

CALGARY HERALD

Gambling addicted governments enslaving others

Published: November 5, 2010 in the *Calgary Herald*
By Susan Martinuk

Most of us don't wake up each morning wondering what we can do to lose a lot of money today. But, apparently, a growing proportion of Canadians do and, thanks to our provincial governments, there are no shortage of opportunities.

So, fuelled by the insidious advertising message that with a little bit of luck they can beat the odds and live the good life, they head off to dump their cash at the local casino.

But everyone else knows that gamblers rarely win and, even if they do, the cost can be high. So why do our provincial governments continue to believe they can rake in huge profits from the gaming industry without incurring any long-term costs?

A just-released report from the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada (IMFC) states that it's a conflict of interest for governments to run gaming casinos for profit, while trying to promote a message of restraint and responsibility to gamblers. According to the report, *Government Gambling and Broken Families*, governments are in the business to make money, so "efforts to curb gambling of any kind will have little incentive to be successful."

Consequently, the report calls on governments to remove themselves from the gaming business and put a halt to any plans to expand gambling in their provinces.

Unfortunately, gaming has just one thing to offer and it's the one thing that governments so desperately want -- profits. Statistics Canada reports that net gambling revenues increased dramatically over the past two decades as cash-addicted (and cash-strapped) governments refitted their laws to allow gaming casinos and to put video slot machines in bars. Gambling net revenues grew from \$2.73 billion in 1992 to a whopping \$13.75 billion in 2009.

In 2008, governments gained an average revenue of \$528 per person (18 and over). That number was highest in Saskatchewan, where individuals contributed an average of \$825 per person.

Despite the windfall, revenues have flattened since 2005 so governments are looking for more ways to expand their revenue base. As of September, B.C.,

Ontario and Prince Edward Island are allowing Internet gambling. According to the report, the Ontario government estimated that Ontarians were spending up to \$400 million per year on private, online gaming sites and that was \$400 million that was slipping through their hands. Hence, online gambling is now legal and the government is now claiming its share of those revenues.

In a truly free society, there's nothing wrong with building casinos and giving the public the opportunity to choose whether or not they want to waste their time and money. It's called individual responsibility. But, the problem is, those who are most addicted to gaming are the least able to make responsible decisions.

The report stats that 3.2 per cent of Canada's adult population (18 and over) has a gambling problem. But another five to 10 others are directly affected by the behaviour of each problem gambler. That means the real number is closer to 12 to 25 per cent of our population. That means the government is fuelling the negative social behaviours of one in eight people; maybe even as much as one in four.

Government gambling isn't just a tax on stupidity; it really is, as they say, a tax on the poor. Low-income households (making less than \$20,000/year) spent more than twice as much on gambling as high-income families (making more than \$80,000/year).

The Hollywood version of casino gambling is one of rich men in tuxedos playing high stakes blackjack and sipping Scotch as casino owners anxiously wait to see if some high roller is going to break the casino. But the reality of casino gambling is poor people sitting at VLTs and sipping beer while governments greedily rake in the winnings.

Seduced by big money, governments have tried for too long to play both ends of the stick -- to discourage irresponsible gambling while exploiting casino gambling for their own profit. But the social impact of gambling on families, while difficult to quantify, is growing, and that's why this report wisely calls on governments to get out of the gambling business.

Sadly, it's not enough for society to have to help those addicted to gambling. We also have to be on the watch for governments with the same addiction.