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UKES: CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I have attended many evaluation conferences. I have even organized a few. So, I know something about what goes into the planning, the logistics and the diplomacy of putting a large show such as this one together. It was a rather large event with its 220 participants, 57 presentations and 22 sessions.

The great achievement of the organizers is to have made it look easy. This is true artistry. This is true discipline. I have never attended an evaluation conference where the delivery was so natural, so pleasant and so relaxed. So, I would like you to give a big round of applause to the planners, the implementers, the keynote speakers, the chairs of sessions, the presenters, the performers, the participants and last but not least the jewel in the crown of the UK Evaluation Society, your gracious outgoing President -- May Pettigrew.

In his opening remarks, Professor Creigh-Tyte, referred to Keynes as a pioneer of evaluation and a lover of the arts. Keynes was also an internationalist and the architect of the Bretton Woods conference that created the World Bank. I hope that his global vision will infiltrate the ranks of this Society. This would be in keeping with the reasonable ambition Professor Creigh-Tyte called for. It would also be consistent with his plea to fill evaluation gaps. It is not enough to “add it all up” at the national level. The bottom line today is global.

These may be wild words to use in a national conference but Keynes once wrote: “words ought to be a little wild for they are assault of thoughts on the unthinking”. He would have approved of many of the words spoken at this Conference, such as those of Paul Burton who talked about “flash floods of enlightenment” and likened policy evaluation to a chaotic decomposition process. And being a connoisseur of ballet and of ballerinas he would certainly have enjoyed the extraordinary performance of the Bristol Playback artists.

Michael Scriven has argued that one can evaluate anything, including evaluation. The conference demonstrated that this is indeed the case. It explored the potential of artistry, the limits of discipline and the power of delivery. It provided ample confirmation that art can be evaluated and that evaluation is an art. It taught us everything we wanted to know but were afraid to ask about Health Action Zones, CCTVs and psychotherapy evaluations.

The extraordinary keynote presentation of Francois Matarasso reminded me of John Kennedy’s words “When power leads man to arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses, for art establishes the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment”. Like poetry, evaluation recollects emotion in tranquility. Like poetry, evaluation seeks the center of things.

Is artistry compatible with discipline? Like evaluation, art is largely a solitary affair. It offers the perspective of the outsider. It rejects conformity. It is subversive. By contrast, discipline is a way of working together. It demands cooperation. It implies consent. So there is tension between artistry and discipline. But both are needed because artistry adds value while discipline provides legitimacy.

Discipline for evaluators is especially important because they are so few in numbers. Just as the Marines, evaluation only needs a few good men and women. According to George Washington “Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable, procures success for the

weak and esteem to all.” So, artistry demands discipline just as discipline (to achieve effective delivery) demands artistry.

Effective delivery requires us to adopt a good bedside manner and to practice the subtle tactics of dissemination. But the basic task of evaluation is to make authority responsible. Joseph Conrad once observed: “action is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusions”. We must keep this in mind since a primary responsibility of evaluation is to shatter ill-founded dogmas and self-serving policy assumptions. All too often policy makers use statistics as drunken men uses lampposts – for support rather than illumination.

Delivery also has to do with instruction and learning. But lessons drawn are not necessarily lessons used. James Richardson, a poet, has suggested that embarrassment is the greatest teacher but since its lessons are exactly those one tries hardest to conceal, it teaches also to perfect self-deception. No one likes bad news as Professor Simons reminded us in her keynote presentation.

In this sense, learning (designed to embarrass) and accountability (to overcome self deception) go hand in hand. We must speak truth to power instead of portraying only what decision-makers would like to be true. To quote John Adams: “facts are stubborn things and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations or the dictates of passions they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.”

The most powerful instrument in our tool kit is “to tell it like it is”. We must wield this instrument responsibly and fairly to be sure. But wield it we must. Transparency is at the heart of good evaluation. Like the legendary Greek poet, we must dare to tell the truth. We cannot expect to be loved even if as the scriptures put it “discipline is the care of love”.

The conference reminded us the fundamentals of our profession. It strengthened our joint commitment to fairness, rigor, inquiry, objectivity and participation. It also prepared us for the changes that lie ahead. From my perspective, I picked up the following trends. First, evaluation is becoming more international. Second, it is becoming more pluralistic. Third, it is facing rising competition.

Therefore:

- We should reach out to new actors: beyond government and academia, we should seek connectivity with the auditing profession, the private sector, the civil society and the wide world of global evaluation.
- We should address new topics: relevance should be sought at local, national and global levels; partnerships need evaluation; the focus should move from projects and programs to policies and institutions.
- We should construct new evaluation systems: the governance of evaluation is in dire need of evaluation.
- We should practice what we preach , apply the lessons of our own experience and heed the call for international solidarity in evaluation.

Specifically we need:

- To recognize the political context of programs and policies we are called upon to evaluate: the utopian (linear) models of policy making and organizational change are not suitable for effective evaluation delivery.

- To be selective and eclectic in the use of evaluation methods: they should serve rather than drive our evaluations. No single evaluation doctrine should be allowed to dominate our practice. Both independent and empowerment evaluation are needed in an open society.
- To be realistic about the potential of evaluation. Not all evaluations induce reform. High rewards for evaluation often go with high risks. Courage is necessary.
- To be inclusive and allow the interplay of contrasting perspectives about the role and practices of evaluation.
- To give a helping hand to evaluation organizations that are struggling to get established, especially in the developing world.

Ladies and gentlemen, for the past decade, UKES has climbed the mountain of evaluation excellence. You have not yet reached the top. But you have made good progress and the road ahead is clear. By the time you get to Cardiff, you should have gotten closer to your destination. I look forward to joining you in your journey.