

Tributes to the International Conference on Gambling and Risk-Taking

I initially encountered problem gambling in 1979 when I was invited to sit in on the first Gamblers Anonymous meetings in New Zealand. I was there to help the group forge links with mental health providers and to raise public and professional awareness of what was then known as compulsive gambling. Ever since, I have retained an interest in gambling. My early focus was on finding ways to assist problem gamblers and people close to them and reducing wider gambling-related harm and social costs. While this focus and concern persists, over the years I developed a wider interest in gambling per se, in its varied forms and contexts, and how it has evolved over time. Gambling is a fascinating area to be involved in; in whatever capacity one engages with it. It reflects and touches cultures, economies, societies, individuals and families in multiple ways. It is highly politicized and often polarizes communities and constituencies.

One of the strengths of Bill's International Conferences, additional to their continuity, is their truly international scope and the fact that they bring multiple players to the table. It is not industry focused, problem gambling/treatment focused, regulator focused or academic research focused. It is all of these and more. This inclusiveness is a major strength.

Back in the late 1970s there was relatively little research on gambling. In the early 1980s I commissioned a literature review on problem gambling that had a reference list of just two pages. It is hard to believe how things have changed. Gambling became a major growth industry in many parts of the world. This expansion was driven by changing attitudes including the increased legitimacy of legal gambling, the intersection of electronic technologies in financial markets and gaming venues, the advent and evolution of the Internet, accelerating globalization and the spread of gambling to previously non-gambling settings. Problem gambling, not classified as a mental disorder until 1980, became a growth pathology, reflecting the rapid increase in the availability of high risk gambling forms. Specialist treatment and related services were established and proliferated. Had someone gone into hibernation in the early 1980s and woken today the pervasiveness of gambling in everyday life would surely be among the changes that would occasion most surprise. It has been a profound transformation. Ambrose Bierce, over 100 years ago, quipped “the gambling known as business looks with austere disfavor on the business known as gambling.” Today gambling is indeed big business, and business, post-major global recession, clearly has a

substantial gambling underpinning.

Gambling research has also grown, almost exponentially, during the past 20 years or so. A number of gambling specific journals have been established and gambling articles increasingly appear in mainstream journals in an array of academic disciplines and specialties. When I first began to read about gambling, to try to see the bigger picture as well as increase my understanding of problem gambling and related adverse impacts, Bill Eadington's name stood out. His first gambling publication was in 1973 and he has continued to publish since, for four decades. While a number of these publications are in economics journals, Bill's interests and scholarship is broad and multidisciplinary. It has a strong applied and policy focus. The year following his first publication, in 1974, Bill organized and coordinated the National (later International) Conference on Gambling and Risk Taking. It is remarkable that he has continued to do so, every three years, from 1974

to 2013. Someone, John Cleese I think it was, once explained how Americans differed from the English. He gave three differences but only one can be mentioned in polite company. He said that when the English hold world sporting events they invite people from other countries. Organizing successful international events of any sort presents a huge challenge. This is more the case when there are diverse stakeholders, including major ones with often opposing worldviews and agendas. There are other significant national, regional and international gambling conferences. However they generally, predominantly, engage parts of the sector with little or no involvement of other parts. One of the strengths of Bill's International Conferences, additional to their continuity, is their truly international scope and the fact that they bring multiple players to the table. It is not industry focused, problem gambling/treatment focused, regulator focused or academic research focused. It is all of these and more. This inclusiveness is a major strength.

A few years back I was asked by Bill to give an opening plenary address, focusing on research and policy developments in Australia and New Zealand. This invitation reflected the commitment to ensuring that the Conferences do not have an overly heavy US or North American emphasis. There were two opening plenary speakers and Bill was on the program to follow. If my memory serves me correctly the first speaker (not me) went over the allotted time and I only partially cut back to accommodate it. While I speak a lot in public this was far from one of my better performances. Partly the timing threw me. Bill was magnificent. I felt like a bumbling novice in comparison. He took the much-reduced time in his stride. He gave a perfect, albeit truncated, presentation - a scholarly, clear, engaging overview of gambling developments worldwide and future projections. His sense of fun and wit was not dimmed.

Gambling research and related policy and service interests is only one of my areas of academic and professional activity. For this reason I need to be selective when it comes to conference participation, other than in our own two-yearly international conference and think tank in Auckland. The International Conference on Gambling and Risk Taking is at the top of my list. We owe Bill, Judy and others who have sustained this event over the years much credit. It provides a safe forum for engagement and debate and has played an important role in fostering scholarship and research and forging links between research, policy and practice. I am aware that the Conference is but the tip of the iceberg of Bill's wide-ranging consultancy and other involvements worldwide. His contribution and influence is huge. He is highly regarded, deservedly, by people from all branches of the diverse, somewhat disjointed international gambling "family."

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