

Moving People to Move Change

18th Annual Mel Smith Lecture
Speaking Notes for Troy Lanigan
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Trinity Western University [#1]

Before I get into my prepared comments, let me first recognize a few folks here tonight ... our campus club here at Trinity Western [#2]

In 2009 the CTF started an internship program ... not reaching enough students ... Feb 2013 ... Generation Screwed ... 3rd year, 30 campuses.

Thank-you for “moving people to move public policy change”

That’s our topic tonight. [#3]

I first met Mel Smith in 1992 ... at a time we were both starting new careers. Difference, mine was a first and Mel’s in retirement.

One of the many things I learned from Mel, and it speaks to everything I’ll talk about tonight , is that despite his spending 31 years at the most senior level of the BC Public Service he understood that public policy change is driven more from outside the system than it is inside the system.

Yes, Mel could push his points from inside the system and have impact. BUT he was restricted in how far he could push. He was restricted in how broadly he could push. And beyond all that, he was often confined by process and bureaucracy.

So, like me, Mel was starting something new in the early 90s as a consultant, a university instructor, a public commentator, a writer, an advocate, an author, a speaker, a volunteer ... he could have happily put his feet up with Beverly in their lovely Broadmead home ... but that wasn’t who he was. His convictions defined him and his ability to express them to the fullest gave him tremendous purpose and fulfillment in life.

I once said to him you’re awfully busy for someone retired ... he said he wasn’t retired, he was liberated.

And this is another important thing I learned from Mel: the power of enthusiasm and optimism. It would have been easy for a career civil servant to be somewhat cynical. Yet he was exactly the opposite of that. In fact, he was as happy a warrior as anyone I have ever worked with. And it was contagious to those around him.

It was his opposition to the Charlottetown Accord that brought us together in 1992. The effort earned him national attention, but it was here in British Columbia that his profile gained the

most prominence. Any of us here at the time remember his regular appearances on Rafe Mair dissecting the Accord's shortcomings for all Canadians but especially for those of us in West. The referendum that took place later that year had 54% of Canadians voting against the Accord, but here at home nearly 70% of British Columbians voted against the Accord. Mel's influence on that vote cannot be understated.

From there he took on many projects, aboriginal policy being his most passionate pursuit, but also democratic reform issues including support for recall and initiative and new laws that would require governments balance their budgets and pay down debt. Taxpayer Protection Laws as they were known would also give voters approval over tax increases and financially penalize politicians who didn't abide by the law.

By 2001, eight of ten provinces had (emphasis *had*) some variation of balanced budget/taxpayer protection law in place. It's not well known or acknowledged in discussing Mel's remarkable career, but Mel had a hand in crafting five of those laws ... but obviously an indirect hand in all of them because of course precedent in one part of country is carried to other parts.

He brought much to policy debate but he also contributed to the organizations that would give more prominence and longevity to the convictions he held so dearly. When the CTF started in 1990, "Federation" in Canadian Taxpayers Federation meant a "federation" of provincial associations. October 25, 1994 Mel and I held a press conference to announce creation of the BC Taxpayers Association [#4] -- he as board chair and me as its first Executive Director [#5]. Provincial associations would later fold into CTF and Mel served on that board for many years too.

Mel was an early leader in the creation and direction of the CTF. He was an inspired thinker, a mentor and above all an important friend in my life. I will reference his work and contributions through-out my comments, but let me just say to Beverly, to Nick to Trinity Western what an honour it is to stand here tonight and give a presentation in his name and in particular to discuss a topic that he and I shared such tremendous passion for: moving public policy. Thank-you.

I'm going to start my discussion tonight with Anna Hazare [#6]. Anna is an 80 year old social activist and anti-corruption crusader in India. For some time he used traditional techniques like hunger strikes to draw attention to social causes and corruption issues. In 2011 he wanted to organize support for an anti-corruption law and in doing so he went to a new medium: mobile.

Here at home we organize more commonly via email, but in many parts of the world broadband isn't as accessible so organizing on mobile is more common (think the Arab Spring protests of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt). Everyone may not have broadband access, but just about everyone has a mobile device ... especially the people Anna wanted to reach.

Did some traditional advertising and earned media to "text to a short code if you support me" (familiar enough): 80,000 did. Good result. But he went a step further and what he did next has to do with how people uniquely use mobile phones in India.

