

Thanks to Gordon Tullock

Roger D. Congleton

BB&T Professor of Economics

West Virginia University

1-1-15

Abstract. Gordon Tullock's impact as a scholar was broader than his own contributions because he was an initiator of new fields of research rather than one who modestly extended pre-existing pastures. His import as founding editor of *Public Choice*, as an ambassador for public choice, and as a teacher, mentor, and friend for public choice scholars around the world should also be remembered.

1 Thanks to Tullock the scholar

Tullock's work was unusually broad and had an unusually large impact.¹ His work with Buchanan, especially the *Calculus of Consent*, was very influential. Tullock deserves credit for stimulating that book to be written according to the preface. Tullock had "prepared and circulated a mimeographed research paper entitled 'A Preliminary Investigation of the Theory of Constitutions,' which contained the first elements of the important central analysis now covered in Chapter 6" (Buchanan and Tullock 1962, p. viii). Chapter 6 includes the most cited and taught material from the *Calculus*. It is arguably the core chapter of that important work, the book that launched the field constitutional political economy.

His largest impact as a solo author is associated with his two papers on rent seeking (Tullock 1967, 1980). The first points out that competition over scarce resources is not necessarily a good thing. Resources that are consumed in conflict are lost forever, rather than devoted to the production of useful goods and services. This idea was generalized in his work on the law (1971), anarchy (1972), and revolution (1974). His 1980 piece provides a versatile game theoretic framework for thinking about rent-seeking contests, which has come to be known as the Tullock contest success function. These ideas and models defined the rent-seeking research program, which by now includes several thousand theoretical and applied papers (Buchanan, Tollison and Tullock 1980; Congleton, Hillman and Konrad 2008;

¹ For more detailed overviews of his work, see Congleton (2004, 2012, 2013). See Brady and Tollison (1994) for a collection of Tullock essays and Fishback and Libecap (2012) for a collection of essays in Tullock's honor. The introductions to both of the latter two volumes also include useful overviews of his work.

Congleton and Hillman 2015). That work also played a role in the development of the literatures on contest theory and conflict.²

His impact on the field of public choice is substantially broader than his own research contributions, which number in the hundreds, because of his founding and editing of the journal *Public Choice*, and through his attendance at public choice meetings and seminars around the world. In the early days, Tullock (and the economics department at VPI) subsidized the journal. And, in contrast to most editors today, Gordon was normally the sole referee on pieces published in “his” journal, excepting technical pieces for which a specialist’s opinion seemed necessary.³ Although most of the very best pieces in public choice appeared in major economics and political science journals, most secondary and tertiary pieces were published in *Public Choice*. As a consequence, the field of public choice was substantially defined by his editorial decisions. Those whose works in his opinion made contributions were published, and those that did not were not. There were few other outlets for public choice pieces outside of his journal, especially for those whose vision of public choice was similar to Gordon’s. Naturally, it was the persons that published in *Public Choice* who could afford to specialize in that discipline and so attended the meetings of its American and European societies and thereby became established scholars in the field. In this manner, Tullock not only defined the field, he populated it.

Among his colleagues and admirers, he is also known for his efforts to use the rational choice model to understand the law, science, dictatorship, anarchy, and biology (1994). A long series of papers and books examine how institutions affect incentives for individual decision-making, a significant subset of which involve conflict and the reduction of conflict. His book with Richard McKenzie (1975) includes romance as well as crime, governance, and revolution as cases in which the rational choice methodology can extend our understanding. In conversations at public choice and other conferences he would constantly challenge any theory that lacked clear rational choice foundations, often simultaneously creating admirers and detractors .

Nonetheless, although Tullock took the *Homo economicus* model seriously and applied it with virtuosity, he regarded it to be only a partial explanation of individual and group behavior. People are 5% altruistic

² For overviews of the contest and conflict literatures, see Konrad (2009) and Garfinkel and Skaperdas (1996).

³ Tullock was one of the formateurs of the American Public Choice Society. See Tollison (1982) for a short overview of the founding of the Public Choice Society and journal. He mentions that one issue a year was reserved for the more mathematical work of the Carnegie-Rochester branch of public choice. Tullock edited the remaining issues. Peter Bernholz (2002) notes that Tullock played an important role in efforts to establish a European Public Choice Society and regularly attended the meetings for its first three decades.

(1981) and nonpecuniary benefits (deference, power, and longevity) also produce relevant benefits for decision makers.

