

Address to the Combined Community Sector / Heads of Churches Briefing Day

“Responsible Gambling in the Smart State”

8 October 2008 11.35 – 50 am Archbishop Phillip Aspinall

I'm glad to have the chance to speak today about the blight on our community that is problem gambling. My first real encounter with the impact of problem gambling came about 13 years ago when I was Director of Anglicare in Tasmania. Anglicare ran a specialised financial counselling service as well as general counselling and emergency relief services. So we dealt on a daily basis with people who were paying the human cost of problem gambling – either their own problem gambling or that of a family member. The people that I met then and the stories they told have stayed with me.

Earlier this year I addressed the issues surrounding problem gambling at some length in my address to the Brisbane Anglican Synod and it's good to have the chance to touch on them here today.

I think the time is right to look at this again and it's good to see that happening at both state and federal levels. At the federal level I am encouraged by the work initiated by Senators Nick Xenophon and Stephen Fielding and the inquiry currently being conducted by the Senate Community Affairs Committee. In our own State we await the outcome of the Government's consultation on its Responsible Gambling Strategy, but we've seen several developments already. Recently there have been press reports about restrictions in the opening hours of gaming venues. And some time ago the premier announced a 2 year moratorium on new gaming machines. . It seems that there is a window of opportunity open to us at the moment and it's important that we make the most of it.

I think church leaders are most concerned about the damage caused to people as a result of problem gambling. This damage is done not only to the gamblers themselves but also to their families and communities. Even those who work in the industry can be adversely affected. In January this year the Courier Mail newspaper reported that the owner of a Brisbane hotel had decided to remove its 40 gaming machines even though it would hurt profits.¹ "In the end, I just couldn't stand it," he said. "The pokies just prey on people who can't afford to gamble. I've seen people walking out in tears. They've got kids and you're just hoping that they haven't done their weekly wage and will still be able to put food on the table. At least I can sleep better at night these days.”

Problem gambling has devastating effects. It means that families don't have the money to live from day to day. So they go without food and children go without clothes and the things they need for school. When loans or rent can't be paid people risk losing their homes. These are the most visible effects.

But there are wider impacts. As gamblers try to hide the extent of their problem and their losses, communication and trust in families break down. Relationships are torn

¹ *The Courier Mail*, 4 January 2008 , see www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,23739,23004129-952,00.html.

apart, marriages disintegrate and families shatter. Members of the extended family as well as neighbours and work colleagues get dragged into the hurt and mess.

Problem gambling undermines the self esteem and sense of responsibility of the gamblers themselves. And so young children are left unsupervised, sometimes in cars outside gambling venues, or left in the care of people who, under normal circumstances, wouldn't be trusted. Spending long hours in front of gaming machines distorts normal ways of relating, which can isolate gamblers socially. Problem gamblers often hit rock bottom before they can see what has happened. Sometimes, tragically, it leads to suicide. Others, thankfully, seek help.

Some problem gamblers, like other addicts, resort to crime to feed their addiction. In Queensland alone in the last five years 21 women have faced court, charged with theft totaling \$7.5 million to feed gambling habits.² The impact spreads beyond families and hits businesses and communities. It requires governments and welfare agencies to provide crisis accommodation, emergency relief, counselling and other support to those harmed, increasing the burden on the community as a whole.

Australia reportedly has the highest gambling rate of any country in the world.³ It has approximately four times the number of 'Vegas-style slot machines' per capita as the United States. Gaming machines have outstripped other forms of betting as the country's favourite form of gambling.

Queensland has slightly more gaming machines per capita than the national average so the moratorium on new machines announced by the Premier is as necessary as it is welcome. In 2007 Queenslanders lost \$1.8 billion (\$1.769) on gaming machines. That's more than \$34 million every week or around \$5 million every day. And it's growing. In the past year the figure rose by \$1 million per week.⁴

Not only are we a nation of gamblers, evidence suggests that **problem** gambling rates are also high. Probably about 2.1% of Australian adults are 'problem gamblers'.⁵ So in Queensland alone there may be 80 - 120, 000 people with a gambling addiction. But those already addicted are only half the story. There is an equal number at risk of becoming addicted.⁶ And when you remember that for each individual problem gambler several other people are affected as well, family members, relatives, workmates, the figure is very significant.

