



Wolfville Area Interchurch Council

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The Honourable John F. Hamm, M.D., M.L.A.
Premier of Nova Scotia
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Dear Dr. Hamm,

The Wolfville and Area Inter-Church Council which consists of eight member churches and parishes is united in an appeal to you to do away with Video Lottery Terminals. Your recent declaration to reduce their number is welcome, but we feel it does not go far enough.

In 1998 Church leaders in Nova Scotia joined in a statement of concern about the menace of the gambling industry. They presented that statement to you that included a request for limitations on VLTs, and research on the social and human costs of gambling in Nova Scotia. Neither of those requests has been answered.

We feel strongly that the estimates of gambling profits are an illusion. They do not outweigh the social and economic costs generated by VLT gambling, including higher health care, expenses of justice and social service departments, and loss of productivity. Would that we had more data on the family breakups and people taking their own lives because of VLT addictions. However, the existing evidence and the stories of those hurt by gambling addictions suffice to convince us that the now is the time for action.

What has been discovered is that problem gamblers and those at risk for problem gambling contribute 40% of the Nova Scotia government's more than \$182 million take from the industry. 50,000 Nova Scotians are now identified as being problem gamblers or at risk of problem gambling. Each problem gambler negatively affects between 10 and 17 other people. That works out to roughly half of our population being negatively affected by job loss, divorce, suicide, bankruptcy, poor physical and mental health, arrest and incarceration, which resulted from gambling addiction. *"VLTs are the gaming activity most associated with problem gambling. ... Statistics Canada recently reported that 25% of those playing VLTs were at risk for problem gambling, or already were problem gamblers. ... VLT gambling exhibits the highest levels of problem gambling in relation to time, money, and other forms of gambling [and has] the highest rate of self-reported problem development compared to any other form of gambling available in Nova Scotia."* (Reference: *The Costs and Benefits of Gaming*, GPI Atlantic, July 2004.) Eliminating VLTs will thus result in a dramatic reduction in harm, despite the continued existence of other forms of gambling in the province.

Contrary to previous petitions, the Government of Nova Scotia effectively decided to allow the gambling industry itself to determine the shape of gambling policies and practices in Nova Scotia. At the very least there should have been an independent agency to regulate gambling in our province. Then we would not have reached this sorry state. The plebiscite held in King's County in which several communities voted to prohibit VLTs was ignored by the provincial government.

A number of myths and misperceptions about VLTs help to keep this scourge in our province. We have already debunked the myth that VLTs generate net revenue for the province. Some other myths are:

1. *"The problem is the misuse of VLTs by a small number. Cars are not taken off the road because some people drive irresponsibly. Alcohol isn't banned because some people become addicted. Banning VLTs won't address the real problem."*

The reality is that VLTs have no function other than to remove wealth from the public and redistribute it to businesses and government. They serve no useful social, practical or educational purpose. More importantly, they are designed to take advantage of human psychology, for example, using variable-ratio reinforcement schedules to maximize the users' tendency to play. The designers of these machines optimize the speed of play, visual and audio effects, and payoff schedules to manipulate people into continuing to play. By colluding with this process, the government is engaging in psychological warfare against its citizens. While people who are addicted to gambling may well find other ways of engaging their addiction, eliminating VLTs will remove the most damaging form.

2. *“Removing VLTs will create hardship for businesses and not-for-profit groups.”*

If a business has to engage in practices that are destructive to the community, and cannot continue without doing this, then either the business is not viable or it needs a new business plan. Not-for-profit groups whose mission is to serve the community (not to destroy it) can find other sources of donations and grants.

3. *“If VLTs are banned, the gambling will go underground and will support organized crime. This won't solve the problem. It's better that the government regulate it.”*

There are two problems with this statement. One, the idea that we set our public agenda based on what “organized crime” does, is ridiculous. By that logic we would have government brothels and the NSLC would be selling heroin. Socially damaging activities need to be made illegal. Two, by making this practice legal, the government gives it its moral approval, and makes it more likely that citizens will encounter and try the machines. The experience in South Carolina, where they removed 34,000 VLTs overnight, is that there are only a few hundred illegal VLTs now operating in the state, which is a massive reduction in harm.

We are committed to following the will of God as revealed to us. We do feel a responsibility for our neighbours and for the well being of the community as a whole. Thus we are led to speak out at this time. We repeat an earlier statement that casinos and VLTs are “changing our province's cultural, social, and economic life in a manner that is detrimental to the majority of our people.” (Church Media Release, 24 October 1994).

We feel that our government should first and foremost protect the citizens of Nova Scotia and that this duty extends to bringing to an end their victimization through gambling.

Sincerely,

Wolfville Area Inter-church Council

Per: N.P. Cloghesy
Vice-President

April 15, 2005

NPC/

CC/ David Morse, M.L.A.; Mark Parent, M.L.A.; Leo Glavine, M.L.A.; Chronicle-Herald; Advertiser