

John Stewart: A personal appreciation

I was a lecturer at the Institute for Local Government Studies (INLOGOV) between 1970 and 1975. It was the unofficial staff college for senior officers in local government. It had two sides—development studies and British local government. I was in development studies for no better reason than they advertised the job. My research was on British local government. I had never taken a course in development studies, let alone taught such a course to others. I was a fish out of water among “expats” who were colleagues from the Colonial Civil Service; used to display an effortless superiority over the natives, I fear the expats saw me as a native. I did not fit in.

My immediate boss was Ken Pickering who ran the division as if he was still a District Commissioner. The flash point was a patronage appointment to a lecturing post. I protested, politely at first, and suggested we advertise. He refused and told me to mind my own business. I became bolshy and appealed his decision to Henry Maddick, head of INLOGOV. It transpired that Henry agreed with me, although he never said so to my face. The job was advertised. Ken summoned me to his office for some name-calling. I was “a snake in the grass.” I was on a two-year contract. He would not renew it. I had opened my mouth to change feet. His decision shattered me. Enter John Stewart. He may not have been riding a white horse, but he was my savior because he offered me a post in the British local government side of INLOGOV.

INLOGOV provided a distinctive academic experience because it ran various, specialized short courses for local government officers and a 10-week residential management course. I taught on the master's degree, short courses, in-house courses, and, in my final year, on the 10-week course. I did not teach undergraduates, only postgraduates and local government officers. The latter were a daunting group for a 28-year-old who had never worked in local government. Most of them, most of the time, were kind—they listened. INLOGOV colleagues who were former local government officers were less kind. I was criticized vigorously for talking too quickly and being too academic. Their points were accurate, but I was not convinced they were criticisms. I thought the audience liked my enthusiasm and welcomed my academic approach as a change from their usual fare. Watching my new boss, John Stewart, strengthened this conviction.

John was an idiosyncratic and inspiring speaker. He held his local government audiences in the palm of his hand as he talked about such potentially uninspiring subjects as corporate management. In part, it was his appearance.

He threw on his suits and missed.

He walked with a limp, a hangover from polio in his youth.

He shaved but random patches of stubble would remain.

He would twist and break biros and paper clips in his fingers as he talked.

He would pace the floor, then twist himself around a chair or a table.

Svengali-like, he mesmerized his audience. I have been on teaching courses, which advised me either on how to present to live audiences or on TV. No course recommended John's style or anything near to it. How could it? The man was the style. Like it or loathe it, it was distinctive, and it worked. I learned that lecturing was about having your

own presence. Universities have templates for appraising staff. At best, they set a minimum standard. To command an audience, to communicate your enthusiasm and love of your subject, you must project yourself. In a small way, you are an actor. John showed me by example how to lecture, and his lesson stood me in good stead.

The research lessons I learned from John were a mixed blessing and a challenge. INLOGOV marketed its wares to local government, so we had to write for the local government magazines such as the *Local Government Chronicle* and *Municipal Journal*. The advantage of publishing in these journals is that I learned to write for a local government audience. The magazines had copy editors. My colleagues from local government offered advice. INLOGOV encouraged me to practice the art of translating one's research for practitioners. The problem was that such translations counted for nought on my academic CV. To move to another university, to gain promotion at my existing university, I had to publish in academic journals. The academic tradition and the search for relevance to practitioners posed a dilemma for me.

Mainly, my work was practitioner-oriented, and the worst practical project was about the impact of European Community regulations on British local government. The pamphlet I wrote sold literally tens of thousands of copies to local authorities, many of whom bought it in bulk. It was worse than useless on my CV. John was aware of the practitioner-academic dilemma confronting all his younger colleagues, not just me, and sought to change the intellectual ethos of INLOGOV. He recruited Chris Hinings who was a member of the (then) hugely influential "Aston Group," which pioneered the quantitative analysis of the structure and functions of organizations. With my INLOGOV colleague, Royston Greenwood, Chris was "translating" the Aston Group's approach to the study of local government. Chris's arrival was important, less for this specific research project and more for his presence as an academic heavyweight who legitimized my aspirations. John was the guru of local government who addressed an academic audience on occasions. Chris was a successful, mainstream academic and a modest, encouraging colleague to boot.

There was an immediate impact on my work. I was commissioned by the Committee of Inquiry into Local Government Finance (Layfield) to look broadly at the relationship between central and local government. It was a turning point in my career. I was indebted yet again to John Stewart, who was a member of the Committee. John gave me the opportunity to write about intergovernmental relations while Bob suggested I look for inspiration in the theories about organizations. Most of my report to the Layfield Committee Rhodes, (1976) was a review of the literature but it contained one novel idea. I suggested that central government–local government relations should be seen as a set of actors embedded in complex networks of administrative politics. This notion of policy networks was to inform my work for the next 10 years. I am struck by the happenstance of it all. There is a great temptation to suggest that your career had a logic; that it unfolded according to a plan, in a linear way. In practice, it was a case of grasping opportunities that others presented to me. I was lucky to have John Stewart as a mentor actively seeking out opportunities for me. I was looking for my own voice and he helped me find it.

John supported my academic endeavors, and, on occasion, he too would write for an academic audience. But his heart lay with local government, with defending and improving it. As I look back, I do not think the academic community ever gave him due credit for this work. The local government community was more discerning. In 1992, I was invited to contribute to a conference and subsequent book celebrating the 25th anniversary of John's appointment at INLOGOV. I revisited his seminal book, *Management in Local Government: a viewpoint* (1972). I argued that it was less a book about management and more a political theory of local government with equality and the redistribution of power and resources at its heart. I concluded he was a son of the Fabian tradition. Of course, his work had an important impact on the management of local government but equally it was a stirring defense of local democracy (Rhodes 1992). INLOGOV remains as a monument to his contribution, and we need it to carry on his teachings. We need a voice defending local democracy as much today as we ever did.


I must have been a pain for John, but he was too kind ever to tell me. He could see I had talent, but it was without direction. I was a provincial lad looking for somewhere to fit in. I was young, gauche with a chip on my shoulder. I had yet to learn restraint and judgment. John was patience personified, steering not directing, displaying the judgment I strikingly lacked. He helped me to find my feet in academia and was an admirable role model. I owe him a great debt and I will always be grateful for his guiding hand. I was sympathetically nurtured.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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