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"I've always been outspoken on what I think can be improved": An Interview with Dr. Garry J. Smith

FIONA NICOLL* & MARK R. JOHNSON^o

DR. GARRY J. SMITH HAS SPENT MANY YEARS AT THE FOREFRONT of critical gambling research in Canada. In this interview he talks about the genesis of the Alberta Gambling Research Institute, how sociology brings a different lens to gambling studies than psychology, why he speaks out against certain aspects of commercial gambling, the relationship between fun and fairness, and the critical gaps in research that need to be added to address the inherent conflicts of interest that occur with self-regulated gambling.

The interview was conducted by academics Fiona Nicoll and Mark R Johnson on 29 November, 2017. A transcript of the conversation was edited for publication. As part of this process, both interviewers and the interviewee were invited to edit their remarks.

I. BUILDING A GAMBLING RESEARCH CENTRE

Mark Johnson: Could you tell us about your role in the establishment of AGRI [Alberta Gambling Research Institute] in 2000, and what you consider to be AGRI's crucial achievements in the last decade and a half?

Garry Smith: I was teaching sociology of sport in the faculty of Physical Education and Recreation before I took early retirement in 1997. In speaking to politicians about gambling in Alberta, it became clear that there was a disturbing lack of knowledge about the subject. Politicians focus almost exclusively on the revenues and are unaware of the adverse consequences of the activity. When EGMs came into Alberta in '92, the minister in charge was lobbied hard by the hospitality and tourism industry. Some of the rural hotels were going out of business, so to help them out he gave the exclusive rights for VLTs [Video Lottery Terminals] to with liquor licenses. Before implementing the VLT program, the minister was warned by elected officials in North Dakota about the hazardous nature of the machines based on their own two-year experience with VLTs. The warnings were dismissed, but the dire consequences predicted turned out to be true.

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One of the studies I worked on with Harold Wynne and Rachel Volberg [Research Associate Professor UMass Amherst School of Public Health and Health Sciences] was an Alberta problem gambling prevalence study in 1994.¹ As expected, the prevalence rate was high as VLTs had been legal for a couple of years. When the minister was shown the study results, his first step was to try to squelch any bad publicity. In so doing a press conference was called to announce the negative results, while at the same time giving notice that the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission would now be adding gambling addiction to its mandate.

In other words, problem gambling was now under control because we had treatment specialists in place to help those with gambling problems. There was no mention of changes to gambling policy or regulation, because they didn't want to reduce revenues.

I'd written several papers on gambling issues, so was familiar with the subject matter, and coincidentally at that time, the Vice Dean of the Faculty of Extension, was interested in establishing a research center for gambling studies. One of his goals was to establish workshops to create an awareness of gambling impacts, and along the way, generate revenue for the faculty.

Not knowing where to start, the Vice Dean phoned his friend who was president of the University of Nevada-Reno (UNR), and asked if he could recommend people who were knowledgeable about the academic study of gambling who might assist in establishing an Alberta-based gambling research center. The president put him in touch with Bill Eadington, a leading international gambling expert and director of his own research institute at UNR.² Dr. Eadington said you have a person on your own campus, Garry Smith. You should talk to him.' That's how I became connected with the gambling research centre initiative.

I then met with the Vice Dean (Edd LeSage) to formulate plans for what eventually became AGRI. Initially it was strictly a University of Alberta enterprise, which began by reaching out to groups that we thought might be interested in this endeavor such as government officials, problem gambling therapists, gambling industry leaders and so forth, to determine their interest in the project and how they might fit into it. One fortuitous break for us was the government-run Gambling Summit held in Medicine Hat in 1998,³ in response to citizen objections to the growing number of electronic gambling machines (EGMs). Key Summit outcomes were eight recommendations (all accepted by government) to improve

¹ Harold Wynne, Garry Smith & Rachel Volberg, *Gambling and Problem Gambling in Alberta: A Report Prepared for Alberta Lottery & Gaming* (1994).

