

THE FLEECE EXPRESS

Busing poor people to casinos is bad public policy

Loto-Québec's bus trips for suckers are distasteful and exploitative

If you live far from Montreal, Loto-Québec has got a deal for you.

You can ride a chartered bus to the Île Notre Dame casino from Quebec City, Shawinigan, Joliette or wherever you live for a typical round-trip price of only \$20. You'll also get two coupons, each worth \$10. One is good for gambling or for food at the casino's restaurants. You can use the other coupon for the same purpose on your next trip, so long as it's within two months.

So Loto-Québec's coupons mean it's essentially a free trip.

In fact, the crown corporation is even more generous than that. It also subsidizes the privately owned bus company to the tune



HENRY AUBIN

of \$5 to \$10 per rider.

Is this a good deal for Loto? Absolutely.

Not enough people, in Loto's opinion, visit the casino, which is why the crown corporation once sought to build a new, glitzy facility in Point St. Charles. The buses — an average of 11 a day — bring in people who might

otherwise not visit.

The same practice also feeds customers to Loto's two other casinos in the Charlevoix and Gatineau. In the first survey of its kind, the Université de Laval's psychology department examined the Charlevoix facility and found Loto's investment pays for itself many times over. The study's author, Professor Francine Ferland, told me yesterday the average rider spends \$175 per visit. The coupon for a future visit also achieves its purpose: Riders return an average of once every two months.

Given the ease with which even casual bettors can lose large sums and, worse, become addicted to gambling, this raises the question of whether Loto, as an arm of the provincial government, should be subsidizing such trips at all.

A Loto-Québec spokesperson disagreed with my use of the

word "subsidy" yesterday, saying the money was part of a "budget devoted to commercialization." And she said the practice was not much different from those that offer players free passes to a casino show or other perks. Indeed, in the case of high rollers, Loto will even pay for trips to sporting events like the Super Bowl or the Masters golf tournament in Georgia.

Yet without trying to defend such freebies, it's fair to note they are usually offered to people who are fairly well-heeled (at least for the moment). And in the case of trips to distant events, recipients are people who could get similar loyalty-building favours from casinos in Connecticut or Las Vegas. So, for better or worse, Loto-Québec is keeping up with the competition.

But such an excuse cannot apply to these buses. Their market consists largely of people who

can ill afford to lose money.

In its survey of 250 riders, the Laval study found most (54 per cent) have incomes of less than \$30,000. Their average age is 59. More than one-third (38 per cent) are 65 or older. Forty per cent lack a high school diploma.

Note, too, once Granny (70 per cent of riders are women) is at the casino, she's pretty much stuck there. Not until about seven hours after the bus arrives does it leave. There's little to do except keep playing.

Ferland said 97 per cent of those she surveyed play the slot machines. And a Le Soleil reporter who rode on a bus from Quebec City to Île Notre Dame wrote they can spend their \$10 worth of free coins within five minutes.

To be sure, such trips can be welcome outings for people with time on their hands — a way to fight boredom. But is it the

state's responsibility to give people something to do? Is the state being benevolent here or exploitative?

The Laval study cast disturbing light on that question. It says 3.6 per cent of the 250 subjects appeared to be addicted to gambling and another eight per cent were "at risk" of becoming so. This at-risk category, it notes, is "significantly" greater than among Quebec casino gamblers in general.

The state's subsidization of gambling trips is distasteful in principle. And this particular market's vulnerability to gambling addiction makes it repugnant in practice.

The fate of the Fleece Express will be a test of the government's social conscience.

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HUMAN GREED COMPOUNDS the misery of the HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa

Corruption siphons AIDS money

ROY BASKIND

The AIDS catastrophe has been with us for 25 years. It has killed more than 25 million and orphaned millions of children. Yet, for the past 20 years, we have had the medications and medical expertise to transform this once fatal infection into a chronic disease. In the rich countries, people with HIV can now live long and productive lives. But in poor countries, like those in sub-Saharan Africa, where 95 per cent of those infected have no access to these medications, HIV means a sure and painful death.

There is no shortage of people in Africa who are working hard to fight AIDS, witness this week's AIDS conference in Toronto. Moreover, billions are pouring in to combat the epidemic in poor countries. Why then are those infected not getting the medications and care that they need and dying en masse?

From my experience in two African countries, I have seen firsthand what kills AIDS patients: corruption.

When I arrived at the Bulungwa Lutheran Hospital in the Makete District of Tanzania in February, I saw a robust and effective HIV clinic in action. A dedicated and effective staff of professionals was treating 650 HIV patients. The worst-affected area in Tanzania was getting just what it needed: medical and managerial expertise from people like Dr. Rainer Brandl, Jackson Mbogeta, and Mary Musoma, members of the clinical team.

Partec, a world-leading innovator of medical blood-cell counters, had donated the machine (a CD4 counter) needed to monitor patients taking anti-AIDS medications. And the people living with HIV had organized into one of rural Africa's most effective and energetic AIDS activist organization, PIUMA.



The Gazette's Terry Mosher sketched Dr. Roy Baskind as he examined a child in Bulungwa, Tanzania, this year.

The clinic was working beautifully. Canadian friends of the clinic had made a first visit and were intent on a fruitful partnership. Patients were getting better and the community, devastated by AIDS, was coming back to life.

Today, five months later, the clinic has been crippled. The original staff was locked out. The clinic's services have been severely reduced. The donated Partec cell-counter has been tossed out and replaced with a Becton Dickinson machine that

doesn't work and on which the hospital technician has no experience or training. Brandl has been forced to leave. The patients on medications are not being cared for properly — yesterday, we received word the 19th patient at the clinic has died since the lockdown began.

