

## Tullock the Man: An Appreciation

By David R. Henderson

I had difficulty knowing whether to put my comments under “The Contributions of Gordon Tullock,” “Tullock the Teacher,” or “Tullock the Man,” because my appreciation is of Gordon in all three categories. I decided on the last because both the teacher and the thinker who makes intellectual contributions are so big a part of the man. I never took a class from Gordon, but he was definitely one of my most important teachers.

I had discovered Gordon’s name and work by working my way through back issues of the *Journal of Law and Economics* in academic year 1970-71. I had taken the year off after graduating as a math major and set up a self-study program to learn economics. I came across Gordon’s and Jim Buchanan’s *The Calculus of Consent* in a footnote and went to the library to get it. I found myself wanting to copy almost every page and copying in those days cost about 10 cents a page, which is about 40 cents today. So I went and bought my own paperback. I loved that book and, naturally, followed up by reading more of what he and Jim had written. That year, I read Gordon’s *The Politics of Bureaucracy* and *The Organization of Inquiry*, along with about 10 or so journal articles Gordon had written. What an intellectual treat that was. Gordon’s conversational reminiscences of his time in the State department, in *The Politics of Bureaucracy*, in fact, informed my own style in my chapter, “A Tour of Washington,” in my book, *The Joy of Freedom: An Economist’s Odyssey*. And his *Organization of Inquiry* is still the most thoughtful work I have ever read on how to maximize additions to knowledge. Whenever his suggestions for decentralization and incentives are followed, additions to knowledge follow; when centralization takes over, as with Nixon’s centralization of cancer research, progress slows and more people die.

What a treat it was then, a few months later, when I learned that Gordon would be coming to the University of Western Ontario in October 1971 to give a talk at a weekend-long symposium held by the philosophy department. At the time I was taking a year of advanced undergraduate economics to prepare myself for graduate school. I remember the topic and the content of Gordon’s talk. It was about political revolutions. In it, he pointed out a simple but powerful insight. Any one person’s decision to participate in a revolution, he noted, does not much affect the probability that the revolution will succeed. Therefore, when each person considers participating in the revolution, the expected benefits that he takes account of that are generated by the revolution are not much affected by his own decision to participate. This is true, noted Tullock, even for the most visible and influential participants. On the other hand, noted Tullock, a nasty government can individualize the costs very effectively by heavily punishing those who participate in a revolution. So anyone contemplating participating in a revolution will be comparing heavy individual costs and small benefits that are simply his pro rata share of the overall benefits. Therefore, argued Tullock, for people to participate, they must expect some benefits that are tied to their own participation, such as a job in the new government or whatever. Tullock noted that, in fact, the typical revolution involves many of the people who are actually in the government they are revolting against. This is

evidence for his model, Tullock said, because such people are particularly well situated to replace the incumbent office-holders.

His model was clever and, like much of public choice, only slightly overstated. On the program for the symposium were two discussants, Martin Shubik of the RAND Corporation and David Braybrooke of Dalhousie University. But, said the session chair, Shubik cancelled at the last minute and so the chair had replaced Shubik, with Mel Watkins, an economist from the University of Toronto. When the announcement was made, there were a number of titters in the mainly Canadian audience. Every Canadian there knew who Mel Watkins was. He was a well-known socialist economist who was trying to get Canada's New Democratic Party to move further left. He was also known for the so-called Watkins Committee report, that had come out a year or two earlier, that had advocated heavy government restrictions on foreign (read: American) takeovers of Canadian firms and on foreign (read: American) investment in Canada. Only a few years later, incidentally, the Trudeau government, to compete with the left, adopted a modified version of the restrictions Watkins wanted.

Watkins was up first. He sneeringly attacked Gordon's model without ever, as I recall, giving one actual reason or fact that would refute it. (Believe it or not, I still have the tape of this whole session—I taped everything in those days—and I could check to see if my memory is correct.) Watkins's whole tone, and even some of the words, were about this imperialist American having the nerve to come to Canada and tell us how it is. When Watkins sat down, a handful of people in the audience of about 150 broke into applause. Braybrooke, when his turn came, gave a more standard discussion, pointing out that Gordon's model fell apart if you put a conscience cost as an argument into the potential revolutionary's utility function.

Then the session chair gave Gordon a chance to reply and he quickly admitted many of Braybrooke's arguments. Then he said that listening to Watkins' rant made him nostalgic because he hadn't heard that kind of anti-American rant since the days when the communists were dominant on many American campuses. Also Gordon said he was nostalgic, he looked genuinely hurt.

Afterward, I went up and introduced myself and we set up a time to meet for lunch the next day. We had lunch and walked around the campus and Gordon answered many of my questions about American politics, the Goldwater campaign of 7 years earlier, and on and on. I had Gordon all to myself for those few hours and I took advantage of it.

The day after that, Gordon gave a talk to the economics faculty and students titled, "The Charity of the Uncharitable." In it, he pointed out that most Americans give one or two percent of their income to charity and that they don't change stripes and suddenly become much more charitable when they enter the polling place. Therefore, argued Gordon, when people support particular programs that look like charitable handouts to others, it's important to examine the details of such programs. Typically, when one does so, he claimed, one finds that the biggest supporters of the programs are people who stand to gain themselves. Among the strongest supporters of welfare, he noted, are people who will get jobs administering the welfare programs or studying the welfare programs. Then Gordon used a memorable simile: using government welfare to help poor people, he said, is like trying to feed sparrows by feeding horses. For the next

few weeks, my friend Harry Watson and I would quote that line to each other and laugh uproariously.

The other thing I remember about his presentation is how uptight the largely Canadian economics faculty was about Tullock's views. They listened quietly and asked a few questions, but did not engage. I could tell—from facial expressions, tones, and body language—that they didn't like what they heard, but they wouldn't take him on. In the following weeks, when I tried to engage some of the faculty about things Gordon had said, I found him dismissed as a "right-winger." The best I heard from a couple of faculty was that he was "a very smart right-winger." At the time, I thought the reaction was due in large part to the Canadian temperament, which I had grown up with and gotten sick of. The basic rule is that you shouldn't argue about things like charity because good people don't argue about such things. Since moving to America in 1972 and having attended countless presentations, I'm now convinced that I was wrong. Part of it, to be sure, was the Canadian temperament. But I've also attended similar presentations at which no Canadian, other than I, was present, and I've seen the same thing. When a libertarian or conservative wants to take on this or that government policy by talking about its actual effects, an audience of largely "liberal" economists will often not engage. They'll be studiously quiet and then some will make ad hominem attacks later behind closed doors. I really have found that free-market-oriented economists are simply more fun, more enjoying of the intellectual endeavor, and less stodgy than intervention-oriented economists. For me, back in 1971, Gordon represented the best that U.S. academic economics had to offer. He still does.