

OBJECT and Fawcett Society

Press release from OBJECT (1) and Fawcett Society (2)
For immediate release

Lap dancing licensing reforms pass through to House of Lords but criticised for being too weak

MPs tonight (19.05.09) forcefully called on the Government to strengthen lap dancing licensing reforms, as the measures were debated during the 3rd Reading of the Policing and Crime Bill (3). MPs Lynda Waltho (Lab), David Lepper (Lab), Celia Barlow (Lab), Roberta Blackman-Woods MP (Lab), Andrew Slaughter (Lab), Bob Spink (Independent) and Dan Rogerson (Lib-Dem) all called for licensing reforms to be applied universally across England and Wales and for the removal of a 'frequency loophole' – warning that failure to do so would lead to a 'patchwork' licensing regime likely to be exploited by the lap dancing industry.

Lap dancing clubs are currently licensed under the Licensing Act 2003 in the same way as cafes and karaoke bars – with a Premises License. This lax regime has led to the number of lap dancing clubs in the UK doubling since 2004 to over 300 establishments, with local communities powerless to stop the spread. Following OBJECT and Fawcett Society's widely supported campaign to reform licensing (4) the Government pledged to give local communities a greater say in the licensing of lap dancing clubs by allowing councils to licence lap dancing clubs as 'Sex Encounter Venues'.

However, the reforms are seriously flawed. In their current form they will be optional and will not apply to venues hosting lap dancing less than once a month, despite growing calls for tougher action. A Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee report last week called for lap dancing licensing reforms to be made mandatory for all local councils (5) and local authorities from across the country recently travelled to Parliament to tell Ministers themselves that the new controls will be too weak (6). The reforms will now pass to the House of Lords for scrutiny.

Dr. Sasha Rakoff, Director of OBJECT, commented on the 3rd reading:

"It is crucial that the Government gets these reforms right. Too many people in too many towns and cities across the country have found themselves without a voice in licensing. Yet lap dancing clubs are not just a bit of 'harmless fun'. They give the green light to sexism and promote 'sex object culture' – a culture in which women are increasingly treated as sex objects. It's time for licensing which tips power away from club owners and back to local communities so we urge the Government to ensure these important reforms are universal and contain no loopholes".

Kat Banyard, Campaigns Officer at the Fawcett Society, commented on the 3rd Reading:

"We urge the Government to heed calls by MPs and local authorities for the lap dancing club licensing reforms to be strengthened. Optional licensing with a frequency-based exemption would play right into the hands of the lap dancing industry. Lap dancing is part of

the sex industry, so venues hosting it should be licensed as Sex Encounter Venues wherever and whenever it takes place. Stronger reforms would help ensure the safety of women working in the clubs and those living in the vicinity. Half-baked reforms won't do. Only universal reforms without exemptions will guarantee local people a say in the licensing of all lap dancing events in their communities."

For further information and to request interviews please contact Sandrine Leveque (OBJECT) on 07975 897005 or Kat Banyard (Fawcett Society) on 020 7253 2598 or 07775 855037.

NOTES TO EDITORS

- (1) OBJECT is a human rights organisation which challenges the increased sexualisation of women in the media and popular culture. www.object.org.uk
- (2) The Fawcett Society is the UK's leading campaign for women's rights. www.fawcettsociety.org.uk
- (3) The Policing and Crime introduced by Home Secretary Jacqui Smith MP, received its second reading in the House of Commons on 19/1/09. (<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2008-09/policingandcrime.html>)
- (4) Key moments in the campaign included the following:
 - a. 03/12/08: Lap dancing licensing proposals announced in Queen's Speech.
 - b. 25/11/08: Campaign gives evidence to Culture, Media and Sport Committee and hands petition of 10,000 names to No. 10 Downing Street.
 - c. 18/6/08: a 10 Minute Rule Bill was introduced by Robert Blackman-Woods MP (City of Durham) calling for lapdance clubs to be licensed as Sex Encounter Establishments. The Bill was unopposed and received cross-party support
 - d. 18/6/08: The Department for Culture, Media, and Sport began a consultation with all local authorities in England and Wales on whether they wanted greater powers to control and regulate lap dancing clubs. 75% of responding local authorities asked for such powers.
 - e. 21/9/08: The Rt. Hon. Jacqui Smith announced at the Labour Party Conference that the Government would grant local people a greater say in stopping lap dancing clubs opening: http://www.labour.org.uk/jacqui_smith_speech,2008-09-21
 - f. 3/12/08: Plans to tighten the licensing of lap dancing clubs were announced in the Queen's Speech
- (5) *'The Licensing Act 2003 (Sixth Report of Session 2008-9)*, released Thursday 14th May 2009, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee.
- (6) On 31/03/09 OBJECT and Fawcett Society organised a Local Authority Evidence Hearing which was attended by Licensing Managers and local councillors, all calling for stronger reforms. <http://www.object.org.uk/index.php/government-to-plug-holes>

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