

# PUBLIC POLICY PERSPECTIVES

*Paul C. Johnson*  
*Former Editorial Director-Vice President*  
*Prairie Farmer*

It would be futile for me to comment extensively on the papers given in this symposium. They were presented by competent “Young Turks” in policy education who have devised sophisticated methods and tested them, and are therefore in a good position to say what will be effective with today’s extension audiences.

I am a bit dizzy from listening to this display of methodology, and I can only express my admiration for the advances that are being made.

I have always thought of economics and its public policy aspects as a long, hard battle against economic illiteracy. This is frankly an old-fashioned view, but it is on the whole valid. We have just been exposed to economic illiteracy of horrendous proportions at all levels in the current bout with price controls and rising food prices.

At the same time, the situation is fluid as I have never seen it before. Liberal economists have turned conservative, and classical economists have begun to sound liberal. Farmers who have gone from extreme protectionism to free trade philosophy in my lifetime know a lot more about the facts of economics than they are willing to say. Many are putting good economics aside in favor of pushing their class interests. Politicians who know better are taking all kinds of silly postures to please the consumer. The “economics” in what we have called home economics through the years is practically nonexistent, so Ms. Consumer is the most illiterate of all in this field. Nevertheless, she is somebody to be reckoned with. This may, indeed, be our biggest challenge for the future.

Preaching the laws of economics is not as fruitful as in the past. Perhaps we should pay more attention to the facts of life as revealed in economics. The cow must be reconnected to the milk bottle in the human mind. We have a whole new ball game tied to consciousness of shortages instead of abundance-taken-for-granted, as has been the case for more than a generation.

I was impressed by Barry Flinchbaugh’s suggestion that the speaker go to the meeting early and do some listening before his

presentation. I have discovered whenever I did that I seldom gave the speech I had prepared.

Even the young educator is inclined to make the mistake of trying to play in the wrong ball park. We older men are almost certain to make that mistake unless we do our homework thoroughly—and home in this case is not back on the campus.

I believe we have become too fond of talking about power structures and decision makers. Most power structures operate by default because too many of the constituency are too lazy or too uninformed to take a hand. Rather than become frozen to current power structures, we might well overturn a few. As a country editor I found out long ago that most power structures are quite fragile.

And when it comes to decision makers, we often make the same mistake. Decision makers are always in the process of going that-a-way. I am sure economists, who have been among the elite of male chauvinists, have vastly underestimated the new breed of female decision makers. Are they new? They may have been there all along.

In conclusion, let me give you my reasons for thinking that this is a good time for an agricultural economist to be alive. You have exciting work ahead.

1. The overcapacity or surplus syndrome we have worked under and which has somewhat paralyzed our thinking over the years has been dispelled. We may have occasional gluts in the future, but never again will we think they are permanent and paralyzing.

2. University faculties and programs have been shaken up but good in recent years. They are beginning to function in new patterns which may be more appropriate to our times.

3. The people we work with have also been shaken up, but not defeated. While they may be closing ranks here and there to defend their own real or imagined interests, they are more willing to listen than they have been any time before in my lifetime.

People may be troubled with blind spots and various brands of illiteracy, but they are always smarter than you think and quite capable of dealing with problems as soon as they are made manageable.

Remember the old adage: "A houn' dog don't enjoy no huntin' he ain't in on."



PART III

*Land Use Policy*

