

Do rebels have the courage to vote out the super-casino?

Labour rebels are under pressure today to honour a public pledge to vote down the Government's plans for Britain's first super-casino.

More than 80 of the party's backbenchers registered their opposition to the vast gambling complex in Manchester last month – enough to wipe out Tony Blair's majority in a Commons vote.

But there were signs that some MPs could crumble in the face of extraordinary strong-arm tactics by Tessa Jowell.

But even if the Government overcomes a rebellion in the Commons, peers said there was a strong possibility the Culture Secretary would be defeated in a vote in the Lords, where Tory and Liberal Democrat peers have a majority.

Labour peers are also expected to stage a revolt after rejecting the offer of a deal making Blackpool next in line for a giant casino.

Miss Jowell, whose Cabinet career is on the line, needs the backing of both houses for the casinos to go ahead.

It is the last chance for the super-casino to be blocked.

The frantic horse-trading in Westminster intensified as a report concluded that building the super-casino in east Manchester would have „devastating social consequences“ for the area.

An interim report for former Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith's Social Justice Policy Group says Manchester is the „worst possible location“ for the venue because it is already a deprived area with high unemployment and crime.

Mr Duncan Smith said MPs and peers had a „duty“ to defeat the Government. It would take 33 Labour MPs to cancel the Government’s majority in the Commons. Tory and LibDem MPs will vote against the plans.

A Commons motion expressing „surprise and regret“ at the Casino Advisory Panel’s decision to recommend Manchester has been signed by 104 MPs, including 83 Labour backbenchers.

But many MPs who signed the motion have smaller casinos in their constituencies, which, to their dismay, would go down with the super- casino if the Government was defeated.

Frank Cook, Labour MP for Stockton North, who signed the original motion, said rebelling would result in his neighbouring city of Middlesbrough losing a smaller casino.

Mr Cook, who is yet to decide which way he will vote, said: „I have spoken to the whips and told them I disagree vehemently with the tactic of lumping Manchester together with all the other casinos.

„I am in a predicament because Middlesbrough is scheduled to get one. It is quite unfair and I think it is wrong and it isn’t rational at all to put them all together.

„I may have to vote for Manchester in order to ensure that others get their casinos.

„There are others like myself who are being Shanghaied into voting for the Manchester super-casino when we would prefer to vote for them one for one.“

Downing Street said it did not know whether the Prime Minister would vote.

The Social Justice Policy Group will publish a full report in May. Its interim report said the supercasino would result in „degeneration not regeneration“.

!A vulnerable urban centre such as Manchester, would, contrary to attempts to convince us otherwise, find its already fragile fabric under increasing strain.

„Such a region will not benefit from the placement of a further drain on resources,“ it said.

„The minimal claims of regeneration and employment creation are far outweighed by the long-term damage a super-casino could inflict on one of the most deprived areas of the country, especially considering the resources which would need to be ploughed into tackling the fall-out of social problems.“

Mr Duncan Smith said: „MPs and peers have a duty to stop the Government in its tracks. The very idea that we should have an economy that is run on a roulette wheel is just madness.“