

Where would gambling studies be as an academic discipline without the periodic international conferences on this subject established and sustained by Bill Eadington over an immensely productive academic lifetime? The answer, as I think as any honest scholar would have to concede, is: “Possibly nowhere. Certainly not where they are today.”

I came comparatively late to this discipline from an interest in public policy and commercial practice, especially in South Africa. In the early 1990s, it became clear that South Africa would have to legalise casino gambling. This was for two reasons. First, because with the reintegration into South Africa under Mandela and De Klerk of the so-called independent homelands - recognised as independent states by the then South African government but by no-one else - South Africa found itself with 17 casinos run by Sun International which had been legal under homeland law but were now illegal under South African law. Second, and less peculiarly and more importantly, South Africa was confronted with a vast number of illegal machines in seedy venues in every small town in the country. The Central Government had already decided to legalise up to forty casinos divided amongst the nine Provinces but where these were located and who was awarded a licence, in return for what, was a matter for Provincial Governments to determine.

At this point I became involved by putting together a team of South African academics whose mission was to assist Provincial Government in devising good public policy for their Provinces in relation to casinos. The trouble was that, though we had between us quite a lot of diverse disciplinary expertise, none of us had actually studied

the gambling industry. It didn't take long to discover that the best way to remedy this rather egregious gap in our knowledge would be to make contact with Prof William R Eadington of UNR. We duly descended on him and, after he had quite properly satisfied himself about our *bona fides*, he could not have been more generous and wise with his advice nor more impressive in relation to the breadth and depth of his expertise in all matters to do with gambling. It took him little effort to persuade me that attendance at the next International Conference on Gambling and Risk-Taking would be a must for any academic wishing to become or remain up to date with the latest work being done in psychology, economics, sociology, law, public administration, and, indeed ethics, history and mathematics.

It was at my first conference that I came to the conclusion that gambling is an immensely interesting and rewarding subject to study – much more interesting, as far as I'm concerned, than actually gambling. One thing that made it interesting was

that, whatever your own discipline, you were forced to understand what people were contributing to the study of gambling as a whole from their own disciplines. Another factor was the sheer diversity of interesting questions to be explored. Why do people gamble at all when they know the odds are stacked inexorably against them and why do some people gamble to the point where they are doing themselves and others real harm? Why is the question of legalising gambling or making more commercial gambling legally available always controversial and always results in special regulatory regimes such as do not seem to be required for other forms of entertainment? What's the best way for

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governments to tax gambling – and what are the worst ways? Leaving aside questions of appropriate legal status, is gambling as such immoral and best thought of on the analogy of, say, pornography, or is it mostly harmless entertainment, like riding roller-coasters or eating spicy food and only a problem when indulged in to excess? And so on.

The international conferences have always sought to combine diversity of subject matter and discipline and, it seems to me they have steadily got better as more and more high-grade academics and others interested have come to see how intellectually rewarding the study of gambling can be. However, as everybody knows, much of the value of academic conferences comes not from listening to papers, however useful – and often entertaining – this activity frequently is for both audience and author. A huge part of the value of these conferences exists in the opportunities they provide to meet, get to know and exchange ideas with others who share an interest in gambling whether as scholars, industry professionals, regulators and legislators, treatment and educational professionals. For this to happen, conference organisers need to ensure that their conferences are sufficiently attractive and prestigious to ensure that the best and the brightest in all the relevant fields are motivated to attend. Bill's intellectual authority combined with his personal magnetism and sheer determination has ensured that these conditions have been consistently met at these conferences.

Nor, finally should it be thought that good conferences are one-off events. They are often the occasion for establishing collaborative working relationships that prove productive over long periods. They also often provide opportunities for forming abiding friendships – not least with Bill himself. Both these things have certainly be true for me over the past twenty years and for both of them I am deeply grateful to Bill himself and to all of you.

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