

In Honour of André Blais

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Notes for an Address to a Symposium Celebrating André Blais's 65th Birthday
January 20, 2012, Université de Montréal

I know - the language of this symposium is English. But since we are at Université de Montréal, I will begin my address in French, as a tip of the hat to my former colleagues in the University's Political Science Department.

Those of you in the Department who are not among the youngest will remember that years ago, in another century, André and I had decided to organize an English-only symposium, here at Université de Montréal. Alarmed by this precedent, the Assembly of the Political Science Department ordered us to explain ourselves.

Bravely, André declared: "Stéphane will explain." Thanks a lot, André!

So I explained: "This symposium will not be held in English. It will be held in Scientific Esperanto!"

So my address today will take place in Scientific Esperanto.

And don't worry. This won't be long. My speech will take less time than it would take to read one page of André Blais's endless curriculum vitae.

I am very honored - and thankful - that Daniel Rubenson and Peter Loewen selected me to give these introductory remarks, but I don't see how I can be of any help to you today.

If the idea is to comment on André Blais's scientific writings, you are the experts. I have been away from academia too long ... So I really don't have the credentials to say meaningful things about his prolific writings.

And if I'm supposed to speak about the man, well, that makes me a bit uncomfortable. André and I are very modest, private men; our respect for one another's privacy certainly helped forge our friendship over the years.

But let's see what I can do; we'll see how far it goes.

Last summer, I had a tennis appointment with a friend of mine. Since I was close to being late, I explained to him that I had been delivering a speech to my Party's grassroots where

I mentioned that according to several political science studies, attack advertising does indeed dissuade supporters of the targeted political party from casting their ballots. My friend's answer was: "since you mention it, the most recent studies show that this effect is almost non-existent".

Any idea who that friend is?

Some time before that tennis game, I told that same friend that the severity of the Liberal defeat in the 2008 election was all the more disappointing to me because the televised Leaders debates had helped us reduce the gap with the Conservatives. And what was my friend's answer? "That's very unlikely: the most recent studies show that TV debates have a minuscule impact on voters."

Any idea who that friend is?

How many times has André Blais done that to you? How many assumptions, ideas, hypotheses, theories, has he blown out of the water with a stroke of his implacable empirical rigor and indefectible methodological maestria?

Thinking of letting enthusiasm get the better of you? Thinking of saying something more spectacular than rigorous? Thinking of having a bit of fun with ideas and words? Do not fear, Professor Blais is here... to remind you of your sacred duty to scientific rigor!

I'm telling you: we have to be real masochists to celebrate such a man.

Was he born that way or did he become that way? Is it genetics or socialization? I can't say. But I can tell you he was already like that the first time I dealt with him.

It was September 1974, in Québec City, at Université Laval. I was a student in his crowded Quantitative Methodology class, along with hundreds of other students. It was one of my first political science courses; I thought I understood the subject matter well. But I'll never know if that was the case, and I'll tell you why.

That year, Laval's Political Science Department made two contradictory moves: they decided that mathematics would cease to be an admission prerequisite ... and they hired André Blais as a professor.

Since math was not a prerequisite any more, the student number exploded. Many of these new students were radicals, Marxists, Leninists, Maoists and so on. Devastated, the teaching staff unwisely tried to keep the student fauna at bay by showering it with assignments. The inevitable happened: the students rebelled.

In a particularly rocky meeting, one of the protest leaders, named Bruno Blais (unrelated to André), was denouncing the lack of democracy at the University while at the same time

striking the blackboard with a brush and yelling: "Silence! Shut up! Shut up!" Well, he got his greatest ovation when he declared: "And the worst of them all is André Blais!"

Then the students decided there would be no exams at the end of the term, arguing that this practice was way too elitist and inappropriate given our numerous other assignments. The professors, still in shock, gave in to that demand so that the classes could resume. All of the professors but one: André Blais, adamant that his exam be held. But the Department went along with the students and this is why I never wrote that exam.

The following year, André found himself teaching Political Science at Université de Montréal. Of course, his move had nothing to do with his differing perspective on final exams ... or did it?

Notwithstanding that episode, André has always had positive things to say about the teaching he received at Université Laval; he is still especially grateful to one of his former Laval professors, Vincent Lemieux. Likewise, André always speaks highly of his experience as a young professor at the University of Ottawa.

I met André again in 1984, when I was hired to teach political science at Université de Montréal. André welcomed me right away, just like he did for so many of his new colleagues. He showered me liberally with good teaching and research tips and, surprisingly given his seniority, often sought advice from me.

It was not very long before he offered me the opportunity to co-author a paper with him. So I wrote the first draft and gave it to him. After a while, he phoned me. "Do you mind if I change the title?" he asked. "No, not at all". A little later, he phoned again: "Do you mind if I change the first sentence?" "No, just do it". After a while, he sent me his version: every sentence had been changed. Nothing remained of my original text! And the worst of it was that I had to admit that each and every change he made was an improvement!

How often has he done that to you? I'm telling you, what a bunch of masochists we are to be celebrating this man!

Well, years have gone by, and now I wonder: how could I pay a fair tribute to André's distinguished career and accomplishments as a masterful researcher and professor? Should I count the number of books and articles he has written, the number of conferences he has delivered, the number of courses he has taught, the number of Master's and doctoral theses he has supervised, the number of universities he has visited, the dollars in research funds he has secured, the number of references to his work in the Social Science Citation Index? Impossible. That's way beyond my mathematical abilities. I told you: I did not write his Quantitative Studies exam at Université Laval.

There was a time when we could find some fault in André's work habits: for a while, when we all used computers to write our papers, he wrote his in longhand and had them typed

by support staff. But then, one day, we found that he had become a lot more proficient than most of us in the use of information technology.

Thankfully, André Blais still suffers from one human shortcoming: let's say that he's not the most flamboyant showman in town. His sober body language, uniform tone and unwavering reserve don't make for the most electrifying speaking performances! But he was quick to recognize this challenge and turn it into an asset. Over the years, André's precise wordsmithing, clear text structures and concise discourse have made him an effective and compelling speaker. When he's done speaking – whether in a classroom, scientific convention or media event – you understand exactly what he meant to say and you will not forget what he said.

André once told me that he wasn't too interested in dealing with the media, that it wasn't a career priority of his. Yet, the media love him. They appreciate his sense of nuance and his precise, concise and informed commentaries.

Precision before all else, mannerisms be damned! Recently André asked me to comment on one of his latest drafts. A typical quote: “Further post-estimation tests show that the Extreme Anxiety model explains significantly more variation in the probability to vote for A in every election, as compared to the Affect-as-Information—Affective Intelligence model. The $\chi(1)$ for the difference is 4.12 ($p=.04$) for the Fifth election, 4.00 ($p=.04$) for the “Far AB-Far BC” election and 9.92 ($p= 0.00$) for the “Far AB-Close BC” election.”

Well, of course! That's obvious... I couldn't have said it better myself.

Or here's another quote: The less people are more interested in politics, the more they are less inclined to vote, at least at a 0.5 coefficient!

Ok, I invented that one.

So, precision before all else: that's André... Or is it? Well, no, that's not André. For André Blais, it's not precision first, it's generosity first. Generosity and dedication to his students, assistants, colleagues, co-authors; and an absolute dedication to his wife Suzanne and their four children. André Blais is the ultimate team player and family man!

But here I am, getting personal when I said I wouldn't. So let me conclude by saying that this conference is a wonderful idea and that I will try to stay around, because I'm sure to learn a lot from you. I'm sure of that because if you were chosen to deliver a presentation at a Conference for André Blais, you must be very, very good indeed.

Thank you. Merci.