

# Dome boss dined with Jowell to talk casinos

The billionaire Dome tycoon who entertained John Prescott on his ranch in Colorado had dinner with Tessa Jowell three months later and has met other ministers responsible for the gambling reforms.

The Culture Secretary has disclosed that she discussed the subject of casinos with Philip Anschutz, who is hoping to open Britain's first super-casino in the Dome, at a dinner hosted by the public relations expert Matthew Freud on October 30 last year.

This was one of 15 occasions between 2003 and 2005 that representatives from Mr Anschutz's company AEG or its casino partner, Kerzner, met ministers or officials from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

The revelation comes at an awkward time for the Government, when Mr Prescott is facing a barrage of questions over a free stay on Mr Anschutz's ranch in the middle of a nine-day trip to the US last July. His spokesman has said that the trip was a "day off" and Mr Prescott did not discuss business with Mr Anschutz. But the donation made to charity after the visit was paid by the taxpayer because the stay was part of an official visit and he was accompanied by civil servants.

Mrs Jowell confirmed that she discussed casinos with Mr Anschutz. "I attended a dinner at which Philip Anschutz was a guest," she said in a written parliamentary answer. "He certainly talked to me about casinos, but got absolutely no information that was not freely available in the newspapers."

Richard Caborn, the gambling minister, also met Mr Anschutz at a dinner in October last year hosted by Lord Heseltine, who was responsible for the Dome under John Major. Both dinners

took place after the Government had decided to limit to one the number of regional casinos, and had handed over the decision of selecting its location to the Casino Advisory Panel.

At the time the dinners took place, the panel was drawing up the selection criteria that it would use to make this choice, aided by the Culture department. Mr Anschutz's representatives met department officials directly in March 2003 and representatives of Kerzner met them 12 times in the two years up to last December. Seven of the meetings were with ministers, either Lord McIntosh of Haringey, who stood down at the last election, or Mr Caborn.

The sheer number of meetings underlines the closeness of ministers to Mr Anschutz and his partners.

The Conservatives are now initiating a dual investigation into the conduct of Mr Prescott. The first will be conducted by Sir Philip Mawer, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, who will look, among other things, at whether the trip should have been declared in the Register of Members' Interests.

The second will be conducted by Gus O'Donnell, the Cabinet Secretary, who will focus on whether there was any breach of the Ministerial Code. The Tories have also written to Mr Prescott, asking him when the charity donation was made and the identities of the officials with whom he was travelling.

Hugo Swire, the Shadow Culture Secretary, said: "The rules are quite clear about registering hospitality and gifts. It seems extraordinary that someone in Mr Prescott's position would not have known that he should declare a stay at the 32,000-acre ranch of one of the world's wealthiest men."

The Tories also raised the issue in the Commons, claiming that Mr Prescott and Mrs Jowell's meetings compromised the process to select the first super-casino location. Mr Caborn said that any suggestion of impropriety was a disgrace.