

**Speaking Truth to Power: Remembering Doug Hartle**  
Remarks following the Engineering and Public Policy Seminar  
University of Toronto  
Ian Clark, October 17, 2007

I have been asked to say a few words about “speaking truth to power” based on my time in government and my position on the faculty of the new School of Public Policy and Government.

This is a wonderful topic, and I think it is fitting to connect my reflections to the tenth anniversary of the passing of my first boss in government, Professor Douglas G. Hartle. Since coming to the University of Toronto I have been amazed at how many of the good and the great in Canadian public policy have a strong U of T connection, and how much I personally owe to scholars from this university.

I will focus on Doug Hartle, the first Director of the Institute for Policy Analysis which was founded in Canada’s Centennial Year, 1967. But I will also make reference to Al Johnston, MA in Public Administration from U of T in 1945 and Rod Dobell, who succeeded Doug at both the Institute, and as Deputy Secretary of the Planning Branch in the Treasury Board Secretariat.

In the spring of 1971, I asked the dean of Harvard’s government faculty for advice on where to do my summer internship for the MPP program. He offered to write to Al Johnson, who he met when Johnson went to Harvard midcareer to get a PhD in political economy and government. Johnson had recently been appointed Secretary of the Treasury Board, which had five years earlier become a free-standing department, separate from Finance. Johnson had acted on Professor Hartle’s recommendation to create a Planning Branch and had persuaded him to come to Ottawa to be its first Deputy Secretary. I did my internship in the Planning Branch under Hartle, and returned the next year as a policy analyst.

For better or worse, the Branch did not have many engineers, but it did have more freshly minted economics PhDs than any other department, while the senior economists to whom they reported had the occasional working lunches at an Italian restaurant that served dry martinis and reasonable cigars. A young analyst knew he had arrived when he was invited to one of these lunches. I must say that I found Hartle more lucid on public policy matters after two or three martinis than almost anyone else in Ottawa, at any time of the day.

It was a great privilege to work with so many brilliant economists. By that summer I had only taken a few semesters of micro and macro economics but I realized that my other MPP courses provided insights that my seniors in Ottawa still had to learn from frustrating experience. At the Kennedy School we had studied Robert McNamara’s Planning, Programming and Budgeting System, one of the most ambitious attempts to structure discourse so that the truth of planning could speak to the power of budget making. We had studied the planner’s logic; but we had also studied how and why it failed to meet expectations, and why Lyndon Johnston was having second thoughts about the government-wide implementation of PPBS. I felt wise beyond my years in gently suggesting to my economist superiors why we were going to be disappointed in our efforts to implement a very similar system across the government of Canada.

To put it in the terms that Sean Conway used this afternoon, I had been taught that every public policy move has potential losers and that one should try to think systematically about the likely reaction of those affected.

I give the MPP program full credit for helping anticipate many of the problems that the rational planning approaches ran into in those early years. This was my first experience with speaking inconvenient truths to power, albeit to senior planners. Ironically, it would have been easier to speak these truths to the really powerful. The ministers and deputy ministers were highly sceptical of the benefits of PPBS and they could easily envisage the costs.

But if Doug Hartle was naive about the ways of power when he arrived in Ottawa, he did not stay that way for long. He remained rigorous and analytically honest. He learned from observation and experience. He devoted that fine mind and prodigious energy to enlarging the conceptual framework for bringing rational thought to bear on public issues. Hartle's intellectual journey is wonderfully described by Rod Dobell in the Tribute to Hartle edited by his U of T colleagues, Richard Bird, Michael Trebilcock and Thomas Wilson.<sup>1</sup>

He wrote lucidly. Dobell cites three Hartle quotes on the attitude to policy analysis and evaluation of the people responsible for running programs and answering to Parliamentarians for their performance:

“it is a strange dog that willingly carries the stick with which it is to be beaten.”

“... there was an obvious attempt on the part of departments to steer the analyst clear of the larger policy issues and on the part of the analysts to concentrate on producing useful but non-controversial findings.”<sup>2</sup>

“One could hardly expect the deputy head of a department to countenance an analyst buried somewhere in the bowels of the organization undertaking, on a routine basis, a critical appraisal of the *raison d'être* for his empire – with the results likely to find their way into the public domain.”<sup>3</sup>

Hartle quickly came to insist that policy analysts take heed of the perspectives of ministers. He famously noted that:

“we can say that policy analysts are truly politically neutral, in the sense that they are ready to be equally useless to any government, whatever its political stripe.”

