

Enduring Lessons from Gordon Tullock

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I am pleased that Roger Congleton asked me to share a few recollections of my days at Virginia Tech under the tutelage of Gordon Tullock. As I have been asked to speak "as a student," which I haven't been able to do in 25 years, I will describe 5 lessons I learned from Professor Tullock.

1. You don't have to know anything about a topic to write about it. I hesitate to attribute this to Professor Tullock because he really does seem to know something about everything, or at least enough to fool me. I went to Tech because I was interested in the relationship between the individual and the state and the Public Choice Center at that time was focused on the economic justifications for government. Little did I know that one of the professors had written not one but two books (surprising weighty for their slender builds) about the economics of anarchy! Perfect. But not only anarchy. Gordon Tullock has written about everything from ethology to foreign policy. I remember something about ornithology and about ants. About whether to run stop lights at night when no one is around. Professor Tullock liberated me to write about whatever took my fancy in the legal arena where I now work -- tort law, environmental law, contracts, tax, antitrust, property law. I even wrote a piece on the evolutionary basis of group formation. I hadn't realized it until looking back after 15 years that everything I did was economics-- the power of the subconscious and Gordon's teaching.

2. Logic Counts Most. From Gordon Tullock I learned the value of equations. I have a bit of difficulty persuading my legal colleagues that equations are not just restating what we already know. I remember a Tullock quote from a 1988 article where he writes, "I

recommend my book, *A Mathematics of Politics*, over Tony Down's book [*An Economic Theory of Democracy*] because I use high school algebra and he uses calculus. Well, I really don't remember how to calculate first order conditions. But I remember that algebra forces one to consider dimensions of a problem one might otherwise overlook. (Mentioning the self-promoting quote above reminds me of another lesson, which I cannot say I have taken to heart -- "any publicity is good publicity." And then there was "Machine guns would be a cheaper way of keeping the poor in line than welfare." Or was it the other way around?)

3. An idea is an article; an article is a book. This is perhaps the most liberating lesson of all. All it takes is an idea (and a little perspiration) and you have an article! Tenure here I come! Over the past 25 years, I have interviewed hundreds of aspiring law professors. A shocking number ask, "Where do you get your ideas for articles?" That is just stunning. Where can one find the time to write about all of the ideas? It is said about some people that "So and so has never had an unpublished idea." While some might be tempted to say that about Gordon, it is absolutely false. He has so many great ideas that the ratio of uttered to published ideas must be a thousand to one. But all those ideas have certainly kept him young.

4. If your data refute your theory, reevaluate your data. Does anyone outside of this group collected for Gordon Tullock's birthday really understand what that means? I hope it is no longer a secret that our graduate student training at Tech was not very technical. The great value of this lesson is that, like "logic comes first" (see lesson 2), it forces one to think. How could the data possibly say that? Among lay people, data is so much more powerful than theory that we have to take extra care with empirical conclusions. When a graduate student hears as many ideas and theories as we did from Professor Tullock (see lesson 3), he or she naturally becomes skeptical of theories. Theories are just fun -- until they become important. But data! And, statistics! That is heavy stuff. Well, we didn't have to worry much about econometrics. Nevertheless, because of lesson 1 (you don't have to know anything), I am ashamed to admit that I have written 2 books and regularly conduct seminars for judges and

lawyers on statistics. Before this audience, I am apologetic. But just to let you know my heart is in the right place, I also wrote an article proving (!) empirically that states whose courts use the phrase "in evidence" rather than "into evidence" have higher unemployment rates and higher GDP growth. The theory is perfectly sound --shorter words and fewer typists yields higher unemployment, greater x-efficiency yields higher GDP growth. I also remember a lesson scratched into a desk in the Tech library, I'm sure not by Gordon. It said something about the beneficial effects of massaging data -- former Hokies will remember, but it is a little to rude for this dinner party.

5. Tolerance of Graduate Student Shenanigans. Perhaps it is because he is so devoted to his work and to ideas or perhaps it is because he is just plain tolerant, but I have always been grateful that Gordon Tullock apparently ignored our graduate student shenanigans. Other faculty members were shocked to learned that another graduate student and I were taking tap dance lessons at night when we should have been reading the AM-FM debates. Professor Tullock showed no signs of caring whatsoever. And when I couldn't resist answering a final exam question in Advanced Monetary Theory with a nine stanza limerick, my career was almost finished. But there was no sign that Gordon Tullock cared in the slightest. For that tolerance, I thank you Gordon.

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