Social Construction of the Sport-Gambling Relationship: A Case Study of Bill C-290

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Critical policy analysis and its accompanying (de)construction of the policy process has become one of the prominent ways of analyzing policy change. Policy issues that have traditionally concerned sport managers include: governance, taxation, franchise location, international relations, athlete eligibility, drug testing, gender equity, procedures for team selection and programs, and access for persons with disabilities (Chalip, 1996). Many scholars have written about these various issues but absent from this list is sports gambling. In Canada, Bill C-290 has become a prominent topic of conversation and has found its way onto the political agenda. Bill C-290 is a proposed amendment to the Canadian Criminal Code that would allow individuals to place a wager on a race, a fight, a single sport event or an athletic contest. The Bill was passed unanimously through the House of Commons, but is currently stalled in the Senate.

Practically, legalizing single event betting may be viewed as an extension of the current betting system in place in Canada. It offers Canadians another avenue of entertainment, serving as a form of tourism through attracting individuals to cities with casinos. What should not be ignored through the political process are the potential social consequences of legalizing another form of gambling. An analysis of the rationales for the continued prohibition or the potential regulation can be used as one avenue to better comprehend the current decision facing the Senate in relation to this Bill. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to conduct a critical policy analysis of the discourse associated with Bill C-290. This study is relevant to the topic of sport management because of the close connection between sport and gambling and because of the significance Bill C-290 will have on sport gambling in Canada, should the bill pass the Senate.

Literature Review

Before policy is developed it must garner enough interest to land on the political agenda. This often takes months of government lobbying by businesses and organizations or in the case of Bill C-290, a Member of Parliament to start the conversation. Regardless of how it happens, proposed policy must capture the attention of policymakers in order to enable legislation to be proposed (Berg & Chalip, 2013). The fact that Bill C-290 has become a prominent topic of discussion on the legislative agenda is reflective of the validation of sports betting in the eyes of some members of the public. However, now that Bill C-290 has gained entry onto the legislative agenda as a legitimate public interest, the boundaries for the policymaking process are set as the discourse has already been framed in a particular way (Berg & Chalip, 2013; Chalip, 1995). This framing can happen in a number of different ways, one that includes the involvement of selected stakeholder groups and their perceptions of the Bill.

Stakeholders sometimes support, but can also challenge or resist particular views, assumptions and decisions, leading to the omission of certain ideas from discussions of policy in order to positively frame their ideas (Chalip, 1995; Chalip, 1996; Piggin, Jackson & Lewis, 2009; Sam, 2003). The greater issue is that those with policy-making power often ignore or design knowledge in keeping with their particular perspectives (Piggin et al., 2009). The significant influence of select stakeholder groups, for example the professional sports leagues, has been well documented by newspaper journalists, who cited the leagues as one of the major reasons why Bill C-290 is currently at a standstill. Inviting select stakeholder groups to speak openly and on-record about their position on Bill C-290 supports the notion that discussions on gambling tend to ignore the norms of cultural power distribution, since their opinions counter the position expressed unanimously by politicians in the House of Commons on this issue.

Gambling, inclusive of sports betting, is described by individuals in widely divergent ways, ranging from being a source of tax revenue to the scourge of society (Bernhard & Abarbanel, 2011; Frey, 1992). As such, sports betting may be treated with unease from a political standpoint, due to an individuals’ cultural view on sport. Three main arguments that are often linked to the regulation of sports betting include: regulated gambling would provide
economic benefits to local communities; sport gambling reflects a desired consumer activity in a market-driven economy; and sports betting has not brought about the demise of sport (Miller & Claussen, 2001).

Aside from Las Vegas, an approach that legally prohibits single event betting has dominated states, provinces and territories in North America. Several states and provinces/territories (e.g., New Jersey) have attempted to legalize single event betting but to date, all have failed. Canada is now in a position to potentially regulate single event betting because of Bill C-290’s presence on the legislative agenda. However, currently single event betting remains prohibited in Canada and the three main reasons that could be made to support its continued prohibition include: gambling represents a regressive tax; gambling jeopardizes the integrity of sport; and single event betting is a risky revenue stream with a small profit margin (Miller & Claussen, 2001). This study therefore explores the dominant discourses emanating from Bill C-290 by engaging in a critical policy analysis of this issue.

Method

Data collection for this project is near completion and the analysis will be completed prior to the NASSM conference. Stakeholders directly associated with Bill C-290 have been recruited to participate in a semi-structured interview. Specifically, this includes the sponsoring members of the Bill in the House of Commons, their respective executive assistants, the sponsoring member of the Bill in the Senate and the Members of Parliament who lead the Justice Committee in both the House of Commons and the Senate. To triangulate and validate the data collected during the interviews, an examination of the House of Commons and Senate sitting and committee meeting transcripts will be analyzed, as well as Canadian newspaper media accounts. The analysis of the documents and media accounts will assist in verifying the participants’ comments during the interviews, thus adding further detail regarding the Bill’s progress and identify other key stakeholders that may have influenced the Bill in both the House of Commons and Senate. Exploring the federal House of Commons and Senate sittings and committee minutes using critical policy analysis is useful because it systematically illuminates ways that social constructions direct and constrain policy discourse, thus giving shape to emergent ideas (Chalip, 1996). Data will be coded and analyzed using a deductive approach with themes that Miller and Claussen (2001) identified as rationales for regulating or prohibiting single event betting. A separate theme may be created if similar arguments emerge through the interview, document and media analyses. The ultimate goal of this study is to identify the constructs within the sport-gambling relationship that may implicate future sport management research, particularly policymakers, both theoretically and practically.