

From FY 2005 BUDGET DEBATE ROUNDUP SPEECH

Putting the debate on the casino in perspective

Besides ensuring a conducive overall environment for businesses, we will continue to promote in a more focused way certain key and promising sectors of our economy. Tourism is one such sector, and the proposed integrated resort, including possibly a casino, is part of our overall set of initiatives to promote tourism. The issue of whether we should build such an Integrated Resort has generated vigorous and sometimes emotional debate, certainly passionate debate, among Singaporeans. It is good that so many people are so actively engaged in this debate. It shows that Singaporeans care for the issues that affect our economy and our society, and that they care deeply enough to want to speak up and be heard. This is what an active citizenry is about.

But an active citizenry does not mean the Government abdicating its responsibility. The Government has been elected and entrusted by the citizens to decide on issues and safeguard the long-term interests of Singapore. It will pay careful heed to the various views expressed, especially views expressed in this House, and it will take them into consideration before arriving at a decision.

But the Government cannot govern by referendum. The casino is not an issue of national survival or sovereignty that deserves to be settled by a referendum, as Dr Loo Choon Yong suggested. Nor is it an issue of conscience or fundamental principle like abortion or organ transplantation, because we already have many forms of legal gambling in Singapore. So there is no need for a free vote in Parliament, which Mr Tan Soo Khoo has suggested. It is a policy matter - whether to allow an additional outlet for gambling, and to weigh the pros and cons to decide whether the economic benefit to Singapore of doing so outweighs the social costs. Hence, I said in the Budget speech that this is an issue that the Cabinet will decide, after hearing all the views that have been expressed and studying the concept proposals submitted by the interested bidders.

We have received a total of 19 proposals, and we will make a decision in 4-6 weeks after studying the proposals carefully.

Let me put the issue in perspective. The casino will neither be the panacea to the challenges which are facing us - boosting growth, creating jobs, or raising revenues - nor will we allow it to undermine the foundations on which Singapore has been built and which we have come to stand for - hard work, strong families, safe, secure and a wholesome environment. Nobody can predict exactly how things will turn out. But this should not paralyse us from making a decision one way or the other. We must be willing to push on, and let the results speak for themselves. This is the approach we take to all our major decisions, not just on the casino - be guided by facts; assess costs and benefits, both social and economic, tangible and intangible; take a holistic approach; adopt a long-term perspective; not to be swayed by emotion or populism; then exercise judgment; and in good time, with due deliberation, make a decision and implement it well.