There is a practice in mobile culture in many parts of the world that would feel alien to all of us in this room. It's the practice of the "missed call." But in most of Africa, Latin America, parts of Asia and India people use missed calls to avoid charges while also communicating a message. If you're dating someone a "missed call" might mean "miss you." Or if you're running behind schedule a missed call might mean "I'm going to be late." A young child might use a "missed call" to tell her parents she's arrived safely at her destination. Known as flashing, beeping, fishing ..

Hazare digs into his 80,000 mobile list, traditional advertising and earned media to use this practice ... "If you support me on this anti-corruption law call me at this number and hang up." Then he has your number.

Anyone care to guess how many missed calls Anna Hazare gets?

[#7] 35,000,000

I was at a tech conference in NYC and an expert there told the audience this is the single largest digital action that he knew of. Ever. Organized by an 80 year old Indian man no less.

Story doesn't end there.

Took those numbers and through a rudimentary hack ... Anna went back to those people and turned out huge crowds in off line protests [#8] ... 200,000 in Delhi.

As for the anti-corruption bill ... it took two years, but it did finally pass in 2013.

I love this story because it touches on and illustrates so many pieces of what's involved to "move people to move public policy." In the time I have tonight I'm going to discuss just five of them that reflect this story as well as my experience and learning over 28 years doing this work. What Mel and I and I believe Anna Hazare would say is that ... you don't always win, but there are practices and lessons that lend themselves to successful outcomes.

1. Nothing Moves Until it is Pushed

[#9] The first one may seem obvious, but it's actually more complex. The CTF's founder Kevin Aram would often repeat the conviction that "change" was impeded because people tended to blame "others" for the state of affairs: the corporations, the unions, the immigrants. Blaming "others" Avram said, especially blaming politicians, manifests itself in cynicism and solves absolutely nothing. "Change," he argued, "comes when citizens accept responsibility and are proactive themselves in imposing integrity, discipline and political will." End quote.

To say Kevin was counter-intuitive would be an understatement. "Never say thank-you to a donor," was a practice of ours during his time with us. Why? Because he believed saying thank-you implied that we were doing something for people that they should be doing for themselves.

So nothing moves until it is pushed, but nothing is pushed until people themselves accept responsibility and are prepared to inform and equip themselves to do something about it.

[#10] Here's a great poster from the Hazare campaign in 2011. I like because it's a testimonial *and* a call to action for other people to get involved. For other people to accept responsibility. I'll come back to this.

2. Effectiveness Matters

[#11] Before coming to work at the CTF I worked in Virginia for the Leadership Institute which identifies, trains and helps place young conservatives in the public policy field.

The founder of the Institute Morton Blackwell opens all his schools by sharing what he calls the "Sir Galahad Theory" ... which states that I will win because I am right. Akin to Mel reading Charlottetown Accord, concluding that it was deeply flawed and then sitting at home safe in the knowledge that it would be defeated.

Of course being secure in the knowledge you are correct about something does not mean you will win. So the entire premise of the Leadership Institute is that "victory is determined by the number and the *effectiveness* of the activists on each side."

The CTF was born out of the ashes of the GST debate in the late 1980s [#12]

It was actually a great period of time. Status quo was being disrupted. Thatcher and Reagan challenging the role of governments, embolden protestors stood in front of tanks in Tiananmen Square, the Berlin Wall came down, Nelson Mandela released from prison. At home new political parties emerged, Bloc in Quebec, Reform in the West ... each challenging old ways and old establishments ... each representing new expression. Researching my book I found, and was reminded, our founders weren't alone in trying to get a tax protest group off the ground in the late 80s. There were dozens of efforts.

In the end the GST was implemented -- albeit at a rate lower rate than first proposed -- but nonetheless implemented.

Now everyone could have gone home and reverted to armchair cynicism. Fortunately, many, notably our founders took the more reflective view that simply "reacting" to government policies through protest or otherwise was not going to change anything. If taxpayer advocacy was actually going to have an impact, it needed to be organized, needed to be professionalized, needed to be "effective." It needed to be in a position to be proactive rather than reactive.

Morton Blackwell would say "you owe it to your philosophy to learn how to win." Kevin Avram might go further and say "you have a responsibility to learn how to win."

So after the GST protests a group of folks got organized and founded a taxpayer advocacy organization in 1990 ... a non-partisan watchdog that would mobilize citizens against the inertia of big government.

