

**An Interview with a Philosopher-King,
or at least a Philosopher/School Board Member**

(As near as I can recall, this interview was conducted by a fellow philosopher in 1997 to use in the Philosophy Department's newsletter for alumni. That accounts for the allusions to Plato's Philosopher-King.)

Q: I'll begin with some facts about your academic and political career. If you could help me get things straight, I'd appreciate it. Arrived at Tech when, etc.

Born in Cleveland, Ohio. Majored in philosophy at College of William and Mary, 1976. I had planned to go to law school originally, but midway through college decided I'd rather be a philosophy prof. Ph.D. from UCLA in 1983. Taught for 2 years at U.C. San Diego. Came to VA Tech in 1985. Got tenure in 1991.

Q: You ran once and lost, and ran again in 1995 and won.

In June 1994 I first applied to be on the school board. At that point school boards in Virginia were still appointed (by the local governing body--in this case the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors). They did not choose me from among the 5 applicants from District F. Then I again applied in June 1995 for a special position on the school board representing the Town of Blacksburg. Again I was not chosen. Since the board of supervisors is a very conservative group, I took these 2 rejections as a badge of honor! The first election for school boards in this county took place in November 1995. I ran in my district against the incumbent, who was the person who had been appointed in June 1994. I beat him by a resounding 2-to-1 margin! I hadn't looked forward to campaigning, since I am no extrovert--but I ended up enjoying that after all. I went to over 700 houses door-to-door, and raised nearly \$3000!

Q: Since taking office the main problems facing the School Board have been....

Working out how to deal with the Board of Supervisors in budget negotiations, since they hold our purse-strings--we have no taxing authority; deciding how to deal with the over-crowded and aging Middle School in Blacksburg; and working on how to ensure that all students are academically challenged at an appropriate level, regardless of their abilities.

Q: What led you to pursue elected office as a School Board Member?

The Platonic desire not to be rule by inferiors. If a better candidate came out, I wouldn't mind stepping aside. Also, the desire to avoid having single-issue representatives on the school board.

Q: How would you compare the sort of discussions you have with your constituents and those you have with your students at Virginia Tech?

As a teacher I have a certain conventional “authority”--a supposition that I pretty much know what I’m talking about. With constituents I’m not really an authority figure. And indeed, many of my constituents know more than I do about the workings of the school system. In school board meetings I have to rely a lot on my ability to think on my feet (or rather, on my seat!). In class I think a lot on my feet, but it is in territory that I feel quite familiar with.

Q: How in general do you view the relationship between philosophy and politics?

Philosophy tends to get us thinking in terms of ideals and general solutions; politics has gotten me thinking more in terms of “good enough” resolutions for concrete situations. However, the training I have, from philosophy, to be able to analyze a situation, separate the relevant from the irrelevant factors, and assess the pros and cons, has been invaluable. I’ve tried to use that to move beyond the slogan/sound-bite debates.

Q: What is the most important thing you’ve learned from your political career?

The importance of being able to find common ground (though I haven’t been terribly successful at that) and the willingness to negotiate and compromise. The “best” can certainly be the enemy of the “good”. I’ve also learned how difficult it is to move beyond slogan/sound-bite debates: Despite my best attempts, the debate about what to do concerning the over-crowded, aging Middle school was, in my opinion, driven by 2 simplistic slogans: “Keep the school downtown” and “Don’t tear down a perfectly good building”. Thus we will be renovating and expanding the Middle school, rather than building a new facility from scratch.

Q: What do you see as the greatest problem facing the American political system as it exists today, whether at the local or national level? Any suggestions for improving the way our political system works?

I don’t know about the national level, but at the local level the most important problem is how to get individuals to become informed and active in expressing opinions and lobbying their representatives. If we aren’t going to have direct democracy like the Athenians, at least our representative democracy has to be more than the mere formality that it often is. I’ve tried to raise local awareness and involvement in school issues by creating an e-mail mailing list in which I explain current issues, express my view about them, and solicit input. (The beauty of this is that I incur no printing or mailing costs!) I send out information about once or twice a month to a list of over 400 people in my district and around the county. It is very easy for people to respond just by pulling down the “reply” setting on their e-mail. This list, which has been going for about 10 months now, has gotten covered by American Airlines magazine, a European News Service, the Chronicle of Higher Education, and is being studied by some Blacksburg Electronic Village researchers. This obviously does not reach all of my constituents, but in a hi-tech district like mine, that includes many VA Tech families, it reaches a lot--perhaps 10%. I doubt there are many other representatives who are so closely in touch with so many well-informed constituents.

Q: *Has your political career led you to any new thoughts about the anti-democratic philosophical utopia that Plato developed in the Republic?*

It has given me an appreciation for the legitimacy of alternative points of view. The ruled won't be friends with the rulers if they can't feel that their opinions have been heard and weighed, even if not accepted.

Q: *Do you see yourself running for higher political offices in the future?*

The representative to the Board of Supervisors in my district, Mary Biggs, is a good friend and I have no desire to replace her. Beyond that, offices such as the VA legislature are only part time positions that require you to be out of town for significant chunks of time, which wouldn't fit well with my job. Beyond that level, to be a successful politician you have to really WANT to be a politician, and I don't. And my Platonic motive is not likely to kick in, since I really like and respect my representatives, such as Shuler, Marye, and Boucher. So you're not likely to see me running for philosopher-king.