

Public Choice as an Academic Enterprise:
Charlottesville, Blacksburg, and Fairfax Retrospectively Viewed

Richard E. Wagner

Department of Economics
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA 22030

703-993-1132
rwagner@gmu.edu

Abstract

This paper treats the development of public choice as an academic enterprise that originated at the University of Virginia and which grew to maturity at VPI. It seeks to distinguish between the particularistic and personal sources of programmatic success on the one hand, and institutional and organizational sources on the other. Only to the extent the success is institutional or organizational is there something that potentially can be duplicated through the adoption of an appropriate institutional framework. Otherwise the success is idiosyncratic, and must be attributed to the particular qualities of James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, independently of the institutional and organizational framework.

Public Choice as an Academic Enterprise:
Charlottesville, Blacksburg, and Fairfax Retrospectively Viewed¹

The purpose of this paper is to explore the success of public choice as an academic enterprise, and to do so by paying particular attention to whatever insights might have resulted from my having been present at all three locations: Charlottesville, Blacksburg, and Fairfax. I am one of only two people (Robert D. Tollison being the other) who went through the graduate program at the University of Virginia (1963-66), and who was a faculty member at both VPI (1973-79) and George Mason University (since 1988). Organizationally speaking, public choice was founded at the University of Virginia, but it was at VPI where public choice experienced its prime years of maturity and achieved a major presence on the intellectual radar screen. While the Nobel Prize was awarded to James M. Buchanan after he had moved to George Mason, it would surely have come all the same had he remained in Blacksburg.

I think it is reasonable to summarize the relative contributions of Charlottesville, Blacksburg, and Fairfax to the value of the public choice enterprise by a simple though conjectural statistic, the rate of return on intellectual capital. Such a statistic, if properly constructed, would surely show abnormally high rates of return during the Charlottesville and Blacksburg years, while showing, perhaps, but normal rates of return in Fairfax. In any case, I take this conjectured pattern of intellectual returns as comprising the basic stylized facts with which I work. At the one extreme, this pattern could be judged as

¹ I should like to thank Peter Boettke and Roger Congleton for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

wholly idiosyncratic, due exclusively to the particular qualities of James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, both individually and through their interaction. In this case, the intellectual success of public choice would have been a singular event and it would offer no institutional or organizational lessons. At the other extreme, the particularly high rate of return in Charlottesville and Blacksburg, as well as subsequent stasis in Fairfax, would reside in particular organizational features that differ across the three settings. It is only to the extent that this alternative option has explanatory power that the success of public choice offers lessons for future conduct.²

I do not think anyone can doubt that idiosyncrasy is by far the major part of the explanation for the success of the public choice enterprise. I would put it at somewhere between two-thirds and four-fifths of the story. It is not, though, the full story. Institutional arrangements and organizational forms have been important to that success, though even those arrangements and forms have also borne the imprint of Buchanan and Tullock. This is surely as it should and must be. The ability to achieve intellectual influence must start with some ideas that have the capacity to intrigue other scholars. Without the presence of that capacity, all the organizational and institutional tinkering in the world will accomplish nothing but facades and illusions of scholarship. My attention here is centered on the institutional and organizational features and not on the bodies of work of Buchanan and Tullock, nor on their personal characteristics. Many items

² For a complementary effort to account for the success of public choice, though rather based on significant archival research rather than personal reflection and recollection, see Steven Medema (2000).

have been written about these men and their work, and I have done so myself.³

In this paper I try to keep their ideas and characteristics in the background, to focus on the institutional and organizational environments within which public choice originated and matured.

I start with some general remarks about the promotion of research programs, and follow this with individual discussions regarding Charlottesville, Blacksburg, and Fairfax. It is in those individual discussions that I seek to explore and distinguish the idiosyncratic sources of success from the institutional and organizational. Before starting, it might be good to offer some brief, though perhaps obvious remarks of disclosure or disclaimer. While these remarks are based on my good deal of interest in both the economics of organizations and institutions and in the history of economics, they nonetheless revolve around more than 30 years of personal experiences and reflections. During this period the observer has gone from being a young man to a middle-aged grandfather. This transition brings well-noted changes of vision and orientation that can sometimes create difficulty in distinguishing between the universal and the particular when it comes to reflecting upon the events and circumstances that form part of one's own history.