Fast forward five years and now the federal government is in a full-blown deficit crisis and the solution being put forward was -- shocking -- a slew of new taxes including a "temporary deficit reduction surtax" (somebody had a sense of humor).

But unlike reaction to the GST, taxpayers were in a far better position to make their voices heard *before* any decisions were made. We built a huge National Debt Clock [#13] that showed per second overspending, we raised donations and hired full-time spokespeople who were committed and articulate, we dispatched them throughout the country, we organized a series of cross country rallies attended by thousands [#14], and we gathered a quarter million signatures on a petition demanding the budget be balanced through spending cuts and NO TAX INCREASES. That petition was delivered to Paul Martin's desk before his 1995 budget was tabled.

In the end, the government opted for deep spending cuts and avoided almost all the proposed tax increases. The 95 and 96 federal budgets were the most taxpayer friendly federal budgets in my lifetime. Hands down. Within three years the budget was balanced federally and in every province across the country.

This is when Mel Smith was drafting model balanced budget/taxpayer protection legislation and working with us to build popular support for its implementation.

By 2000 taxes were coming down because government's had their fiscal houses in order and were in a position to do so. Canada led growth in the G7 for much of the first decade of the new century.

Now ... I'm careful to note it wasn't just us ... I don't want to exaggerate claims ... economic imperatives, more movement infrastructure like think tanks, friendly media commentators and writers ... and also, people were engaged – willing to write a letter, pick up the phone, attend a meeting.

One really important observation is that most successful public policy campaigns – and I'm talking about the big ones -- are crystal clear in their objective. Seldom do you remember a campaign that was nuanced in its message: No More Taxes, "Fight Against Corruption," No TransLink Tax [#15].

Of watered-down compromise Margaret Thatcher once said: "the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies. So it is something in which no one believes and to which no one objects." I wouldn't agree with that sentiment in all cases, but when it comes to mobilizing people to move public policy it is absolutely bang on.

Truthfully, in many ways, a successful campaign is like picking a fight. Fights galvanize, fights are black and white, fights instill passion. They motivate and mobilize people to take action because they have measureable and specific outcomes.

When Mel took on the Charlottetown Accord he was picking a fight with the establishment. When Jordan Bateman took on the NO side of the TransLink Tax referendum he was picking a fight with 19 of 22 mayors in Metro Vancouver, the Vancouver Board of Trade, the BC Chamber of Commerce, the BC Federation of Labour, 150 organizations including environmental behemoths David Suzuki Foundation and Greenpeace, business magnate Jimmy Pattison both

the Liberal government and the Opposition NDP. Oh, and a \$7-million budget vs. his budget of \$40,000.

But the YES side still loss ... they had everyone but the people ... which is our next point

3. People Move Lawmakers

[#16] The objective of Anna Hazare's campaign was to pass an anti-corruption law. But what was his *strategy* to achieve that?

Overwhelming public support that couldn't be ignored.

When Mel Smith was writing model balanced budget/taxpayer protection laws ... variations of his work were introduced by four different political parties: PC, NDP, Parti Quebecois and Liberal.

Why was that?

Because it didn't matter what political party you were from. Politicians, of every stripe, understood at the time that there was *overwhelming public support* to place some limits around politicians' ability to tax, borrow and spend.

Former Liberal Premier of Ontario Dalton McGuinty – at one time -- called TP laws ... “the price of admission to government.”

Let me give you a very recent example of a campaign here in BC.

We regularly survey our supporters in BC to identify priorities ... elimination of the MSP tax has always been a top response.

Every year since 2012 Jordan would go into his annual meeting with the finance minister and make the case against the tax: unfair, expensive to collect, an unnecessary burden on BC taxpayers and small businesses. It also obfuscated the province's true income tax picture. He would write columns and do media interviews to draw wider a wider audience. And every year the government would raise the tax and defend it on various grounds.

But at the same time we kept organizing a growing number of supporters on this issue to make their voices heard and in particular to participate in pre-budget consultation submissions. We had success in doing this to avoid increases in the carbon tax and we were now doing the same on the MSP tax.

Well lo and behold the government announced in its budget a few weeks ago February 21st the MSP tax would be immediately cut in half as a first step in eliminating it completely. At one billion dollars or \$900 a year per household, it's the single largest tax break in British Columbia since 2007 [#17].

