Roundtable Discussion as Oral History:  
The Legislative Modernization Panel at the 2003 Pennsylvania Political Science Association Annual Meeting

By Michael Cassidy

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In the Fall of 2002, I agreed to put together a roundtable discussion for the April 2003 Pennsylvania Political Science Association (PPSA) annual meeting at Villanova University. A topic which had long interested me was the legislative modernization movement which took place nationally and in Pennsylvania in the 1960’s through the 1980’s. This panel provided an opportunity and an attractive format to collect a valuable oral history about Pennsylvania’s modernization movement which at its height revolved around innovations introduced by House Speaker Herbert Fineman who served in the House from 1955-1977. In recognition of the central role Fineman played in Pennsylvania’s early legislative modernization he is sometimes referred to as “The Architect of Legislative Reform” and “The Father of the Modern Legislature.”

After Fineman agreed to participate the roundtable was “rounded out” with Professor Alan Rosenthal of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. Rosenthal has been actively studying and advising legislatures and legislative organization since the 1960’s and is the author of innumerable academic articles and a half dozen books on the subject of state legislatures. Rosenthal had been an activist in the national modernization movement and had worked with Fineman and other leaders around the country. Also agreeing to serve on the panel was prominent Harrisburg attorney and lobbyist Franklin Kury, a former Deputy Attorney General, House member (1967-72) and state Senator (1972-80). Kury is known for his authorship and advocacy of landmark public utility regulatory reform and environmental protection legislation in the 1970’s. Kury described his participation on the panel as a “competent witness” to the institutional change advanced by Fineman and others.

Despite an initially difficult and uncertain panel recruitment process and every mix up possible in the technical recording end, the Legislative Modernization Panel turned out to be one of the best panel discussions I have been associated with at PPSA. Fineman, Rosenthal, and Kury captured the full sense of the modernization movement while providing the PPSA audience with new insights and amusing anecdotes. The final result was an entertaining and informative panel that produced a valuable oral history.

Oral History as a Tool of Political Science?
Barbara Truesdell, Assistant Director of the Indiana University Center for the Study of History and Memory, writes about oral history techniques in “How to Organize and Conduct Oral History Interviews” available on the Center’s website at www.indiana.edu/~cshm. According to Truesdell, oral history is a tool used by the social sciences (she specifically mentions history, anthropology, and folklore) that
“collects information about the past from observers and participants in that past. It gathers data not available in written records about events, people, decisions, and processes .... (and) can reveal how individual values and actions shaped the past, and how the past shapes present-day values and actions.”

While the instrument is admittedly subjective, it can be especially valuable in the study of state and local politics and the development of state and local institutions. In state and local politics we are often fuzzy on what happened and completely in the dark about why it happened. Often these areas have not produced a comprehensive written record or body of scholarly analysis contemporary to the events under study. If extant, news accounts are valuable but provide only a sketchy picture of historical or political developments, especially in state and local politics. News accounts also suffer from a myriad of well documented shortcomings. Thus contemporary news accounts are not necessary a less subjective source than the oral history interview. Both can be judged against any existing public record and each other. The roundtable panel format also provides an internal check on the accuracy of any one participant’s recollections. It provides an opportunity for instant feedback or validation.

The Roundtable Format
Of course using the roundtable panel discussion format to collect oral history is not a novel approach. As any fan of C-SPAN can attest, presidential libraries, beltway universities and other organizations make good use of the format to gather the recollections and perspectives of prominent actors in important political events while informing and entertaining an audience. The roundtable works well for collecting an oral history for two reasons. First, the interviewees/panelists -- politicians and academics alike-- are familiar and comfortable with the format. Second, the university venue and (in our case) PPSA sponsorship add legitimacy to the project. Clearly the format and venue made the “Herb Fineman” oral history project possible. Inviting such a prominent group of academics and politicians to a tape recorded lunch would not have had any likelihood of success.

In addition, the general guidelines for an oral history interview are fairly similar to the preparations necessary for a good panel discussion. Barbara Truesdell makes some common sense recommendations for preparing an oral history interview that apply equally to organizers and moderators of roundtable discussions. Truesdell’s recommendations are summarized in the following points.

1) Prepare by knowing about the subject matter that will be discussed and likewise know as much as possible about the interviewee(s).

2) “Know your recording equipment thoroughly, be it audio, video, or both, and make sure it’s in working order before you arrive at the interview”. (Unfortunately, I gained a greater appreciation for this recommendation as my video recording arrangements fell apart prior to the panel’s start time.)

3) Prepare a list of questions putting easier ones at the beginning and otherwise grouping the questions logically. Keep the questions open ended and relatively
simple. Send the interviewee(s) a list of your questions or a summary of what kinds of questions they may expect.

4) Clearly explain what will be done with the interview and how it will be used. Here Truesdell recommends a formal "deed of gift" or "informed consent" permission form available on the website. (Using the public venue panel discussion ameliorates the need for a permission form as the public nature of the discussion is generally well understood. Never-the-less panelists were warned in writing that the panel discussion may be broadcast on PCN and a videotape recording would be made.)

The Truesdell web article also gives some excellent practical advice on conducting the interview and the common pitfalls of recording equipment. After the interview she recommends taking field notes to help organize the material or prepare for any follow-up suggested by the interview. She also recommends full or partial transcriptions be made along with short descriptions to accompany and correspond to the interview tapes following the style and form dictated by the archives that will be receiving the documents and tapes.

In the “Herb Fineman project” the PPSA panel discussion was used to form an article in the journal of the Pennsylvania Political Science Association, Commonwealth (Volume 12, 2003, pp. 87-110). The article presents Fineman’s prepared remarks in full with a commentary which makes use of illustrations from the panel discussion. In addition the videotape of the roundtable along with Fineman’s original typed remarks with his handwritten notations and a draft of the Commonwealth article have been enthusiastically accepted by the Pennsylvania House of Representatives Archives.

It is hoped that this project will contribute to further research into the recent institutional development of the Pennsylvania General Assembly. The project also demonstrated the viability of the roundtable format to create a valuable oral history document.