

**SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, YOUTH AND SPORTS, AND SECOND MINISTER FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY, DR VIVIAN BALAKRISHNAN, ON INTEGRATED RESORT ON MONDAY, 18 APRIL 2005 AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE**

**Introduction**

Over the past one year, the Integrated Resort (IR) has weighed very heavily on my mind and conscience. I share all of the anxieties and discomfort that many Singaporeans have expressed so candidly and sincerely. The intense passionate debate shows that Singaporeans care for this country, care for our families and care for each other.

2 All forms of gambling have the potential to destroy the lives of those who become addicted. This is a clear and present danger. The MCYS study showed that 2.1% of our population may be at risk of addiction. However, for those individuals trapped by addiction, that statistic is meaningless. For them and their families, it may as well be 100%. Every Singaporean destroyed by gambling is one too many. It is not possible to put a dollar value on one life or one family's happiness.

3 At the end of the day, I had to be sure that, on balance, our society, as a whole, could withstand the social impact, and that we were not going to make things worse overall.

4 What became clear to me is that banning a casino is not the solution.

5 Firstly, many Singaporeans already gamble and have easy access to casinos. Almost 6 out of 10 Singaporeans (58%) have gambled at least once in the past 12 months. Around 40% gamble regularly at least once a week. They will have even more options as new mega casinos are built in our neighbouring countries. A 'prohibitionist' approach is not realistic in this day and age. If we ban casinos altogether, we would only end up missing the economic benefits, without achieving any insulation against casinos. We would still have to pay the social costs. Worse, we would not have any ability to control or regulate these casinos at our doorsteps.

6 Secondly, and more importantly, not all Singaporeans are vulnerable. While many Singaporeans participate in gambling, the vast majority do not develop problems. Only a minority may be at risk of gambling addiction. My Ministry's study found that 2.1% of Singaporeans belong to this group. This

figure is not a surprise to us. It is comparable to Hong Kong (1.9%) and Macau (1.8%), which are both majority-Chinese urban societies, just like us. Hong Kong does not have a casino, whilst Macau has many casinos. Yet the prevalence is practically identical. It is not clear how many more in Singapore would gamble just because a casino is set up locally, especially when we have imposed onerous entry restrictions.

7 What is clear is that there will always be a vulnerable segment of the population. We need to focus on this group at risk. We will implement specific targeted measures to identify, treat and mitigate the negative social impact on this group. We will therefore have both generic measures to deal with all forms of gambling as well as specific measures for the casinos within the IRs.

8 Using this approach, I believe Singapore can reap the benefits of the integrated resorts with properly regulated casinos, whilst dealing with problem gambling in the minority of our population who are already exposed anyway.

### **National Framework on Gambling**

9 My Ministry, together with MOH and MHA, is developing a national framework to address problem gambling. The national framework on gambling will include:

- First, public education on problem gambling;
- Second, counselling and support services at the community level;
- Third, professional medical treatment for compulsive gamblers;
- Fourth, research on gambling;
- Fifth, setting up a national council on gambling;
- And sixth, establishing a strict regulatory and enforcement regime

10 The Minister for Home Affairs will speak more about the regulatory and enforcement regime. Let me elaborate on the others.

#### *Increase public education*

11 Our most immediate task is to raise public awareness on problem gambling. In this respect, the healthy debate we have been having has been very useful. It has put the spot light on the dangers of problem gambling. It will help prevent more people from falling into this at-risk group. It is much better to have a well informed population capable of exercising responsible choices, rather than to hope that people will not gamble because of lack of opportunity.

#### *Strengthen community partnership*

12 Our community partners and voluntary welfare organisations have a

crucial role to play.

13 We have asked all our 36 family service centres (FSCs) and 5 CDCs to provide more information on gambling addiction to the public. Staff at the FSCs and CDCs will be trained to check for compulsive gambling symptoms among their clients. If they detect a significant gambling problem, they will refer the gambler to specialised services. The FSCs will also provide counselling and basic advice.

#### *Specialised treatment services*

14 The Community Addictions Management Programme (or CAMP) at the Institute of Mental Health currently provides treatment and counselling for gambling addiction. Their team comprises psychiatrists and psychologists. They will expand their programmes. They will also offer other forms of counselling and support that compulsive gamblers may need such as financial counselling. The Minister for Health will elaborate on CAMP's plans.

15 MCYS and NCSS will also work with 1 or 2 family service centres or counselling centres to provide specialised intervention services and programmes at the community level. They will handle referral cases from other family service centres or counselling centres. They will also provide step-down care for stabilised cases from CAMP. Social workers will work with the gamblers and their families to deal with their addiction.

