

Professor James M. Buchanan: A Personal Tribute from a Student

By Richard B. McKenzie, from his chapter in *The Origins of Public Choice: The Legacy of Buchanan and Tullock*, Dwight R. Lee, contributing editor, (Heidelberg, Germany: Springer, 2012).

At a conference organized in the early 1990s to celebrate Professor James M. Buchanan's Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics, the speakers were asked to tie their comments on economic education to Professor Buchanan's prodigious works. My opening line crystalized the importance of my serendipitously coming within Professor Buchanan's orbit of influence: "When I was in Professor James Buchanan's microeconomics class in the fall of 1969, he taught me very little. I say that with pride here in this august setting because Professor Buchanan would be the first among you to realize that I could not offer a higher compliment. He understands, as he got me to see, that the measure of good teaching is not how much you teach, but how much is learned by students — and then how much students can do with what little is taught and learned. The first principle in economics should be economy in the principles covered, a point rarely driven home for young economists today.

With his death at age 93, much will be written about Professor Buchanan's prodigious scholarship that has changed the way people view political and government arenas. My perspective is more personal, that of a student who came to know an admirable side of Professor Buchanan that his critics and devoted readers will never know. Professor Buchanan was my dissertation director. Most dissertation directors take weeks, if not months, to return first drafts of their students' dissertations. In my case, I vividly remember placing all 250 pages of my first draft on Professor Buchanan's desk just before 5 p.m. one day, only to find a marked-up version, as well as an untold number of typed single-spaced pages of comments, *the very next morning!*

After graduating and taking an assistant professorship, I started churning out a stream of papers, anxious to move up the academic ladder. But I had an advantage that other young professors could only wish for. I had Professor Buchanan in my corner, giving generously of his time to review and comment on my work, and all with unbelievable promptness. I would send Professor Buchanan a paper, and he would have it back to me in no time at all, with pages of comments — long ago, when papers and messages traveled at the snail's pace of the Post Office. He was so prompt and predictable on getting papers back that on occasion I would put a paper in an envelope and then go to one of my colleagues and say something to this effect: "Notice that I am putting this paper in the mail to Jim Buchanan today. I am willing to bet you a cup of coffee that I will get this paper back with one or more single-spaced pages of comments a week from now." Without fail, I won the bets and had any number of cups of coffee off Professor Buchanan's tireless generosity with his time and wisdom with a former student.

I once told Professor Buchanan's longtime assistant Betty Tillman how remarkable it was that he would get my papers back so promptly and with obvious attention to detail. I was struck by her reaction, "Honey, I hate to tell you this, but he doesn't just do it for you. He does it for everyone. There's hardly a day that goes by that he doesn't get at least one paper in for review, and he almost always has his comments written by the next morning."

Professor Buchanan's comments on my papers followed a somewhat predictable format. He would always start by saying something positive about the content, perhaps focusing on how well the paper was written, if lost for positive comments on content. He would then add his incisive comments, which sometimes forced me to set the paper aside. But on one paper I remember well that he didn't start with his usual positive remarks. He wrote to this effect: "Dear Dick, we all write good papers and bad papers. With some papers we pursue publication. With others, we trash them. In the process of writing any number of papers, we acquire great wisdom in deciding which papers are which. You will acquire great wisdom in deciding what to do with this paper." I didn't need for him to say more, which he didn't. I never tried to revise that paper.

Today, I am pleased to call James Buchanan my *professor* for pressing on me a remarkably simple but important point that escapes so many colleagues across the country: Being a professor is a privileged position. It demands scholarship, but it also demands that you give of yourself in ways that will never show up on your resume, or in your obituary.

Richard McKenzie is a senior fellow with the National Center for Policy Analysis and the Walter B. Gerken Professor of Economics and Management Emeritus in the Merage School of Business at the University of California, Irvine. This article is adapted from his chapter in Dwight R. Lee, contributing editor, *The Origins of Public Choice: The Legacy of Buchanan and Tullock* (Heidelberg, Germany: Springer, 2012).