

Mud flies as UK's supercasino roadshow sets off

London (Reuters) – Britain launches a public examination on Wednesday to decide the future location of a controversial Las Vegas-style supercasino amid a barrage of criticism from the media and anti-gambling campaigners.

Prime Minister Tony Blair originally envisaged 20 to 40 giant casinos for Britain, bringing thousands of jobs and millions of dollars of overseas investment.

But under sustained pressure last year from anti-addiction campaigners, the opposition Conservative Party and the Daily Mail newspaper, that number was cut back to eight and finally to just one.

Blackpool in northwest England is seen as one of the most likely venues, alongside London's Millennium Dome, which is being redeveloped by U.S. entertainment mogul Philip Anschutz.

The government's Casino Advisory Panel will decide the location of the supercasino after it holds seven public examinations, which will give religious groups, local authorities and anti-addiction campaigners a chance to air their views.

They kick off with the Millennium Dome on Wednesday and end on Sept. 8 with Blackpool, which Ladbrokes has expressed an interest in running and which international operators such as MGM Mirage and Kerzner are also rumoured to be interested in operating.

The Dome – once regarded as Britain's biggest political white elephant – was originally erected by the government at a cost of about 800 million pounds (USD 1.5 billion). It closed at the end of 2000 after failing to attract the estimated 12

million visitors budgeted.

Anschutz Entertainment Group is now building a leisure complex under its roof, including a sports arena for 23,000 people and an 11-screen cinema. It also hopes to house the country's one supercasino.

Fears of Farce

But those hopes dimmed last month when a parliamentary investigation found that Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott had broken ministerial rules by not declaring a stay at Anschutz's ranch or that the entertainment mogul had given him a cowboy outfit as a present.

„Lots of people are interested in damaging Prescott, and it's quite possible that some of that mud will also stick to the Anschutz bid,“ said one London analyst who declined to be named.

Anschutz Entertainment suffered further embarrassment on Tuesday when it was forced to apologise to local religious leaders for misrepresenting their views by saying they would welcome a casino at the Dome.

The company had provided the information to the government's culture department, which had posted it on its Web site.

„We have apologised to the chaplaincy that this did not reflect all their views,“ said a spokeswoman.

Newspapers and the opposition Conservative Party have slammed the way the bidding process is being handled.

One contender, Wembley, dropped out of the bidding last week after the local council withdrew its support for a joint venture between Quintain Estates and the world's biggest casino operator, Harrah's.

„The awarding of the licence is fast descending into farce,“

Shadow Culture Secretary Hugo Swire said on Tuesday. „Nobody now has any faith in the way this crucial decision will be taken. All eyes will be on the public consultation tomorrow.“

The Casino Advisory Panel will also hear the proposals of Cardiff, Manchester, Glasgow, Sheffield and Newcastle.