² William Yardley, "Bill Eadington, Economist and Gambling Expert, Dies at 67", *The New York Times* (14 February 2013), online: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/15/business/bill-eadington-economist-and-gambling-expert-dies-at-67.html>>.

³ Alberta Lotteries and Gaming Summit 98, *Alberta Lotteries and Gaming Summit 1998 Report: A Public Input Process* (July 1998), online: https://dspace.ucalgary.ca/bitstream/handle/1880/129/aaz_sm.pdf?sequence=1 at 2: "Recommendation #1: That the provincial government dedicate more resources to gambling research in areas like the prevention and treatment of problem gambling, the social impacts of lotteries and gaming, native gambling issues, and emerging gambling activities."

gambling oversight in the province, one of which was the need for a gambling research centre to examine the impacts of widespread gambling.

To cement the deal, we decided to involve the other two major Alberta universities so that different regions of the province would be represented. That turned out to be a sound strategy which led to the establishment of AGRI in 2000.

When AGRI was founded, David Hodgins was already on faculty in at the University of Calgary in Psychology and researched gambling issues. Nady el-Geubaly was a psychiatrist at Foothills Hospital in Calgary, who had done research on gambling addiction. Rob Williams was a finishing PhD student at the University of Calgary who was well versed in the psychology of gambling. The University of Lethbridge hired Rob which meant the first three AGRI research coordinators were me in Edmonton, David Hodgins in Calgary and Rob Williams in Lethbridge. All three of these individuals held the positions for the first 18 years of AGRI.

The major achievements of AGRI include:

- Establishing awareness of gambling research in the community... AGRI is now recognized as one of the world's premier gambling research centers'.
- Through the provision of research grants and graduate student scholarships, AGRI has increased the critical mass of researchers in Alberta who focus on gambling ; 3) The LLLP Project, a four-year longitudinal study⁴ is AGRI's most notable research project. The study produced mountains of data, and numerous publications. A key factor in the LLLP's success was the low attrition rate. Rob Williams had done a similar longitudinal study in Ontario, so we were able to learn from his experience and combine data sets.⁵
- AGRI has held an annual conference since its inception. These themed conferences have featured most of the world's top gambling researchers and created opportunities for collaborative efforts with Alberta scholars;
- Finally, the three AGRI research coordinators also produced a well- received edited book.⁶

II. A CRITICAL, SOCIOLOGICAL LENS ON GAMBLING

Fiona: You're a sociologist working in a consortium of researchers, dominated by psychology and psychiatry. How do you see your contribution to [the] group, and what have you learned from working with these researchers ?

Garry: The main difference is I study gambling from a public policy and social justice perspective. So, I'm looking at rules and regulations, how gambling is operated and what

⁴ N el-Geubaly, et al, *The Leisure, Lifestyle, & Lifecycle Project (LLLPP): A Longitudinal Study of Gambling in Alberta*. (Calgary, AB: Alberta Gambling Research Institute, 2015).

⁵ RJ Williams et al, *Quinte Longitudinal Study of Gambling and Problem Gambling*: (Guelph, ON: Ontario Problem Gambling Research Centre, 2015), online: <<http://hdl.handle.net/10133/3641>>

⁶ G Smith et al, *Research and Measurement Issues in Gambling Studies*. (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2007).

impacts it has on society. The bio-psych people look at individuals, why they gamble, and the risk factors that lead to problem gambling.

I'm not anti-gambling but based on my years of experience I think gambling provision and regulation could be improved. Governments disregard the problems created by widespread gambling or they just nibble around the edges to make it look like they're doing something consequential. But it's not enough. That's a short answer.

Fiona: What does sociology allow you to contribute?

