

THE COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Representing the Anglican Church (Diocese of Sydney), Baptist Churches, Christian Reformed Churches, Churches of Christ, The Fellowship of Congregational Churches, The Presbyterian Church and The Salvation Army

SUBMISSION

INTRODUCTION:

The NSW Council of Churches appreciates the opportunity to comment to the Authority on the investigation of the Sydney Casino Operator and Licence under Section 31 of the Casino Control Act 1992.

We note the terms of reference of the investigation, and the two main questions, namely whether or not:

- Star City Pty Ltd, the operator of the Sydney Casino, is suitable to continue to give effect to the casino licence and the Act; and
- it is in the public interest that the casino licence should continue in force.

We are not in a position to assess the suitability of Star City as an operator and will leave that to others. Our focus and concern continues to be on the latter question:

Does the Casino serve the best interests of the Community?

We in the churches would say, “No, it does not.” Some have argued recently that gambling has a positive economic impact – it provides jobs and opportunities for general spending in the venues catering for it. But this is far outweighed by the economic, social and spiritual harm caused by the gambling lifestyle as it impacts on individuals, families and the community at large.

Historically, the NSW Council of Churches has had a longstanding concern about the operation of a casino in Sydney. Basically the Council opposed the whole concept and fostered public debate and individual dialogue with the then Premier Neville Wran when the suggestion to establish a casino was first mooted in the 1970s. Since that time the Council has sought to monitor the initial plans, location, tendering process, the ongoing general operation of the facility and the effects of gambling within the community.

We have to recognize, however, that the Sydney Casino is a fait accompli. It is one popular part of the gambling scene in this state, the hub of this type of activity because of its high profile and extensive advertising. This racks up the demand for gambling state-wide as a form of entertainment and there are many willing to cater to it and profit by it, not least the NSW State Government through its taxes. The Government needs the gaming revenues to balance its budget. So while we cannot realistically expect that the present Government or even a future one would kill the golden egg-laying goose, we can keep on highlighting the damage done and arguing for measures which might contain and lessen it. We acknowledge that there is a fund to assist addicts and victims; we wonder how helpful this is in the face of the problems generated.

In a similar submission three years ago we commented that demands on church charitable agencies as a direct result of gambling had increased over the previous five years. These trends have continued, whether due to casino gambling or to the general proliferation of

gaming machines provided by pubs and clubs. In the short time available for this submission, we as an umbrella body of churches are not in a position to assess these trends fully and give the required statistics; the welfare provider agencies of some of our member churches such as Anglicare and the Salvation Army may be better equipped to do this.

But just this week a letter in the Sydney Morning Herald gave a powerful and poignant illustration of the impact of gambling addiction on one family. Janet Hall wrote:

Wake up, Australia. The debate around gambling has focused on the "positive economic impact of gambling", the good works and community spirit the clubs and pubs, and the potential impact of an additional tax on poker machines.

There is little consideration given to the other side of the gambling coin.

Over ten years of torment, fear and pain I lost my home, life savings and finally my husband. The consequences of his gambling addiction became overwhelming and my husband took his own life.

I have lived everybody's worst nightmare and tragedy, yet there is no national appeal or heart-rending support for victims of gambling, let alone families left after suicide.

A socially unacceptable tragedy brought about by a very socially acceptable, and constantly encouraged, addiction.

An additional Government tax on gaming machines serves only to strengthen society's addiction to, and support of, yet another parasitic industry of human destruction.

The next time you participate in any "subsidized" activity provided by the gambling industry, spare a thought for those of us who have paid for it with our blood, hardship, heartache and grief."

In sad microcosm, this illustrates that it is not only economic problems that directly result from gambling but also broken relationships, failed businesses, dysfunctional families, criminal behaviour, psychiatric problems – and suicides. While not all gamblers are severely addicted, even many middle-range gamblers suffer and cause much harm to themselves and their families. As a matter of conscience and compassion we as Christians cannot but speak out against our community's passion for gambling.

