

Casino, the final debate: Good Economic Policy Or bad social policy?

Close to the end of the week, our Prime Minister issued a rally call to all Singaporeans to support the casino project. The decision was made with a gamble. No one knows how much it will benefit or hurt our future. On the one hand there is the view that the project will create thousands of jobs, with the guarantee that it will boost our tourism industry. On the other hand, there is the argument that the social cost will be huge – triads, gambling addictions, broken homes, loss of virtues etc. Will the economic benefits make Singapore better? Or, will the loss of virtues, the corrosion of family life, and the inroads of triads make us worst?

No one can disregard the social ills caused by casino gambling. Along with it there will inevitably be the increase of organized crimes. Triads, loan sharks run by illegal syndicates will make inroads into our city. They will loiter at Marina, Sentosa, Geylang, Joo Chiat, the turf club, and at every place where there is a den, legal or illegal. But the more terrorizing factor is what gambling does to a family. It creates conflicts in the home about money management. It tears down home when the gambler turns abusive and irresponsible when he becomes addicted to it. It can alter a person's character, and in extreme cases (and these cases are many), drive him even to act irrationally. No one knows of course how many hard core gamblers the casino will eventually produce. The ST gave an estimate of about 10 000 gamblers. It seems that the rate will potentially grow as long as there are casinos and other forms of legalized gambling in the city.

But will the economic cost overwrite all these social ills? On the up side, we are told that it will create new jobs, thus reducing the unemployment problem. Also, we are assured that tourists will want to stay longer, thus spending more, provided that our neighbours do not create a mega IR with better fun and games.

So, is the decision to proceed with the casino a good economic policy, or a bad social policy? There are certain things that we can be certain about – job creation, a sizeable increment in money and investments, more flow of tourists etc. And we can even say that there will definitely be an increment in domestic conflicts, addiction and organized crimes. I am thankful that the government honestly admits this instead of hiding it under a deck of cards. This project will bring about an erosion of virtues, a distortion of values, and a corrosion of family lives in our society. This is undeniable. While this is highlighted in the debate, the corrosive effect, I feel, is not given due attention. Our policy will definitely have a ripple effect. Besides the social ills I have highlighted, the decision will also alter the way our future generation view moral issues and make ethical decisions. I fear that our future generation will choose material success over moral virtues. When this happens, we can expect our city to fall in the same way as the mighty Roman empire.

It is true that the Bible does not say explicitly "Thou shalt not gamble". But the law does say "Thou shalt not covet". Gambling breeds greed, and makes us lust for money that is not earned with our hard work. As a game of chance, it dismisses the doctrine of God's sovereignty.

A decision has been made. After writing four essays on this issue, I still say "casiNO". As Christians, we should stand united to voice our protest and concern. Yes, we will counsel the gambler. We will prepare our church leaders to deal with the problem. While we disapprove of the decision, we should nevertheless be willing to extend God's forgiveness and grace to those trapped by greed and gambling.

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