



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

AFFORDABILITY CHECKS: TROUBLING TIMES

THE ISSUE of affordability checks is clearly very serious indeed for the racing industry. It seems that for some time now, all the letters published by the Racing Post have been on this subject and some of them border on the unbelievable. As John Scanlon says (Off The Bridle, p.23) it is inconceivable to think of government interfering to such an extent in how people spend their own money on any other leisure or sporting activities. Or is it?

Apart from my long-held concern for the finances of British racing, it is the government's apparent disregard for basic civil liberties which troubles me most. There are many aspects of our lives which are now the subject of increasing government interference and Covid showed us how much they can get away with if they can convince the masses that they and/or their 'advisors'

know best. 'Experts say', 'scientists have found', and so on.

Of course, there are people for whom gambling is a serious problem and it might be said that government needs to intervene for their own good or the good of their families, but there are many other habits, some of which are chemically addictive as well as being habitual, and nobody, so far, has suggested that the government should check that people can afford to indulge these habits before they can be sold cigarettes, alcohol, Cadbury's Crème Eggs or whatever else satisfies their cravings.

My parents, like many of their generation, were both chain smokers and they were eventually both burning more than 60 a day of their favoured Benson and Hedges. Now, I haven't bought a cigarette since I was about 12, when they used to sell 'singles' to us

schoolkids in the sweet shop in Callander High Street, so I haven't got a clue what they cost today. But a glance at the Tesco website shows me that 60

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B&H Gold will set you back nearly £45. That's more than £300 a week each for a couple like my parents. So why doesn't

the government feel that they need to ensure that people can afford to buy cigarettes, especially when you consider the added burden that they bring to their beleaguered NHS? The simple answer is that they fear it might cost them too much in votes and revenue. Clearly the Gambling Commission is too far removed from the elected Members of Parliament to worry about such things. Maybe we should put more emphasis on telling them what it is going to cost them rather than what it is going to cost us. That might be more effective.

DESPITE all my concerns about the effect that affordability checks might have on betting turnover, the levy, and ultimately prize-money, I am still a little uncomfortable when I see prominent owners and trainers making heartfelt pleas on behalf of the betting industry. It confirms our

inextricable link to, and dependence on, the bookmakers. It is probably because of the circles I move in, the TV I watch, and the publications I read; but it almost seems that we are making more public pleas on their behalf than they are for themselves.

For as long as I have been a trainer, and probably for a long time before that, the betting industry has been trying to reduce its dependence on horseracing while, in the same period, we have done little or nothing to reduce our dependence on them. On the contrary, with the shift in newspaper coverage of racing from the dailies, the Sporting Life and the early Racing Post to the RP tipping sheet we have now, plus the dedicated satellite channels' emphasis on betting, we are now portrayed more as a product for gambling than as a sport.

John also covers the issue of the

quality of pundits in racing and that is, to a large extent, the crux of the matter when it comes to portrayal of our sport in the media. That said, I must assume that it is the programme makers and producers who dictate the content and employ people whose principal interest is gambling rather than the sport of horseracing. They, in turn, are often ultimately driven by advertising revenue (not in the case of Racing TV?) and a large amount of that comes from the betting industry. What a pity that we have not had people with the foresight, as in media coverage of football, to resist the pressure from the betting industry and concentrate on the sport. We can all see that it pays off in the long-term, it builds a much bigger following for the sport, and many of those followers will bet. It probably attracts a lot less unwanted attention from the Gambling Commission as well.

Mention of my parents' smoking habits (see above) has reminded me of the story of the two dyslexic skiers at the top of the piste.

One says to his friend: 'Let's zag-zig down to the bottom. C'mon.'

'It's not zag-zig', says the friend, 'it's zig-zag'.

'No, no', says the first, 'it's zag-zig. Let's zag-zig down to the bottom.

This goes on for a while until one suggests: 'Let's go and ask that man over there'.

'KO' says the other, and off they go. They approach the man and say: 'Can you settle an argument here, do we zag-zig down to the bottom or do we zig-zag?'

'Don't ask me', he says, 'I'm a tobogganist'.

'Oh, good', says the skier, 'can I have 20 Benson and Hedges and a box of matches?'

ICAN'T get away from John's Off The Bridle this month as he touched briefly on another subject that has been in the news recently, the removal of nine Listed and Group 3 events from the Pattern. While I was also disappointed to note the bias towards cutting races over longer distances and, in particular, the 14-furlong March Stakes at Goodwood, I cannot agree with John that the running of more Black Type races correlates with greater return on investment for owners. I have long said that there is not only too much racing, there is too much good racing. We have too many good races for the available population of horses of that class and this undoubtedly leads to small fields and less competitive racing. Furthermore, the 'return on investment' which John alludes to would come only from selling these horses to race abroad and a further dilution of the quality of British racing.

What we should be questioning is

FIT FOR PURPOSE?

whether the Black Type system, like the handicap system, is an archaic anachronism which is no longer fit for purpose. There are strong arguments for retaining the Classics and many aspects of the Pattern which are such an important part of the heritage of racing in Britain and in many other racing nations, but the splashing around of black ink to make pedigrees look better than they really are is misleading and detrimental to the aims of improving the breed.

It would be far better if Black Type was allocated according to international ratings. We could retain designations of Group 1,2,3 and Listed but the Black type should be allocated according to



Subjectivist wins the March Stakes in 2020

rating. I have touched in recent months on the subjectivity of ratings but it still would be better than the situation where a horse would get Black Type for being tailed off in a three-runner Listed race in Nantes or Naas but not for winning the Ebor.

Does punishment fit the crime?

JUST AS the Klarion was going to press, news was breaking of huge penalties being handed out by the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board to trainer Ronan McNally and others. McNally's 12-year ban is the longest, by some way, ever issued to an Irish licence holder and more than three times the previous longest, which was given to Stephen Mahon for welfare breaches.

McNally was found guilty of heinous crimes such as 'running horses in order to obtain handicap marks not reflective of their ability'. Is this not the practice which Matt Chapman recently described, publicly on television, as part of 'the game'? McNally was found to be guilty of other breaches of rules including the passing of 'inside information' but if I am

reading it correctly, it would appear that the 'inside information' related to when a horse was going to win, not that it was going to be prevented from winning.



Ronan McNally

If these are the worst crimes ever committed in Irish racing in modern times, as the length of the ban would suggest, then the IHRB and their counterparts at the BHA, need to look very carefully at their systems and rules which make it potentially beneficial to deliberately underperform and encourage people, from trainers to stewards and pundits on the telly, to think that this is the way to win in horseracing.