A Modest Proposal for Resolving the Tenure Crisis and Making Professors Beneficial to the Public

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A MODEST PROPOSAL

for Resolving the Tenure Crisis and Making Professors Beneficial to the Public

Anthony Parise

The review of tenure policy now underway in Academe has provoked all kinds of anxieties. The enormity of it frightens all of us. But if we force ourselves to think about the unthinkable we can render it, first, rational, then familiar, and finally, perhaps, comforting. I intend, in this little missive, to carry the problem through this progressive declension.

What are the desiderata of an ideal tenure system?

First, it should be understandable, coherent, like a work of art. What kind of art? What genre? Well, clearly, tenure policy is under review because the happy assurances of the old policy are no longer practicable. The new system must redistribute a reduced quantum of security and acceptance. Put brutally, some people must be deprived of their livelihood. They must tumble from happiness to (personal) misfortune. The analogous art form, then, is tragedy.

But tragedy is not only a drama that arouses pity and fear. It is, in its own grisly way, an affirmation and an exaltation. In tragedy, the hero-victim must learn, and accept, that his peripeteia does not result from a casual turn of Fortune's wheel. That, according to Aristotle, would be "not fearful or pitiful but shocking." Instead, the central figure of the play must know that it is "not through wickedness and vice that he falls into misfortune but through some flaw." The whole business — to borrow once more from Aristotle — "must have the appearance of purpose."

Next, the ideal tenure system must be fair or rational. If it is not the strumpet Fortune who turns the wheel, neither should it be men masking as Fate. The play of bias, caprice, passion, or other human frailty is not for our stage. Any drama in which humans weigh, judge, evaluate, and balance a host of imponderables is comedy, hence manifestly inferior to one in which Mind is controlled and directed by Objective Data, the modern manifestation of Fate. The choral songs, in the tenure tragedy, should celebrate the Laws of Nature — the modern guise of the Gods — not the laws of men.

If these objective data derive from Nature, then the ideal tenure system
should be as orderly as Nature and operate with the same Necessity. The Universe is not Absurd and its laws are not held in abeyance. Oh, no, it is a rational system, a clock made by a consummate clockmaker. Therefore — I'm still assuming the grand perspective though my metaphor has changed — anyone crushed in the gears of this magisterial and sublime clock should understand the essential rightness of his merely personal (or "mental") grief. As Dylan Thomas says, "Wise men at their end know dark is right." (Of course, not all men are wise. There are those who, taking a pratfall on the ice, denounce the laws of friction and of gravity; but they are not fit heroes for our tragedy; they are soreheads and to them even the best of all possible worlds would be a personal affront.)

Third, an ideal system is self-regulating. It does not require continual adjustment and interference. The appropriate analogy here is not tragedy but classical economic theory. The same unseen hand that makes a harmonious, constant, and synchronized economic system out of millions of disparate decisions, millions of discreet profits and losses, should be quietly at work in our tenure system. In a laissez faire economy, nothing succeeds but success itself, and failure is its own quietus. In a word, supply and demand are always in perfect balance. Input is always justified by output. So let it be in Academe.

Fourth, an ideal tenure policy should honor the norms which currently obtain in the parent culture. No institution at odds with the enironing society can long survive — not the family, not the church, not even the army. The school, which depends in an immediate way on the support of society, is most vulnerable of all and therefore should be the most responsive — nay, the most ingratiating.

Finally, but most important, an ideal system must promote some larger good. As in a laissez faire economy, individuals are to be goaded into paroxysms of effort; but all that effort must be coöperant to some great end. No doubt, the anxieties and fears incident to the abolition of the old tenure system will provoke not only effort; they will also bring out latent vice and perversity. But that should not obscure the greater good that vices create. Mandeville, in The Fable of the Bees, presents a compelling (though literary) model of the great society. His "Grumbling Hive," the moral equivalent of a free enterprise economy, represents a society in which myriad individual vices automatically strengthen the moral fabric as a whole. Private evils, like hunger, constraint, fear, ambition, operating according to some hidden but dynamic law, create a vigorous, magnificent — hence good — community:

Thus every part was full of vice,
Yet the whole mass a paradise.
Envy itself, and vanity
Were ministers of industry.

Mandeville (born too soon) presciently said that each bee pursues his own interests and the result is a strong hive and plenty of honey.

So too a tenure policy is just a transcendent ideal — not the happiness of an abstraction. Call it Industry. Or, best of all, call it by Mandeville's name.

Down, down, down, from the heights of earth.

Mandeville found his illustrative model when I go to the lumber camps of Wisconsin. Men were Men, not mush. There the aspirant could kick his arse with impunity. The policy was harsh, but it was pure, it was simple, it was right, it was moral; and this system guaranteed that the chopper's merit was never in doubt. The objective test. No fair-minded person would be unhappy unless he wilfully chose to rebel against the system.

It was a harsh system, yes, but it was a harsh era and one did not have the refined sensibilities that could not take the heat of the board-rooms — or even the salons.

Most important, never before has art been so well served. Excellence (and Mandeville was a marvel to behold, a prodigy), the art that deserved — but lacked, alas! — that recognition.

Now, let me hasten to say, I believe in Egotism. No. To recall Santayana: to repeat it. But we should distill some essence out of history.

First, we should learn to isolate the qualities we want to foster. Second, we should foster — the courage — the courage to be Real! To be the virtues we swear by. Third, we should organize.

And, as Heraclitus is always tedious — or am I the same college, or the same primeval state from their grandeur Chicago was
Mandeville (born too soon) presented a theodicy without god. In his beehive, each bee pursues his own interests and is moved by ignoble motives, yet the result is a strong hive and plenty of honey.

