

Senior Minister of State Vivian Balakrishnan at Parliament Sitting, 19 April 2004

During the Committee of Supply, Minister George Yeo said that we are prepared to consider having a casino as part of an international resort and residential development on the Southern Islands and Sentosa.

For a long time, the Government has been averse to having a casino in Singapore because of its potentially negative social impact on our local population. This concern remains valid. Should we decide to have a casino, access to it by Singaporeans will have to be controlled. In many countries, locals are not allowed free access to casinos. For example, in London, only members are allowed and the membership criteria are strict. In Korea and Monaco, locals are not allowed entry at all. We will do a careful study of the regulations in other countries.

The reason we are now prepared to consider having a casino is because of the rapidly changing tourism landscape in the region. Billions of dollars are being invested in Macao to make it the Las Vegas of the East. Thailand is considering new laws to allow casinos. Cruise ships have already become floating casinos in international waters with cruises to nowhere during weekends. In Batam, there are many casinos operating.

With rapidly growing affluence in Asia, we have to upgrade and broaden our tourism product offering in Singapore. When the International Advisory Council for Tourism met in Singapore last year, one feedback was that "Singapore is so middle-of-the-road that it is in danger of being bypassed". In the coming years, we will make major investments in the tourism industry so that it continues to be an important generator of jobs for Singaporeans. While we do not want to be a Las Vegas or a Macao, we need to consider all possibilities. At one end of the spectrum, budget airlines will make air travel cheaper for which we need to build more two and three star hotels. At the other end of the spectrum, we must be able to attract our share of the rich and famous for which casinos might be an attraction.

However, we will not rush into a decision on casinos but will first study the implications carefully and consult widely.