

# Dome billionaire wins head start in race for super-casino

The race to build Britain's first super-casino has been condemned as a fix.

The man who will decide which of the seven bids will win the lucrative licence admitted that the U.S. tycoon with close links to John Prescott had been given a major head start.

Professor Stephen Crow, chairman of the Casino Advisory Panel, suggested that the joint bid by Dome owner Philip Anschutz and Greenwich Council was in the lead because building work had already started on the Las Vegas-style casino.

His admission triggered cries of foul play from opposition MPs, who said it was worse than cricket's ball-tampering scandal. Professor Crow's panel will start public hearings into the seven bids this week before recommending one site before the end of the year.

But it emerged last week that Mr Anschutz's firm AEG has jumped the gun by constructing the shell of an 'entertainment complex' on the Dome site at Greenwich.

Professor Crow, an adviser to John Prescott on planning issues in the late 1990s, said yesterday that the construction work would be taken into account during the hearings.

And he admitted that other bidders – who include one-time favourite Blackpool – might cause concern because they had not started building. He told BBC Radio Five Live: „It's certainly no secret, because Greenwich Council have told us about it.

„It's something we have to take into account. It's put forward by Greenwich on the basis that they would be able to get on

with the job quicker because building has already started.”

His comments reinforced speculation that Mr Anschutz had been assured by the Deputy Prime Minister he would win the contract.

Tory culture spokesman Hugo Swire said: „This is like a starting pistol for a 100m race being fired – and then the umpire saying the fact somebody started ten seconds before everybody else will be taken into account in a positive light.

„It seems that by jumping the gun, one bid is actually going to benefit. This whole process is mired in such controversy that I think it is seriously flawed.

„The person on whose desk this is going to ultimately end up is Tessa Jowell and it is time that she gave a very clear statement that she is satisfied with what is going on.“

Liberal Democrat culture spokesman Don Foster said: „Anything that gives one bid an unfair advantage over the others has got to be prevented.“

Referring to the current controversy surrounding Pakistan’s cricket team, he added: „Ball tampering is nothing in comparison to this.“

Mr Anschutz’s company has denied making a ‘secret start’ to the casino. But pictures published in The Mail on Sunday revealed that the vast 7,000-square metre complex is near completion.

Mr Prescott was entertained at Mr Anschutz’s ranch in Colorado last summer when he was given a cowboy outfit by the billionaire.

The Deputy Prime Minister was rebuked by Parliament’s sleaze watchdog for failing to declare the trip and the gift.

Mr Prescott has repeatedly denied having any involvement in

licences or planning issues for super-casinos.

Besides Greenwich and Blackpool, the shortlist includes Cardiff, Glasgow, Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne and Sheffield.

A bid by Wembley was withdrawn last week, narrowing the field from eight to seven.