

We must thank the noble Lord, Lord Browne of Belmont, for keeping this matter before us. He and other Lords who've contributed to this important debate are veterans in a cause which is too often laughed off by those who consider those who raise the concerns we've been hearing as cranks, do-gooders or zealots. In the New Testament there's a story about a woman who goes on knocking at the door of a judge in her demand for justice until, finally (though grudgingly), worn out by her persistence, he lets her in and hears her case. It would be apposite to think of these proceedings as the parable of the importunate noble in the hope that soon, please God soon, we may at last sense a greater openness to the issues that weigh so heavily upon us.

It's only a couple of weeks since we debated Fixed Odds Betting terminals. Most speakers in that debate were mystified by the news that the Government would be conducting a consultation in order to reach a decision about the amount of money that could be staked on those machines. We felt that any number of consultations had taken place in the fairly recent past and failed to understand the particular nature of this one. A figure between £2 and £50 would emerge and speakers expressed the hope it would be at the lower end of this scale. So let me begin my remarks by asking the government what progress they have made on this matter and when they feel they'll be able to announce the outcomes of the consultation as well as the level set for the stakes.

And I begin there and with that question for a reason. In March 2014, the noble Lord, Lord Browne of Belmont was persuaded to withdraw his amendment to the Gambling, Licensing and Advertising Bill with an assurance that they would bring forward non-statutory proposals for a Multi-Operator Self Exclusion scheme. The government certainly didn't give this a very high priority. An undertaking was given that it would appear before the end of this year. Those goalposts have now been shifted again and the summer of next year is now being spoken of. Can the noble Lord the Minister throw some light on this? And if it's true, can he tell us whether we can have greater confidence in the latest projected date than in previous ones? And why exactly is it taking so long?

The on-line self-exclusion proposal is not by any means a solution to the problem facing us. At the very least, we should find a way to enable someone wishing to end their on-line gambling to have a one-stop route to cutting out of all on-line sites whether operating under a Gambling Commission license or not. Even that, of course, is nowhere near enough. I have worked in the field of

addiction long enough to know that the hardest thing of all for anyone in this situation is to be sufficiently self-motivated to take such an action in the first place. The very nature of addictive behaviour is the over-riding of self-determination where one's will is dulled and overwhelmed by habit and where realism gives way to fantasy. It's a very big ask to expect such people to opt for even a well-constructed self-exclusion scheme. Like asking an alcoholic to give up drinking.

And we're told that there are 400,000 problem gamblers with four times that figure at risk of falling into the same category. Their habits are difficult to detect. Many of them are children. The plea is made to protect children from being groomed for the gambling industry with games that feature the likes of Peter Pan and Sherlock Holmes. The noble Lord the Minister is only too aware of recent debates on how best to protect children from the dangers of the internet. He will certainly be smacking his lips at the prospect of debating an amendment to the Bill currently before the House in the name of the Baronesses Kidron and Hardy. It's on the question of child-friendly design in the use of the internet – “a concept that started to emerge in services where kids spent a considerable amount of time [on social media] and there was concern that they would be exposed. Initially, that concern was primarily about grooming for sexual exploitation but it became about exposure to all kinds of harms and criminals.” [Baroness Shields: Growing up with the Internet: page 61, para 268]. In the name of joined up thinking, I would urge the government to look at these proposals and also those relating to age-verification with a view to bringing them into play to help us deal with children at risk from gambling. Perhaps the noble Lord the minister can give us some assurance on this matter too.

It is a fact universally acknowledged that, by its very nature, gambling will produce victims. Experts differ on numbers but, as already mentioned, we are here speaking of hundreds of thousands. Eventually, treatment regimes will be needed to help with their mental and physical health. That is, they will be a charge on our Health services. In acknowledging this, I wonder whether the government could consider imposing a levy on the gambling industry to meet these costs. The present voluntary subscription Gamble Aware (£8m; i.e. less than 0.1% of the gambling industry's £13.8bn) is derisory. A levy could more adequately help Gamble Aware do its work and even generate finance that could be hypothecated as a direct contribution to NHS budgets. Will the minister tell us whether the government would agree with this reasoning and be led to consider such a levy? If not, why not?

My colleague Tom Watson has recently pointed up the gross negligence of 888 that led to a record fine of £7.8m and the mistreatment of 7,000 customers whose efforts to ban themselves from the site were ignored. And what about the staggering salary of Diane Coates, co-CEO of Bet365. Her £199million, that's 25 times the amount given to Gambling Aware and four hundred times the salary of the Vice Chancellor of Bath University currently in the news. Must the gambling industry be given the freedom to write its own rules, to regulate its own activities, even though there is verifiable evidence of the potential harm that these activities can result in?

There is so much to say. Noble Lords have raised a number of points. And they have made us all aware that, far from being cranks, do-gooders or zealots, they care deeply about the well-being of our citizens and the communities they live in. I look forward to hearing a recognition of this concern and a serious engagement with the issues raised in this most welcome debate.