

GAMBLING IN NEW ZEALAND
edited by Bruce Curtis, Dunmore Press, 2002

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In his contribution to this collection of essays, John Markland begins by saying, “Whatever our view of gaming, it is an integral aspect of our society”. Those few words sum up the timeliness and relevance of the information and perspectives contained in *Gambling in New Zealand*. Gambling or gaming has played a role in shaping our popular culture and even, for some, the definition of leisure. In addition, it is increasingly influencing the volume and source of funding available to the community and voluntary sector. Problem and compulsive gambling, and the downstream effects on the gambler and those associated with them, have also received media coverage in recent years.

Gambling in New Zealand is a collection of 17 very good essays divided into two sections. The first, “Policy Perspectives”, includes articles describing government policy and regulation of gaming from historical and contemporary perspectives, and essays that critique government policy from a community development and Treaty of Waitangi perspective. The second section, “Impacts and Audiences”, includes essays on topics ranging from gaming and crime, women gamblers, Lotto, and the sunset of the horse-racing industry – in short, the effect of gambling on different sectors of society.

The contributors to this collection come from a broad range of disciplines and both the public and private sector. Contributors write from backgrounds in history, sociology, anthropology, economics, Māori and Pacific health, and community health, women’s studies, psychology and film studies. Essays from the Manager of the Department of Internal Affairs’ Gaming Policy Unit, an independent scholar and the head of Sculpture at Auckland UNITEC are also included.

For those who have read other gaming literature, for instance, David Grant’s *On a Roll* or the excellent history of the TAB, it requires something of a gear shift to enter the territory of *Gambling in New Zealand*. Overall this is relatively dense material, arguably targeted more to an academic or policy audience than to a layperson interested in gaming: it is a scholarly collection.

In the opening essay, “Pathology, play and politics”, the collection’s editor Bruce Curtis writes, “Nearly all of the essays in this book attest to the ongoing nature of the debate around gambling and the difficulties confronting policy makers”, and notes that the intention of the book is to “provide an opportunity for discussion and well targeted research”. Arguably,

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those opportunities have existed for some time, but it is both interesting and informative to have a range of facts, figures, issues, perspectives and ideas on a central topic gathered in one place.

The editor comments in his introduction that several of the essays deliberately problematise aspects of policy and policy formation. I kept this to the fore when reading those essays, which covered such topics as Māori and the Treaty of Waitangi and gambling (Dyall and Morrison), the relationship between corporate and community forms of gambling (Curtis and Wilson), and unplanned and unanticipated aspects of policy (Austrin), and reflected on whether the writers simply cover problematic issues, rather than problematise those issues. Take, for example, the issues discussed in the Curtis and Cate chapter “Gambling with Communities”. For me this was a particularly important essay, primarily because it raised issues that are central to the treatment of gaming or gambling from a social policy perspective. Curtis and Cate argue that there is a discontinuity between government messages of protecting communities from gambling, and policies that have had the effect of enabling a rapid growth in gambling. In short, they argue, changes to gambling policies and regulations have sent mixed messages. They have marginalised the positive aspects of gambling (returning profits to communities from which they originated), through disadvantaging existing community forms of gambling, while at the same time doing little to minimise the undesirable outcomes, such as problem gambling.

Certainly over the last two decades there has been a considerable increase in the range and visibility of gaming products. Casinos, sports betting, gaming machines, instant games (scratchies) and Lotto spring immediately to mind. This proliferation could not have occurred outside a regulatory framework. There has been an increase in the number of people seeking help for problem gambling, and some of those seeking help have very severe problems. There are, however, mixed views on the correlation between the growth in gaming opportunities and the growth in people seeking help, and estimates of the number of problem gamblers are wide-ranging. There are also various interpretations of problem gambling prevalence rates and explanations for changes in the rates over time.

Notwithstanding the fact that the range of gaming products has increased, and the possibility that more products equates to more problems, Curtis and Cate argue that the effect of having big players in the gaming sector – casinos, the Lotteries Commission and the TAB, is to marginalise grass-roots gaming such as housie, clubs and rural racetracks and iwi-based gaming. The latter gaming types, argue Curtis and Cate, most closely align gaming (and proceeds) to the community. The essay does not, however, provide any comparative quantitative data on the amount of funds generated and distributed through, for example, Lotteries Commission products as opposed to local housie operations. While it can be assumed that the Lotteries Commission is generating vastly more than housie operations, the question

of whether localised community-based gaming is the purest reflection of a community protection or community benefit model remains unanswered.

Moving right away from the gaming policy and problem-gambling quagmire, several of the essays in *Gambling in New Zealand* were particularly enjoyable to read. Notable were Peter Howlands “A lucky dip? The fun, excitement, and exclusive hegemony of Lotto”, and the Claudia Bell and John Lyall piece, “One night out gambling”. The pleasure in these two chapters was not in their covering matters of less seriousness than other pieces, but in their effective mix of creative writing and critical analysis.

The range of information and issues covered is broad, but notably absent (given the community benefit model that dominates current gaming policy) is any information or discussion about the amount of gaming proceeds going into communities, or different sectors within communities. Given that one of the aims of the collection is to stimulate and inform public debate, it is a pity that text or data on that particular part of the gambling “picture” is absent. Notwithstanding that observation, the collection would need to have been considerably bigger to cover in detail the myriad issues that gaming raises.

I have observed with interest the gaming policy debate in New Zealand for over a decade, and have been acutely aware of how much the gaming environment has changed in the last 20 years: the decreasing presence of raffles, the bang and roar of Lotto, the introduction of instant games (scratchies), sports betting, Casinos, and gaming machines. Like many others I have read press articles about people whose lives have been destroyed by a gambling addiction, children left in casino car parks, gaming-related crimes, public debate about the proliferation of gaming machines, community debate about whether a casino should or should not be established in a particular city, as well as many stories of incredible Lotto winnings, good luck, and winning against the odds. If nothing else, this collection of essays contextualises these stories and information snippets and encourages reflection on the complexity of gaming and the many different ways it is part of our cultural, social and policy milieu.