16 They will also facilitate Gamblers' Anonymous support groups, akin to Alcoholic Anonymous. Some of these groups will begin in CAMP, but as the members improve and progress, they could carry on at the specialist family service or counselling centres.

17 Both CAMP and these specialist agencies will set up and jointly operate a hotline for gamblers and their families. Anyone who feels they need help can call the hotline.

#### *Research on gambling*

18 MCYS' recent study is our first national scale study on gambling prevalence and problem gambling. We will repeat this study at regular intervals to monitor the trends in gambling in Singapore. Such research will help us implement and fine-tune programmes and services.

#### *National Council on Gambling*

19 We will set up a National Council on Gambling this year to advise the Ministry on public education programmes for problem gambling; to allocate funding for preventive and rehabilitative programmes initiated by the social service sector; to coordinate with CAMP on the treatment programmes for gambling addicts and to assess the overall effectiveness of the treatment, counselling and support programmes.

20 The Council will have some 10 to 12 members with expertise and experience in public communications, counselling, and rehabilitative treatment and services. The members will be appointed by MCYS for a two-year term. I hope that some social leaders who have worked so hard to highlight the dangers of problem gambling will consider serving on this council. We will need their insights and value their contributions.

21 Overall, our preliminary estimate is that these initiatives could incur a start-up cost of \$20m and an annual recurrent cost of about \$40m . This includes the cost of the regulatory agency as well as the expansion of CAMP.

***Stringent social safeguards for the casino***

22 This national framework will apply to all forms of gambling. Let me now focus on the casino specifically.

23 The project team studying the potential development of the IRs visited several major jurisdictions with casinos including Nevada, Bahamas, Macau, Australia and London. We held discussions with ministers, policy makers, regulators and research bodies in these countries. We also studied carefully their social safeguards, and the legislation and regulations needed to implement them.

24 Let me assure the House that MCYS has put together a comprehensive set of social safeguards -- safeguards that are more stringent than those in many other jurisdictions; safeguards which we will enforce strictly. I want to categorically state that we will not compromise on our social safeguards at any point in time, just to improve the economic viability of the casino. I will highlight four key safeguards.

25 We will impose a **casino entry levy on all Citizens and Permanent Residents**. The levy will be \$100 per day or \$2,000 for annual membership. The levy sends out a clear message: Gambling is an expense. Each time you pay to enter or show your membership card, we want to remind you that gambling is not a means to make a living. At \$100 per day, the levy will also discourage impulse gambling.

26 Secondly, we will empower spouses and family members to exclude persons with gambling problems. We know of many jurisdictions which require or encourage casinos to implement self-exclusion measures where a compulsive

gambler can ask a casino to bar him or her from entering it. We will have such a measure. But by itself, we know this is not sufficient. Compulsive gamblers are addicts and as such, few have the willpower, or even the awareness, to stop.

27 This is why we will be the only major jurisdiction apart from South Australia which will empower family members to exclude other family members from the casino. MCYS will consult the family sector on how best to operationalise such an exclusion scheme.

28 In addition, we will exclude from the casino persons receiving publicly funded social assistance programmes, bankrupts, and those with poor credit records.

29 We will enact legislation to implement these exclusion measures. MHA will set up the casino regulatory agency. Rest assured that we will enforce these measures.

30 Thirdly, we will prohibit extension of credit to residents who gamble in the casinos. Future earnings should not be used for gambling. The casino operator will not be allowed to accept credit card and post-dated cheques, nor will they be permitted to extend credit to local residents. The only exception would be for resident premium players. But to qualify as one, the patron would have to deposit no less than \$100,000 upfront with the casino.

31 Finally, we will prohibit any form of advertising on the casino in our local mass media. We do not want advertisements to promote gambling. If you do gamble, never forget that it is an expense. It should never come ahead of the more important needs of your family.

## **Conclusion**

32 Sir, the reality today is that many Singaporeans do gamble. Many gamble in casinos nearby and on cruise ships. Many also gamble on sports, horse racing, 4D, Toto, and many other gambling products. Fortunately, most Singaporeans do not develop problems with gambling. Most Singaporeans are able to exercise self restraint and fulfil their responsibilities to their families.

33 Nevertheless, there have been tragic instances where families have been ruined or lives cast away because of gambling addiction. We acknowledge this and the Government is therefore committed to specifically identifying and helping these gambling addicts and their families.

34 Sir, we are not embarking on this IR project lightly or blindly. We will put in place a national framework to deal with problem gambling. We will impose stringent social safeguards for the casino. We will monitor and enforce these

safeguards strictly. We will also commit the necessary resources to help the more vulnerable members of our society.