Garry: Different methodologies for one thing, such as participant observation, other qualitative methods, case studies and population surveys. Sociology focuses on the group, community, society. Is gambling good, bad or neutral for society? Does it enhance the quality of life in a community? It could in some ways, but usually it doesn't, because of the way that it's operated and regulated. So, I guess I just have a different lens. And I bring this up quite a bit in the AGRI group. I say, 'We have enough psychologists.' That's how we got Fiona [Nicoll, Associate Professor, Political Science, University of Alberta] on board ... because the majority of researchers are psychologists. We need a better balance in research perspectives.

III. "WHAT THE HELL? HOW DID THAT BECOME A POLICY?": SPEAKING OUT

Mark: You've been outspoken about your concerns related to EGMs [electronic gaming machines] and gambling related crimes. What's motivated you to speak out on these topics, whilst many researchers choose to remain silent on them?

Garry: I think those who don't take a critical perspective when they see things in the commercial gambling realm that need changing are letting the public down. For example, it's obvious that EGMs are the most dangerous format out there. You go into EGM venues and it seems like they're zombies playing... Negative statistics associated with EGMs in Alberta include: a yearly profit margin on EGM play is 30%, 91% of government gambling revenue comes from EGM play and about 75% of problem gamblers say that EGMs are their game of choice.

I wear both a citizen's and a researcher's hat. EGM gambling is hazardous because it takes advantage of vulnerable citizens. So, I have written and spoken out on this issue. Not just that issue, but gambling-related crime as well. Generally, you could say



Figure 1: At the West Edmonton Mall, Edmonton, Alberta. Photograph by Fiona Nicoll.

I take a critical perspective. A recent article I co-authored with Linda Hancock is an example of critical social science; whereby you see a practice or situation in society that you think needs correcting, you study it with the idea of improving it.⁷ Some say that's a form of advocacy research, but the idea is to spell out why the situation is problematic and then recommend ways to rectify it for the benefit of society. This is the approach I've taken in most of my studies.

One of the steps I took when I started studying gambling was to establish a network of people involved in various aspects of the activity, because I wanted to get a panoramic view of the phenomenon. Consequently, I sought out city police and RCMP personnel familiar with gambling-related crime, gambling industry workers, Gambler's Anonymous members, lawyers who defend addicted gamblers who have committed crimes and problem gambling treatment specialists. Eventually, I developed a network of experts that I could call on for information. This approach was also valuable in learning each group's perspectives on gambling.

Mark: When you mention lawyers who defend gamblers who've been accused of crimes, are there particular defense strategies used in that context?

Garry: I coauthored an article with Rob Simpson on that very subject based on our experience as expert witnesses.⁸ We noted that defendants invariably plead guilty, while their lawyers argue that being addicted to gambling means loss of control. Typically, defendants in these trials do not have criminal records; however, they find themselves in a jam because of their excessive gambling. In a panic they may embezzle money from their employer but mean to pay it back after their next big win.

What they're angling for is a reduced or limited sentence. Lately Canadian courts have shown leniency in this regard. Two decades ago the response of most judges was: You stole \$500,000. Therefore, you go to jail for five years. Lately, judges have realized that the government also has a role in this tragic situation by making EGMs too accessible to the public.

Governments benefit from gambling-related crime because they reap the proceeds of crime. For example; a problem gambler embezzles \$500,000 from her employer and puts it into EGMs. Now the government has that money and the small business owner that was stolen from is out \$500,000. That poor guy is in court saying, 'What about me? My business is going under because she stole this money.' That's too bad says the judge, you should have been insured. This scenario just didn't seem fair to me. In every case I was involved in, the defendant got a reduced sentence.

⁷ Linda Hancock & Garry Smith, "Critiquing the Reno Model I-IV International Influence on Regulators and Governments (2004–2015)— the Distorted Reality of 'Responsible Gambling'" (2017) 15(2) *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*.

⁸ G Smith & R Simpson, "Gambling addiction defence on trial: Canadian expert witness perspectives" (2014) *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology*. 2014;3.