Prefatory Notes on the Historiography of Economics

There is surely much room for an economics of producing economics.⁴

Histories of economic thought typically follow a great man approach in

³ In Wagner (1987a) for Buchanan and Wagner (1987b) for Tullock.

⁴ For a thoughtful effort in this vein, see Robert Tollison (1986).

characterizing the development of economics. The histories are written as a succession of great men and their works. There is nothing wrong with this approach. The history of economics does present us with a number of giants, two of whom we honor with this conference. Giants provide their inspired articulations, but a good deal of the subsequent theoretical development is a spontaneously generated order, where the order itself takes the form of a network of findings, propositions, and citations generated through interactions among scholars. The production of economic knowledge is a cooperative endeavor among economists, and with that cooperation secured through a process of open competition among scholars.⁵

It is surely the case that this competition exhibits such phenomena as cascades, increasing returns, and network externalities.⁶ A good deal of economic research involves scholars in the present time period inferring information about the value of particular lines of inquiry from the revealed scholarly choices made by others in previous time periods. For the most part, those others are giants and near-giants. Some of the resulting cascades will be short-lived and might subsequently be called fads. Other cascades will have long duration, and may subsequently be called schools or traditions. In either case, to a considerable extent the flow of scholarship will resemble a series of cascades, some broad and others narrow, some of long duration and others short-lived.

⁵ For an examination of this process with respect to science generally, see Gordon Tullock (1966).

⁶ On cascades in general, see Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch (1992).

The central point in any case is that economics emerges through interactions among participants, where the analytical constructions developed and advanced by any particular participant are to a great extent based upon a network of constructions that other scholars have developed. Great men and their ideas are necessary for the development of economics, but they are not in themselves sufficient. Cascades must develop, and the duration and volume of those cascades that emerge will involve participation among a number of scholars. It is in the securing of participation where institutional and organizational features may matter, as these can influence the longevity and power of those cascades. This, anyway, is the claim I pursue here.

A sustained cascade of the form represented by public choice will not emerge without the articulation of inspired ideas that are capable of supporting a large volume of scholarship within the framework so articulated. Buchanan and Tullock were absolutely essential to the articulation of the ideas that now constitute public choice. There was also, however, an important organizational and institutional component to the success of public choice. Academic organizations and institutions can help to build more robust and longer-lived cascades.

The success of public choice was clearly founded on the work of its originators, but the various organizational and institutional elements that I examine here surely boosted the force of the resulting revolution. All of these features worked to lengthen and deepen the cascades that emerged around the work of Buchanan and Tullock. One element of success of the public choice

program involves graduate students, both the attraction of students who have the potential to become professionally competitive and the ability to place students in places where they will be able to participate in the generation of public choice scholarship. It is surely the case that the higher the quality of the students attracted to a program and the more research-oriented their subsequent placements, the more robust will be the scholarly cascade under examination. Other elements that contributed to success included such activities as the sponsorship of conferences, journals, and other publications. Public choice scholarship developed in good measure through these kinds of institutional and organizational activities, though all such activities would have amounted to little had it not been for the power of the ideas themselves, particularly their expression in a positive or constructive heuristic.

Charlottesville: Post-Classical Political Economy Aborted

As a form of academic organization, public choice originated in Charlottesville in the late 1950s with the creation of the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Study of Political Economy and Social Philosophy. I spent 1963-66 in Charlottesville, supported by a fellowship sponsored by the Thomas Jefferson Center. To be sure, I do not have much to say about the Charlottesville years that would be relevant to the topic of this conference. A graduate student typically does not learn a great deal about the university and the program in which he resides, unless he wants to make it his business to find out. I have never had much interest in such matters, and spent my time in Charlottesville

concerned almost exclusively with academic matters. Hence, there is little by way of programmatic information I am able to convey about the Charlottesville years, other than what appeared to me in my capacity as a graduate student.