We have to look at least three areas of concern:

1. Welfare

The agencies can testify that demands for welfare assistance have continued to climb annually, with an ever-increasing line of people seeking donations of food and clothing and financial assistance to help pay for rent, electricity, telephone, medical treatment, admitting that gambling losses are the reason. It would be interesting to know the child welfare ramifications also. In a previous submission we noted the cases of children being left in cars while their parents gambled at the casino. Thankfully, perhaps this at least has been dealt with.

At that time we recommended that:

- the casino management implement a proactive policy of identifying potential problem gamblers before they become "hooked" on their pastime and incorporate a provision into client services and public relations that can refer problem gamblers to an appropriate counselling agency for assistance.
- People identified as being addicted to gambling should be barred from the casino. [We are aware of and approve self-exclusion measures.]

- Parents who neglect their children by leaving them alone in motor vehicles parked at the casino while they gamble should not only be prosecuted but permanently barred from the casino.

We wish to add further harm reduction recommendations, or to endorse some that are being tried:

- The removal of ATMs from casino premises (and clubs and hotels) to make it harder for people to spend beyond their limits.
- The lowering of the commonest stake in gaming machines (“pokies”) from \$10 to \$5 per turn.
- Reducing the hours that venues are open.

2. The Moral Question

Gambling was at one time referred to as “the gambling racket”. Now it is “the gambling industry”. Racket or industry, it is certain that the millions of dollars spent annually on games of chance at the casino (and other agencies) are being redirected by the spending public from groceries, clothing for the family, recreation, health and general well being. The result is misery for many. Yet it is argued that it is the right of the individual to participate in whatever form of pleasure seeking and recreation one may choose, irrespective of the consequences. As an American observer put it:

“We are arriving at an absurd condition that might be called liberation socialism. Everyone has the right to live exactly as he or she pleases but if something goes wrong, some abstraction called “society” is to blame and must pay the bill for the damages. Everyone must be free to make risky choices and everyone must be protected from unpleasing consequences by social insurance that is provided by government, which is to say by nobody. In consequence, there is a moral deficit of huge and growing proportions.” [Peter Johnson, Law Professor at Berkeley University.]

3. Truth in Advertising:

Advertising always sells images far from reality. In the case of the casino and gambling generally this happens to an absurd degree. Unlike a normal purchase of goods from a store where a return is guaranteed gambling has no such guarantee. If truth in advertising were to apply here, instead of images of glamour and fun we would learn the odds against a windfall and would see the real images of despair, whether that of the actual gambler or of his or her family.

Our previous recommendation:

- In view of the growing numbers of people with a gambling addiction we recommend that the casino rethink how it presents the image of “everyone’s a lucky winner” to the public through advertising and that careful consideration be given to ways to warn people that they just may lose their money.
- Better still, (a pipe dream?) a ban on casino and gambling advertising altogether! There is no way it can tell the truth and achieve its purpose.

4. Chaplaincy

In the past, through dialogue with the Salvation Army Chaplains Department the Council sought to examine ways of providing a special service for people with a gambling addiction who frequent the Sydney Casino. Our investigations revealed that while the Salvation Army did have some involvement on a minimal scale in assisting problem gamblers through either a direct or indirect contact with the casino they did not have sufficient personnel to cover the

expected need and therefore were not able at that time to become involved in a proposal by the NSW Council of Churches to apply to casino management for the establishment of a chaplain's office at the casino.

We were told that while there are human resources personnel available for staff, there is no ongoing professional referral mechanism in place to refer problem gamblers to counseling or welfare services. The public's interests would certainly be better served if the casino management were to consider establishing a chaplain's office on the premises. Despite practical and ethical problems, and the potential difficulty in finding a suitable chaplain prepared to take on this role, we repeat this recommendation made in 2000.

Recommendation: That the casino management consider funding establishment of a casino Chaplaincy to care for the needs of patrons with gambling addictions.

Conclusion:

The Casino is, after all, a place which promises the world to all but will only ever deliver a slice of it to a very limited few. In reality it is a place where disappointment and heartache hits many particularly when their quest for enjoyment and wealth turns into loss and often a nightmare of addiction. That's the type of business it is and that's the type of business it must remain if it is to continue to operate.

The question that the Authority must ask in investigating the suitability of the operator to continue managing the facility cannot be answered in isolation from the overall short and long-term damage that such an establishment inflicts on the community.

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