

# The Wit and Humour *of* Political Science

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## INTRODUCTION

Although, as was long ago observed, “The trouble with political jokes is they usually get elected” (Lukes and Galnoor 1986), there is a rich vein of humour pertaining to politics. Political scientists, however, are not normally counted among its authors. As Ross Baker, himself a political scientist, has commented sarcastically, “Among the legendary thin volumes such as *Ethics for Used-Car Dealers* or *Love Sonnets for Bureaucrats*, one would invariably find a copy of *The Wit and Humour of Political Science*” (1979, 338). Even so, notwithstanding political science’s reputation as a field of study only slightly less dismal than economics<sup>1</sup>, many political scientists—well, some, or at any rate, a few—do not fit the stereotype of grim, humourless curmudgeons.<sup>2</sup>

The humorous literature in political science, much of it clever, some of it even hilarious to a knowledgeable reader, is scattered in books as well as journals. Virtually all of it is invisible today, having made its appearance in diverse and sometimes rather obscure publications some two or three decades ago and vanishing since then. Moreover, it is often impossible, by title alone, to distinguish between political satire and political science, so there is no easy way to track this literature down. Our mission was to find these fugitive pieces and uncover among them those gems that could still speak to the present generation of political scientists so as to make the “wit and humour of political science” accessible to today’s readers.

This volume collects what in our opinions are the wittiest and funniest pieces about political science and political scientists. We are confident that even a small investment of the reader’s time will be sufficient to disprove Baker’s slur on our discipline. Like all good humour, much of the work we have chosen for inclusion has a serious point. It helps scholars keep an open and skeptical mind, it picks out weak points in theory and methods, it points out how research may be going wrong, and it pricks the balloon of bombast, pretentiousness, and jargon. And, not only that, it’s fun.

Most of the essays here have appeared in scholarly books and journals (e.g., the *American Political Science Review*, the *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, *European Political Science*, and, especially, *PS: Political Science & Politics*). The collection includes work by some of the world’s most eminent political scientists—including, of course, the four editors of this volume—along with the distinguished American pioneer of post-rational theory, A Wuffle, and the influential German theoretician, Professor Dr. Dr. Dr. Dr. Otto I.Q. Besser-Wisser, who revolutionized political science with neo-postdistanciationalist politometrics. It also includes such classics

as Rosa and Charlie Parkin's masterly neo-Marxist analysis of "Peter Rabbit and the Grundrisse" and Leszek Kolokowski's important treatise on "The General Theory of Not-gardening," as well as the work of such luminaries as Nelson Polsby, Heinz Eulau, James Scott, Arnold Rogow, William Keefe, and Robert Erikson. It covers virtually every aspect of political science, from writing a doctoral dissertation and getting a job to attending conferences and chairing departments to doing research—or at least pretending to—and getting that research published. Its contents make essential reading for all political scientists, even the most senior, but it may be enjoyed the most by younger scholars, especially those without tenure (or, worse yet, without a job), by other social scientists, and even—gasp—by readers unaffiliated with any academic discipline.



## Notes

1. But even economists have an "economist jokes" web site.
2. Most academic communities have collections of jokes, satires, parodies, and humorous pieces about their work. Chemists, for example, have a Web site on dihydrogen monoxide, and longer satirical essays and pastiches appear in places like the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* (created by psychologists, but now covering all of the social sciences) and the *Annals of Improbable Research* (for the broader scientific community), while Wikipedia has its alter ego in the fact-free *Uncyclopedia*.



## References

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# Practice of Political Science: Administrative Service



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## ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATION

*William J. Keefe*

TO: Graduate Students, Staff, and Faculty

FROM: WJK

RE: Still Another Crisis and No Theory

When a crisis develops in the department, I ordinarily turn immediately to theory for guidelines as to its resolution. If the crisis is in "American" I invoke American theory; if the crisis is in International Relations I invoke IR theory; if the crisis is in a subfield I invoke subfield theory. As you know, our discipline is resplendent with theories, all of which can be easily brought to bear and some of which have explanatory power.

Our department is now faced with a crisis for which we have no theory. We will have to go it alone. The hard truth is that we will run out of coffee on Friday or Monday. We do not have sufficient funds to purchase another case. Put another way, we, as the consignee, are in trouble with the consignor. Put still another way, they are going to take the goddamn coffee machine out of here unless we all pay our goddamn coffee bills. If I just had a theory, I would know what to do.