I still recall crisply the events that brought me to Charlottesville. It was during my last year as an undergraduate at the University of Southern California, 1962-63, when I decided that I wanted to go to graduate school, so that I could continue to feed my largely bookish and nerdish ways. That fall I began to explore programs in political science and economics. As the spring semester began, I found myself facing a quandary. The subject matter of political science matched my interests more fully than did that of economics. While I did well in my classes in political science, I did not much like having to master huge amounts of factual detail and to discern professorial preferences regarding possible exam material. This wasn't necessary in economics. There, you could go a long way armed with basic principles, good logic, and imagination.

Early that spring I discussed my quandary with Richard Bilas, who had come to USC the preceding fall from Virginia. Almost instantly, he exclaimed excitedly that he had the solution in his office, in the form of a copy of the *Calculus of Consent*. "Read this," he said, "and you will see that if you go to Virginia, you can do political science with economic logic!" I came quickly to realize that he was right, and went.

Upon arriving in Charlottesville, I found myself in the company of a small group of smart, energetic, and enthusiastic people who loved to argue about economics and occasionally drink a fair bit. Among those who were in residence

while I was there, and who were subsequently to make significant contributions to public choice, were Charles Goetz, Charles Plott, Thomas Willett, and Mark Pauly.⁷ Most of my colleagues recognized that Virginia was a different kind of place when they went there. So far as I can tell from various conversations at the time, Virginia was quite competitive in its ability to support graduate students, in that those of us who received offers of support from other programs that might have been more highly rated received equal or better offers at Virginia. A good number of Virginia students went upon graduation to universities with Ph. D. programs. My sense of the matter is that if the empirical work were performed, the Charlottesville years would have been the most successful with respect to the attraction of students and their subsequent placement, as well as for the resulting contributions to public choice scholarship.

The term “public choice” was established only in 1968, after Buchanan and Tullock had left Charlottesville. Had someone thought to supply a label for the program in Charlottesville, it could well have been something like “Post-Classical Political Economy.” There were a number of prominent scholars there who would have had but a modest interest in what came to be called public choice at VPI. These included Ronald Coase, Warren Nutter, Rutledge Vining, and Leland Yeager. These were all people from whom I took classes my first year in Charlottesville. A program of Post-Classical Political Economy would

⁷ Among my classroom contemporaries, far more than just these four made significant contributions to public choice, and I mention only the four that seem to stand highest in some of the citation-based studies of impact that I have seen. For a complete listing of graduate students from 1957 to 1991 in Charlottesville, Blacksburg, and Fairfax see Robert Tollison (1991). Moreover, Thomas Borchering also spent 1965-66 in Charlottesville, as a post-doc from Duke.

have encompassed the interests of all these faculty, in which case public choice would have been a subset of that broader program.

The program in Charlottesville was anchored on classical foundations. In 1776 there was the *Wealth of Nations* and the American *Declaration of Independence*. It is quite reasonable to insert the *Federalist* into this extended present. What results from these works and their supporting intellectual penumbra is a conjunction of belief in ordered liberty that addresses both the moral foundations and the attendant questions of economic and political organization to secure that liberty. These classical foundations of Post-Classical Political Economy were clearly set forth in the *Calculus of Consent*, where Buchanan and Tullock noted that they thought they were simply elaborating on some of the central principles incorporated into the *Federalist*.

The distinction between classical and neo-classical economics is typically represented in terms of how economists explain relative prices. Classical economists explain them in terms of relative inputs of labor; neoclassical economists explain them in terms of relative marginal utilities of products. Economists are thus distinguished principally in terms of how they account for prices. Adam Smith and David Ricardo explain prices in terms of labor inputs, so are classical economists. Carl Menger and Leon Walras explain them in terms of marginal utilities of consumer goods, so are neoclassical economists.

Not all economists, however, have had prices and allocations in the foreground of their attention. For a good number of them, prices and allocations occupied but the background, with institutions and conventions occupying the

foreground. A different history of economics could be written in terms of differing foregrounds and backgrounds of analytical interest. In such an alternative history, David Ricardo and Leon Walras would be placed into the same school of price and allocationists, because of the paramount importance they assigned to relative prices. Likewise, Adam Smith and Carl Menger would be placed into the same school focused on social order and institutional process.⁸ The research program initiated in Charlottesville, continued in Blacksburg, and now located in Fairfax is clearly a continuation of the central institutionally focussed orientation of classical political economy, as amended by marginal utility analytics. The program of Post-Classical Political Economy that formed in Charlottesville was aborted in the late-1960s, to be replaced by public choice in Blacksburg.

