

UMR-MEC Conference on Energy / UMR-DNR Conference on Energy

12 Oct 1978

LUNCHEON SPEAKER: Can Government Be Creative

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Recommended Citation

Slavin, Alberta C., "LUNCHEON SPEAKER: Can Government Be Creative" (1978). *UMR-MEC Conference on Energy / UMR-DNR Conference on Energy*. 358, pp. 125-127.

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CAN GOVERNMENT BE CREATIVE

Ms. Alberta C. Slavin
Commissioner of the
Missouri Public Service Commission

"Genius is the inspired use of information." That's what the Xerox commercial says. It will take the collective genius to be found in this room and in the entire nation put to inspired use all of the energy information we have. Why? Because one of the most formidable barriers to the inspired application of information is regulation and existing institutions.

I used to be an outsider trying to make institutions more responsive to human needs. Now I am an outsider on the inside trying to make these same institutions responsive to human needs. When I was an outsider on the outside, I thought perhaps the changes could be made more quickly from the inside. Now that I am an outsider on the inside, I am experiencing the frustrations of being a bonafied bureaucrat in a system which is slow to change.

Institutions are reactive rather than creative. Too often creativity must come from without. We can all cite instances of creative leadership which promised to bring new programs, new directions, new institutions, to rid us of the old, the stale, the tired, only to discover that when this fresh approach so welcomed by people became a part of the institutional process it lost its freshness, its eagerness, its creativity.

Institutions are like sponges. They engulf the new participants with the everyday activities, the trivia, the processes, and the

minutia which are a part of the institution even though the faces change.

And those who promised reform, freshness, and change are swept along by those processes convinced they must understand them fully before they can deliver the promised changes. Thus, far too often the reformer is swallowed up by the institution or finds that it takes much longer than expected to move forward.

"But I have my guard up," I say. "I'm not going to be swallowed by the institution. I am going to shape the institution so that it serves the purpose for which it is intended."

In my case, I am a regulator. I come from the people. I know their problems. I dreamed of forging a program which would bring renewed confidence to regulation in Missouri. People would know they had the voice of an outsider on the inside. But with each passing day I look at the bureaucratic clock on the wall and ask what I have accomplished.

Can an agency which is principally reactive be creative? I fear not unless goals are formulated and objectives articulated and then the programs implemented. Leadership - the will to act, to move, to give direction - is also vital to success. Creativity without program and leadership falls prey to the institutional and bureaucratic jungle which is its environment.

And there must be courage to move in a progressive direction even if mistakes are made. Indecision and uncertainty create aimlessness and boredom, and the excitement of charting a positive course is lost. The uncertainty that surrounds the regulatory climate in Missouri today is far worse than a program that is grounded on goals and objectives and based on a philosophy known to the utilities, the investment community and the public.

And, it is uncertainty that is gripping this great nation in its attempt to resolve its energy problems. Although the public responded positively and patriotically as the first shock wave of "Energy Crisis" swept over the land, that mood didn't last long. Driving less, turning off Christmas tree lights, turning down thermostats, and donning more layers of clothing was quickly replaced with cries of "Hoax!" "Contrived!" "A shortage engineered for the profit of the money-grubbing oil companies." "Conserve? Don't be stupid. I used less, and my reward was higher prices."

That anger has dissipated, but a deep-seated residue of distrust remains. Why? Just keep your eye on Washington. On April 20, 1977, President Carter launched his national energy policy. He went to the American public with his message. He equated our situation with "the moral equivalent of War." His was an ambitious program--complicated legislation based on a cornerstone of conservation.

"But what about supply?" went up the cry from industry. "The President has ignored supply!" And in the hue and cry that followed, who could hear those voices responding that conservation was our most readily available and cheapest source of supply in a country where waste was the watchword of energy consumption?

For a year and a half the American public has been treated to a spectacle of price wrangling between the special interests that dominate the Congress. For months, the energy legislation has been held hostage to the

natural gas position of the legislation. Finally, perhaps from sheer fatigue or desperation, a majority of Senators--somewhat sheep-faced--have agreed to support the legislation on the grounds that "it is better than none."

Figures on its impact to consumers have been bandied back and forth with most efforts directed toward minimizing its inflationary effect. But, don't be hornswoggled. The increase allowed in the legislation will pass right through to you. Pass go. Pay \$200 -- that's the monopoly way. And this right on the heels of two major wholesale price increases over two of the coldest and most severe winters in recent memory. People are still paying off last winter's bills--and thousands are without service as they struggle to play catchup before the first frost. With fear in their hearts, they face another boost in their heating bills as predictions abound for another bitter winter based on sun spots and the woolly caterpillar.

Where do they turn? Would you believe nowhere? The Senate, in twenty months of wrangling over how much to increase the price of natural gas devoted nary a thought to developing a program to help people who would be wiped out by their action.

"What about the Crisis Intervention program of last year?" you say. Sorry--no appropriation for 1979-80. Last spring the CAP agencies in Missouri distributed ten million dollars through maximum grants of \$250 in six weeks time to 33,000 needy households in Missouri. It is better than nothing, but it doesn't go very far if you face a gas bill of over \$200 and an income of \$168 for one month.

Aha! "But you're a regulator. You're on the inside. Do something. Eliminate the pass-through--those increases in the price of natural gas from the wholesaler to the retailer which are automatically passed through to the consumer." Let's face reality. The Commission would be buried by an avalanche of gas rate increase cases if such action were taken

"Well, redesign the rates then," you say. The Public Service Commission has eight major rate design cases in the hopper. Even if this Commission was of a mind to redesign rates with a social welfare component, the first case is not even scheduled to be heard until February of 1979. The company? Union Electric. Even the future of that case is cloudy because of the lawsuit filed by Union Electric and 15 of their largest industrial customers to remove me for bias and prejudice. And irony of ironies, as the judicial and regulatory process ambles slowly and fitfully forward, my clock, my bureaucratic clock, is running out.

So--what of my hopes and dreams to accomplish something as an outsider on the inside? I still have those dreams as I furtively glance at the clock. I want a meaningful energy conservation program that inspires confidence in the regulatory process in the minds and hearts of consumers in this state. I want to help you bring to fruition the creative ideas you are presenting here in Rolla this week. But I am impatient. If I can't serve my dream or yours as an outsider on the inside, I must move on.

Genius--The inspired use of information.

Yes, this country--this state--needs genius in its institutions of government. It is not enough to have genius at work in our academic institutions. For many years I have had posted in a prominent position in my home the phrase, "Just thinking doesn't count!"

We must work together to translate the creative genius represented in this room today into the energy programs of tomorrow. Otherwise, the ideas you spawned may wither and die under the sheer weight of bureaucracy which reacts rather than creates and which follows rather than leads.



REMARKS

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