

Why building a casino is a bad policy

When I was a social worker in Geylang, one of the vices we saw that damaged homes and families was gambling. The gambling dens were unknown to the public. They were not visible. But the compulsive gambler knew where to find it. Even the police needed a tip off to raid these dens run and managed by organized crime groups. And in Geylang, the “Ah longs” run the show.

And soon, if pragmatism wins the day, gambling will be publicly opened. What was considered a vice and organized crime will soon be a legalized activity. Those compulsive Geylang gamblers can soon visit Sentosa and gamble with their heads held high.

It seems to me that we are blurring the line between crime and entertainment, vice and virtue. I will come to this moral argument later. But let me first deal with the current casino controversy logically. Is this a good social policy? Is this even a good economic policy?

Is building a casino a good social policy? Two things are sure to happen if a casino is built. Those who gamble will go on gambling. There is more reason not to quit from it. In addition, it will create a base of new gamblers, who in the past never gambled because the activity was associated with vice. But because gambling has now been redefined to mean simply an entertaining game of chance, these non-gamblers might be enticed to join the others. Then there is also the problem of addiction. By playing it big to open a casino in Singapore, we are making it harder for the addict to reform. At the same time, we are creating a new addiction for those who have stayed away from it so far.

Viewed purely from a social perspective, gambling has no positive impact on the society at large. When people congregate in the casino before the wheel of fortune and a desk decked with cards, their prime aim is to gamble and win. Everything else is secondary. People do not go there to relax and exchange views about life and work. They go there to gamble.

There are some who think that by legalizing gambling, we will drive out illegal gambling. This argument is simplistic. In fact, it will not happen. This line of argument makes the false assumption that people will prefer state approved casinos to the illegal dens run by organized crime groups. I would like to argue that the opposite is going to happen. We will see a reverse effect. If, as suggested, that the casino is going to be opened only to those with cash and credit to gamble, it will drive a lot of people into the smaller secret dens, where their smaller stakes will be accepted. Opening up a casino will inevitably open up the people’s mind on gambling. And if they cannot gamble at Sentosa, they will gamble at Geylang. The thought is actually quite frightening isn’t it? A state approved casino actually could actually be a stimulator to more illegal gambling. Opening a casino is a bad social policy.

But is it a good economic policy? After all, it is going to bring in the foreign dollars and create new jobs for many people. But is this where the economics begins or ends? Gambling is not like buying a perfume off a shelf. The perfume is a manufactured product. Every purchase will stimulate more research and production. But gambling is not like this. Every game won or lost is not going to stimulate any other economic activities. In fact, because the gambler loses more

than he wins, he loses also the opportunity cost of using the money for some meaningful capital investment. And since the casinos will be run by foreign players, is it not the case then that we will suffer a huge capital loss to overseas firms? Then there is also the possible problem of debts. Debts owed to casino waste the money that is earned, reduce consumer spending, increase the conflicts in the home; not to mention also that people who flee from their creditors live in fear, withdrawal and deceit.

Is it a good moral policy? Our government has so far done well in emphasizing the importance of family values and responsible social behaviours. By opening up gambling, are we not jeopardizing these moral foundations that have been crucial in our nation building? How good are we in making right ethical judgments? If our government takes the lead to decide on this moral issue basing on the philosophy of pragmatism, I fear that our people will also view all other moral issues with the same lens of pragmatism. Our people have never been taught moral philosophy in schools. We have never been given a classical liberal education to think broadly about ideas and their consequences. Gambling is an ethical issue that needs to be considered on moral grounds as well. It simply cannot be decided basing on economic or pragmatic grounds alone. Because it is an ethical issue, we must be matured enough to define concepts like truth, virtues, values, and consider the moral consequences stemming from our decisions. We may be matured in many other fields. But I am not so sure that we are matured in thinking clearly about issues pertaining to our morality.

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