Vancouver Sun columnist Vaughn Palmer wrote that the finance minister acknowledged the CTF's campaign had been effective.

Not because Jordan himself was necessarily convincing anyone, but because many supporters, taking action, moved public policy.

We meet with politicians but it's NEVER our focus. Our focus is always on organizing and mobilizing large numbers of people to impact change. It matters more to lawmakers when they hear from their constituents than it does hearing from an interest group.

Now obviously this isn't the only way to move public policy. Unions, corporations, special interests walk into minister's offices and can have huge influence. Bombardier and auto makers come to mind ...

External factors can have a huge impact too ... natural disasters, financial crisis, decisions handed down by courts.

Moving public policy is also caught up in "the system" ... I talked off the top about how Mel Smith had limitations as a civil servant. Lawmakers also have limitations: constituent groups to pacify, election promises to keep (sometimes), the constraint of party discipline, balancing interests and striking compromises, the imperatives of re-election and mitigating scandals.

Public policy is fluid and dynamic ... the reality is that often times things don't line up the way you want them too. The reality is that sometimes the other side is having success and you're not.

But it's also true that times and dynamics change and while politicians and governments come and go ... citizens and voters remain.

Morton Blackwell has another quote "initiative passes to those who are best prepared"

To the extent you are focused on engaging and building with the public you have the best chance of long term success and even crossing party lines when the opportunity arises.

4. It's a Long Ball Game

[#18] When I introduced Anna Hazare's campaign I talked about a timeframe of two years, but I suspect the truth is far different than that. My understanding is that the man has been fighting to stem corruption for many many years.

[#19] The suffragette movement began in the mid 19th century ... yet it took upwards of 60 years until that the first province granted woman the vote in 1916. But within 7 years of 1916 the federal government and every province but one had extended the franchise to woman.

To use the Malcolm Gladwell term ... movements reach a "tipping point" and quickly gain momentum akin to snowball in March.

Another example to the south of us ... many may not be aware but for the first 125 years after its constitution was ratified, the United States did not elect its senators. After decades of discussion and proposals, Oregon became the first state to elect its Senators in 1908 followed

by Nebraska and 10 others “tipped” in short succession. By 1914 a constitutional amendment required every state send its senators to Washington via popular vote.

We’ve had a few campaigns that moved quickly but generally change seldom occurs overnight ... honestly, when I started working for CTF in early 90s I sincerely believed I’d never live to see a balanced budget. We used to say we permanently stuck in the 25th year of the government’s five year balanced budget plan.

We had tremendous success starting in the early 90s calculating the gold-plated pensions of provincial politicians and mobilizing campaigns to get them reformed. The federal politicians were a intransigent bunch. [#20] Despite the fact taxpayers were shelling out \$23 for every \$1 contributed by an MP to their pension plan, it took 22 years before legislation was passed in 2013 that would gradually bring that ratio down to a more acceptable \$1.62 to \$1. But we did get there after marshalling a tremendous amount of public pressure and I doubt we’ll ever go back. But who knows ...

My good friend John Williamson, who served as our national spokesman for many years was very fond of the saying “no defeat is permanent no victory is everlasting.” [#21] And how true it is.

In the 2008 federal election every party leader in the debate committed uncategorically to balancing the federal budget every year should they prime minister. In 2015, two of the three main party leaders committed to that same policy and the third committed to small and “temporary” deficits.

Today, we have a federal government running massive deficits with no desire, interest or plan to balance the budget and I have no doubt they would be re-elected tomorrow if an election were held. “No victory is everlasting” ...

Even when you win you don’t always win ... TransLink looks for different revenues sources, a variation of the MSP tax may be reinstated after the next election cycle and Anna Hazare still fights corruption which adopts new forms and practices. It’s a long ball game but it’s also a never ending ball game.

5. Adapt to Changes

[#21] One of the things I love about the Hazare campaign is the juxtaposition of an 80 year old man leading the world’s largest digital campaign. Now obviously he has people around him, but nonetheless he is a leader of movement that asked the right questions sought new and innovative way to mobilize larger numbers of people different from what he had done in the past.

It’s hard to believe how technology has changed ... just in my time doing the work I do.

I've been around long enough to witness the evolution of our weekly media commentaries being dropped in the mailbox once a week, to being faxed once a week, to being e-mailed once a week.

