

Labour's Gambling Ombudsman strengthens social responsibility but leaves out addicts in the short-term

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Campaigners Adam Bradford (26) and David Bradford (63), from the Safer Online Gambling Group, have today expressed mixed reaction at Labour moves to bring about a Gambling Ombudsman.

The policy announcement, which is being made by Labour's Deputy Leader Tom Watson today, has been dumbed down as 'interesting' but 'not substantial enough to protect vulnerable gamblers.'

David Bradford hid his online gambling addiction from his family, eventually stealing 53,000 GBP from his employers, remortgaging the family home and running up 500,000 GBP in debts on an addiction which lasted over 30 years. David and his son Adam have been campaigning since David's prison time in 2014 to bring about stricter gambling regulations and more support for addicts.

Today Adam Bradford said: "Tom Watson's plans make sense. There is nobody out there supporting and fighting for the interests of gambling addicts and their families. That is what groups like ours hope to achieve however " Labour's words today miss some focus. We need better preventative measures from the online gambling industry "such as advertising restrictions, spend checking and a heavy intervention of healthcare based approaches to treatment both digitally and through the NHS in order to treat this issue with the respect it deserves. We do not believe amalgamating problems in this way is the most helpful approach and it leaves those who are vulnerable without the support they need. Every major city in the country needs a gambling addiction support clinic and every gambling addict should have access to treatment and support from the industry and our healthcare system."

In a major speech given at an event hosted at Demos, Tom Watson will today outline new policies on gambling legislation, building on the gambling review he published in September last year.

Tom will call for the creation of a new watchdog that is equal to the regulator and dedicated to consumer protection: a formal Gambling Ombudsman to provide customers with legal safeguards and ensure financial compensation when appropriate.

Tom will refer to cases of gamblers being let down by the present lack of a formal ombudsman. For example the story of a woman who, after spending 40,000 GBP on over a dozen credit cards until they were eventually declined, was encouraged by the operator to continue gambling through bonuses and free bets. Or the story of a man who, following huge losses, was given VIP status and given tickets to Premier League games. After this man tried to take his own life, the operator agreed to write off most of his debts but on one condition: that he signed a Non-Disclosure Agreement forbidding him from telling his story to the Gambling Commission.

In the speech, Tom will say that the current system is falling short of adequate customer protection. He will ask, "what kind of system allows a dirty deal to be struck between an operator and a vulnerable person? Where is the framework of consumer protection?", adding "I cannot think of a single other type of transactional arrangement for goods or financial services that would allow this type of situation: unclear terms and conditions, a lack of transparency, a lack of framework – and fuelled by

predatory bonus offers”.

Tom says that a Gambling Ombudsman would focus entirely on these questions. Specifically, it would ensure clarity of Terms and Conditions, transparency of customer data and data analytics, legal support, and financial compensation when necessary – including to the victims of crimes perpetrated by problem gamblers.

Tom will argue that in order to achieve this will require a restructuring of the so-called “tripartite arrangement” that oversees the regulation of operators and the treatment of people who have come to gambling-related harm.

He will propose a new structure: with the regulator overseeing operators, an ombudsman to protect and represent consumers, and an NHS programme to oversee the commissioning of research, education and treatment.

Tom says this will become necessary with the introduction of the anticipated mandatory levy on gambling revenues. The betting industry currently pays around £10m under a voluntary system that has allowed some firms to pay much less than the recommended 0.1% of revenue where some companies also pay nothing.

Both Tom and the Safer Online Gambling Group recognise the need for a new Gambling Act to achieve this legislative change.

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