

# Professor Peter Collins

The effects of reducing the stake on a B2  
machine in UK betting shops

# What we asked ? What we answered.

- QUESTION: Can robust evidence be assembled assessed which would answer, more or less clearly, the question: “what should the Government do about the maximum permitted stake on FOBTs in betting shops?”
- ANSWER: Yes, such evidence can be assembled
- It shows clearly that the Government should now substantially reduce the present maximum stake to something closer to £10 in order to afford significant protection to a fairly small but not negligible number of vulnerable people who presently play FOBTs
- In particular it will more than halve exposure to large losses amongst those identified as vulnerable to being or becoming problem gamblers
- And furnish substantial protection for many (especially the young) who may play FOBTs in the future

# Why did we only focus on this question?

- In 2015, in declining the Local Authorities' request for a stake reduction, it was about this question that the Government said that what it needed was robust evidence
- It is the high stakes permitted to FOBT players in betting shops which is seen to be the most egregiously anomalous feature of the UK Gambling scene and the one which has generated the most public alarm as reported in the media
- We were not asked, nor had the resources, to review the whole regulatory environment in relation to harm minimisation, including B1 and B3 machines, speed of play, house advantage, scratch-cards and, above all, online gambling
- We compared play at £50 and £10 limits because £50 is the effective max at present and £10 seems a reasonable number for measuring a "substantial reduction" without eliminating B3 machines altogether
- Our methodology could, however, be appropriately and effectively applied to all any proposed number for max stake as well as many other aspects of gambling law and regulation, including all those mentioned above

# How did we reach these conclusion about maximum stakes for FOBTs

- We built a cumulative case bringing together evidence from regular FOBT players, those who had worked in betting shops and for bookmakers, problem gambler treatment professionals, the general public, and
- Arranged simulations of actual FOBT play for two sessions of 20 min play with maximum stakes, first of £50, then of £10 by 58 regular FOBT players. 17 of these regular players tested as vulnerable on our double measure of vulnerability, i.e. they were BOTH at moderate or high risk (on PGSI) AND had sometimes or often thought they should give up or cut down on gambling
- We focussed on measuring by how much people identified as at risk of being or becoming problem gamblers would reduce their exposure to large, rapid losses if the max stakes were reduced from £50 to £10
- We focussed on vulnerability to large losses (VLL) and not cost of playing time per hour) because we thought the former the more relevant factor associated with gambling-related harm, including anti-social behaviours in gambling venues
- Though each individual item of evidence is fallible in different ways, we did our best to correct for sources of fallibility and then sought to see whether the evidence from different sources converged or diverged
- They converged overwhelmingly on the conclusion that maximum stakes on FOBTs should be substantially reduced in the interests of protecting the vulnerable (as soon as possible)

# Would this harm-reduction benefit be outweighed by diminution of player enjoyment?

We think not because:

- Two thirds of players never stake more than £10 and only 7% regularly stake more than £30
- 37 out of 58 *regular players* thought the stakes should be substantially reduced to help the vulnerable including some of those who would themselves prefer to play for higher stakes
- Most said they didn't notice much difference in enjoyment between playing with a max stake of £10; only a few said it diminished their enjoyment (but not their absorption); a couple even said they found it less stressful playing for the lower stake
- We thought that people who sometimes or often thought they should cut down or give up playing FOBTs might welcome a max stake reduction in the same way as some smokers welcomed the ban on smoking in public places

# Possible objections and answers to objections

- Objection 1: Simulations are unrealistic
- Answer: 97% reported that they played the simulations as they would have played in a betting shop; almost all in fact played on the simulation in accordance with what they has said was their typical staking behaviour in a questionnaire, administered well before they knew they were going to do simulations; levels of absorption were very high on both simulations
- Objection 2: The samples should be bigger and more representative
- Answer: This would certainly be desirable but given the degree of convergence of the different groups sampled, the combined evidence from the actual groups sampled is already overwhelming
- Objection 3: There are other things govt could do which might more substantially reduce gambling-related harm
- Answer: True, but that's no reason for not doing this now

# Further Objection

- Objection: It's funded by Bacta so it can't be trusted to be either honest or accurate
- (Unworthy and cynical) answer: GambleAware/Gamcare/The Gambling Commission and the Strategy Board etc and the research they commission are all funded by the industry through donations and licence fees where the largest contributions come from bookmakers
- Non- cynical answer: all the evidence is publicly available for re-analysis and the data-gathering processes are repeatable so the conclusions are publicly corrigible
- Though advocates take sides this does not necessarily invalidate the arguments and evidence they adduce and often this proves much more convincing to the judge and jury than the arguments of the equally partisan opposition

# Should the Government Wait?

- The onus is now on those who reject the conclusion that a substantial stake reduction would lead to harm reduction to refute our conclusions.
- Meanwhile Government should reduce maximum stakes pending such rebuttal
- Thereby going some way to meet the wishes of the two thirds of people who know about machine gambling in betting shops and think it should be banned completely
- “Waiting” will be perceived as a “long-grass” ruse adopted in response to undue, improper and even corrupt pressure from the bookmakers
- Or simply as evidence of stupidity and incompetence