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A TRIBUTE TO NELSON W. POLSBY

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## Nelson Polsby and the IGS

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Nelson Polsby was Director of the Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) from 1988 to 1999. His time as the IGS Director was very rewarding to him and instrumental in the Institute's evolution. Under Eugene Lee, Nelson's predecessor, the IGS had evolved from a public administration unit to one that examined California public policy and political issues more broadly. Nelson's vision was to take the IGS into the realm of national politics and to expand its educational mission within the university and abroad. It was an ambitious agenda that continues to this day. Nelson immediately brought on some able staff to assist him. Adrienne Jamieson, now the Director of the Stanford in Washington program, became his Assistant Director, and Gerald Lubenow, a former writer and editor for Newsweek, became his Director of Publications and Programming. He recruited me from Caltech to be his Associate Director a year later.

Despite the fact that his first landmark study was about community power (or maybe because of it), Nelson avoided state and local politics whenever he could. He would proudly proclaim to all that he had never visited California's state capital, Sacramento, and never intended to. "That's Bruce's territory," he would say. And no matter how "hot" state politics got, Nelson declined invitations to opine on it for the media with one ironic exception: term limits. Nelson and I filed a joint declaration in a law suit against Proposition 130 (California's legislative term limits law), arguing that term limits would alter the balance between the executive and legislative branches, and therefore, was not a mere amendment but a revision of the State Constitution. Time has proven us correct, I believe, but at the time, our argument was summarily dismissed by the State Supreme Court. Ironically, eight years later, Nelson was forced out of his IGS Directorship by UC Berkeley's ten year term limit on Directorships.

Many of Nelson's obituaries mentioned teatime at the IGS. Eating cookies, drinking tea and talking to students and colleagues were important to Nelson to be sure. But just as "air conditioning" was the central metaphor for his last book on Congress, "teatime" was really just his convenient shorthand for community building at the IGS. Nelson established several regular IGS seminar series on such subjects as British politics, American government, and political history. These seminars drew graduate students and faculty from political science, law, economics, history and public policy. In the heady early days, attendees could expect a full lunch of pizza, Chinese food, or on a bad day, sandwiches. Two substantial budget cuts later, there was no free lunch in IGS land, except for the speaker and seminar organizers. But the habit of lunchtime seminars was firmly established by then, and the seminars have continued to flourish at the Institute ever since.

One of Nelson's best ideas was his Overseas American Scholars program. Nelson believed that the IGS should become a center for foreign scholars who want to study American government and politics. Although he was never able to

persuade donors to fund it, the program flourished anyway. Over the years, numerous Americanists from all over the world came to study at the IGS. In fact, the IGS may have hosted every Korean scholar in existence who studies American government. Nelson was particularly interested in British politics and sponsored a British politics seminar for many years. Many distinguished British politicians, scholars and journalists came through to visit Nelson and talk in this seminar, including Lord Chris Patten, former Conservative MP and Governor of Hong Kong, Neil Kinnock, former leader of the Labour Party, and Geoffrey Howe, former Foreign Secretary.

This was also the period when the IGS began to develop a research theme focused on political and governmental institutions. Because some of this work developed in opposition to what Nelson viewed as senseless political reform proposals by good government groups (the so-called goo-goos), he sometimes jokingly referred to the IGS as the "Institute of Bad Politics." It did not help the IGS image with the reform community that I shared many of his opinions on these issues.

I suspect that Nelson's formative views on political reform came from his analyses of party rule changes in the sixties and seventies. Nelson observed that attempts to open the party through the McGovern-Fraser Commission reforms cut elected officials out of the process and empowered the media and consultant classes. He also believed that campaign finance reform aimed at reducing inequity in one realm (campaign donations) ignored inequalities in other politically relevant resources. Campaign finance regulations, he thought, caused incumbents to spend more time fund-raising than they did before. In the end, Nelson favored a disclosure regime only. A number of talented graduate students who worked on campaign finance topics came out of the IGS during this period including Ray LaRaja, Jennifer Steen, Dorie Apollonio, Meg Carne and Justin Buchler.

Nelson's office was always open to students, and he was rarely alone. They would sit at the long table and argue with him, listen to Nelson's conversations with his colleagues, eat lunch or study. And he liked things as they were. When I tried to give his room a new carpet and a paint job, he adamantly refused. Sprucing the place up, he told me, made the IGS seem as sterile as a hospital ward. Nelson and I rarely disagreed about politics or departmental matters. Our occasional quarrels were over décor and the cost of fancy cookies.

The last ten years of his life were marked by some real physical hardships. His various ailments slowed him down, and made it harder for him to get to the faculty club, or to meetings on campus. But he remained as sharp and thoughtful as ever to the end. After almost two decades of Nelson's presence, it is hard to imagine the IGS without him. I miss him already.

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