

# Angry peers ready to block super-casino

Britain's first Las Vegas-style super-casino will be blocked by the House of Lords, Tessa Jowell has been warned.

The Culture Secretary was told of the threat during a private meeting last week.

She heard that peers were angry that the Casino Advisory Panel, which she set up, had chosen Manchester as the location for the gambling complex when other sites, in particular Blackpool, appeared to have a stronger claim.

The message was delivered by members from the joint committee of MPs and peers which drew up the original legislation for a super-casino.

One member of the committee who attended the meeting but asked not to be named, said: „We let her know that we were unanimous in being shocked and surprised by the Manchester decision.

„If we had drawn up a list of things that would make an unsuitable venue, then Manchester would have been at the top. We told her in very clear terms that there are very long odds against it getting through the House of Lords.“

The warning is part of a growing rebellion in Westminster against the decision to award the super-casino licence to Manchester. More than 80 MPs, including many on the Labour benches, have signed an early day motion protesting against the choice.

The city's victory has been at the centre of controversy, since it was announced last month.

Critics have been concerned by both the city council's and the Labour party's links with Kerzner International, headed by the

South African tycoon Sol Kerzner, which is widely perceived to be the city's preferred operator. Mr Kerzner has been accused of bribery in South Africa although charges were later dropped.

Officials from the firm have held at least 12 meetings with different ministers.

There was further controversy when The Sunday Telegraph revealed that Manchester was already saturated with casinos and could not even guarantee that the complex would be built in the deprived east of the city, as it had suggested in its original bid.

Blackpool has also accused Manchester of running a negative campaign against its bid. The seaside resort is now seeking an explanation from the panel on why it decided to give the licence to Manchester.

Gordon Marsden, the MP for Blackpool South, who also attended the meeting last week, said: „There needs to be a second look at this very perverse decision by the panel. We left [Miss Jowell] in no doubt as to the strength of feelings over the decision. There is everything still left to play for.“

John Greenway, the chairman of the joint committee said: „A number of colleagues who worked with me on the committee have expressed concern about the choice of Manchester.

„If Parliament has concerns about whether it was the correct decision, then I would be happy to be on a committee to look at the issues.“

In an effort to head off an embarrassing and damaging defeat, Miss Jowell has said she may reconvene the joint committee to review the Casino Advisory Panel's decision.

She is due to put the panel's recommendations before the Commons and the Lords in a „ministerial order“ next month.

The Lords have unlimited powers to block the „order“, unlike a parliamentary Bill, and cannot be overruled by the Government.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport had initially planned to include the proposals for a super-casino licence in Manchester in a single „order“ along with less controversial plans for smaller casinos in 16 other locations.

But because of the expected opposition to the Manchester licence, the department is now considering putting two separate „orders“ before Parliament, one concerning the super-casino, and one relating to the others.

Last night, Lord Oakeshott of Seagrove Bay, a senior Liberal Democrat, said: „A Manchester monster casino is still miles from the winning post. It faces a searching steward’s inquiry and probable disqualification in the Lords.“

A spokesman for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport said: „Miss Jowell said she would see if there were additional opportunities to discuss the panel’s work in Parliament.

„She believes the panel acted with rigour and remains minded to follow its recommendation of Manchester.“