

Bet on the Politicians

BY MARNI SOUPCOFF

I don't blame Congress for passing a bill that will stop Americans from gambling on foreign websites. I often think to myself what a chaste and wholesome place the Internet would be if only someone would get rid of those filthy animated slot machines operated out of Bermuda.

For God's sake, as things stand now, some depraved soul could legally spend all night playing online Keno on a server based in Antigua. Disgusting, isn't it?

Congress isn't stupid, though, which is why they are only prohibiting gambling online in foreign arenas, by preventing banks and credit card companies from making payments to online gambling sites. They are not so silly as to ban edifying and righteous domestic offline gambling activities, such as betting junior's entire college tuition on the fourth race at Aqueduct or mortgaging the house for a spin of a roulette wheel at Caesar's—Las Vegas.

American businesses make money on that stuff, after all, and no one except Ralph Nader is dumb enough to campaign on a platform of taking away potential campaign donors' money.

I think Congress's logic makes a lot of sense. If they ban municipal and state lotteries (nothing but good clean fun, those Powerballs), then they risk the ire of thousands of local politicians and bureaucrats whose salaries are currently paid for by their math-challenged citizens' ticket purchases. Not a good bet.

On the other hand, if Congress effectively bans British poker sites and Bahamian blackjack portals, then who's going to complain? A bunch of foreign guys with funny accents who can't even vote. I'd say those odds call for doubling down.

OK, but what if the federal government suddenly banned all gambling, online and off? How effective could we expect such a prohibition to be?

Until someone discovers how to control human beings' innermost thoughts and desires, the answer is: not very. People have a way of doing the things they like to do even when they are not supposed to. Hence, the fact that prostitution has been illegal in most states since 1915 has proven no barrier to the reality TV show *Cops* featuring a steady parade of johns,

pimps, and prostitutes for the past 15 years. Besides, foreign online gambling companies have made it clear that they have the technological ability to get around the new regulations.

But what about protecting Americans from foreign fraudsters out to cheat them on online Bingo? My first response would be that people who think they're going to get rich on a random numbers game that is best known for placating the over-medicated residents of old-age homes deserve whatever they get. However, this is a callous and unfeeling approach. Forget I mentioned it. The government really does have a genu-

ine interest in protecting its citizens from fraud.

And what better way to protect a customer than to make his business transactions illegal and force him onto a foreign black market with zero accountability? That way, if he gets ripped off, he won't be able to complain to anybody. And that means reports of fraud are bound to go down.

Another government job well done!

Of course, the federal lawmakers did have another option available to them.

Yes, it's a wild and crazy notion, but they could have

chosen — had they been so bold — to stop playing moral matron and instead allow online gambling to proceed legally in the open. Victims of fraud suddenly would be able to appeal to U.S. authorities, and more honest entrepreneurs could start gambling sites, halting the trend of the online gambling business being dominated by shady elements.

To be sure, there would be people who would make stupid decisions, blowing bundles on online baccarat instead of buying groceries. But by the same token, there are plenty of idiots out there now who spend their next month's paycheck on *Bloomingdales.com* instead of paying the rent — yet no one's suggesting banning online shopping.

I suppose it all comes down to the government letting people make their own choices and deal with their own mistakes without interference from their elected officials.

It's possible that a future Congress and president will recognize the value in such an approach and reverse the de facto ban on online gambling.

But I wouldn't bet on it.



Marni Soupcoff is a member of the *National Post* editorial board and a Toronto-based journalist. She is a former Institute for Justice staff attorney.