

Tories demand an explanation on supercasinos

Ministers have been urged to clarify their policy on supercasinos after The Times revealed that a government report predicted up to 40 regional casinos could be built within a decade.

The Conservatives have demanded that Tessa Jowell, the Culture Secretary, make an urgent statement to the Commons to explain the report, which has undermined many key arguments used to sell the Gambling Bill.

Hugo Swire, the Shadow Culture Secretary, told The Times that the report made a mockery of the pilot scheme, which caps the number of new casinos to one regional and sixteen smaller venues for three years.

„This report blows the gaffe on the Government’s long-term plans for gambling in this country. It is deeply worrying that the Government has a hidden agenda to push through such an explosion of gambling.“ He was particularly concerned at government figures suggesting that 1 per cent of the population may be addicts, almost twice the number given by Ms Jowell herself.

„It seems remarkable that another government department doesn’t trust Tessa Jowell’s figures on the current number of problem gamblers,“ Mr Swire said.

The Conservatives, who negotiated a cut in the number of supercasinos during the pilot to one last year, said that they would not consider raising the limit unless ministers provided proof that it would not lead to a rise in problem gambling.

If ministers were determined to have eight supercasinos, they could push it through in committee without Tory support.

Yesterday the Government attempted to distance itself from the report, which has John Prescott's departmental seal on the front cover.

The Prime Minister's official spokesman said the report, published in January, was „out of date“ – even though the document explicitly takes into account the introduction of a cap in December 2004. The report also says that proliferation of regional casinos „may result in enhanced socio-economic problems in terms of crime, antisocial behaviour and alcohol“.

The Government announced yesterday that it was going to tighten up the rules to prevent cinemas, bingo halls and nightclubs being turned into gambling spots without planning permission. It is believed that this will help to curb proliferation when the cap is lifted.