

# The Road to Perdition

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# Interesting times





# Interesting times

- Gambling can be particularly vulnerable at times of populism and political extremism
- What does the current political situation tell us about the prospects for gambling?
- What do the attacks on gambling tell us about wider threats to a free and civil society?





# Interesting times

## The revolutionary's handbook

1. Demonise opponents
2. Infiltrate the apparatus of power and influence
3. Suppress dissent, censor, marginalise and intimidate





# Demonisation – the harm agenda

## **Problem gambling**

- A somewhat abstract and heterogenous condition
- Typically affects only a minority of adults and gamblers
- Rates generally stable or in decline
- Presented industry lobby with opportunity to marginalise costs

## **Gambling-related harm**

- More relevant to policy
- Very loosely defined and can be applied to a large proportion of gamblers if the threshold is set low enough
- Extends beyond the gambler to affected others
- Difficult to establish causality
- Presents anti-gambling lobby opportunity to exaggerate costs



# Demonisation – the harm agenda

## Where this is going

- Gambling reframed as population-wide risk to health (necessitating population-wide counter-measures)
- *“No safe level of gambling”*
- Harm prevention as paramount/sole aim of regulation
- Failure to distinguish between harm and opportunity cost
- Conflation of gambling-related harm and gambling-inflicted harm

## The Short Gambling Harms Screen

Category	Item
Financial	1. Reduction of my available spending money
Financial	2. Reduction of my savings
Financial	3. Less spending on recreational expenses such as eating out, going to movies or other entertainment.
Emo/Psy	4. Had regrets that made me feel sorry about my gambling
Emo/Psy	5. Felt ashamed of my gambling
Financial	6. Sold personal items
Financial	7. Increased credit card debt
Relationships	8. Spent less time with people I care about
Emo/Psy	9. Felt distressed about my gambling
Emo/Psy	10. Felt like a failure



# Infiltration – a very British coup?

## Public health

- Greater involvement of public health organisations in gambling policy
- Succession of public health appointments to major gambling institutions
- Pervasiveness of public health language and logic in regulatory language
- Exclusive focus on costs – in contravention of public health model

## The new tobacco?

*“Other public health contexts show how measures that affect the whole population (such as smoke-free legislation in Britain) often have the biggest effect on behaviour change.”*

Wardle et al, 2019



# Infiltration – a very British coup?

## Media

- Mass media almost uniformly hostile to gambling – not accidental
- Anti-gambling lobby empowered by social media

*“... we ... built very good relationships with journalists and over a number of years. At each newspaper we had a journalist that we were working very closely with who had clout... eventually newspapers were running campaigns that were aligned to our objectives... building that consensus [across media outlets], using that coverage to leverage support from MPs and parliament.”*  
Cited in Rintoul, 2019





# Infiltration – a very British coup?

## Research

- Academic research in Britain now almost entirely negative/ hostile to industry
- Suggestion of strong *a priori* political/ideological beliefs among some researchers
- Applied research from within industry almost invisible

*“Those who research, those who treat and those who regulate problem gambling also often have a financial interest – as well as an ideological interest – in making immoderate claims about how widespread and harmful problem gambling is”.*

Collins, 2003



# Rising intolerance – suppressing dissent

## Exclusion

*“Excluding the influence of the gambling industry from policy development and research”*

Rintoul, 2019

## Censorship

*“We have banished the term ‘responsible gambling’”*

Cited in Rintoul, 2019

## Marginalisation & intimidation

*“To have suffered the abuse and been vilified as such by Members of Parliament, campaigners, former addicts themselves and even representatives from the Gambling Commission, this past week - has horrified me.”*

Twitter, 2019





# The Road to Perdition

Growing calls for gambling policy to be transferred to Department of Health

- Should the Department of Health run the National Lottery licence tender?
- Under what circumstances would the Department of Health ever propose regulatory relaxation for gambling?

*“If gambling is to be taken seriously as a public health issue then **policy responsibility for prevention and treatment should lie with the Department of Health and Social Care**, with input from other departments who deal with the harms of gambling such as welfare, justice, and education.”*

Wardle, Reith, Langham & Rodgers 2019



# The Road to Perdition

## Short-term threat

- Dislocated process of regulatory-political scrutiny likely to result in further tightening – some of it necessary

## Longer-term threat

- Gambling being repositioned as an inherently harmful activity while consumer benefits increasingly marginalised
- Key institutions gradually being captured by public health lobby
- Rise of populism and political extremism raises risk levels





# How to respond?





# The Canary in the Coalmine?

*“We live in a free country where people are allowed to make dumb decisions every day, whether it’s about their job, their relationships or even their health. Some of us drink, some of us smoke, some of us gorge ourselves on cake and, yes, some of us gamble. So **be careful what you wish for: your own personal vice might be next.**”*

*The Independent, 2018*



Thank you for listening

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