I've been outspoken on what I think can be improved in the commercial gambling realm. In regard to whether things have improved in how gambling is managed and conducted, I would say, not a lot, only marginal steps. The bureaucrats I dealt with at the AGLC [Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission], generally recognized the weaknesses in their gambling oversight regime, but were powerless to do much, because their political masters always call the shots. The AGLC employee might say, 'We need to improve a soft responsible gambling program.' and the politician would typically reply, 'We can't do that. That would cost us money.' It comes down to the provincial Treasurer declaring 'We made \$1.4 billion from gambling last year. This year I'm budgeting for \$1.5 billion. We need that money and we need to show annual increases'. But by doing that, the government is hurting some of their own citizens.

IV. "SINCE WHEN IS IT FUN TO STEAL PEOPLE'S MONEY?": FUN & FAIRNESS IN GAMBLING

Fiona: As a person who is not anti-gambling, and has participated in activities such as poker and gambling on golf, can you reflect on what that brings to your approach to gambling research?

Garry: I know what fair gambling is. The golf article I did, pointed out how there are no third party rake-offs in this scenario.⁹ Nobody's being hurt, because we know each other's financial situation and are not trying to make excessive profits. In this case, gambling spices up the fun. If you look at the commercial forms of gambling out there, they're profit driven, and unfair. EGM's in Alberta, we're told, have a 92% payout rate to players. That's on every given play, but what gambling providers don't say is that the payout rate works out to 70% over the year. That's not fair. You cannot win on EGMs if you play frequently. You could win if you hit an early jackpot and then walked away for good. But few players do that. People like to keep playing which makes it a loser's game. Some poker players can come out ahead, because there is skill involved. You can also make money [gambling on] horse racing if you are skilled, although not many do.

⁹ Garry J Smith & Robert Paley, "Par for the course: A study of gambling on the links and a commentary on physical skill- based gambling formats" (2001) 1:1 *International Gambling Studies* 102.

Some casino games have a minimal house advantage; for example, in blackjack if you're a card counter, and know basic strategy you have a fighting chance. Likewise, certain roulette or baccarat bets can reduce the house advantage. One of the fairest plays is sports betting in Nevada. There is an element of skill involved. In Canada there is a government operated sports betting game called "Sports Select." The problem is that only parlay bets are allowed. With a profit margin of 44% it is a sucker's game that has never gained significant market penetration. Sport Select advertising is also misleading; ads suggest if you know sports, you could win money. Unfortunately, no amount of knowledge can overcome those odds. Similar games are in Ontario and all other provinces They are all parlay style betting. You have to bet on at least two games, or up to 10. But you [must] get every choice correct to win.

Fiona: That's crazy.

Garry: The odds of winning a two game parlay at even odds are 1 in 4. However, if you win, you get paid at far less than what the true odds of winning are. ... Say I pick five games and get four of them right. I win nothing. If I'm betting in Vegas, and win four and lose one, I make money. It's terrible odds and payouts offered by your own government. To make it worse, some of the bets involve tie outcomes; For example, in basketball betting, a score within four points either way is counted as a tie. That adds a third element to the equation, I could lose because of an arbitrary tie, according to their rules.

Mark: Why is it so extreme?

Garry: It's a way to make money. If you ask the providers, they say, 'This isn't for professional gamblers; it's meant to be a fun thing.' Since when is it fun to steal people's money? I talked with the Chair of the AGLC board last year. I told her. It's a small thing, but the Sport Select game is an entire rip-off. She listened, but [she is] not going to do anything about that. That's the way it goes. That's generally the way [the regulators approach it], they think. 'We can't babysit people. You choose to do what you want to do, as long as



Figure 2: Advertisement for "Poker Lotto" at West Edmonton Mall, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Photograph by Fiona Nicoll.

you're not harming other people.' But in some cases, you are. The way gambling is run in Canada is exploitative.

