

7 June 2006



Bye the Bye

You really can't win. When I first suggested supporting a bid for a casino there was strong support from Councillors, overwhelming support from the business community, and approval from the Torbay Strategic Partnership. Also, public consultation showed 74% in favour. Indeed, this strong response was very helpful in making our case.

However, now that we are on the shortlist with a better than 50:50 chance of success, most of the comments in this newspaper are negative. One hostile web-chat contribution from a Bristol reader amused me. If going for a casino is such a bad idea, then I wonder why Bristol, Bath and Weston Super Mare all submitted bids? Did he contact the local papers there with his thoughts?

The case for the casino is threefold:

First, it will bring jobs and prosperity. A casino could provide a couple of hundred jobs and draw people into Torbay who will stay in our hotels, spend money in the shops and restaurants, etc.

Secondly, it provides the opportunity of investment in our crumbling infrastructure. Depending upon the location of the casino, it could bring funds to restore, for example, our promenade and gardens, or perhaps give a long-term future for one of our iconic buildings. There might even be money for a bandstand if we ask the operator nicely.

Thirdly, and most importantly, it spells out a clear message that Torbay is open for business and open to new ideas. We have simply said no to too

many opportunities in recent years. We have said no to a ferry link, budget hotels, gymnasiums, Harry Ramsdens, car showrooms, more marina berths, bold retail developments. The list is endless. We have been too prescriptive in our planning policies and bogged down in fruitless debates about what are the right and wrong sort of jobs.

The result is that we now have the weakest economy in the South West, falling behind Cornwall, yet without the objective funding that would be so helpful.

I accept that some people have honest objections to gambling. Many years ago, when I first joined a well-known Political Party in Brixham, there was an elderly supporter who donated a splendid cake for the Christmas Fair each year – on the understanding that it was sold, not raffled. But in this modern age dedicated gamblers can go on line or join the crowds at the bookmakers. Most of us enjoy a flutter on the lottery and even if we don't, then we enjoy the benefits of the Heritage Lottery Fund. Our own Torre Abbey is the largest recipient in the South West, scooping the best part of £5 million for its restoration.

One of the themes that is most common to the objections is that the locals won't use it.

At the risk of endangering my already fragile popularity, I would say that, well, er, um, that remark completely misses the point. The whole purpose of this project and indeed the emerging vision for Torbay is to add to our existing tourism industry by enhancing what is special and exciting. We need to draw more high spending people into our beautiful Bay.

We have to promote a most sophisticated ambience. The Chief Executive has talked about a continental café culture for Torquay. Already there are improvements underway at the harbour, investment in some of our hotels, a flourishing restaurant scene and greater recognition of our architectural, literary and cultural heritage. Paignton, with its splendid beaches, the Zoo, the steam train and much more has a great basis for being the best family resort anywhere. Full stop. Brixham is truly unique and draws many regular visitors.

But the truth is that we are falling behind and have neglected tourism in recent years. During the 60s and 70s we took it all for granted and now the world has moved on. It is not because people haven't got the money to come here for their holidays. It is simply that they expect something better. One and a quarter million British tourists now take a cruise each year. Many more fly long haul to exotic spots around the globe, or hop on budget flights to Barcelona, Prague or Nice in the same way that earlier generations hopped onto a tram.

We need to target a different group of visitors and lure them into Torbay. For example, those who take their main holiday on the Oriana in July might come here for a few days in September or October to explore nearby National Trust Properties, celebrate Agatha Christies birth place or walk the coastal footpath. And where might they go in the evening, after a good dinner, to try their luck just like they can on every major cruise ship?

All this and more will be discussed at my Tourism Forum, to be held at the South Devon College on June 23rd. Spaces are filling up fast. I have invited

members of the business community to contribute their thoughts on how we can work together to promote our Number One Industry.

Nick Bye

Mayor of Torbay