



Fair play for gambling?

The Parliament Magazine organised a breakfast discussion in parliament on March 5 which brought together players from across the gambling debate

Many of us like a flutter from time to time and see little harm in the occasional bet. But few of those who part with their cash will be aware of the confusion which currently exists when it comes to gambling services. Fewer still will know that, despite court rulings to the contrary, a number of Europe's capitals continue to restrict access to their national gaming and gambling markets. In an effort to shed some light on the issue, the Parliament Magazine organised a breakfast discussion in parliament on March 5 which brought together players from across the debate.

One of the speakers at the 'fair play for gambling' event was professor Siegbert Alber, former MEP (1977-99) and advocate-general at the European court of justice (ECJ). As gambling activities are traditionally regulated at member state level, the European commission has never proposed any common EU-wide rules for their regulation. The exclusion of gambling from the EU's services directive, though, has led

to complaints from private operators about access to national markets. Alber, a former German MP, was critical of the European commission for refusing to become involved in efforts to clarify gambling's legal status, saying, "It is a pity the commission does not have the courage to propose rules in this sector but would rather wait for ECJ rulings". He said there was currently a backlog of ten such cases which are currently awaiting judgment (the first of which is due in May).

UK centre-right MEP Malcolm Harbour, who chaired the breakfast discussion, said he supported the idea of an impact assessment exercise and further research being carried out on the possible consequences of liberalisation of the gambling market. He said, "I would also urge the commission and member states to make some progress on this issue." His party colleague, Emmanouil Angelakas, meanwhile, said he would press for the creation of a parliamentary intergroup



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or working group to study "all aspects" of the issue after June's European elections. The Greek MEP – who said he never gambles and, indeed, dislikes such activity – pointed out that there is currently a "big divide" between member states regarding the status of online gambling, with 13 countries having a free market, seven where it is state controlled and one which has a private monopoly. Twenty permit online gambling while seven member states do not. "Gambling is a specific service and has nothing to do with other financial services. The profits of

online gambling should be used for social activities and for the benefit of society," he told the 50-strong audience.

Another keynote speaker, Sigrid Ligné, secretary general of the Brussels-based European Gaming and Betting Association, called for a European code of conduct to help regulate the industry. She said, "There should be some sort of regulation and I think the best option is to do it at EU level. The problem is that there is no momentum and nor does there appear to be any consensus in the European parliament. We are fed up with court rulings but, if necessary, will continue to defend our position in the courts."

Tjeerd Veenstra, director of the executive board of De Lotto, presented the position of European lotteries. He agreed that the debate is best kept out of the courts, saying he had represented his company, De Lotto, in no less than 22 court cases in the Netherlands. "I have to admit that I feel sometimes tired and fed up. We won them all but it (the court action) seems to continue for ever." He

added, "We have to take into account that online gambling creates specific risks for vulnerable consumers and requires special attention with regard to crime and fraud. Gambling, without proper and strict governmental regulation, easily develops into a pure money machine that attracts naturally all kind of people who want to have access to that easy money."

During a question and answer session, Konstantinos Maragkakis from Stanleybet International, said, "Prejudice and pre-conceived ideas," in the current discussion are clouding understanding of the issues around the regulation of online gambling. He reiterated the differences between the idea of a liberalised market as compared to a regulated market denying that a more open arrangement would create a "free for all" or dry up streams of revenue for state lottery projects saying it is "an issue of policies not control." He also rebuffed allegations that, "private companies are all bad," claiming that they often showed great integrity in this field, or that the current moves could lead to an increase in match fixing, citing the UK as an excellent example of a well regulated, open market. "I challenge anyone to produce a case where a properly regulated operator has behaved without integrity. This should be an issue of policy, not state control" His comments were echoed by Stanleybet's deputy director-general Adrian Morris who said there was a clear need for "more data on the size and structure of the gambling market" across Europe. Morris said he doubted whether opening up national markets to gambling would see member state monopolies lose any significant revenues. "[National] lotteries and sports betting are different markets, I doubt there would be a lot of revenue lost" by national monopolies. Figures from British research in 2006 seem to back up the argument that opening up national betting markets does not reduce the amount of money returned to society by national lottery operators. Using the UK as an example, figures show that 41 per cent of income is channelled back into good causes compared to an average of 26 per cent worldwide. ★



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