So too a tenure policy is justified, ultimately, by its exaltation in a transcendent ideal — not the happiness or virtue of individuals but the greatness of an abstraction. Call it Learning. Or call it the Knowledge Industry. Or, best of all, call it by the name of our college.

Down, down, down, from the Parnassus of general principles to the mud of earth.

Mandeville found his illustrative analogy in the beehive. For my model I go to the lumber camps of Wisconsin in the days when Pine was King and Men were Men, not mush. There the ax-jack held his job as long as no aspirant could kick his arse. Such a recruitment and retirement policy was harsh, but it was pure. Indeed, it answered to the ideal in every respect. It was clear, readily understandable, and orderly. It was based on an explicit norm; strength and aggressiveness were the virtues generally honored and this system guaranteed that the most virtuous men were honored. A chopper’s merit was never in doubt because it was constantly subject to an objective test. No fair-minded person could complain about his private fate, unless he wilfully chose to rebel against the very nature of things.

It was a harsh system, yes, but it accords well with the larger culture. It was a harsh era and one did not expect to find in the frozen swamps the refined sensibilities that could not be found in the factories, the farms, the board-rooms — or even the salons.

Most important, never before or since has the mystery of axmanship been so well served. Excellence (areté) prevailed in the swamps. The chopping was a marvel to behold, a prodigious work of hands and days, an epic metier that deserved — but lacked, alas! — its Homer.

Now, let me hasten to say, I do not suggest that we re-create that Golden Age. No. To recall Santayana: to learn from the past is not to re-live, not to repeat it. But we should distill several lessons from this lumbering paradigm out of history.

First, we should learn to isolate and define with mathematical precision the qualities we want to foster. Second, and more vital, we should learn courage — the courage to be Realists, the courage to live by, or starve by, the virtues we swear by. Third, we should learn adaptability. All things pass away. And, as Heraclitus is always tediously insisting, you can’t step twice into the same college, or the same primeval forest. When the pines were felled and from their grandeur Chicago was built, when Wisconsin was a wasteland of
slashings, tinder-dry and awaiting the spark, the lumberjacks did not dissolve into self-pity or an unmanly nostalgia for what was dead. Nor did they sanctify the ax. Future oriented, they re-tooled. The lathe and the oil drilling rig became the new symbols of that mysterious good to which all active men make, by their very busy-ness, a hymn of praise.

I will not presume to draw the full lesson of the past, nor to set forth in detail the ideal tenure system. But a suggestive sketch follows.

We should begin by purifying the language of the tribe. Keep words in their proper places and things will order themselves. Restore the word tenure to its pristine and aboriginal meaning and half of our confusions are wiped away. Tenure comes from the Latin to hold. It was an active verb and suggested nothing passive. It designated not something given but an ability to perform, especially to hold on. Applied to office holders, it suggested not a sinecure but a capacity to grasp— and that grasp could be tenuous or strong, depending on the virtu of the grasper himself.

Once we get a hold on root meanings, our misconceptions vanish. How right are those who identify philosophy—and the consolations thereof—with semantics!

Next we should objectify the measure of a jobholder. I suggest the following formula:

\[ PW = \frac{(FTE - \text{Avg FTE}) \cdot (PP \times SR) + PSP}{1 + MT + GDD} \]

PW is, of course, the coefficient of Professional Worth. It is computed in this way: The Full Time Equivalent student hours generated less the Average FTE's generated in the Unit is multiplied by the quantity Number of Pages Published times the Student Rating expressed as a percentage in the Excellent category. To that figure is added the number of Public Service Projects undertaken. The whole is divided by the number of those incidents of Moral Turpitude and Gross Dereliction of Duty which shed discredit on the institution.

The beauty of this formula, I hardly need point out, is that any personnel who generate fewer FTE's than the average in their Unit will have a negative PW (unless their PSP makes up the deficit).

Still, this formula is suggestive only. The point is that there must be a numerical indicator of worth. From mensuration all good things proceed. (Even the mystic poet William Blake assents to this principle. One of his Proverbs of Hell is: "In a year of dearth, count, measure, and weigh.") Given numbers, fair comparisons are possible and the competitive spirit is given clear direction. Best of all, since it promotes efficiency (conceived as a relationship of quantifiable input with the larger society. For surely modern society is Efficiency, and Efficiency! Some will sneer and that sneer has negative survival value. Any organism, any organization with cost greater than value, an uncoordinated luxury is being committed. Nature is a luxury on the face of the earth. The institution that does not pay its own way must learn—that survival is the price of life.

If you don't believe me, ask the cockroach. It has been around a lot longer after Man has departed the earth. We recognize—as a species, as a society—survival is everything.
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relationship of quantifiable input to output), it puts the college in harmony 
with the larger society. For surely the only norm, indeed, the only god, of a 
modern society is Efficiency, and Accountability is his prophet.

Efficiency! Some will sneer at that: “What’s so grand about efficiency?” 

That sneer has negative survival value; it lacks Realism and is void of Grace. 

Any organism, any organization whose input exceeds its output is expendable; 

when cost exceeds value, an unconscionable (and necessarily ephemeral) 
luxury is being committed. Nature will not for long coddle any organism that 
is a luxury on the face of the earth. Society will not for long support any 
institution that does not pay its own way. For Nature knows — and Society 

must learn — that survival is the primal grace.

If you don’t believe me, ask Darwin. Or take a lesson from the 
cockroach. It has been around a lot longer than Man and it may be around 
long after Man has departed the earth (leaving no forwarding address), unless 

we recognize — as a species, as a society, as a college, as individuals — that 
survival is everything.