Mark: I always found that one of the crucial things about being involved in gambling game playing spaces as a researcher is gaining subcultural knowledge about how people in those spaces work, how they function, how they think, what kind of terms they use, what those terms explain about how they think about what they do. Have you found the same kinds of things in your experience?

Garry: Certainly, partly through reading books based on observational studies of poker, horse race betting and off-track betting. I've also been immersed in various scenes. I play poker. I go to the casino sometimes to observe and I speak regularly with people in my network; for example, bookmakers, people that take sports bets illegally. I've met them, interviewed them and learned how they work, their parlance with their clients. It's being part of the subculture, hanging out and asking questions now and then. I've also interviewed professional gamblers. They enjoy talking about what they do for a living as long as they're not going to be exposed in some way.

This immersion is really important. I'm just trying to think from the psychology side. I guess they get immersed in the problem gambler subculture, which is good, but gambling addiction is atypical of people that gamble. Some people get a lot of pleasure out of gambling, and they control themselves. It's an intellectual exercise. It's the people they meet with and it's fun to take a risk with money you can afford to lose. There is a positive side to gambling but generally, not so much in commercial gambling here [in Alberta].

Mark: If you could choose a single policy measure to reduce the social harms from commercial gambling, what would it be?

Garry: The most effective way of reducing harms is to have much tighter restrictions on activities such as EGM play and criminal activity such as money laundering and loan sharking. When new EGMs are being tested the deciding factor for acceptance is REVPAC: Revenue Per Available Customer.



Figure 3: Caesar's Bingo, West Edmonton Mall, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Photograph by Fiona Nicoll.

So when they're testing new machines they pick the ones that generate

the most revenue, irrespective of how hazardous or deceptive they are. The government seemingly wants to exhaust a player's money as quickly as possible. That is a perverse way of treating your own citizens. That's not right, I would tighten up the testing, and not be so dependent on REVPAC. If that's not working, I would consider even harsher measures for EGMs. For example, improving the odds. If you make gambling accessible and tell the people that this is a harmless entertainment form, then you should give players a better chance to win. At present the government is content with gouging and deceiving players. By way of an analogy we have [government run] campsites in Alberta. They're there for people's pleasure and recreation and priced reasonably. Cost recovery is the basis for campsite rentals, not what the market will bear. Whereas in gambling, it's way more than that. Why shouldn't it be almost like cost recovery? If you think it's an amusement, well, it's fun to play. But it's causing a lot of misery for people. So, make the odds fair.

But then again, all these things are going to reduce [revenue]. And that's a problem. So, you have to create an awareness with governments about the damage that's being done. What I'm trying to do I guess in the long run is, piling up awareness with research, 'til finally it's like, 'Jesus. This is a problem. We're going to have to do something about it.'

What else can be done? I think interventions on the Casino floor. Some things are being done around the world, like suspending people. You've got to keep track of what they're playing.... 'Jeez, you spent \$5,000 last month. You maybe should stop.' Generally, in Alberta, politicians and policy makers don't want to do that because, of the stigma of being a nanny state. 'Who are we to tell people how to spend their money? Maybe he's a millionaire.' Probably not, so I think we should be erring on the side of caution. A precautionary principle is a good one to invoke.

Fiona: Garry, do you think if fantasy sports had been around 30 years ago, you would have been interested in playing it?

Garry : Maybe, initially. But I'd investigate it closely to see whether the odds and payouts were fair. I'd play for a couple of weeks and evaluate how it's working. That's what I did with most other games I play. I know poker and I like playing. I know what the odds are. I know how to play. Sports betting in Vegas, I know how it works, and I know what the odds are and so forth. I know you shouldn't play parlays and make sucker bets and all those things. I played Sport Select initially, when it came out, but then very quickly found it is a rip-off.

Fiona: Actual sports betting in Alberta is illegal on single event sports. But fantasy sports, which is a meta game, is allowed. Do you understand the pleasure of that meta game? I guess is what I'm saying is, 'Is it sporting?'

