

Editorial

A National Lottery

The National Lottery Bill that has been wending its way through Parliament is set to revive one of the few popular devices ever devised for extracting cash from the citizen's pocket in order to fund public capital projects. Legally sanctioned national lotteries are well-established in many other countries (including the rest of Europe), and they raise huge sums of money for worthy causes.

In Britain, lotteries have a chequered history. The profit from a lottery held in 1569 was used to repair harbours on the coast of England. The proceeds of another, run in 1763, contributed to the foundation costs of the British Museum. But an Act of 1826 suppressed all public lotteries in Britain, and the Betting and Lotteries Act 1934 exposed those conducting them to criminal penalties. The introduction of Premium Bonds in 1956 can perhaps, with hindsight, be seen as the thin end of the wedge, but this is not a true lottery since the punter's capital is not at risk (other than from the ravages of inflation). There have been some minor

relaxations in the law to permit small-scale local and charitable lotteries.

Now there is to be a fully-fledged National Lottery, much along the lines recommended by the Royal Commission on Gambling in 1978; it is scheduled to be launched towards the end of next year. The lottery (incorporating a variety of different competitions) will be run by a private operator, subject to regulation by an Office of the National Lottery (Oflot) which will be headed by a director general appointed by the Secretary of State for National Heritage. The money raised will be distributed to existing bodies like the Arts Council and the Sports Council; some of the proceeds will go to a new National Lottery Charities Board, which will distribute money to charitable organisations; some will go to a Millennium Commission, which will devise and oversee projects to mark the year 2000.

The core of the government's proposals enjoyed cross-party support, though, prompted by heavy lobbying from football pool companies, and by the concerns of some of its own MPs, particularly ones representing Merseyside constituencies, Labour

moved an amendment at second reading, objecting to the fact that the Bill offered no protection against prospective job losses in the pools industry. The government professed scepticism about the companies' objections, partly on the unconvincing grounds that a lottery is a pure gamble while the pools are to some extent a game of skill.

We may feel instinctively that this Bill, promising much-needed funds for all kinds of worthy and/or neglected causes, accords with the famous Benthamite "greater happiness . . ." principle; but can we be sure that, in the midst of political near-consensus, possible negative considerations have been fully argued through? Take, for instance, the social objections to gambling; a mere glance at the kinds of problem that land on the doorstep of Gamblers Anonymous should make us pause before dismissing such considerations out of hand. It seems a pity that they were so little aired in Parliament. It is perhaps a sign of the times, and a chronic weakness of the legislative process – that this Bill was discussed almost exclusively in commercial and socio-economic terms.