

## **Ahern refuses to guarantee ban on betting machines**

Mark Hennessy

The Irish Times

July 16, 2008.

IRELAND -- Minister for Justice Dermot Ahern has refused to give the Labour Party a guarantee that controversial betting machines will be banned from the country's bookie shops. Fixed-odds betting terminals, known as FOBTs, have become the focus of anti-gambling experts since their introduction in betting shops in Britain.

Last night, former Labour leader, Pat Rabbitte, said Labour would not join an all-party committee on gambling unless it received a guarantee in advance that FOBTs would not be allowed.

Mr Ahern last week published the long-delayed report of the Casino Committee, Regulatory Gaming in Ireland, which opposed the introduction of FOBTs.

However, Labour fears some official support exists for them because they would provide €30 million of much-needed revenue to honour past promises to fund horseracing. Mr Rabbitte said: "I have made plain that I would not participate in such an all-party committee if its purpose was to overthrow the recommendation in respect of FOBTs.

"On initial reading, the report only confirms the Labour Party in its view that FOBTs are 'the crack cocaine of gambling'. These terminals are woefully addictive and will do untold damage to some young males if allowed into bookie shops.

"The gambling commission, the UK regulator, has found one in nine people who played touchscreen roulette were classified as addictive gamblers. They are easily accessible, rapid play and you win or lose, rapid rewards - hallmarks of games which lend to addiction," he said.

Mr Ahern said in the Dáil last week that the report was "excellent" and deserved further analysis. He noted that it had viewed FOBTs as "incredibly addictive".

However, he said the Government's final decision could not be made without "a comprehensive examination, which includes a mechanism whereby the public can make its views known".

A spokesman for the Minister last evening reacted to Mr Rabbitte's claims, saying Mr Rabbitte should be prepared to consider the report "in its entirety and not try to cherry-pick things out of it".

In March, Mr Rabbitte claimed that the then minister for justice Brian Lenihan "had given the nod to the bookmakers' industry" that FOBTs would be introduced, despite the expert group's report.

Mr Rabbitte then said Mr Lenihan believed "an all-party committee would be necessary to overturn the finding of the report".

"I believe the bookmakers' pitch to Government was on the basis that the €30 million shortfall between taxes and the subvention to the horse and greyhound industry could be made up from the extra taxes."

The report makes a distinction between betting and gaming and partly justifies the exclusion of FOBTs from bookies' shops on the grounds that using them could not be regarded as betting.