

An Effective Move To Suppress Illegal Soccer Betting

By David Lan (16-12-2002)

On 26 November, the Executive council of the HKSAR approved to grant exclusively a 5-year license to the Hong Kong Jockey Club which promised to introduce soccer betting in a "pragmatic and responsible " manner. Government's package also includes the setting up of a New Gaming Commission to oversee soccer betting and the Mark Six lottery, a fund to help problem gamblers and for public education etc.

At present about half of the 60 lawmakers have already indicated their support whereas some 15 said they have yet to decide on Government's proposed plan. Taking its natural course, the bill will probably be introduced in Legco with opportunities for discussion and public debate in the next few months. By middle of next year we shall see whether Legco would enact laws to regulate soccer betting in Hong Kong.

Legalizing any form of gambling in Hong Kong is always a matter of great controversy. Government's stated policy has always been not to encourage or permit any forms of gambling except horse racing, Mark Six lottery and mahjong. Government has tried hard to hit on illegal gambling all these years with some success except in the area of illegal soccer betting. Even before the year 2000, when the author of this article was heading the very Bureau responsible for the Government's policy on gambling, I noticed the increasing voices from the community to take a critical but realistic look on soccer betting, which became more and more popular in Hong Kong as time passed by, a demand which unless the law is changed, could only be met through the illegal means. With the World Cup taking place in 2002 and so many big matches taking place in Europe and elsewhere every year, Hong Kong realized then that the SAR would soon have to face the real challenge. In the mean time, studies were being conducted, facts should be gathered and the community's reaction and views have to be carefully studied.

Some sectors of the society are strongly opposing the proposal, for example the Great Coalition to Oppose Legislation of Soccer Betting whose members include religious, education and youth groups continue their fight to oppose the Government's proposal. Hong Kong is a free society and we should respect people's views, especially when they are made with good intention.

When Government enacted laws in 1975 to introduce the Mark Six lottery, we saw the great controversy and anger demonstrated by some sectors of the community. We subsequently noticed how effectively the new Mark Six lottery was able to eliminate



illegal betting on "Chi Fa" which had penetrated deeply and widely in the life of the Hong Kong Community at that time. This time round, I believe Exco's decision to legalize betting on soccer is a correct one. It will go a long way towards wiping out illegal betting on soccer, which according to the Secretary for Home Affairs Dr. Patrick Ho Chi Ping was already prevalent in the illegal market in Hong Kong. Dr Ho must be happy that Exco has made this decision so speedily, in less than 5 months since he took up the position as the SHA.

I do not wish to argue with Dr Ho that Government's intention to legalise soccer betting was not to aim at helping Government to balance its budget. But my response as a member of the community is "Why Not?" Apart from the fact that Hong Kong is now suffering from budget deficit, I rather see the revenue from soccer gambling going to the Government's coffer and Hong Kong's charity through the Jockey Club, than finding its way to the triads or to punters overseas through the internet. My only unfulfilled wish was "Why hasn't this happened earlier so that we could have caught the World Cup fever in Japan and South Korea some 5 months ago?" I suppose the answer is "it's better to be late than never", especially the soccer fever sweeping Asia is going to stay in Hong Kong.

Finally, if we take a look at all major cities of countries in America, Europe and Asia including Japan and Singapore, Hong Kong is perhaps, the only major city that has yet to regulate on soccer betting. Why should Hong Kong continue to be the exception?

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