



Speech by
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Member for Noosa

Gambling Legislation Amendment Bill

Hansard, 12 February, 2008

Mr ELMES (Noosa--Lib) (8.41 pm): Can I say at the outset that my position on poker machines and gambling generally is very clear. Whenever gambling is promoted and is easily accessible it swiftly becomes a danger to the individuals who get hooked on its various forms. In my opinion, poker machines themselves, while providing a substantial revenue stream to clubs and pubs, do not provide any real social benefit to the people who use them but rather place the vulnerable in our society at great risk. That this Labor government has allowed itself to become so dependent on revenue from gambling is a disgrace.

When the current Prime Minister exerted great influence over the then Queensland government the decision was made to bring poker machines into Queensland. Kevin Rudd and Wayne Goss knew that they would need the revenue that poker machines and other forms of gambling bring to help balance their books. Labor got Queensland hooked on poker machines and the current Labor government has continued by increasing the number of machines. It should be held accountable for the social damage it has caused. I hope that the new Premier will show some leadership on gambling generally and start a process that will tighten the availability of gambling and afford more protection and support to those who suffer from its addiction.

There is one section in this bill that demonstrates very clearly the government's attitude towards gambling. It concerns me that we are presented with a bill that penalises cheating or defrauding a gaming host with a fine five times greater than that levied against the same host in the event that a child were to play a poker machine.

This shows where the government's priorities lie. They lie not in the protection of children from gambling but in the protection of revenue for clubs and pubs. For example, the penalty for cheating under this bill is increased to \$37,500 or five years in jail whereas the penalty for a casino that allows a minor to gamble is in comparison a paltry \$7,500. This fivefold difference clearly demonstrates that this government has its priorities upside down. It should be protecting people first from the dangers of gambling but instead it is more interested in protecting its revenue stream.

I would also like to draw the House's attention to the atmosphere around playing keno in licensed venues. To play keno one does not necessarily need to sit or play in a special area. Quite often the TV monitor and the keno materials are on or near the restaurant table. It would be impossible to police whether a child is filling in a keno entry as well as the adults who happen to be sitting at the table. On the other hand, poker machines by their very appearance are immensely attractive to children. It is in this situation where a mum or dad might come into a hotel for an afternoon session on the poker machines with the kids in tow where the kids from a young age are exposed to that initial attraction of bright lights and sounds and what seemingly is an easy way to make money. On top of that, even when a relatively small payout is collected the sound effects of the machine and the coins tinkling into the tray is clearly heard by everyone in the vicinity. In other words, to children and others it means bright lights, lots of movement and easy money.

Through my research into this I came across some photos which I would like to table. I did seek permission from the Speaker's office to table them.

Tabled paper: Photograph of gaming machine

Tabled paper: Photograph of gaming machine

They are photos of machines that are currently in use in pinball, arcade type amusement venues and so forth. These particular machines are in a business known as Kapow, a children's arcade in the Hyperdome shopping centre in Tanah Merah located in the electorate of Springwood. The fact that they are in Springwood--

Ms Stone: It is not Springwood.

Mr ELMES: Where is it then?

Ms Stone: Tanah Merah is not in Springwood. Get your facts right.

Mr ELMES: Wherever Tanah Merah happens to be--I am sure it is a very attractive place. These machines are in the Hyperdome shopping centre in Logan. The fact that they are there means that they are also located in many other businesses across Queensland. In this particular business 18 children at a time can play these particular machines. For these particular machines they buy either a 50c token or a dollar token. They put them in the machine and by adjusting a tray they can get a payout of around \$20. If that is not kiddie poker games I am not quite sure what is.

If there is a message that has to come out of this debate--and I hope the government takes me up on the offer--it is that machines like that should not be available to children. Children as young as five or six visit those particular establishments. I would hope that the government would see the sense in making sure that those machines which are poker machines by any other name are removed from businesses such as those.

We have all seen news reports where children, sometimes small children, are left outside places in the car. I refer to instances that we have all seen reported with gusto in the national media. It beggars belief that any responsible adult could see this as effective child minding. If it does not represent an outstanding example of the actions of problem gamblers I do not know what would. The users of poker machines are typically those who are most vulnerable to exploitation.

