

Presentation on Casino Gambling
By Sheila Holder, Alliance For Change Member of Parliament
Made on the occasion of the debate in the National Assembly
On the motion standing in her name, Thursday January 11, 2007

In proposing this Motion I have no doubt it is unlikely to earn the approval of this Assembly but I intend to proceed nonetheless to establish three main points.

1. That Public policy ought not to be pulled out of a hat and decided arbitrarily by Government in breach of the Constitution;
2. That before the decision to introduce legalized gambling was made it is imperative that an impact study is done to ascertain whether Guyana has the wherewithal to (at least) minimize the deleterious impact of casino gambling &
3. That the intellectual capital residing in the UG should be enlisted by the Assembly to aid in arriving at informed decisions with a view to generally encouraging academics in that institution to utilize their skills more widely for the national good.

At the outset I want to make the point that since the PPPC Government has gained a majority in the recent national elections it is entitled to devise its own legislative agenda; however, when that right clashes with those accorded the people by the Constitution, Government has a duty to heed the warnings of the people on matters that will affect their lives in predictable ways. So states the fundamental principle contained in article 13 of the Constitution and so it is proclaimed in the preamble as well. *“That Guyanese should forge a system of governance that promotes concerted effort and broad-based participation in national decision-making in order to develop a viable economy and a harmonious community.”*

Any prudent and accountable Government would consider it mandatory to explain how come casino gambling is being considered when it appears in no strategic national plan and since it wasn't considered as a viable option by the broad based national effort that brought forth the NDS. Given those facts a thorough examination of the pros & the cons by the society should be done.

We have the UG, an institution of higher learning that has operated by and large for the last forty years without the kind of vibrant national input based on academic studies to guide and influence the crafting of public policy. And so there could be no better institution than the UG to be asked to conduct the studies proposed in the Motion to advise the Assembly accordingly on the following: -

- **Whether** casino gambling would add to Guyana's tourism product;
- **Whether** the proposal to exclude Guyanese from casinos as proposed by President Jagdeo can be accomplished given the country's governance difficulties and failures.

- **Whether** casino gambling would worsen the current crime situation in the country.
- Under what conditions, if any revenues from the gaming industries would positively benefit the economy and avoid the predictable negatives. But alas Government has failed to see the wisdom of doing so. Instead they have arbitrarily decided that legalized gambling is good for Guyana.

That only newly constructed hotels of a certain size will be licensed and as if pulled out of a hat - the number of casinos per region that should be permitted to be licensed. All this based on no evidential data, no facts or credible studies but they are proceeding to rush to legalize casino gambling by presenting for its first reading today a bill amending the Gambling Prevention Act. This being done even as my Motion waited to be debated.

By hurrying to overturn the prevention of gambling Act Government has signaled its dismissal of an informed study to guide their decision. It is a 'take it or leave it' approach because after all they have a parliamentary majority to ensure that casino gambling legislation is approved no matter what anyone in the society has to say about it. If this is going to be the approach it doesn't auger well for the future of the 9th Parliament.

Evidence abounds around the world that could guide this Assembly on the impact of legalized gambling not only on gamblers but also on non gambling sections of society where casinos are sited. **According to Sociologist Dr. David Philips** of the University of California, San Diego - Las Vegas, the gambling haven of the world, has displayed the highest suicide rates in the US for both residents and visitors.

In Gulfport, Mississippi suicides jumped over 200% after casino gambling was introduced.

In neighboring Biloxi suicides increased over 1000%. And so the statistics go for increased gambling addictions, increased bankruptcies, increased crime and increased family related problems. So the concerns being expressed in the society are not without foundation but Government refuses to heed them.

A few months ago a National Gambling Impact Study was commissioned by the State of Buffalo, USA. The Buffalo Commission found that as gamblers loose their money the faster the socioeconomic negatives increased dramatically. Its final report confirmed that the gambling industry had created new unprecedented levels of addicted gamblers, bankruptcies, crimes, suicides, exploitation of the poor, and corruption - giving credence to a 1999 U.S. Gambling Commission that unanimously called for a moratorium on the expansion of gambling in the USA. Sadly, however, it has grown into a monster, the likes of which this Government is enjoining our beloved country. From legalized casinos operating in two jurisdictions in the 1990s the US now has over 400 casinos in 28 states being run mainly by Indian tribes.

Government has not adopted the custom of producing white papers but is obliged constitutionally, to consult widely with relevant stakeholders. Government will say that it

has adequately consulted but the questions being raised by civil society including the religious community is that they have been provided with the usual cursory opportunity to be heard with little or no hope of influencing the decision on legalizing casino gambling. This attitude could be traced directly to Government's built-in parliamentary majority which as we've witnessed during their last term is now being used tyrannically. To all those God fearing people from the Christian, Hindu and Moslem faiths who voted for this Administration – the ball is now in your court.

If you disapprove of Government's decision to introduce Casino gambling, you have a duty to do something about it. Raise your voices to demand accountability on this matter by insisting on a serious analysis of the consequences of moving in this direction. There is no logic to rushing to issue gambling licenses at a time when World Cup Cricket is around the corner because it is unlikely that the profile of a cricket fan would fit the bill of a casino gambler.

Finally, I'm fully conscious of the political double standards that prevail around the world where political parties while in opposition call for that which they refuse to deliver when elected to Government. The AFC denounces this stance and commit to formalizing in time to come the views of such sectors as the religious community in developing public policies, because we believe they represent a significant constituency whose voice should be heeded by Government and whose religious principles are universal in their known benefits.

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NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

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Mrs. Sheila Holder, M.P.

MOTION

CASINO GAMBLING

WHEREAS the preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of Guyana proclaims that Guyanese should forge a system of governance that promotes concerted effort and broad-based participation in national decision-making in order to develop a viable economy and a harmonious community;

AND WHEREAS the Government of Guyana has declared its intention of introducing casino gambling as a possible boost to the country's tourism and hospitality industry with the proviso that the proposed casino gaming legislation will preclude Guyanese from participating in casino gambling in Guyana;

AND WHEREAS some sections of the religious community have expressed opposition to the introduction of casino gambling,