2 Thanks to Gordon the teacher, mentor and man: some personal memories

I first met Gordon during my time as a graduate student at Virginia Tech. He was always a quick, outspoken critic during departmental seminars. I also took his Public Choice course, which was a course like no other I have ever had. It was a loosely organized survey of public choice issues, taught in the Socratic style, with assigned readings every week and oral quizzes on the material covered. It was a class of about 10 students, so we all faced a question or two every week. His questions were always pointed and had the reputation of reducing the unprepared (or slow) student to tears, although I do not remember anyone in my class being so affected. In any case, I quickly became his favorite target in my class—which implied that he liked or respected me a bit, although I did not realize it at the time, and cannot report that I enjoyed it. After Tullock was satisfied that he had plumbed our limited depths, he would launch off in a random direction on an issue in which he had some interest, again peppering the class with probing questions. Besides learning a bit about public choice and Gordon Tullock, we learned a lot about our own implicit assumptions—many of which were far shakier than we realized.

Tullock was eminently accessible and always open to argument in class, out of class, at seminars, and over meals—indeed, intellectual interchange seemed to be his main form of entertainment. Winning an argument with Tullock was, perhaps naturally, never acknowledged—when he lost or was losing, he simply changed the subject. It is a consequence of his accessibility, humor, and argumentative style that so many Tullock stories exist.

Two very helpful lessons were learned from Gordon during my final year at VPI&SU. During a random conversation in a car on the way to a conference of some kind in Northern Virginia, we began discussing my dissertation on the role of information in choice. He thought it a good topic but argued that I needed to focus on the cost of information processing, as well as the collection costs. I had been mainly focused on search or acquisition costs. After a bit more thought after the conference, information processing costs became one of the main themes of the dissertation.

In another instance, after bluntly but accurately noting my sloppy mode of dress, he handed me a copy of *Dress for Success*, a book about how particular styles of clothing and grooming made a large difference in how others thought of you. I naturally took this as an insult and unnecessary given rationality on the part of others. However, after struggling in the job market for a couple of years, I

pulled the book out and dressed as described—and sure enough, a good haircut, dark suit, and shoes, made an enormous difference in my subsequent invitations for “fly outs.” It is not advice that I always have taken to heart, but very interesting and useful to know that fashion matters. I must admit that I am still surprised that it could and does work.

The first decade after graduating from Virginia Tech, I saw Tullock mostly at various conferences, where he made significant points at seminars, often critical but nearly always insightful. My next sustained experience with him came nearly a decade after graduate school.

I was a visitor to the Center for Study of Public Choice (by then at George Mason University) in the 1986-1987 academic year, the year that James Buchanan won the Nobel Prize. Naturally, there was great excitement at the Center during the period after the prize was announced. I heard about it on the radio on the way into the Center from my wife’s family farm near Great Falls, VA. By the time I had arrived at 8:30 a.m., the press was assembling, refreshments were out, and a press conference was scheduled. Viktor Vanberg and I attended (standing up, since the chairs all naturally went to the press). In his first paragraph, Jim mentioned that the prize should have been shared with Gordon (although as the prize was formally described this was not really the case). It was well known that Gordon believed the same, as did many of his academic fans scattered around the world.

During the yearlong visit, I managed the transition from student to colleague, at least partially. At some point during the visit, Gordon circulated a short paper on rent seeking, that in my opinion had some serious problems, and I told him so. We argued about it off and on for the next week or so, at which point he told me that he was tired of arguing about it—a rare event. In that case, I was not, and I wrote up a short note summarizing my argument and submitted to *Public Choice*, which at the time he still edited. He read the piece and accepted it for publication. Few editors would have done so. That he did was a sign of his openness to debate and his quest for the truth. It is one of many occasions when his interest in the truth or at least good arguments trumped what many other scholars would have regarded as their self-interest.

A year later, I joined the Center’s faculty, but Gordon had left for the University of Arizona; so neither the Center nor I benefited directly from his insights for a dozen years. Gordon returned to the center in 1999 with a joint appointment at George Mason’s Law School and its Department of Economics.⁴

⁴ This occurred during the short period in which I was the director of the Center for Study of Public Choice. Since he planned to spend half of his time at the Center, I gave him half of his old office—we were perennially short of

I invited him to join my weekly Friday luncheon for Center visitors, which I had run since the late 1980s. He accepted the invitation and often drove from the Law School in Arlington to the Fairfax campus just to attend the lunch. Naturally, given his personality and stature, it rapidly became the “Tullock Lunch,” and my main job was to make sure that the visitors understood that Gordon meant no harm in his somewhat aggressive method of conversation. It was also my job to make sure that none of his errant remarks went unchallenged. These were nearly as common as his gems and extraordinary insights and helped made luncheon conversations a joy for the table, rather than simply a monologue.

