

November, 2010

Are You Game?

By Elizabeth Lu

The British Columbia Lottery Corporation claims they have been making continuous efforts to increase public support for legalized gaming in BC, which includes much of the government's involvement as well. However, the targeted results the corporation has set for themselves does not seem to measure up to these claims.

Each year, BCLC has been keeping track of the amount of support the public has for the gaming industry in BC. In annual reports dating back to the 2006/2007 fiscal year, BCLC's targets for following years have either decreased or stayed the same in comparison to the actual percentages found for that particular year. For example, in the 2008/2009 report, public support for legalized gambling sat at 65% of adults who supported legalized gambling; and their target percentage for the following year sat at 63% – showing they predicted a 2% decrease. In 2007/2008, 62% of adults supported gaming and the target percentage for the next year was 62%. This showed they predicted no increase, but rather success in maintaining their baseline of public support.

BCLC claims the positive trend in those previous reports reflect their success in raising awareness about their “efforts to provide a secure and socially responsible gaming experience supported by systems and programs that enhance player security and the integrity of gaming.” A statement which contradicts their own predictions as to what impact they are having on the public and the effectiveness of their efforts, which includes the government's as well.

Shane Simpson, the NDP gaming critic, has his doubts about the positivity the public feels on the subject of security. He says due to recent events, and the public's awareness of these occurrences, support for gaming has been declining. For example, he explains of the federal agency, FINTRAC, which tracks money laundering and terrorist financing. They fined the province for not being diligent

enough in their struggle to deal with organized crime, money laundering and loan sharks. As well, he mentions its effect on the public.

“I think when that starts to become public,” Simpson says, “and it has in the last year or so, it does get the public starting to wonder what's going on and starting to think government is just trying to take every dollar it can without meeting its responsibilities to be socially responsible on the other side of the equation. And that's a concern.”

Simpson also believes gambling addiction remains a large factor in any lack of social support for legalized gambling, especially with internet gambling on the rise.

“I think there's been some real concern raised about the internet gambling that the government is going into 'cause I think people know that that's a problem, for a whole bunch of reasons, but around problem gamblers. I think that the public is concerned because the BC liberal government really hasn't supported problem gamblers very well.”

Dr. Robert Williams, a professor at the University of Lethbridge and coordinator for the Alberta Gaming Research Institute, seems to agree with the lack of focus going into attempting to solve the issue of gambling addiction.

“The sort of things they do,” says Williams, “with public education campaigns or self exclusion programs are unenforceable. They look good on paper but they actually have no real effect.”

Williams clarifies that when one speaks about the gaming industry, they are speaking about the government. He says it is the government who receives the majority of the profits, therefore they are essentially the owners of these venues.

“To be fair, the government is keenly concerned about gambling addiction and has been trying

to address it.” says Williams. “The problem is that they're not social scientists and they don't want to do anything that's going to interfere with profits. And that's the problem that about one third of all gambling dollars come from addicts, so if you decrease the rate of addiction you're going to affect your profits, so they don't want to do anything that truly affects addicts.”

He adds that much of any resistance felt towards legalized gambling can relate directly towards the provincial government's connection with the industry.

“People are pretty uncomfortable with the provincial governments being the purveyor of this problematic product.” says Williams. “The government doesn't grow tobacco or brew beer, but it has no qualms about actually delivering the main recipients and owner of gambling. So Canadians are uncomfortable with the government provision of it as well.”

In the most recent 2010/2011 service plan report, it shows a decrease in the public's attitudes towards gaming in BC from 65% to 61%. This statistic correlates with Shane Simpson's speculation on the public's increasing awareness of the progress – or lack thereof some may argue – that BCLC and the government are making, concerning these issues. One of the most prominent being the issue of problem gambling. Simpson suggests one of the best ways to improve our system is to look towards other jurisdictions as an example.

“There's a number of places in the world,” Simpson says. “Probably the one that's most pointed out is the Netherlands. [It] really kind of is the gold standard for when it talks about dealing with problem gambling.”

He explains the Netherlands have a system in place which allows them to identify, track and also support problem gamblers. They are able to identify and track those who seem to be gambling too much and too frequently, discovering the problem early enough to intervene. “We really should be looking at those kinds of systems and seeing whether they make sense here, but we don't appear to be

doing that.”

In their recent service report, BCLC states they plan “to continue to provide gambling in a socially responsible manner and strengthen responsible gambling awareness programs.” But is this progress apparent enough? What does it mean when BCLC themselves are predicting a decrease in public support despite their new and continued strategies to gain more approval from British Columbians?

“It’s a losing battle,” Dr. Robert Williams says, “public attitudes are just getting worse and more negative each year. They haven’t done anything that really has changed public opinion.”