To be sure, what was to become public choice would have been the dominant portion of the program even in Charlottesville. Buchanan was clearly the star of the program. Most people who harbored professional ambitions wanted to work with him. Of the four subsequent luminaries I mentioned above with whom I shared classroom space, only Tom Willett did not write with Buchanan, and this was out of his strong desire to pursue international trade. In the Charlottesville years students did not do dissertations on public choice. They did dissertations on public finance for the most part, though public finance approached very differently then it was approached elsewhere in academia.⁹ With Buchanan, a student came very quickly to form a sense of participating in

⁸ Carl Menger and Gustav von Schmoller would likewise occupy membership in the same school despite the common view of intense discord as reflected in the *methodenstreit*, as I note in my essay on Menger (Wagner 1999). See also, Helge Peukert's (1999) essay on Schmoller.

⁹ This difference is illustrated nicely in Buchanan (1967)(1968).

the construction of economics, as well as to realize that the subject matter of economics was a social construction that was fashioned through interaction and competition among interested participants.

The groundwork for what became public choice was laid in Charlottesville in several ways. What was to become the journal *Public Choice* was started by Tullock in Charlottesville in 1966. It was initially projected as an irregular publication, and was called *Papers on Non-Market Decision Making*. It quickly became regular, and after three issues was called *Public Choice*. The origins of the Public Choice Society are likewise in Charlottesville. This took the form of two small meetings organized by Buchanan and Tullock in 1963 and 1964, each involving about 25 scholars.

The Charlottesville years were bright but brief. What had been a robust program in 1963 was gone by 1968. Tullock went to Rice in 1967. Buchanan went to UCLA in 1968. In “Maud Muller,” the 19th century American poet John Greenleaf Whittier tells the tale of a judge and a maiden, the choices they made and did not make, and the regrets and longings they came to develop. The moral to the tale is set forth in the well-known stanza:

For of all sad words of tongue or pen,

The saddest are these: “It might have been!”

It is surely possible to speculate about the alternative history that might have occurred had Charlottesville continued from the late 1960s in much the same vein as its course during the early 1960s. It is certainly imaginable that some such projection as this might lead one to conclude that the public choice

enterprise lost value by moving to Blacksburg, as compared to what its value might have been had Post-Classical Political Economy continued to thrive in Charlottesville. But this is only speculation about what might have been.

The appraisal of historical success faces a problem of adopting the appropriate alternative against which to base a comparison. The problem with comparing public choice as it actually developed with Post-Classical Political Economy as it might have developed had the situation in Charlottesville not deteriorated is that this latter was not a relevant option. For the participants in such an academic enterprise as the Center for Study of Public Choice, university environments are pretty much exogenous variables. Some university environments are obviously more supportive than others.¹⁰ The relevant comparison in any case must be between attainable alternatives. In the case of Buchanan and Tullock, that alternative would surely be in a continuation of their individual positions at Rice and UCLA, had they not moved to Blacksburg. The relevant comparison is between public choice as it developed in Blacksburg and public choice as it might otherwise have developed without an explicit program at VPI.

Blacksburg: Public Choice Secured

Small companies with innovative ideas that achieve some measure of market success often sell out to larger companies to exploit more effectively the commercial prospects offered by the superior marketing capacity of the larger

company. The move from Charlottesville to Blacksburg had much the same effect of reaching a broader market, even if the process by which the organizational shift came about was starkly different. In any case, there were several people involved who recognized a unique academic opportunity. VPI had started to build an economics faculty in the late 1960s, starting with the attraction of Wilson Schmidt as department chairman from George Washington. Charlie Goetz moved there from the University of Illinois in 1967, and together they attracted Gordon Tullock from Rice in 1968. At that time, Goetz and Tullock established what was then called the Center for Studies in Public Choice. Buchanan moved to Blacksburg in 1969, and the development of the public choice program was well underway.

