

Gambling trap snares MLA, addicts and government

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CANADA – The government's hypocrisy on gambling is showing again. It's obvious that the Liberals have smashed their 2001 campaign promise to "halt the expansion of gambling that has increased gambling addiction and put new strains on families."

Instead they expanded gambling wildly. They've done all the things they warned about as evils -- adding slots, pushing them into smaller communities like Duncan and Campbell River, lifting betting limits and hours, allowing alcohol and ATMs in casinos so people could make bad decisions and then get the cash to follow them up. And, on top of all that, the government launched Internet gambling.

What made it all especially offensive was that in opposition Gordon Campbell and the Liberals said they knew the consequences of gambling -- debt, families in crisis, suicides, increased crime. Even domestic violence and murder, according to Liberal Kevin Krueger.

Gambling is a messy way to make money, whether it's run by government or organized crime.

For one thing, those in the business don't like competition.

Around the province the government has shut down people running poker tournaments in places like legions, where people pay an entry fee and compete for prizes. Even a non-profit weekly game in Victoria was shut down earlier this year.

That's because all gambling is supposed to be in casinos, where gamblers can be encouraged to lose much more. The government devotes more effort to enforcement efforts aimed at eliminating competition than to guarding against crimes at legal gambling sites. (Which is why concern has mounted over reports that people who sell lottery tickets are winning far more than their fair share of prizes. The B.C. Ombudsman's office is investigating.)

But now Liberal MLA Al Horning has admitted he took part in illegal poker games in a gambling den in his Okanagan riding.

So what does Premier Gordon Campbell think about Horning's scorn for the gambling laws?

No problem, he told the Kelowna Daily Courier through his spokesman. The activities were before Horning was elected in 2005 and so not relevant. If people have concerns, they should call the police.

It's not quite the moral outrage Campbell summoned up when the NDP wanted to expand gambling, but times change.

After all, the Liberals used to be big on the need for help for problem gamblers. Now, not so much.

Back in 2004, Sue Reid, a Surrey nurse with a keen interest in gambling issues, submitted a request for the material B.C. Lotteries used to train casino staff in dealing with distressed and problem gamblers.

It's a secret, the Crown corporation said, a pretty good warning sign that all is not right.

After a long battle Reid got the material. It showed that troubled gamblers usually don't get much help in casinos -- a brochure and reference to a toll-free help line.

And it confirmed casino staff often have to deal with gamblers who are angry, emotional and losing all their money. They see people making repeated trips to ATMs as they try to win back mounting losses. They even see people who wear diapers so they won't have to give up a slot machine they think might pay off.

But 85 per cent of casino employees surveyed in 2004 -- well into the gambling expansion -- said it was up to the gamblers to find help. No wonder the government is finally increasing funding for gambling addicts and adding counsellors.

Gambling is a tricky business to manage, too. You would think if the government was going to be in the business, it would be running a tight ship.

But last month Australia's biggest gambling operator and a bank based there combined to buy Gateway Casinos, which has seven casinos in B.C.

An Australian paper reported the bank liked the opportunity because B.C. was one of the only places in the world that offered casino operators a "free ride."

"A very nice kicker to this whole transaction is a dynamic that has been set up at the government level, whereby any capital expenditure you spend on your casinos is refunded by the government," a bank spokesman said.

"So there is, specific to this region of the world, a very attractive environment for a casino operator." Casinos that want to upgrade to capture more of gamblers' money usually pay the costs. In B.C., taxpayers take the hit.

No wonder the Liberals used to think it was a good idea to steer clear of the gambling business.