A Remembrance of Louis Brownlow

The National Governmental Center (NGC) was part of the University of Chicago and headquartered on its campus, at 1313 East 60th Street. The NGC was the repository and center of much governmental innovation and knowledge from 1930 deep into the 1970s. “1313” housed the National Governors’ Conference, International City Managers Association, American Public Works Association, American Public Welfare Association, International Public Personnel Association, American Waterworks Association, American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), and Municipal Finance Officers Association, among many similar groups. A Nazi-sympathizing organization called it “a conspiracy by well-educated career bureaucrats who control the government of the United States” (Hindman 1959). Louis Brownlow, a founder of ASPA, also founded the NGC in 1933.

The Public Administration Service (PAS), the consulting, research, central services, and publishing branch of the NGC, had two regional offices: one in San Francisco and the other in Washington, D.C. In 1961–62, I headed the latter.

Brownlow was a third-grade dropout from Buffalo, Missouri. But, as he was wont to say, “I was cursed with a photographic memory. I not only can remember and call up word-for-word everything I have ever read or heard and everyone I have met, but the curse is that I can’t FORGET anything, either.”

He had been a newspaper reporter assigned to the White House during the tenure of Woodrow Wilson, who got to know and respect Brownlow. In 1915, Wilson appointed Brownlow as one of the three commissioners who then ran the government of the District of Columbia. After his initial Washington service, Brownlow went on to be city manager of Petersburg, Virginia, and Knoxville, Tennessee, and advisor to every president from Wilson through John F. Kennedy.

In 1962, Brownlow was 83, widowed, and living alone in D.C. While he was somewhat frail of body, he had not lost a step intellectually and still offered insights, advice, and a sense of history to a vast array of government officials. The PAS president “assigned” me to “take Mr. Brownlow to lunch at the Willard Hotel every Wednesday noon” that I was in Washington. After the first engagement, it would have taken a major emergency for me to miss my Wednesday lunch with “Brownie,” as he insisted I call him.

Louis Brownlow was a founding father of the modern United States. In 1936, Franklin D. Roosevelt made him chair of what became known as the “Brownlow Commission” but officially was the President’s Committee on Administrative Management. In 1937, this group and Brownlow’s fertile mind produced numerous “inventions.” Few have any concept from whence they came. Among these were the Office of the President, the executive annual budget, the Office of Management and Budget (originally called the Bureau of the Budget), staff assistants to the president, and the federal fiscal year.

Early one Wednesday, I received an extremely rare telephone call from Mr. Brownlow. He simply asked, “Could I bring a guest to lunch today?” Naturally, I consented, but I wondered whether Mr. Brownlow, a widower for several years now, was to squire a lady friend.

I went to the Willard a bit early and there was Mr. Brownlow, waiting. Another distinguished-looking gentleman, not a lady, accompanied him. If possible, the man appeared to be even more dapper and elderly than Brownlow.
On being introduced, I spoke my last word for the next two and a half magnificent hours. I was in the presence of governmental historical royalty. Harland Bartholomew was the literal founder of city planning. Brownlow quickly informed me that the two had “worked together” decades prior, in the late 1920s, founding Radburn, New Jersey, in Bergen County, west of New York City. Radburn was the first community in the United States planned around the automobile. I was familiar with the general setting, but during the lunch, I was to learn what the term “pioneering effort” truly involved.

Radburn had been planned by Bartholomew. Brownlow became the resident governmental liaison and, as it developed, financier. Over the next two and a half hours, these two old friends reminisced about their Radburn years. Piecing together their conversation, it became clear to me that until that time, all home mortgages were one-year financings with a balloon amount coming due at the end of each year period. Consequently, the mortgage holder could agree or not agree to refinance for another year with a slightly lower balloon amount.

Lenders were in total command and purchasers in absolute jeopardy—until Louis Brownlow and Harland Bartholomew.

They changed all that. For financing Radburn purchases, after many presentations and much number-crunching, Brownlow convinced the New York Life Insurance Company to provide self-amortizing 10-year mortgages after a 25 percent down payment. Radburn was a huge success, despite the ravages of the Great Depression.

Recollections turned to how Brownlow had conveyed the success of Radburn to “Franklin,” and he explained how he had “educated Franklin” on the concept of “insurance” to assure mortgage lenders that it was “good business” to write fully amortized home loans. “Franklin said bring him a draft statute and he would see what he could do.” At that point, it hit me that what I was hearing was the detailed literal conceptualization, writing, and ultimate adoption of the Federal Housing Act and FHA-insured home mortgages.

Neither politics nor policy analysis but rather ideas, concepts, and contacts provide this nation with governmental progress. Those ideas and concepts, for the most part, come from dedicated professional staff, those “faceless bureaucrats” who share Brownlow’s “passion for anonymity” and total lack of ideology—just honest, competent, and open government administration. Those career people know what will work and what will fail. I shared and reveled with Brownlow in that passion for nearly two years of Wednesdays, which provided me a new and updated vision of what has made this country great.

The moral here is simple: seek out successful people and tactfully extract their knowledge and advice. Then devise your version and emulate the mentor’s visions as yours.

Reference