The Blacksburg years were clearly successful, probably more than anyone could have imagined. The foundation of that success was Buchanan and Tullock and the constellation of their activities. There is no doubt in my mind that the conjunction of the two produced results that would not have emerged had they operated separately after leaving Charlottesville. Both men are imaginative, creative, and energetic, but in differing and yet complementary ways. Buchanan is more interested in abstract reasoning, and seeks always to provide models to carry his points. Tullock starts more from sensory and empirical observations, and while a user of models shows a relatively lesser interest in the models per se than does Buchanan. I can think of no better comparison of the different styles of Buchanan and Tullock than what can be found by reading two books written in

¹⁰ For an interesting collection of papers on the university and the institutional and organizational impacts on scholarship, see the collection of essays in the *Journal of Economic Studies*, 1993, a

Blacksburg about the same time. These are Buchanan's *Limits of Liberty* and Tullock's *The Social Dilemma*.

Buchanan was continually directing a large number of doctoral dissertations; Tullock rarely directed one. Students of Buchanan repeatedly have commented on his helpful interest in their ideas, even to the extent of his being able to find good things to say when even the authors would have been unable to do so. In my estimation, though, the primary reason why Buchanan has been so esteemed by students is that his very manner of conduct inspires students to believe that they can be like him, even if on a smaller scale. Buchanan provided a splendid role model, in that students could plausibly seek to emulate him; Tullock did not, for students were left clueless as to how they might possibly emulate him.

Buchanan may be smarter and more imaginative, but nonetheless his very conduct leads a student to believe that he can, in proportion to the limits provided by his own talent and determination, be like Buchanan. What is perhaps most notable about Buchanan is that he is always working. Not only does he arrive early and leave late, but also when he is at the office he stays at his desk, hours at a time. He does all the things that the rest of us do: read, take notes, write, and revise, revise, revise. A glance at his desk shows instantly all these activities. It is piled high with column after column of papers, like an avalanche waiting to happen. An archaeologist could construct a pretty accurate diary of Buchanan's activities over a long period simply by excavating his desk. There is no sense of mystery or magic in how Buchanan accomplishes what he does—he

good overview of which is provided in the opening essay by Jürgen Backhaus (1993).

works hard at it. Why even while watching television he shells walnuts.

Buchanan provides a path that others can aspire to follow, even if they lack the ability or the will to travel so far or so fast.

Buchanan's method of teaching gave students insight and practice into how to participate in the creation of economics, in distinction to absorbing what is currently thought to constitute economics. This was accomplished through the short essays he assigned students to write each week. I still remember the first essay he assigned the fall of 1963. He noted that he had heard that if a fly were to be expanded nine times in all dimensions, it would not be able to fly and might even collapse. Government, he noted, had grown massively over the past half century, both in size and in the range of its activities. Thinking about the size of government in relation to that of the fly, made him think that there might be something valuable to work out concerning the problem of fiscal dimension in a society. We students were told to write a few interesting pages on the "problem of fiscal dimension" for the following week.

I had never encountered such a vague assignment in my academic career to that point, and asked for some clarification. As everyone in Charlottesville was addressed as "Mister," I asked: "Mr. Buchanan, could you give us a few suggestions about what you are looking for in this essay?" This question, I thought was a quite reasonable one to ask, as throughout my academic career it had been a common question to ask when a student was unsure about what a professor was looking for in an assignment. In this case, though, I was way off

base, as Buchanan shot back, “Mr. Wagner, if I knew what I was looking for I wouldn’t have given the assignment!”

It was only on hindsight that I came to realize what a wonderful method of instruction this was, if your professorial objective is to get students to come to think of themselves as participants in the creation of economics. Such participation starts with a sense of uneasiness in one fashion or another about received thought. You accept your uneasiness as offering a clue that points toward some alternative line of thought. Your challenge becomes one of trying to articulate your way through that uneasiness in a coherent fashion. This challenge is not always mastered, but without the effort to do so, and continually, no new economics will be created. Buchanan was a master in inspiring students to think that they could be like him to the extent of their talents and interests.