Garry: With fantasy sports, there's so many combinations of players you could have out there, it's in the millions, that it's more like a lottery type of game. I don't think that you get the same feeling with fantasy sports as with single event sports betting, even if you're submitting teams every day. You have to wait to see whether or not you won money.

Single event sports betting, is illegal in Canada; however ... Many many lobbyists have attempted to change the federal government's mind. All [the] provinces wanted to have it, because it's another moneymaker but it was turned down about a year ago, again.¹⁰ So, it's always been on the verge of being accepted, but the impetus for legalization came mainly from Canadian casinos near the American border (e.g., Windsor and Niagara Falls), because they would attract Americans, where single event sports betting was also illegal at the time.

The problem with legal sports betting for players is that governments could never match the odds and services that illegal bookmakers provide. There's lots of illegal bookmakers in Canada that take bets on sports, even British soccer and everything else. Although unlawful, they thrive because they offer credit, fair odds, telephone betting and other conveniences. Mostly they're on the up and up. They're just small guys that have 25 or so clients and they must be trustworthy if they want to stay in business. They meet their clients once a week to settle up; that is, pay up or get paid. It's generally a friendly relationship, which makes it hard for the government to compete. Governments would need a much higher profit margin which would mean player unfriendly odds. For the bookmakers, it's generally 11 to 10 odds on a sports bet, which is fair. The government wouldn't be satisfied with that. They'd make it at least 13 to 10 and wouldn't offer the same services or conveniences.

Legal sports betting could work, but the Government would screw it up, because they'd be trying to profit too much from it, and they couldn't duplicate what's out there. Online gambling is similar. But with online play there are problems such as getting your money back or getting paid in a timely fashion. With single sports event bets, you know the final score, but as with online poker or virtual casinos, there is always the possibility of fraud.

Generally, bookmakers are trustworthy and offer reasonable propositions, even though what they are doing is technically illegal. The police have stopped seriously investigating the activity. It's still on the books as a crime, but more pressing problems such as child porn, drugs and massage parlors get more attention than bookies. Of course, not all bookmaking is harmless, some bigger operations may be connected to organized crime. For example, if bookies get too [many] bets on one side of a wager they have to lay off some bets with bookies in bigger cities. When this happens you're likely getting into an organized crime operation.

A lot of the regular sports bettors I know are professionals, (lawyers, dentists, architects, doctors) They think it's a fair deal and strangely enough, most of these sports bettors don't partake in the legal forms of gambling available in Alberta (eg, casinos, electronic gambling machines, lottery and so forth). Other than betting on sports with bookies, these professional types get their gambling fixes by going to Nevada. Gambling at a local casino has a stigma about it, in that they feel uncomfortable running into clients or patients. In Nevada no one knows them, so they can gamble as much as they want in a relaxed setting.

¹⁰ BILL C-221 *An Act to amend the Criminal Code (sports betting)*. First Session, Forty-second Parliament, 64-65 Elizabeth II, 2015-2016 HOUSE OF COMMONS OF CANADA Defeated at Second Reading 2016 September 21.

V. RESEARCH GAPS: DOES RESPONSIBLE GAMBLING EXIST? ARE STATES ABLE TO SELF REGULATE?

Mark: Do you think that there are any other aspects of gambling practice that are being overlooked at the moment, within gambling studies?

Garry: I would challenge some of the common myths about gambling, such as responsible gambling. Is commercial gambling really responsible? Is there such a thing as responsible gambling? And, if so, what does it look like? What would be an ideal responsible gambling program? Some leading gambling researchers have recommended what I consider are exceedingly soft



Figure 4: Palace Casino, West Edmonton Mall, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Photograph by Fiona Nicoll.

responsible gambling programs. To some extent this is because they receive research or consulting funding from the gambling industry and are reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them. These researchers have never, to my knowledge, said anything critical about the industry nor have these researchers critically investigated EGMs, reputed to be the most hazardous gambling format extant. The underlying message of these researchers is that the onus is on the individual to behave responsibly; If we can just discern why people gamble excessively, the problem will be solved. The gambling industry embraces this approach because it is never their policies and practices that are to blame.

