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## Brother's keeper no more?

*If the casino issue can be decided by Singaporeans, does that mean the Government will let us make our own choices in other similar areas?*

**By Wendy Tng**

IN RECENT months there has been heated debate over whether Singapore should have an integrated resort with a casino. Both hellfire and brimstone, and pots of gold have been predicted as the outcome should Singapore do so.

In mid-November last year, the Senior Minister for Trade and Industry, and Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, made an important statement on the debate which merits in-depth analysis, not only for how it relates to the proposal in question, but for its larger ramifications for Singapore's political culture and governance system.

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan said: 'I think the real question which we need to confront is what type of society we are, or to be more accurate, are we now a more mature society than, say, decades ago, meaning can we trust the vast majority of Singaporeans to act responsibly, to exercise common sense and to make their own choices as to how they wish to spend their disposable income; how they wish to entertain themselves?'

It is not often that Singaporeans are called upon as a people to decide on the state of our maturity. Perhaps such a call was needed because of the many and deep emotions tied to the casino debate. But I would like to suggest that such a call reflects the changing nature of the relationship between state and society.

How so? Where previously the Government felt it necessary to guide and exhort Singaporeans on moral and social issues, and put in place prohibitions to shelter us from such negative influences as long-haired hippies and yellow culture, and place out-of-bounds markers on our discussions of race and religion, it thinks that it is now time for Singaporeans to exercise their judgment and decide for themselves.

In a sense, this is a move also borne out of necessity. Being as international and tech-savvy as we are now, we recognise that external influences cannot be kept at bay as before. The wiser thing to do then is to allow Singaporeans to exercise their common and moral senses for themselves, and practise making things perfect.

Such a freedom brings with it greater responsibilities, which cannot be ignored. To be able to decide whether to enter a casino or not is also to have to bear the consequences of such an action.

But how far does that way of thinking extend? If Singaporeans are already mature enough to decide how to conduct themselves with respect to a casino, presumably they may also be trusted to make their own choices in other similar areas.

For instance, as some have suggested, should individuals be allowed to use their Central Provident Fund savings as they choose?

The usual bugbears of moral and religious conservatives would also have to be tolerated, if not permitted. Will we allow more racy television shows on free-to-air channels? Will we go from the mere tolerance of homosexuals, to accepting them?

If we are to have a more relaxed attitude towards gambling despite its potential costs to the person because 'we can't have a situation where we protect you, even from yourself', then the barricades must also fall for many other choices that we have not been able to make.

Otherwise, there has to be some clarification as to how gambling is different from other cases.

If, instead, we believe that gambling is merely another harmless form of entertainment, then we also need to consider if other activities are similarly self-regarding - that is, they harm only those who choose to take part.

Why does this matter? It matters because if we properly consider Dr Balakrishnan's statements, and concede that some activities are in fact self-regarding, we will have come a long way in the maturity that he described.

Not only will we not need direction from above to make responsible choices for ourselves, we can also take the step of recognising that it is not our place or right to make such choices for our fellow citizens.

This calls to mind an audience poll conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies at its recent forum on the Government's integrated resort proposal.

In that poll, responding to one question, 42.8 per cent of participants stated that they were against proceeding with the proposal. Replying to another question about what they would do personally if, indeed the integrated resort came to pass, only 16.7 per cent of the participants said they would not patronise it, and would actively campaign against it.

The others would patronise both the resort and the casino (42 per cent), patronise the resort but not the casino (18.8 per cent), and the rest would not patronise it, but respect the right of others to do so (22.5 per cent).

This means that overall, 58 (16.7 plus 18.8 plus 22.5) per cent will not patronise the casino - a figure higher than the 42.8 per cent against the proposal.

The implication: There are Singaporeans who recognise that it is not their right to make decisions for others.

On the other hand, as the question and answer session at the forum made clear, there is also a large minority trusting more in their own ability to be responsible than they do others' ability to be so.

Indeed, more often than not, we Singaporeans have seen it as our responsibility to be 'our brother's keeper'. This has also been one of the defining characteristics of state governance in Singapore.

Has the time come to change this?

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