Tullock was altogether different. You never hear of students seeking to be like Tullock, and for good reason. No one knows how to do this. Everyone knows that Tullock has produced a library of scholarship that has been well received not just by economists and political scientists, but by faculty in such diverse areas as law, Asian studies, and biology as well. What no one knows is how he does this. Most significantly, he never seems to be working. His desk is clean. In his Charlottesville days his desk had only a typewriter on it and two piles of paper. On the right of the typewriter was clean paper. On the left of the typewriter were the face down pages of whatever manuscript he was writing. By the time I arrived in Blacksburg, the typewriter and two piles of paper were gone, replaced by a dictating machine. Nor did Tullock spend hours seated at his desk.

He is a flighty soul, continually getting up and down, going off to talk with a colleague, returning to his office for awhile, and before long off to visit another colleague. Tullock is the human equivalent of a heat-seeking smart-missile. However it is that Tullock accomplished what he did, there is nothing in his conduct that provides instruction for others. One can marvel at what Tullock has accomplished, but there is nothing in Tullock's conduct that provides any instruction as to how someone could aspire to be like him.

Tullock's instructional style could only be described as indirect and off-handed, and much of his instruction took place informally outside the classroom. I remember an important lesson he gave me in thinking "outside the box," so to speak. In the fall of 1964, the second of the two meetings that led to the formation a few years later of the public choice society was held at Big Meadows in the Shenandoah National Park. Tullock invited me as a student participant, along with Charlie Plott. I was, of course, honored and delighted to do this. The honor and delight was intensified when Tullock asked if I would pick up Toby (Otto A.) Davis at the Culpeper train station and bring him to Big Meadows. After all, Davis was a graduate from Virginia a few years earlier, and had achieved good success in publication.

The train was due in Culpeper on a Sunday afternoon, and I asked Tullock if he had a picture of Davis, or else could otherwise tell me how I would recognize him. Tullock said he had no picture, but that he was quite sure that Davis would be the only economist on the train. Tullock seemed pleased with himself for giving me this much information, so I didn't press for more but simply

headed to Culpeper on the Sunday afternoon. No train arrived at the appointed time, and the station was empty, so I waited. After an hour or so, someone in a uniform arrived at the station. He told me that the train from the north was due in about 15 minutes. Only a handful of people got off the train, and I managed to ask each man if he was Toby Davis, but no Toby Davis got off that train. The man in the uniform told me that another train was due in about two hours, so I waited. The faces were different, but the result was the same, no Toby Davis.

It was only then that I called Big Meadows and spoke with Mr. Tullock. Upon hearing my voice, Tullock exclaimed immediately: "What on earth are you doing in Culpeper? Davis is here. He's been here all afternoon. He didn't take the train because there was a derailment and the schedule was fouled up. You should be here, not there, and you've missed dinner." My initial reaction, which I kept to myself, was that Tullock should have told me about Davis' change in plans, but this would have been incongruent with Tullock's instructional style. By the time I arrived at Big Meadows, my spirits were a bit on the low side due to a prolonged meditation on my afternoon's adventure. My spirits were boosted by Tullock's kindness and good cheer when he greeted me upon my arrival in the lobby at Big Meadows: "You're late, but at least you figured out that Davis wasn't coming to Culpeper after all. That shows some talent, and tells me there is reason to be hopeful about you."

Buchanan and Tullock by themselves, wherever they would have been, would have generated a prodigious volume of intriguing and valuable scholarship. This is simply their nature. My task, though, is to attempt to assess

how institutional and organizational features might have promoted or hindered the resulting cosmic significance of their scholarly activities, activities that could in principle have been undertaken anywhere.

One thing that was forthcoming at VPI was a strong institutional commitment of support, starting with the University President Marshall Hahn. To be sure, I mention institutional support with some hesitation. It has been my experience that all too often faculty offer a lack of support as an excuse to evade some such shortcoming of their own as a lack of initiative, an absence of energy, or a weakness of commitment. That said, it is still the case that institutional support is important, and was important to the success at Blacksburg just as its absence was important to the eventual failure at Charlottesville. Economics faculty members at VPI were well supported, in salaries and in other ways. VPI did not lose faculty because it would not be competitive with other universities, in contrast to what happened in the final years at Charlottesville. It was the same with graduate students during my time there. The ability to attract good students was perhaps not quite so strong in Blacksburg as in Charlottesville, though numerous good ones were attracted. I remember Charlie Goetz remarking on several occasions that VPI became increasingly competitive in attracting students as the distance from Blacksburg increased and the image of VPI as some kind of “cow college” receded.

