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S
ince coming to the Senate in 1971, I have opposed all gambling measures but one, the so-called “charitable bingo” bill proposed several years ago to allow churches and fraternal and veterans’ organizations to have bingo games on their own premises for the enjoyment of their members. Unfortunately, it developed into a series of high-stakes bingo parlors across the state operated by people and organizations who took over old charitable charters and began holding games. It became indeed unsavory, with the death of one official and the imprisonment of another.

As for the lottery, for the reader who may not know, Tennessee had a constitutional provision since the 1840s prohibiting lotteries so that no lottery could be authorized until that provision should be amended. There are two ways to amend the Constitution, one by calling a convention and the other by means of legislative resolution. The resolution method, the more difficult, was chosen by the proponents of the lottery. It calls for the legislature to pass a resolution setting out the precise words of the constitutional change desired. That resolution has to pass one legislature by a majority, the next legislature by two-thirds, and then in a vote of the people by a majority of those voting in the election for governor. At first, the lottery resolution could not get a simple majority in the legislature. After that step was achieved, it had to be passed with a two-thirds vote in the next legislature. That barely occurred in the Senate; there are 33 senators, and the lottery resolution passed with 22 votes. Then it went on the ballot and passed by the required majority of votes. After the Constitution was amended, at the next legislature the bill setting up the lottery was passed by a large majority.

The proponents pursued it over a long period of time during which I opposed it not only because it was a gambling measure but because the state would operate the lottery. Gambling permitted by the state is attended with undesirable influences and is a corrupter of the fabric of society, in that the state sanctions the operation of an enterprise whose basic attraction is “something for nothing,” a practice certainly not in accord with Tennessee’s celebrated work ethic. A game operated by the state is particularly undesirable because the state is setting the example of something for nothing for the children of Tennessee at an impressionable age. The state teaches them to gamble on the one hand, and on the other hand, it is hoped, through the schools teaches them to work for what they get: two very inconsistent positions.

Other arguments have been advanced against a lottery. One is that it targets the members of the population who are least able to afford it. That does indeed occur. Those who over the years importuned me to work for a lottery resolution often appeared to be in varied reduced circumstances. When traveling in states with lotteries, I noticed at convenience stores that the lottery ticket line was often longer than the food checkout line, and the appearance of the lottery-ticket buyers led me to believe that they were not particularly prosperous. A frequent argument is that milk and bread money often goes for lottery tickets. As a lottery opponent, I never used this argument because the one who owns the money can spend it wisely or foolishly, and that is his or her business, not mine.

A point of interest is that proponents argued that buying a ticket or not is up to the purchaser, that it would be a neutral option for those who desired to buy. But since the lottery began, the state has promoted the games, as they are called, and I believe that this promotion will only increase more aggressively. This development has occurred with other state lotteries. The periodical magazine of lotteries has a section on promotion, often geared to persons of low income.

Another argument against the lottery is the addiction of the gambler, causing him or her to spend into bankruptcy or poverty buying lottery tickets to satisfy the addiction. There is probably some truth in this, but the same can be said about alcohol or tobacco, although not to as great an extent, and again that is the gambler’s, drinker’s, or smoker’s business and not mine.

An argument I believe to be valid is that the operation of a game of chance attracts people who may not be law abiding to a greater extent than do other enterprises. In fact, during the early stages of agitation for a lottery, police officials told me they did not want to see the lottery come because it would increase lawless activity in the community. I used that argument in the early days, but as the lottery idea gained more and more public favor, it was increasingly difficult to find law officers who would take a forthright position against it. There are arguments for and against the Tennessee Educational Lottery peculiar to that institution, but the observations in this article relate to the lottery concept in general.

In summary, the lottery will bring pleasure to many people but will have some adverse results. It is the first legalized form of gambling in the state. Previously, we shared that honor with only Hawaii and Utah among all the states. However, to reiterate the main point I have tried to make with my long struggle against the lottery, when the state operates the lottery, it sets a bad example for the young people.

Douglas Henry, state senator from Nashville, opposed the state lottery.