There's a lot of scandal involved in gambling; for example, a huge money laundering crisis has rocked the British Columbia government recently.¹¹ I get regular calls from the mainstream media asking 'Why is this happening?' And, why can't we control it effectively It's been going on for at least ten years, why can't casino staffs and government regulators do their jobs properly? One way to make it better is through tougher regulations and penalties. If a casino isn't monitoring money laundering closely, there should be license suspension, and a second violation would mean loss of license. Provinces seldom do that, because they get money from it, too. There's a huge conflict of interest in how commercial gambling is operated in Canada; to wit, governments are in cahoots with the gambling industry. Consequently, there is light touch regulation, stringent rules would also negatively affect government revenues.

¹¹ Ian Bailey "How organized crime uses B.C. casinos to launder money", Globe and Mail, 27 June 2018, online: <<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/british-columbia/article-how-organized-crime-uses-bc-casinos-to-launder-money/>> [perma.cc/8TH6-39VD].

Ideally, gambling should be run by an independent tribunal that does not profit from gambling. Tight regulations and strong enforcement would clean up many of the evils that are occurring now with state sponsored gambling.

Fiona: Did you have anything else you wanted to say?

Garry: I'm trying to think of a place in the world where gambling is non-exploitative. In the UK there is a concern with the addictive potency of FOBTs [Fixed Odds Betting Terminals], one can bet one hundred pounds per play. This seems outrageous; how did that become a policy? In Australia, recreational clubs benefit from pokie revenues, with their lavish funds and political connections the clubs have been able to work the rules to their advantage. Against this strong lobby group the average person is voiceless.

Gambling is widespread in North America. You've been to Nevada where the whole state economy is based on tourism and gambling. Gambling runs the state, as oil does in Alberta, where the Big Oil's strong lobby influences politics. The same is true for the gambling industry in Nevada. Despite having over 200 casinos in the state, little has been done by way of rigorous responsible gambling initiatives, nor are there adequately state funded outlets to provide treatment for problem gamblers. ...

Fiona: In Australia, several of the political leaders involved in deregulating EGMs have made public expressions of regret.

Garry: Have they?

Fiona: Yeah. But this happened many years after their political careers were finished.

Garry : You've got crusading politicians such as [Nick] Xenophon and [Andrew] Willkie that are outspoken.

Fiona: We do. We now have anti-gambling politicians.

Garry: Politicians are reluctant to discuss gambling issues because they are unprepared and don't want to be seen as trying to defend the indefensible.

UNLV's Bill Thompson once said to me, 'It's like being married, but you are so ashamed of your spouse that keep him/her locked in the basement. You don't want to be seen in public with them. Yes, you are married, but you're trying to distance yourself from the stigma. Same with state sponsored gambling.'

When the last election was on, a candidate running in my riding phoned to introduce herself and talk about the upcoming election I asked her about gambling. She was totally floored. Her reply was: Jeez, that's not even on our radar. She was a social worker and mentioned how she had seen first-hand many of the negative effects of gambling. She was elected and is now a Cabinet Minister. You know, they don't know much. They don't want to know

much. And hope that everything stays quiet but despite her seeming concern about gambling, she has never made a public utterance about gambling.

... Governments are boxed in because they rely on gambling money, even though they may not like where it came from.

Statements of Interest

Dr Fiona Nicoll has not received direct government or industry funding for gambling research. The Alberta Gambling Research Institute (AGRI) is a consortium of gambling researchers at Lethbridge, Calgary and Alberta Universities. While AGRI is funded by the Provincial government, its research is conducted at arms-length. Grant applications are subject to full peer review; transparency regarding funding priorities and outcomes is secured by an independent board constituted of academic faculty members from each of the partner universities.

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