

More Jamaicans want casino gambling legalised

The tide of public opinion regarding casino gambling is changing. Now, more Jamaicans want the Government to legalise gambling of outlawed casino games, such as roulette and blackjack, than those who are against the controversial amusement.

In comparison to a similar survey conducted in 2006, the latest Gleaner-commissioned Bill Johnson poll, conducted on January 12 and 13, 2008, is showing an eight per cent increase in the number of persons who want the Government to lift the ban on casino gambling.

The 2008 survey showed that 48 per cent of the 1,008 respondents from 84 communities across the island were in favour of the State sanctioning gambling of those casino games that are currently illegal.

A more telling finding is the 15 per cent reduction in the number of persons who opposed the decriminalisation of casino gambling on the island. Johnson and his team of researchers found two years ago that 55 per cent of respondents wanted casino games to continue to be against the law. However, only 40 per cent of those polled this year were of the opinion that the state should not change the status of the illegal games.

At the same time, there is a spike in the number of respondents who were caught between two opinions. In 2006, only five per cent of those polled said they did not know which side to take, while 12 per cent were undecided in the latest poll.

In both polls, more men were in favour of casino gambling being made lawful, than women.

However, more women were undecided about whether or not the Government should permit casino gambling.

The Reverend Karl Johnson, president of the Jamaica Council of Churches, told The Sunday Gleaner that he was not surprised about the shift in public opinion. He indicated that the Church was still standing its ground on the matter.

„What is popular is not necessarily proper,“ he said.

Gambling for tourists

Jamaica's CARICOM partner, The Bahamas, has allowed casino gambling – but, only to tourists. Glenda Lightbourne, assistant secretary – enforcement, at the gaming board for The Bahamas, told The Sunday Gleaner that casino gambling was a complementary amenity to tourism. Currently, Bahamian citizens are not allowed to gamble.

Lightbourne, who has been with the gaming board for almost 38 years, said the Church in The Bahamas has always opposed an expansion of casino gambling, as well as the legalising of the numbers game.

However, she pointed out that casino operations have been a source of gainful employment for many Bahamians, and the country makes millions of dollars in taxes collected under the Casino Taxation Act. At present, the government of The Bahamas is contemplating a legislative move that would pave the way for the advent of a national lottery.

Illegal lotteries, rackets

She explained that illegal lotteries and numbers rackets have operated on the island for years and the government is considering regularising the activity with the aim of generating revenue from the operation.

She added: „... So, with the possible introduction of a national lottery, Bahamians would be able to gamble by numbers and the

government will manage it so that the government can derive revenue from it.

„Right now, as it currently stands, the government derives no revenue.“

Despite concerns from some locals about not being allowed to gamble in the casinos, Lightbourne said the government had no intention of lifting the ban.

Simply put, the nation of approximately 300,000 has learnt from past experiences. „We had a race track in Nassau some years ago ... This track operated for approximately 20 years. People were using their hard-earned cash to go and bet on horses and when they don't win, their family suffers because there is no money to do the things that ought to be done.“

So, the government closed down the track.