While Hartle was writing about this in the 1980s, post-modern critics were asserting that “speaking truth to power” was an outdated notion. In their view, those years in the early 1970s when the Planning Branch was led by Doug Hartle and Rod Dobell marked the deserved end of the era of “positivist” policy analysis. The newer way was to view everything through the lens of process and power.

But Hartle was ahead of most of these thinkers and wrote more clearly than many of them. Hartle's style and intellectual rigour were admired by Richard French, even as he questions the practicality of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Rod Dobell, Evaluation and Entitlements: Hartle's Search for Rationality in Government, pp. 79-108 in Richard M. Bird, Michael J. Trebilcock and Thomas A. Wilson, eds., *Rationality in Public Policy: Retrospect and Prospect, A Tribute to Douglas G. Hartle* Canadian Tax Paper No. 104, Toronto: Canadian Tax Foundation, 1999

<sup>2</sup> Douglas G. Hartle, “The Role of the Auditor General of Canada” Canadian Tax Journal, vol. 23, no. 3, 1975, p. 197.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas G. Hartle, “The Expenditure Budget Process of the Government of Canada: A Public Choice--Rent-Seeking Perspective,” Canadian Tax Paper No. 81, Toronto: Canadian Tax Foundation, 1988, p. 274

Planning Branch's approach to government advice<sup>4</sup>, French compares Hartle's pithy description of the crucial role of process in determining what constitutes the right decision:

“The right decision is the one that emerges from a legitimate decision-making process”

with the prose of John Dryzek, a prominent postmodernist, addressing the same issue:

“Any consensus about matters empirical or normative emerging from a communicatively rationalized political interaction can be described as rational through reference to the conditions of its production.”

In the extreme view of the postmodernists, there was no such thing as a single truth to speak to power. Indeed, there was very little in the world that would qualify as truth.

But today's conference participants know there are many things that are usefully considered to be true – the laws of physics, for example. When an engineer gets it wrong the bridge falls down, not up. Many of the core principles of economics and political science have so much predictive power that they can be considered truths.

The relativism of the postmodernists is a recipe for replays of the analytically challenged manner that many governments have evinced in handling the Kyoto file.

The approach to policy truth in Ottawa at the turn of the millennium had evolved since Hartle's day. As we heard at the conference today, most experts were amazed when they learned of Canada's original Kyoto commitment and did not believe it was credible in policy terms. David Keith suggested this afternoon that Canada should try to develop more external bodies like the U.S. has, with experts who are able to critique the numbers. I do not disagree, but I have to wonder what the policy advisors within government were thinking. It should have been pretty clear to those with experience in economics and public sector decision-making that Canada would not be able to meet its obligations without a dramatic policy intervention. And, as Sean Connolly reminded us today, the history of energy matters in each of our regions guaranteed that an intervention of this magnitude was simply not in the cards.

In government, truth has many aspects. The clearest one is speaking about what has happened. The most unambiguous obligation of those who are paid to advise elected officials is not to misstate what has happened. I have not heard any allegation that advisors intentionally mislead the Prime Minister in his briefing for the Kyoto meetings.

But almost as important is to speak the truth about what can and cannot happen. It is hard to understand how ministers could continue to repeat and recommit to a course which virtually no respected analyst believed could occur with more than a 1% probability. Once people in government see that such a big untruthful elephant is allowed to stay in the room, it is hard to set any standards for advisory truthfulness.

---

<sup>4</sup> Richard D. French, “Postmodern Government,” *Optimum: The Journal of Public Sector Management*, vol. 22, no. 1, (Summer 1992) pp. 43-52. Evert Lindquist contests some of French's analysis in a subsequent volume, Evert Lindquist, “Postmodern politics and policy” *Optimum: The Journal of Public Sector Management*, vol. 24, no. 1, (Summer 1993) pp. 42-50.

I cannot help thinking that if the Rod Dobbells, Al Johnsons and Doug Hartles that I had the honour of working with as a young policy analyst had been in their government positions in the last decade, the Kyoto file would have been managed more rationally and realistically.