

A Reflection on the life of a Teacher
Richard A. Musgrave
1910-2007

There is no higher tribute one can offer than a tribute to a teacher.

Professor Richard A. Musgrave was my teacher. I was privileged to be his pupil in 1959 at the University of Michigan. There I was fortunate to study Public Finance with one of the giants in the field. Indeed, Professor Musgrave was the father who, in my view, not only gave birth to the study of the Public Sector as a field, an important field in Economics, but also nurtured it to make it vibrant and exciting for students.

On January 22, I was on my way to attend a Memorial Service for Milton Friedman, the 1976 Nobel Laureate in Economics, when I learned of the passing of Professor Musgrave. I do not know how to describe the effect such news have had on me. Life and death are events we live with every day. We face and welcome new born and mourn those who leave us behind. As one moves through life stages, one looks backward with nostalgia and forward with anticipation. One's death, although remains in the shadow, is never far away from one's thought. But the death of a teacher was never in the card.

A Teacher, an inspiring teacher, always live. Live in the heart, soul, writing and teaching of his pupils. I as a student have never contemplated the death of such a teacher.

As I continued the drive towards the Stanford University Auditorium, I find myself transported back to the time and place where I have first met Professor Musgrave.

I arrived to the University of Michigan after graduating from Cairo University. I was quite versed in the field of Economics and I have learned something about taxation by taking a course at Cairo University Law School. Taxation or the theory of the Fisc as it was called was not in the proper province of Economics. It was something lawyers study, presumably to argue for or against tax laws and tax treaties. I found tax laws a boring subject and had no desire to pursue it further. My interest was in the study of Micro theory and business cycle theory. But then I met Professor Musgrave. He was assigned to be my advisor. I found out that he offered a seminar in Public Finance. I had no idea what Public Finance was about, but his enthusiasm, his brilliance touched me like nothing else

before. I went to his seminar and like my fellow students we were in awe with his teaching. Not only did he teach us what the economics of the public sector is all about, but he did so with such passion bordering on religion. Looking back, I still remember him pacing back and forth in the class room trying to explain to us what has by now become the standard model in the study of the public economy – The Three Branch Model. We were taught that governments not only have the responsibility to address market failure, but must do so without sacrificing efficiency or adversely affect private initiative. But Professor Musgrave’s passion went beyond that. He saw government as a benevolent institution. Its scope of activities does not stop with the allocation of society resources or the stability of the economy, but also to insure a modicum of fairness and equity. True this was perhaps a difficult and most controversial role one would ascribe to the public sector, but Professor Musgrave’s passion for fairness and equity have spilled over to all of his students not only as they began to think about the role of the public sector, but throughout their academic life. Whether one accepted or rejected the role of distribution – one of the three branches in Musgrave’s model, one can neither shrug off such a role nor shy away from addressing it.

Professor Musgrave has inspired many of his students to pursue the study, teaching and writing about the economics of the public sector. His many contributions as a teacher, educator and scholar have shaped my professional interest in Public Economics. Like many of his students, I have tried to share with my students some of his enthusiasm for knowledge about public sector behavior and his dedication to improving the process of governance. Forty six years later, in 2005, I found myself calling on Professor Musgrave to share with us his reflection on his basic theory. Professor Musgrave graciously accommodated my request by contributing a paper (Chapter 1, Public Finance and the Three Branch Model, pp. 3-8) to the Elgar Companion to Public Economics (2006), which was co-edited by myself and Richard Cebula. In the contribution, Professor Musgrave have reopened “that treasure box of ideas that have stamped the development of Public Finance and (his) vision of what the field should be about”. Professor Musgrave have reiterated his belief that “the three branch model provides a useful framework in which to separate the basic concerns of Public Finance and their distinct analytic. This perspective, as I saw it half a century ago, still stands.” (p.7)

A personal note: Professor Musgrave, you shall be missed. But your words, your passion and enthusiasm for teaching and the pursuit of a just society will forever live. They still guide all of those who seek the knowledge about the public sector as they have guided me through my professional career. On behalf of my students I thank you.

Attiat F. Ott