Audits have shown under the stewardship of the South Central Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania, \$288,000 Canadian in donated funds has disappeared. Under intense pressure from PIUMA, the

diocese has admitted to fraud, but refuses to take legal action against the culprits. Instead, HIV-positive activists with PIUMA are being harassed and punished for speaking out against the church. The local government seems to lack the will or resources to get involved.

But local corruption is only part of the story. The business of treating AIDS has now become a large international industry. There is a lot of money to be made through government contracts for companies like tech-

nology suppliers Becton Dickinson. Certainly, these companies have a right to do good and to profit. However, what is increasingly clear is that large corporations (sometimes with the support of foreign government agencies and NGOs) are exerting questionable influence to keep out innovative competition.

No one can say for sure why the health minister of Tanzania arrived at the Bulungwa clinic a few weeks ago with the unwieldy (and apparently defective) Becton Dickinson machine after or-

dering the dependable, affordable Partec machine decommissioned. But the whole scene stinks of corruption and has put patients' lives (especially pediatric patients) at risk. The Partec machine was able to perform the vital function of calculating the percentage of blood cells in the body, which is vital in treating children with HIV. The Becton Dickinson machine cannot perform this function.

There are a few lessons to be learned in Bulungwa for the entire AIDS community.

First, corruption is not uniquely African. It occurs wherever it is allowed to occur — it's just more damaging in poor countries. Donors need to use far more of their funds building systems of accountability and fighting fraud. Financial oversight needs to be a key priority.

Second, donors, recipient governments and aid-agencies need to put in place and fund strong anti-corruption mechanisms where theft is prosecuted and thieves jailed. The current climate of no accountability and no enforcement is deadly.

And, finally, shareholders of companies that sell products and services to the people battling the HIV pandemic need to demand scrupulously honest business practices from their managers.

The fight against AIDS needs more money not less. But donors need to handle their donations in a professional way, with absolute accountability.

Handing out money and then looking the other way eases feelings of guilt but does nothing to save lives. Unfortunately, the real killer isn't HIV, it's the virus of human greed.

Dr. Roy Baskind graduated from McGill University and now practises in Toronto.

PARTY LEADER BACK IN ASSEMBLY

By-election win was Boisclair's first good day as leader

New left-wing party fails to have much effect on PQ vote

Graceless in victory, André Boisclair celebrated the best day he's had since he became Parti Québécois leader nine months ago with a little whine.

"They said the by-elections were a test for me," the prickly Boisclair complained on Tuesday, the morning after his victory and that of fellow PQ candidate Marie Malavoy. "Now they're saying the National Assembly will be a test."

Yeah, politics is hard: Just one test after another. Unlike anybody else's life, of course.

Actually, Boisclair's next test might come a lot sooner than Oct. 17, when the Assembly is due to resume sitting, with Boisclair facing Premier Jean



DON MACPHERSON

Charest as leader of the official opposition.

In fact, it begins today, when the CROP firm begins interviewing for its next monthly poll. The poll will be more representative of public opinion than a couple of midsummer by-elections in Montreal-area ridings in which turnout was only half of what it

was in the last general election.

If the results at the end of the month show the PQ's popularity continuing its slide under Boisclair's leadership, Monday's by-election results won't count for much. And people, including PQ members, will resume asking, "What's wrong with Boisclair?" and suggesting answers.

That's the way it is in politics: You're only as good as the next poll. One test after another.

Still, Monday's near-perfect results for Boisclair should buy him at least a couple of weeks of relative peace, until the next poll results are published.

"To win without risk is to triumph without glory," wrote the 17th-century French dramatist Pierre Corneille. So there was nothing glorious about Boisclair's overwhelming victory in Pointe-aux-Trembles, since the Liberals and Mario Dumont's Action Démocratique had ex-

tended him the customary courtesy of not opposing another party leader in a by-election.

But even in Taillon, where all the parties entered candidates, the PQ fell only a few points short of its vote share in the 2003 general election. It was a respectable result, considering that, compared to general elections, by-elections favour third parties over the serious contenders for power.

The only sign of dissension within PQ ranks was the absence of Pauline Marois from Malavoy's victory celebration. Marois resigned as MNA for Taillon after Boisclair defeated her for the party leadership. And her absence was obscured by the presence in Pointe-aux-Trembles of hard-liner godfather Jacques Parizeau, in a show of at least temporary unity behind Boisclair.

The Liberals, too, came up only a few points short of their pro-

portion of the vote in Taillon in 2003. But contrary to the PQ, they were visibly disappointed by the result.

They had expected at least to increase their vote share and thereby sustain the perception that the momentum was in their favour. Charest and his ministers invested a lot of time in the campaign.

But the result is a sign that dissatisfaction with the government among francophone voters remains high. And at least until the next poll results come out, talk of a fall election should die down.

There was more good news for the PQ, and bad news for the Liberals, in the results for Québec Solidaire, the new left-wing party considered by some to be a threat to take votes away from the PQ.

But QS drew less than 10 per cent of the vote in both ridings

on Monday, less than half of what it had received in its first by-election last April in ideal conditions in the east-central Montreal riding of Sainte-Marie-Saint-Jacques. In Pointe-aux-Trembles, QS even finished behind the Green Party, which has so few members its two candidates had to share the same official agent.

It's a familiar pattern. In a 2001 by-election in the central Montreal riding of Mercier, a left-wing candidate threw a scare into the PQ. But the balloon deflated only six months later in another round of by-elections in which left-wing candidates got less than 500 votes each.

After Monday, it appears the PQ has less to fear from QS in a general election, and the Liberals less to gain from it.

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