## ON RECRUITING GRADUATE STUDENTS

*William J. Keefe*

Dear Alan:

It is about that time of year that I write a few rigorously-selected, highly favored, and eminent political scientists a personal letter to ask a small, but important, favor. Would you please be so good as to identify your very best undergraduate major, call him/her into your office, and tell him/her that, in his/her best interests, he/she should send immediately for an application blank for our graduate program? Unless we should decide later on to waive our restriction, we will be able to admit but one student from your institution this year; hence it is in your best interests to offer up your very best candidate. If by chance your very best major is committed to going to Yale, because his/her father/mother went there, we can, under such circumstances, consider your #2 student. You will understand that this is about as far as we can go.

Why would your best student want to come here? The answer is simple: our department, like Pittsburgh the city, is a very exciting and stimulating place in which to live, work, and matriculate. The truth is, our department is so exciting and stimulating that I try to stay home one day a week—on Sunday—just to rest up for the coming week.

No ordinary vocabulary can depict, fully, the intellectual excitement of this place. But let me try by asking you to visualize this extraordinary sight—one I confront each morning at 6 a.m. (even during summer sessions) when I arrive to open the departmental offices. There will be 40–50 students in sleeping bags asleep on the quad near our door; if it is a Monday morning, some of them will have been camped there since Friday, waiting to catch a glimpse of the first faculty to arrive. As I try to open the door, they push, snarl, and shove impatiently; lately the only way I have been able to keep any semblance of order is to bring along Rex, my police dog. Finally, I open the door and they pour in, their eyes round with wonder over what they are about to see and learn. By 7 a.m., when most faculty are at their desks, there will be four or five times as many students gathered—some, interestingly, who are formally enrolled at other universities as far away as 800–1,000 miles.

It is quite beyond me to describe their intellectual frenzy: milling and jostling with each other in the hallways, shouting and cheering as an occasional faculty member arrives late, asking faculty for their autographs, taking snapshots of them, getting them to sign their scrapbooks, rubbing against their luster, taking

notes, trying their best to find out what is on their minds. And so it goes all day long: students milling and jostling, trying to warm themselves in the glow of our accomplishments and to eavesdrop on a conversation between faculty members as they go confidently about their business of extending the frontiers of human knowledge. At 1 p.m., when most faculty are ready to leave for the day, there will still be 100 or so students hanging around, some in their pajamas, wistfully watching the faculty stuff their briefcases with manuscripts they intend to work on that night. Truthfully, were it not for our dedication to the life of the mind, all this would be too much.

I honestly wonder how we stand so much intellectual excitement. When our endowed chair-holder arrives for work in mid-afternoon on Tuesdays and Thursdays, sheer pandemonium breaks loose. You have not heard anything until you have heard some 200 pupils screaming in unison, "Doc, tell us what is on your mind today!" I beg him to tell them, and ordinarily he does. It doesn't seem to make any difference which theory the kids scream for him to talk about, he can do it. Usually he begins his talk with impromptu remarks and then, having calmed them, switches deftly and effortlessly into either improvisation or extemporization as he cuts quickly to the heart of the periphery of the theory. "Tour de force," "tour de force," some of the brighter kids chant in Latin as his talk grinds inexorably toward conclusion. Truthfully, the kids eat it up: this is just possibly what graduate education is all about.

On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I rely mainly on the dog to calm the pupils. Even then, it is hard to restrain their natural ebullience over learning. So great is the intellectual bedlam that on two occasions this month I have been arrested for running a disorderly house.

As I reflect on our very human conditions, as it were, it is almost as if these students were groupies, though, of course, they are not. They are serious and resourceful young persons bent on smashing the parameters of knowledge and learning just as much as they can, just as fast as they can. Consider this case: last year a graduate student from an Eastern university camped out in the quad and researched and wrote his dissertation in three weeks just from the things he learned from bugging conversations in the faculty lunch room. That meritorious young man, I am happy to report, has just won the Association's outstanding dissertation award. Today he is a member of our faculty, hard at work on his first publication, a textbook for the introductory course.

If you ever had doubts, I trust I have convinced you that this is the graduate department where you should try to place your best student. Others do this as a matter of course. For example, by my count, we have roughly 75 percent of the sons and/or daughters of the last seven Presidents of the American Political Science Association enrolled in our graduate program; a majority of them, incidentally, are doing very well—in our regular, as well as remedial program. Here and there, of course, one can spot a terminal M.A. in this illustrious group.

The best advice I can give you is to tell your best student to apply early. Last year a member of my own family was placed temporarily on the alternate-award list for a teaching assistantship because he/she failed to meet our application deadline.

Sincerely yours,

William J. Keefe  
Chairman

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