Of course the statistics are debated and research findings are contested. Last April the Queensland Government released the 'Queensland Household Gambling Survey', conducted in 2006-7. It's one of the largest surveys of gambling activity undertaken anywhere in the world. This telephone poll found that just under 0.5 % of the adult Queensland population were 'problem gamblers'. That's down from the 2.1% national estimate of the Productivity Commission in 1999. But we probably shouldn't get too excited by that. Most academics and researchers in the field are dubious about telephone polls. Who is going to admit to somebody 'from the government', over the

² *The Courier Mail*, 13 March 2008, p. 11.

³ Charter, Community Sector Members of the Responsible Gambling Advisory Committee.

⁴ *The Courier Mail*, 13 March 2008, p. 11 (Reporter, Melanie Christiansen, citing figures from the Queensland Office of Gaming Regulation)

⁵ Productivity Commission 1999, *Australia's Gambling Industries*, Report No. 10, Ausinfo, Canberra, Vol. 1, p. 2.

⁶ *The Courier Mail*, 6 June 2008, p.12

telephone, to having a problem? The Productivity Commission thought that less than one third of problem gamblers would answer truthfully any survey about their gambling. So the problem is likely to be much bigger than the recent survey suggests.

The problem itself is daunting. There are also daunting challenges facing governments in attempting to address problem gambling.

We need to recognize, I think, that the issues are tough ones for state governments. There are significant amounts of revenue to states from tax on gaming machines. It has been said that State governments are the biggest gambling addicts in the nation. Last year's State budget in Queensland forecast poker machine taxes of \$548 million – more than half a billion dollars. It's not easy for any government to forego that much income, given other pressures and demands. The amount does need to be offset, though, by the costs government and the community incur in dealing with problem gambling and its destructive effects. According to material published by the Community Sector Members of the Responsible Gambling Advisory Committee about half of that revenue could be expected to come from problem gamblers alone. What is Queensland's government doing to reduce its dependence on revenue from gaming machines?

A further challenge facing governments at both state and federal levels concerns research into solutions to problem gambling. The issues raised by problem gambling and possible responses to it are complex and require close analysis. Research is expensive and can deliver results that appear inconclusive. At one level Queensland performs reasonably well in funding research because back in 2002 the State Government made research one of six priorities.⁷ But there's a need for research that's independent of government. There are inherent conflicts of interest in Government-sponsored research because of the governments' need to represent themselves as effective in combatting problem gambling. A more transparent and accountable research programme that draws on a range of organisations is needed. Community organisations confront the effects of problem gambling every day and often pick up the pieces of damaged lives and shattered families. They know first hand the damage done and I would encourage the Australian and Queensland Governments to make better use of community organisations as research partners in this area.

As I say the issues are many and complex. But the church has a role in all of this at a number of levels. We can stimulate discussion and understanding of the issue through our communities. Whenever we address such issues in our parishes and organizations, and invite people to talk about them, it's surprising how many people come out of the woodwork to say 'Yes, that's happened to me' or 'Yes, that happened in my family.' We then have an opportunity to care for and support those people in Christ's name and to work for change in the wider community. I am heartened to see the movement that is already happening and I look forward to the opportunity for the Anglican Church and others to catch on to that momentum so that we see real change in our community.

A lot of work has been done already over the years in developing effective strategies around –

⁷ 'The Queensland Responsible Gambling Strategy: A Partnership Approach', Queensland Government Treasury, February 2002, p. 4.

- Preventative education
- Access to assistance for problem gamblers
- Safe and responsible ways to operate venues
- Responsible advertising codes
- Codes of practice for operators
- Training for gaming venue staff, and so on.

There are many ideas that can and should be implemented and our community sector representatives on the Advisory Committee are better equipped than I am to talk about the details and priorities among those possibilities.

I simply reiterate that I think there is a bit of a groundswell at present that indicates the time has come to ask an even more fundamental question. In recent days former Premier Wayne Goss has also spoken publicly about his regret that he oversaw the introduction of gaming machines into Queensland. So maybe the real possibility going forward is a staged significant reduction in the number of gaming machines and licensed venues