

GOVT'S RADICAL PLANS TO REVAMP GAMBLING SECTOR

THE IRISH Sun INVESTIGATION

EXCLUSIVE by ADAM HIGGINS

THE Minister charged with revamping the Irish gambling industry today defends plans he believes will help save lives from being destroyed.

In an interview with The Irish Sun about his gambling legislation, James Browne shoots down claims that his law will devastate the horse racing industry and rubbishes "scaremongering" accusations that people will end up in jail for posting tweets about bets.

Tánaiste Micheal Martin was one of the key figures behind the push to regulate our gambling industry and personally chose Wexford's James Browne as the Minister to get the job done due to his experience as a barrister.

And the Fianna Fail TD told The Irish Sun his campaign to make gambling safer is coming from a public health perspective after he saw friends and constituents struggle with gambling addiction.

He said: "I would know a few people that have had gambling problems.

"Nobody in my immediate family, but I would have family members and friends, and I have certainly seen it — particularly through my role as a barrister.

"I have acted for people who through their addiction have stolen from work, and then as a TD, I've dealt with an awful lot of families who have been hurt by addiction.

"There is a particular stigma around gambling addiction and I think sometimes it's not taken as seriously as it should be.

"With other addictions like alcohol or drugs you can physically see them descend into that addiction.

"But with gambling addiction, often the first time a family realises a loved one has it is when the gardai are at the door or the house is being repossessed or, even worse, when they've taken their own life.

"It is a very insidious type of addiction and is very dangerous and we really have to deal with it. That's why this legislation is coming from a public health perspective and that was key for me."

An ESRI report recently revealed there are 130,000 problem gamblers in Ireland — a figure higher than anyone anticipated.

On the back of this, a new Gambling Regulator has been put in place to revamp a gambling industry that is governed by laws that date back to the 1930s, long before TV ads or online gambling existed.

This body will be backed up by strict new proposed legislation that will give it the power to fine bookies tens of millions of euro or jail executives for eight years.

The new laws will change how we gamble in Ireland, with no betting ads on TV before 9pm, an end to promos such as free bets and supports for people with addiction.

The legislation is undergoing some tweaks at the moment before going back to the Dail and Seanad, with punters not likely to see the impact until next summer.

However, in recent months gambling companies and horse racing figures have raised serious concerns about the laws, which they fear will devastate one of our most famous sports.

Bookies have also claimed punters will be pushed into black market gambling due to rules around bet limits or could end up in jail for sharing social media posts about their bets.

Minister Browne told The Irish Sun that there has been "extremely intensive lobby-

United in aims . . . Minister & Tánaiste

New betting laws coming from a public health view, says Minister

● **BROWNE RAPS 'FEARMONGERING'**
● **I'VE DEALT WITH THOSE AFFECTED**

ing" on the bill. But he insists he is guided by public health principles in the legislation.

He said: "We cannot have a situation where the gambling industry continues the way it has been.

"It has become a huge public health problem and we've seen that with the ESRI report. "It is shocking the damage that has been done to our society as a result of gambling.

"And it is correct to use the alcohol analogy; not everyone who drinks has a problem and not everyone who gambles has a problem.

But everyone is at risk. We want to let people to gamble safely, but also recognise there is a risk every time someone gambles and you can't identify who is going to become an addict.

"The person who's an addict today would have gambled safely at some point. They didn't become an addict on their first bet."

The two biggest horse racing broadcasters, Racing TV and At The Races, have told the Minister they could be forced to leave Ireland as his advertising ban would make their coverage unviable.

Racing TV said it would cost €2million to separate out their cov-

erage and create an Irish stream. Horse Racing Ireland claims the loss of this TV deal could devastate the industry which supports 30,000 jobs mainly in rural Ireland.

But Minister Browne says isn't buying this.

He told The Irish Sun: "Racing TV say that €2m is what it would cost them. They haven't shown us any evidence of that cost and I've talked to a number of other broadcasters who say it's very straightforward to split a feed now.

"A lot of it is just software at this stage. You can split a feed in terms of what advertisements are shown in two different houses

beside each other — never mind two countries.

"Even if you accept the €2m — which is questionable — that's a tiny fraction of a contract worth hundreds of millions of euros and a contract that was entered into in the face of Government policy.

"The way the legislation is designed, anything you can see in a horse race today you can see once this legislation passes.

"So we're making exemptions for (advertising) hoarding on a track. You can still call it the Paddy Power cup, you can still have people from Boylesports or Ladbrokes on your show talking

about odds of 3/1 or whatever. That is all factual information. So there is no impact here on broadcasting — it is specifically the ads.

"I'm not necessarily accepting their line — the idea that you're going to collapse a contract worth hundreds of millions of euros."

He added: "You see junior football and hurling matches televised live across the country. It is difficult to believe no one is going to televise in some shape or form major horse races.

"We've seen a leading bookie crying out recently as well. This is a very strong push back by the gambling industry, who are pushing the

TV stations and in turn trying to leverage horse racing to try to undermine what is very important public health legislation."

Asked about claims that people could be jailed for social media posts about bets, the Minister fumed: "That's complete scaremongering. People won't be facing charges for retweeting odds."

The Minister said he doesn't share the concern that jobs could be lost in the horse racing industry on the back of this legislation, as he believes that racing will just revert to sponsors that are not gambling companies.

He said: "You're probably only

talking about 15 years ago when advertising in our top horse racing events came from non-gambling companies. They were sponsored by banks and insurance companies and IT companies.

"I know there's always been gambling with racing but this thing of being solely reliant on gambling companies is a recent event.

"There is a question mark there of the business sense of ending up with this narrow dependency on one industry.

"I think you'd find other companies who will want to go into that ad space."

However, the Minister admitted

A THREAT TO RACING

Opponents to the bill fear jobs could be in danger



Exempt from ads ban . . . Lotto

'Lotto will one day fall under new laws'

By ADAM HIGGINS

The National Lottery will still be able to advertise on TV during the day — but may one day come under the same rules as bookmakers, Minister James Browne has claimed.

The new laws, which will ban gambling ads on TV until 9pm, will not apply to the National Lottery.

This is despite the ESRI highlighting the Lotto and scratch cards as the most common forms of gambling in Ireland currently.

Minister Browne told The Irish Sun that the Lotto is currently governed by its own legislation and regulatory authority, which makes bringing it in under the new rules too complicated. However, he said he believes the Lotto will one day face the same restrictions as bookies.

He said: "The National Lottery has its own bespoke legislation under the Department of Public Expenditure and it has its own regulator and its own rules. It has also been contracted out to a commercial operator, which is a Canadian pension fund as I understand it, and they are contracted to 2029 or 2030.

"Just on that complex aspect alone it would be almost impossible to bring it in under this legislation. But I wouldn't be surprised in the coming years if the National Lottery does move in under the same gambling legislation.

"But at the moment, it is regulated and has its own bespoke legislation. But I would always say to some of these arguments that are put up: there is a reason for the National Lottery to come under this legislation, there's not a reason for other people not to be regulated."