I've been part of the financial agony as to whether we could afford to mail 25,000 letters or just send 10,000 letters. Today, e-mailing one person is exactly the same price as e-mailing 100,000 people. Marginal costs is 0. We paid rent to fill space with filing cabinets that today fit onto a thumb drive, taking up little more space than the guitar pick in my pocket. Hundreds a dollars each month spent on long distance phone charges that are today conducted via video conference at zero cost.

In communicating, gone are the media "gatekeepers" that controlled what we watched, read and listened to. Any citizen with access to the internet or carrying a smart phone is empowered in ways unimaginable in the 1980s.

The casual observer pays little attention, but to the practitioner the changes have been nothing short of revolutionary.

[22] Sociologist Barry Wellman put it: "an Internet year is like a dog year, changing approximately seven times faster than normal human time."

It has completely changed not only "how" we organize campaigns, it's changed how we organize ourselves.

If groups like ours didn't wrestle with adopting to change I would not be standing here today.

A decade ago "joining" the CTF was a financial transaction. Today, it costs nothing to join. Instead of annual "membership" we rely on modest donations to support topical, issue-specific campaigns and calls to action – like TransLink and MSP tax. We rely on data and analytics to mobilize in ever more efficient ways.

Part of that efficiency is timeliness. A much nosier world has shortened attention spans. So while you can't plan how long a particular effort may or may not reach a tipping point, you can certainly plan to be present when something is topical.

When we first learned in 2010 that child serial killer Clifford Olson would soon be eligible to collect OAS and GIS (support payments for seniors) our federal director at the time Kevin Gaudet had a petition and Action Update to our supporters within hours.

[#22] Overnight, 25,000 people (of an eventual 45,000 in 10 days) signed our online petition demanding a federal law to revoke OAS and GIS payments for prison lifers. Two weeks later we delivered that petition offline. From the time we issued that Action Update to the time a federal law was passed, a mere seven months had elapsed. Only pay raises would move faster through Parliament.

The fundamentals do not change. You still need good writers and communicators, hard working philosophically committed and passionate people. But *how* we organize, communicate, fundraise and mobilize people has changed dramatically.

I have had more than one conversation over the years with people my age or older who have tremendous passion about an issue they wish to advance. But as the conversation goes along I'm told "ahhh ... we're not going to bother with Facebook." Of course, why bother having a conversation with 20 million Canadians, 14 million of who go on it every single day.

If you want to engage and have a conversation with people you go to where they are ... 25 years ago they were somewhere else, but today they're on Facebook. It's not different that Anna Hazare reaching people through mobile instead of mailing letters.

What would Mel say about all the changes that have taken place/social media/Facebook ...

Remember, we have a responsibility to learn how to win. Adapting to change is as much a part of successfully moving policy change as anything else I've talked about.

I'm going to wrap-up my prepared comments by sharing a few pieces of correspondence from my in-box related to my work with World Taxpayers Association. The first one is from Gobinda Sharma who heads the Nepalese Taxpayers Welfare Society [#23]. The other is from Frank BeckO from the Ghana Taxpayers Alliance [#24].

One thing my international work has done is reinforce the relative good fortune we have in Canada that many others do not share. Myself and Jordan (and I suspect Mel too although we never talked about it) have experienced some pretty nasty hate mail and even some threats from people who disagreed with us. But I don't believe any of us ever felt persecuted or thought we would be assaulted or jailed for expressing our convictions.

But people like Sharma and BeckO have ... Hazare has done several stints in prison. These people and many others like them around the world face *real* obstacles in freely expressing their convictions.

It's true that not everyone is going to be motivated to take up the cause of public policy advocacy ... I do believe Margaret Mead was correct when she said "never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

But I also believe there is far too much complacency and taking for granted of our relatively good economic prosperity and the relative freedom we have in our country to shape our destinies.

The truth is, our biggest battle is not with any of the issues I talked about tonight. Our biggest battle is against apathy.

To no one is this message more important than to millennials [25]. Indifference to public policy in the decades before you, will not be an option. You're prosperity depends in a very real way to informing and equipping yourselves to change the direction the country is headed in.

So in that spirit, let us take inspiration from the man for whom we gather in honour of tonight [26]. Mel Smith was someone who took his responsibility as a citizen seriously and expressed his convictions with enthusiasm and vigor. In so doing he had tremendous success in advancing those convictions. May we long recognize and celebrate his example.

Thank-you [27].