

Becoming Like Tullock

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I first met Gordon Tullock at a party, while visiting Andy Whinston in Charlottesville, in late 1964. I remember, most of all, being peppered with questions, in what seemed a diabolical yet pleasant oral examination, on topics that seemed, to a conventionally trained economist, a little bizarre, like ants and Chinese diplomacy. But, 1962 being not long after publication of The Calculus of Consent, the discussion also included references to strange voting systems and (for a liberal like me) even weirder theories of politics.

Apparently I passed the exam, because I was invited to join the faculty at Virginia the following fall. Moreover, Tullock considered me an improvement, at least over my predecessor as the department's teacher of macroeconomics, a man who, in the course of the next twenty years, held half a dozen different cabinet positions in Washington. Gordon has always been an excellent judge of talent!

I learned, shortly after arriving in Charlottesville and being subjected daily to the same curriculum through discussions in Gordon's office, that I was not his only student. When he wasn't busy correcting the damage done by my flawed Yale education, Tullock was administering the same treatment to the university's administrators, though less successfully, at their morning coffee in the Colonnade Club. Unfortunately, both for Gordon and for the university, this didn't take, and less than two years later Gordon left for Rice, marking the beginning of the end of what had been the most under-rated (and perhaps the most creative) economics department of the decade.

Now, a third of a century later, I have forgotten all the macroeconomics I thought I knew, to the chagrin of acquaintances who badger me for economic forecasts, but I still think about the ants and Chinese diplomacy, and the politics of economics, often lying awake at night thinking about how I would respond to one of Gordon's exam questions. And those who know me often accuse me, implicitly, of having become like Tullock. I take this as an absolute compliment!