If one were to ask me whether I thought the Blacksburg experience could be replicated, I would answer: “Yes, but only if you had a Buchanan and a Tullock to start with.” You must have people with ideas of sufficient interest and

breadth to initiate the cascades that will subsequently be called traditions or schools. Without that there is only puffery and waste. Given the presence of a Buchanan and a Tullock, the task is one of developing an organizational and institutional environment that is capable of converting an already swift current into a raging cascade.

This was done in Blacksburg, and in several ways. The recruitment and support of faculty and graduate students I have already mentioned. The program at Blacksburg also had intensity about it that I have never seen anywhere else, save for my days as a graduate student. That intensity certainly starts with Buchanan and Tullock. But there were other sources of that intensity. The remoteness of Blacksburg certainly helped. So did the faculty offices in what had formerly been the house of the University President. Blacksburg was the only time in my academic career that I encountered an office arrangement that was itself an interesting and enjoyable place to be. Most university offices present a tradeoff. You have better and more interesting facilities at home, but you are by yourself there. The office presents you with colleagues, and is also the place where you conduct many of your other activities, though the office itself is typically some form of cramped dump.

This tradeoff did not exist at VPI, and I think that this lack of a tradeoff was an important source of the particular academic intensity that existed at the public choice center at VPI. Harry Johnson (1978, pp. 84-105) has an essay on the importance of academic geography, both physical and social. By physical geography, Johnson means the spatial layout of the premises within which

economists do their work. By social geography, he means the pattern of social relationships and communication. While the bulk of his essay deals with Cambridge in the 1930s and 1940s, Johnson also offers some interest commentary on the academic geography of Toronto, Chicago, Harvard, and Yale. In particular, Johnson claims that Chicago was a genuine department, by which he means that significant team production took place. The other three places were not departments, but rather were constituted through scattered clusters of individuals with little interaction among them. In line with Johnson's description, Blacksburg was most certainly a department, as was Charlottesville (and which Fairfax is not).

Fairfax: Public Choice Stasis or a Revitalized Political Economy?

To discuss public choice at George Mason presents a different problem than discussing it at Charlottesville and Blacksburg, because at George Mason it is still a work in progress. At the same time, however, public choice has already been at George Mason longer than it had been at Blacksburg. So there is obviously a story to be told and lessons to be drawn. Based on a straightforward comparison of my experiences in Blacksburg and Fairfax, I have no hesitancy in asserting that Blacksburg was the better environment for scholarly production. The Blacksburg years generated abnormally high returns on intellectual capital, the Fairfax years have been characterized by but roughly normal returns. There was a wonderful and exciting intensity of discovery and interaction in Blacksburg that is only weakly present in Fairfax.

The analytical task, of course, is to draw a reasonable lesson from this experience. Doing this is largely a matter of selecting the appropriate options for comparison. To some extent the reduced sense of excitement and intensity is perhaps a natural product of the aging of Buchanan and Tullock. Furthermore, Tullock moved to Arizona in 1988 and Buchanan moved a quarter-mile away, to his own building that housed his archives, in 1991. The impacts of aging and separation must be impounded in *ceteris paribus*, conceptually speaking, if the organizational and institutional features are to be distinguished from the idiosyncratic. It is easy enough to imagine a mental experiment that would speak to the organizational and institutional elements in what I have just said. In that experiment, Buchanan and Tullock would not have moved into the VPI environment in 1968 and 1969, but into the George Mason environment instead. If institutional and organizational features were irrelevant, the cosmic significance of Buchanan and Tullock and their programs would have been invariant to this alternative location. My own sense of the matter is that their current cosmic significance would now be less than it actually is had they located at George Mason rather than VPI.

