. It would have ensured that the inquiry was expanded in the way the LNP called for and in the way that New South Wales has done under the Bell inquiry. In fact, New South Wales now has a second inquiry underway. In the remaining time I have left I want to note that the casino on the Gold Coast offers a great tourism opportunity and tourism offerings for our community, but we do understand that those benefits come with dangers.

*(Time expired)*