

THE WINDSOR STAR

Province exploiting gamblers

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Yeah, right. When pigs fly. Provincial governments should get out of gambling, the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada said last week.

What government worth the name gives up truckloads of easy cash?

Actually, Nova Scotia just did. It rejected getting into online gambling. Newfoundland did, too.

Nova Scotia's finance minister, Graham Steele, originally endorsed the idea. Like Ontario, his province faces a big deficit.

Then he read the research.

"The thing that struck me," he told *The Globe and Mail*, "was the idea that if we participated in online gambling, we would get people into gambling who otherwise wouldn't."

It was "the right thing to do," he said.

Wow. I'm dumbfounded. A government willing to give up gambling riches to do the right thing.

Newfoundland Premier Danny Williams, whose province also originally supported online gambling and also faces a big deficit, now says he opposes it, too. He acknowledged the argument for it: People are going to gamble online anyway. Why not get a piece of it? Then he said no.

"That may be the case," he told the media, "but I don't think we should promote it. I know personally of the stories of hardship, of financial ruin, of death, and it hits very hard."

Newfoundland doesn't have to "scratch and claw" for every penny, he said. But, apparently, Ontario does.

This is the province of Premier Dad, the "family values" premier who will take away your car if you have .05 blood alcohol even though the legal limit is .08, where cellphones are banned while driving and junk food has been taken out of schools.

Yet we're going to sponsor online gambling.

Apparently, it's possible to suck and blow at the same time.

With the province's budget deficit at \$19.7 billion and the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation's profit falling, the government had to act, Finance Minister Dwight Duncan

said in announcing online gambling late last summer. The government needs the money, and it needs the OLG to be able to compete to get that money.

It doesn't get more crass than that. And some experts question whether the government can even compete with the more than 2,000 sites already operating from other countries. The market is reported to be saturated, and the existing sites well-established, with fewer regulations, lower fees and more lucrative incentives.

If the government can't lure existing online gamblers to its site, where will it get customers?

The worry is that it will attract people who have never gambled online because they'll think that a site sponsored by the government is safer and more acceptable.

The government says it will provide a more responsible site. But there are plenty of examples of the government already failing to protect people in its casinos.

Gambling addicts register to have themselves excluded from casinos and then walk back in. And after these new online gamblers get hooked, they'll probably try other sites.

Other countries that got into online gambling for the same reasons as Ontario now have the highest rates of online gambling in the world and a lot more problems related to it.

All that really matters in gambling is making more money, and the only way to do that is to get more people to gamble, get them to do it more often and get them to bet more money.

And online gambling is great at doing all that. It's easy. All you need is a computer. You never have to leave the comfort of your home (unless you lose it because of gambling debts). No one has to know that you're doing it way too much because no one sees you.

Unfortunately, young people gamble online the most. They spend more time and more money doing it.

And gambling problems are three to four times higher among those who do it online than those who go to casinos.

It's not called the crack cocaine of gambling for nothing.

Families with lower incomes spend more money gambling as a percentage of income than those with higher incomes, according to the report by the Institute of Marriage and Family. Gambling increases during hard economic times, too.

Canadians spent more on gambling in 2009, the height of the recession.

And one-third of the revenue the government receives from gambling comes from five per cent of gamblers -- the ones with the problems.

Online gambling may be booming, but is this how the government wants to make money?