

State of Washington
NORTHWEST POWER PLANNING COUNCIL

An Uncertain Parting

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(remarks to the Council, Tacoma, 13 November 1987)

Early in his efforts to equip me with social graces (efforts thus far unavailing, he says) my father-in-law taught me to play dominoes. He described the attractions of the game as follows: winning shows one's skill; losing, on the other hand, is bad luck. As I think back over my brief career in public life, these are likewise among the pleasures and consolations of politics.

Perhaps it is significant, then, that the Northwest Power Planning Council is committed to changing just these aspects of public policy in electric power and anadromous fish. We've done this by championing the notion that uncertainty is of strategic importance in economic and natural resource management. To acknowledge uncertainty is to recognize that success may be a matter of luck, and to recognize that failure can often be managed better than it is. While no one disagrees that uncertainty is real and large, the idea that that fact in itself should produce changes in behavior remains uncomfortable -- an alien thought after six years of articulation and skirmish.

Uncertainty is unwelcome in electricity. Yet it is critical to the very idea of public power, of power produced through the stewardship of public capital. For the difference between socialism and the Federal Columbia River Power System lies not in the ownership of the means of production, but rather in its guiding assumptions. Chief among those is that the state exists to serve its citizen-ratepayers, not vice versa. Accordingly, the uncertain demand for power -- the surplus of today and the specter of shortages that haunted the region a decade ago -- that uncertain demand is the price we pay for economic freedom.

Uncertainty is equally foreign to fish management, where decades of strife over the fair division of the fish runs has been thwarted by their dwindling abundance. Now to be told that the Council is skeptical of the fish managers' judgment, that we insist upon a disciplined, experimental approach to rebuilding sustainable populations of salmon and steelhead -- this too is an unwelcome message.

Yet the uncertainties of economy and biology are real. Economic freedom and genetic diversity are too precious and too fragile for the straitjacket of simplistic solutions. So the challenge of management cannot be shirked: freedom is the recognition of necessity.

Uncertainty actually does have a clear meaning for managers: learning from experience is essential. This is a troublesome idea, for it demands a thoughtful flexibility that

bureaucracies and single-minded interest groups alike find problematic. Like physicians faced with uncured disease, those responsible for the Columbia River and its resources are bound to do what they can when they can. But they must also have the fortitude to balance the needs of today against the possibilities of finding better answers for tomorrow.

That balance is central to the Council's duty. We make investments: cost-effective investments in conservation and power production, equitable and sustainable investments in fish and wildlife mitigation. Investment is the search for optimal long-run results despite the frustrations of uncertainty and the pressures of near-term consumption. Investment requires steadiness of purpose, especially when faced with conflict or disappointing short-run returns. In power matters, the Council will need to reconsider the surcharge, the one tool we have to encourage cost-effective conservation -- a blunt, awkward tool, but a tool that can work. In fish and wildlife, the Council is beginning to see how much it takes to manage adaptively, to keep pressing for sound experimentation so that the inevitable disappointments in fish enhancement can be turned into opportunities to learn what can work.

All this means, of course, that it is no longer sensible to blame shortfalls and failures on bad luck. Indeed, blame isn't the point: failures in our business are inescapable. Real success lies in managing well while learning to manage better. That will take cool heads, analysis, and a self-confident approach to the open decision making we have pioneered.

Ours is the work of many hands -- our own, Bonneville's, and those of the fish and wildlife managers, and others including the public. This region's heritage is one of joint action, of fates linked for better and worse. At home I have often said that, since Washington is the largest state, what is good for the region is good for Washington too. Here, I remind you that the converse is often true as well; and more generally, that the Council's best work is to discover and to forge consensus that is truly in the shared interest of the region as a whole.

Two regional interests are central, in my opinion:

- The first is to implement a least-cost regional resource portfolio. I am pleased and heartened by the recent good news on the Model Conservation Standards, the fruit of hard work by several colleagues at this table. The region needs now to understand that the surplus is not a single quantity, but rather a supply of power whose quantity and quality varies with price. The Council helped to discover the surplus in 1982; it is now time for the region to see that power as a marketing opportunity, and we should help.
- The second challenge is to realize the potential of adaptive management. Our attempt to double the salmon

and steelhead of the Columbia River Basin encounters a basic complication: the Columbia is neither the wilderness the Indians knew, nor the factory the power system has tried to make it. We cannot preserve the wilderness -- it's already gone. The magnitude of its loss impels us to act boldly. Yet we cannot use simple rules like cost-effectiveness or even doubling the runs to manage the river that remains. The complexity of our mandate, which the Northwest Power Act delicately calls "equitable treatment," has an important corollary: we do not know precisely how to salvage this no-longer-pristine community; that's why learning is so important.

The task of the Council, I believe, is to protect and to enhance the possibilities of rational governance in two turbulent, contentious arenas. The Northwest asks a lot of its rivers, economically, biologically and socially; the resources have been stretched to and sometimes beyond the breaking point. To govern rationally in such a setting demands analysis but also vision, flexibility but also courage.

To those who observe us, the surprise is that we have done as well as we have. With only a few exceptions, the Council has been a force for good in its first six years. It's been a singular privilege to be part of such an effort. I have not always agreed with my fellow Council members. But I will say you have given me the chance to make my case. In an uncertain world I thank you for that measure of respect.

I want also to say a word to my other constant companions these last four years, the staff and the so-called "public" that attends these meetings. I realized not long ago that E.B. White's classic novel for children, Charlotte's Web, can be read as a parable of decision making bodies. You will recall that Charlotte is a grey spider who befriends a hapless pig named Wilbur. Wilbur is going to be turned into bacon at summer's end, but Charlotte decides to save him. She weaves a giant web in the doorway of the barn, and writes in the middle the words "Some Pig." This creates a sensation for miles around, Wilbur goes to the county fair in triumph -- and is spared.

I had always wondered why it was Wilbur and not Charlotte who got all the credit for being so extraordinary. When I was appointed to the Council I found out that this happened in other places than children's storybooks. Staff, you're the best friend a poor pig ever had.

But the labors of even brilliant spiders cannot accomplish much without those who come to the fair, who constitute as much as they represent public opinion. Journalists and interest-group representatives are too often called upon to be the midwives of democracy. My impression is that those who follow the Council have served that larger task well in the pursuit of their more limited charters; we count you among our blessings -- if sometimes grudgingly.

I leave knowing that much -- most -- remains undone. I look at the opportunities ahead wistfully, with a touch of jealousy. And I shall think of the Council each time I assign a paper or set an examination; in my own corner of the world, my authority is, however briefly and insincerely, at least acknowledged without question.

In politics as in dominoes, colleagues, were you not so skilled it would be an idle gesture to wish you good luck. Thankfully, it isn't; so I do.