

THE PROVINCES

THE PRAIRIES

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IN CALGARY

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Do you want VLTs? Yes or no?

When I was a little boy in Ottawa, Illinois (not to be confused with that political theme park on the Rideau Canal), my grandfather was a cashier in an illegal casino. In my mind's eye I can still see the green baize tables. I thought gambling must be good because that was how Grandpa got the silver dollars he gave me. But I grew up and learned that gambling is a complicated issue.

Albertans are struggling with the complexities as they approach the municipal elections scheduled for Oct. 19. About 70 per cent of voters will face plebiscites asking them to vote yes or no to a question similar to Calgary's: "Should the City of Calgary request that the Provincial Government take appropriate action to remove all video lottery terminals from our city?"

Of the many arguments put forward by the no side, the most powerful involves freedom of choice. Gambling, it is said, is a personal decision, and government should stay out of it. Whether or not they realize it, those who argue this way are invoking the "one very simple principle" asserted by John Stuart Mill in the first chapter of *On Liberty*, that the only justification for government restricting individual choice is "to prevent harm to others."

Mill's philosophy, however, was more subtle. "Fornication," he wrote later in his essay, "must be tolerated, and so must gambling; but should a person be free to be a pimp, or to keep a gambling house?" His answer was a qualified no.

To use modern terms, he was drawing a distinction between criminalization and commercialization. Although he regarded it as futile and repressive to criminalize victimless crimes, he was also opposed to commercializing them. Because the purveyors of liquor, drugs, sex and gambling have financial motives to promote vice, not just to supply the demand for it, Mill thought that government regulation short of prohibition is justified, although the precise form of regulation is a matter of practical judgment on which reasonable people may differ.

In this instance, the proposed regulation would remove video lottery terminals (VLTs) from the city altogether, even though this is not what the yes side really wanted. What raised Albertans' ire against VLTs was not so much their presence in casinos as their proliferation in hotels, bars and restaurants, where they make gambling easy and convenient. The provincial government, however, let it be known that it would not honour the results of a plebiscite that excluded casinos. It would heed only the answer to an all-or-nothing question: VLTs in the city, yes or no?

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Ralph Klein's government, it must be said, is in the position of Mill's pimp. The Alberta treasury collects more from gambling than it does from oil royalties and wants nothing to disrupt the cash flow. By demanding an all-or-nothing question, it forestalled a question on removing VLTs from hotels, bars and restaurants, which polling data indicate would almost certainly have passed. A vote on removing VLTs from cities is less certain to succeed, at least in Calgary and Edmonton.

However, predicting the outcome is difficult at the moment. The most recent poll showed 54 per cent opposed to removal of VLTs from Calgary, but that does not mean the proposition will be defeated on election day. Turnout in the last municipal election was only 24 per cent, and previous turnouts never exceeded 50 per cent. Under such conditions, an aroused minority can triumph over a less motivated majority; and in this contest, the foes of VLTs are probably more intense than the supporters.

I intend to vote yes, but not because it will put an end to gambling (it won't) or because I favour total prohibition (I don't). Forms of gambling other than VLTs will not be affected by a yes vote, and VLTs will still exist in municipalities that have not voted for their removal. So why vote yes? Because it is a way to tell the provincial government that it has gone too far, that it has made gambling too easy and has become too accustomed to spending the revenue that gambling produces.

Although the latter point is particularly important, it has received hardly any public discussion. In order to counteract the hypertrophic growth of government, politicians should be required to get citizens' approval for the taxes they wish to levy and spend. Gambling is attractive to politicians because, like deficit financing, it seems to circumvent the necessity of levying unpopular taxes. But just as deficit spending had to come to an end, so will reliance upon gambling, because by giving politicians access to easy money it will eventually impose greater costs upon the polity than it raises in revenue.

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