This government's own Queensland household gambling survey 2003-04 found an overrepresentation of Indigenous, undereducated and underprivileged Queenslanders in the survey of gaming users. These people are the least able to afford the huge expense associated with gambling losses. I know that this government should be doing more to protect these people especially when the government's own research tells them who was abusing the use of poker machines.

The long-term study into the social impact of gaming machines in Queensland, a report dated 1996, found that nearly 10 per cent of Queenslanders used poker machines regularly or at least once a week. It also found that the average users of PubTAB in an Indigenous community were spending over 25 per cent of their weekly income on gambling. Compared to the statistical averages for New South Wales or Victoria, this is a fivefold increase in gambling in Queensland Indigenous communities. It has been said that Indigenous people are the litmus test of our society as they are usually our most vulnerable. If they are not protected then all of us are exposed.

This survey showed that the Queensland government is failing vulnerable Queenslanders by not protecting them from exploitation. There have been numerous other studies performed in Queensland and around the world that prove the unarguable link between problem gambling and crime. Of note is the report *Want to a make bet? Gambling and crime in Australasia* by the Australasian Centre for Policing Research, which concluded that there was a clear and concrete link between problem gambling and the damage to mental health, relationships both with partners and their children, employment and finances.

Finally, the Queensland government's own *Problem gambling and criminal behaviour in Queensland* : a report of the second year of the study into the social and economic impact of the introduction of gaming machines to Queensland clubs and hotels stated that there is a clear nexus between problem gambling and criminal behaviour. These negative statistics should be of great concern to the Blich government.

Firstly, these figures indicate that the people who suffer the most from gambling are the low socioeconomic status individuals who most need the support of government.

Secondly--and this should be of great concern to those opposite--the very presence of these gaming outlets in our communities leads to the self-destruction of some of the users with the increased negative impact on other members of the community who suffer from crimes committed in relation to those supporting gambling habits. Quite often the greatest impact is not on the gamblers themselves but on the families and loved ones who have to watch the gamblers self-destruct.

Reports show that the majority of thefts to support gambling habits are committed against family members and go unreported. The fact that the families of those afflicted suffer in silence for their loved ones only implores us in this place to ensure that much more is done to prevent ordinary Queenslanders from being caught in the trap of gambling addiction. The coalition has for a very long time said that this government does not pay sufficient attention to the negative impact of poker machines and gaming in our community.

A government, especially a Labor government that claims the moral high ground on social justice issues, would be expected to limit the damage caused and spend proceeds on projects that actually provide benefits to the community. The Treasurer has confirmed in this parliament that the majority of revenue from gaming simply goes into general revenue. This means that people suffering from problem gambling are paying for this Labor government's financial whims.

Let me share with this House how addicted this government is to gambling revenue. Last year the government received three times more from gambling revenue than from vehicle registrations. To compare gambling revenue to land tax, this government received over 1 times the cash from afflicted gamblers than from householders who paid land tax last year. With the exceptions of payroll tax and transfer duties, gambling revenue is the greatest source of income to this government raised by its own initiative. Yet out of the \$520 million in royalties received by this government last year, just \$35 million was returned to the community through the Gambling Community Benefit Fund. But--and this is the worst part--only \$9 million was returned to problem gamblers in the form of assistance and prevention against others becoming problem gamblers.

This shows that the Queensland government needs gambling revenue just like an addict needs their next fix. I think this government should do more to reduce the prevalence of gambling in our society and dramatically reduce its dependency on revenue from poker machines and other forms of gambling. So I welcome the increased regulations that make gambling in Queensland more restricted. I welcome higher responsibilities on licensees and the management of venues that allow children to play on or near poker machines.

But I leave the government with this message: do not dismiss comments made in this House tonight out of hand. There are many thousands of Queenslanders and their families who are suffering because all forms of gambling are just far too accessible. This government--all governments--have a duty of care and at this time I do not see any response from the Labor Party to help those in need. I say to the minister responsible that gambling is a scourge on our society. It has and does destroy the lives of people and families and the fact that this government is so reliant on income from gambling is not in the best interests of our community. The government owes a duty to the people of Queensland.

While I and the coalition support this bill, there are many questions and many problems left unaddressed and I for one look forward to seeing some action that starts to address the problem of gambling effectively.