His contributions to lunch were manifold—criticism of our various research projects, historical anecdotes and facts, and topics of the day with which he was concerned—all this for the price of a glass of Chablis, which he claimed his doctor recommended.⁵ In the last few years, signs were evident that his short-term memory was failing, but for those who knew Gordon, one could never be sure. He often liked to repeat a topic just to see if any progress had been made or to stimulate conversation from a new collection of visitors.

The week before Tullock retired I drove in to pick him up and held our last visitor’s lunch with Gordon, although in this case it was largely composed of Center faculty, rather than visitors. It was a nice occasion at Bryon’s Grille, and he was in good form throughout. His fading short-term memory had not affected his quickness, feistiness, or long-term memory. That was not the last time that I saw him, but it was among the last. Tullock retired from George Mason and academia in the summer of 2008 at the age of 86.

Gordon’s incisiveness and toughness as a colleague was matched by his generosity as a man. If one had sufficiently tough skin to withstand a few cutting remarks now and then, one was rewarded with ideas, humor, and friendship. He lived a good life, an academic life, and will be missed by friends and colleagues around the world.

References

Brady, G. L. and Tollison, R. D. (Eds.) (1994). *On the trail of Homo economicus: Essays by Gordon Tullock*. Fairfax VA: George Mason University Press.

space at the time. His office had been divided in two, and the other half used for office equipment. His was, of course, the better half.

⁵ We generally split the bill, and no one else had wine with his or her lunch. Over the course of nine years, I suppose that we had on the order of 300 lunches together, normally with two or three visitors. So, I estimate that I purchased approximately 100 glasses of Chablis for Gordon over the years—a very good value.

- Bernholz, P. (2002). Gordon Tullock, the flying ambassador. Mimeograph, Universität Basel.
- Buchanan, J. M. and Tullock, G. (1962). *The calculus of consent: logical foundations of a constitutional democracy*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Congleton, R. D. (2013). On some neglected, but profound, contributions of Gordon Tullock. In D. Lee (Ed.), *The origins of public choice: the legacy of Buchanan and Tullock*, pp. 33–42. Hiedelberg: Springer, .
- Congleton, R. D. (2012). The constitutional political economy of Gordon Tullock. *Public Choice* 152: 131–46.
- Congleton, R. D. (2004). The political economy of Gordon Tullock. *Public Choice* 121: 213–38.
- Congleton, R. D., A. L., Hillman, A. L., and Konrad, K. (Eds.) (2008). *40 years of research on rent seeking*. Heidelberg, Germany: Springer.
- Congleton, R. D. and Hillman, A. L. (Eds.) (2015). *A companion to the political economy of rent seeking*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Fishback, P. V. and Libecap, G. D. (Eds.) (1999). *Public choice essays in honor of a maverick scholar: Gordon Tullock*. Heidelberg, Germany: Springer.
- Garfinkel, M. R. and Skaperdas, S. (Eds.) (1996). *The political economy of conflict and appropriation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Konrad, K. (2009). *Strategy and dynamics in contests*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- McKenzie, R. B. and Tullock, G. (1975). *The new world of economics: explorations into the human experience*. Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin Inc.
- Tollison, R. D. (1984). Public choice, 1972–82. In Buchanan, J. M. and Tollison, R. D. (Eds.), *The theory of public choice II*, pp. 3–8. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Tullock, G. (1965). *The politics of bureaucracy*. Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press.
- Tullock, G. (1966). *The organization of inquiry*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Tullock, G. (1967). The welfare costs of tariffs, monopolies, and theft. *Economic Inquiry* 5: 224–32.
- Tullock, G. (1971). *The logic of the law*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Tullock, G. (Ed.) (1972). *Explorations in the theory of anarchy*. Blacksburg, VA: Center for Study of Public Choice.
- Tullock, G. (1974). *The social dilemma: the economics of war and revolution*. Blacksburg, VA: Center for Study of Public Choice.
- Tullock, G. (1980). Efficient rent seeking. In Buchanan, J. M., Tollison, R. D. and Tullock, G. (Eds), *Toward a theory of the rent-seeking society*, pp. 97–112. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.
- Tullock, G. (1981). The rhetoric and reality of redistribution. *Southern Economic Journal* 47: 895–907.
- Tullock, G. (1987). *Autocracy*. Dordrecht, NL: Martinus Nijhoff.

Tullock, G. (1994). *The economics of non-human societies*. Tucson, AZ: Pallas Press.