

IN TRIBUTE TO TREBING

TPUG lost probably its most prominent member last August when Harry Trebing passed away. While trite to say, Professor Trebing really was a giant in our field as both academic and practitioner – and friend to many of us who labor in the public utility vineyard. If Fred Kahn was “the dean of public utility regulation” in recent decades, Harry Trebing held that standing before him. Harry taught, wrote, and published during the halcyon years of public utility regulation when government was favorably (and deservedly) viewed as a force for good in the aftermath of WW II and when social intervention in the economy was understood to be required for a more decent society.

His interests spanned both public utility and transportation economics, writing in the days before the separation of these fields became more distinct. Still more broadly Harry was at home as well in antitrust and industrial organization economics and contributed importantly to the literature in these fields. He consistently advanced institutional economics as more explanatory of economic systems, even as the neoclassical approach triumphed in policy applications in the late 1980's. Trebing was a powerful force in countering the over-claiming of the benefits of trusting to market competition and the under-acknowledgement of the demonstrated benefits of traditional utility regulation. He knew that while selective deregulation could work in particular instances, it was not true that workable competition was lurking under every unturned regulatory stone if only regulators would turn them over and get out of the way. He cautioned that even where market competition was reasonably effective in a utility field, it was not likely to remain that way because the general tendency is toward concentration of economic power and not away from it. In some sense, the tasks of public utility commissions needed to behave as mini-FTC's to look after this.

The founding and directing of the Michigan State University Institute of Public Utilities under the imprimatur of the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners was one of Dr. Trebing's great and long lasting contributions to the social oversight of public utilities here and abroad. Literally thousands of public utility commission staff and commissioners have attended the annual multi-week courses at MSU to learn from experts in regulation – economics, law, accounting, policy and practice. The public has benefitted enormously from helping even the match between the regulator and the industries they oversee. I was always pleased to be one of the regular presenters at these conferences beginning in the early 1970's when I was a public utility research specialist at the Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress. To be one of the “warriors in the public interest” (as Harry described us) along with Melody, Shepherd, Irwin, Gabel, Schwartz, Samuels, and others was a badge of honor. And surely no one's library of public utility writings is complete without a shelf of the series of his MSU Institute that covered virtually all current (and historical) issues comprising the field. Along the way when I became founding director of the National Regulatory Research Institute at Ohio State University (1978-1998) Harry and I teamed to usefully serve the NARUC with an amicable division of labor – he with a training and education function and I with a policy research role. It was, I believe an especially fruitful and productive collaboration for the clientele.

There was another interest that we shared and often conferred about – antique automobiles. While I featured Studebakers, Harry collected mainly early Dodge Brothers cars and served as historian to his local Michigan old cars club. He never seemed to actually complete a restoration (though his son is now restoring the 1926 Dodge sedan in his memory), but the process and prospects occupied a good deal of his attention and was the basis of many of our pleasant non-public utility conversations. For all of this, however, what really explained our friendship and bound us together these fifty years was the quest for fair-minded but stringent regulation of these crucial infrastructure industries in pursuit of outcomes clearly in the public interest (read, a tilt toward ratepayers).

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