

Betting shops in estates?

The desirability of renting premises to the Royal Hongkong Jockey Club for betting shops in housing estates deserves careful consideration by the Housing Department and the Government before the present policy is confirmed.

For while there may be general acceptance in the Colony that legalised off-course betting should be promoted to satisfy the demand that undoubtedly exists, as well as to counter the activities of illegal operators, it would be unwise to pursue this to the point where they are forced on people who do not want them.

There appears to be some doubt among Government officials whether the resistance by some Mutual Aid Committees is motivated by a genuine desire to keep gambling out of their estates.

There is a suspicion that the opposition has been prompted by illegal gambling organisations which are trying to keep the Jockey Club out or else by rivalry between kaifongs and area committees.

The suspicion is not unreasonable, but it would be advisable to investigate this possibility closely before allowing it to colour the Government's view.

There have been reports that many of the rackets which flourished in the estates in previous years are now less conspicuous and if in fact illegal gambling has been sharply reduced or brought under control and if it is the majority wish of residents in the various estates that gambling facilities should not be provided, the Housing Department would be wise to back down.

The Neighbourhood Advice Bureau surveys quoted by this newspaper suggest a five to one and six to one majority against betting shops and these hardly look like rigged figures.

If this opinion is the basis of the MAC opposition then the Government, as the landlord in the estates, would be wise to heed it.

Some statements attributed to the Housing Department suggest they disagree with the representativeness of the MACs and in any case deny there is any obligation to consult them before making decisions on who to admit as tenants of estate shopping centres.

Another Housing spokesman has said that before MACs are consulted on estate management policy "they must show they are really representative of the majority of the people."

The Housing Department is skating on thin ice here. The MACs have been set up with Government support to fill just such a role.

If they now have to prove the validity of their support to individual departments before their views are considered the object of setting up such groups is frustrated.

What is worse the Government appears to be at cross-purposes and this can only create confusion and resentment.

Our own stand on legal off-course betting has been to encourage it as an alternative to illegal betting and in most areas it has been accepted without question. It would seem however that attitudes in some Low Cost and Housing Society estates differ and it would clearly be wrong to force these facilities on people who demonstrably do not want them.