The task is to explain why this is so in terms of various institutional and organizational features. There are a number of significant differences between VPI and George Mason that seem relevant. Institutional support at the university level is one important difference between Blacksburg and Fairfax. While the George Mason administration did authorize the positions to secure the move of the public choice center to Fairfax in 1984, a subsequent examination of

departmental budgetary resources shows a very quick regression toward the mean. At VPI, desired faculty members were not lost because of budgets. At George Mason they were. At VPI graduate students were not lost to other programs because we were unable to make competitive offers. At George Mason this happens repeatedly. At George Mason there is little university support for professional travel, while at VPI there was quite a bit. In these and in several other ways, George Mason has not provided the level of support for scholarly activity that was provided in Blacksburg.

The relevant academic geography also is strikingly different, both physically and socially. In Blacksburg you were never more than ten minutes from anywhere. In Fairfax, ten minutes is often the time it takes to get from one traffic light to the next. In Blacksburg, faculty lived in close proximity to one another and informal visits were common. In Fairfax, faculty are scattered over several hundred square miles and informal visits are rare. At VPI, visits from seminar speakers were intense occasions that involved, aggregated across faculty, many hours of in-depth conversations. At George Mason, seminar visits are cursory things, where the speaker arrives, talks, and then leaves. At VPI a solid majority of the faculty were located in the former University President's house. At George Mason they are distributed across three and sometimes even four locations, with no solid majority anywhere.¹¹ Buchanan and Tullock would have been the same people had they found themselves in the George Mason rather than the VPI environment in 1968 and 1969; however, the resulting public

¹¹ There are three separate locations on the Fairfax campus, the fourth location is the Arlington campus 15 or so miles away.

choice cascade would have been less forceful because of these institutional and organizational reasons.

But public choice was located at Blacksburg and not at Fairfax during the 1970s, and for this all who are interested in public choice can be grateful. My sense of the matter is that the cosmic significance of public choice right now would be higher if public choice had remained at Blacksburg under the institutional framework that existed in the late 1970s. If so, the move to Fairfax shifted public choice onto a lower growth path, though possibly not by much. After all, by the mid-1980s public choice had become diffused throughout the world and had secured a place in graduate programs nearly everywhere.

In seeking to appraise the institutional and organizational lessons relevant to the shift from Blacksburg to Fairfax, it is once again necessary to take care in appraising the relevant options. As was the case in Charlottesville, the supporting institutional framework crumbled in Blacksburg. The public choice center and its faculty went from being members of the Department of Economics and carrying the major weight of the graduate program, to becoming a small rump group standing outside the economics department and its activities. If turning back the clock, so to speak, was not an option, moving to Fairfax was surely the superior option, as compared with the relevant alternative.

I hesitate to write too negatively about George Mason, but I do not believe in self-deception either. George Mason now is no match, intellectually speaking, for VPI in the 1970s. Partly, this is a natural product of the ageing and separation that I noted above. It is, however, also a product of various weaker

institutional and organizational circumstances at George Mason, which I also noted above. Yet George Mason also offers potential advantages that were not present in Blacksburg, though they were present in Charlottesville. I refer in particular to the pursuit of a program in Post-Classical Political Economy.

The future, of course, is something about which we can only conjecture. How it will turn out will be revealed to us only in due course. There is a sense in which the move to George Mason could have been expansionary, and might still prove to be so, though it has not done so to this point. The program at Blacksburg was narrower than the program at Charlottesville. Buchanan and Tullock were in Blacksburg, but Coase, Nutter, Yeager, and Vining were not. Public choice was born in Blacksburg, Post-Classical Political Economy died prematurely in Charlottesville.

Fairfax has continually offered at least some promise of a revitalized Post-Classical Political Economy. In the early years in Fairfax, it was plausible that the activities of public choice in conjunction with those of market process or Austrian-like faculty could together have generated such a product. This, however, did not happen, or at least has not happened to date. A Post-Classical Political Economy is taking shape in any case, even though the scholarly evidences of this development have not been articulated in this manner. One can find them all the same in the wide variety of literature that has been variously described as new institutional economics, evolutionary economics, law and economics, and new political economy, among other intellectual constructions, in addition to public choice. For the most part all of these constructions represent a

continuation of the classical orientation toward political economy, only approached with modern analytical techniques and methods. A Post-Classical Political Economy will continue to emerge, regardless of what transpires in Fairfax, and this emergence will owe a mighty debt to the efforts, across many dimensions and in three academic settings, of James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock.

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