PRESIDENT'S LETTER



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Shakespeare and the Unsung Virtues of Municipal Lawyering

"The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers" - Dick the Butcher: Henry VI

You have heard this line before. Shakespearean scholars (which I am definitely not) are somewhat divided as to the true meaning of the line. You see, at the time Dick uttered his famous quote, he was part of Cade's rebellion seeking to overthrow the government. He and his companions were engaged in illegal activity and naturally concerned that the rule of law would ultimately prevail against them. As the most critical defenders of the rule of law, the lawyers needed to be quickly neutralized for the rebels to carry out their nefarious intentions. From that perspective, the line could be considered a compliment to lawyers as the prime defenders of the rule of law. From Dick's perspective, the lawyers were the prime defenders of an oppressive and immoral application of the rule of law against the people and therefore it was right and just to do away with them first.

Regardless of perspective, it is clear that pop culture's appropriation of the line has not been complimentary to our profession. The line has often been referred as the patriarch of the seemingly endless supply of lawyer jokes. The cynics would say that rebellion or not, Dick was on to something. The theory goes that a lawyer-free society would be an ideal first step to real cultural improvement, in the same way that clearing the harbor of mines would be the first step to restoring maritime commerce to an area. In biblical times, it was the tax collecting business that society seemed to loathe universally. But the cynics have seized upon the line to create and then feast on pop culture's alleged disdain of lawyers by crediting Dick for his foresight in recognizing that purging our profession would be a necessary first step to make his (or any) country great again. (Hey, I will be spending the majority of 2020 preparing to host the Republican National Convention in Charlotte so I can make those MAGA jokes!!)

My guess is that Dick and the cynics never spent much time with a municipal lawyer. What so many of us love about what we do is the fact that our community literally is our client. Everyday, we devote our professional time and energy toward improving and enhancing the quality of life of our own community. It's hard to think of a better client to have than the place you and your family have already chosen to call home. As municipal lawyers, we have a very compelling story to tell, particularly to aspiring attorneys who want to earn a good living and make a substantial difference in their community of choice.

Most law schools have something equivalent to a public interest law organization that exposes its students to potential careers in public interest law fields. A colleague of mine here in Charlotte recently relayed an experience he had during a panel presentation of public interest lawyers at his law school alma mater. He was very surprised that the students (some in their third year) had very little knowledge of the wide range of opportunities available to municipal lawyers. I had a very similar experience on a couple of panel discussions at my own alma mater. My impression is that when most students think of public interest law, they tend to focus on criminal law fields such as district attorneys, public defenders and legal aid. This is where it becomes incumbent on us as local government attorneys instead of to tell our stories to the next generation of lawyers.

As we know, the legal needs of a municipal corporation are quite varied and substantial. From litigation to transactional work, criminal law, land use, business, constitutional law, employment law and intellectual property, just to name a few of the legal subjects our offices deal with on a weekly basis. Therefore, I would challenge all of the members of this esteemed organization to give thought to how you can help educate your community about the important work that municipal lawyers do on a daily basis. Reach out to your regional law schools to educate and mentor the next generation of lawyers on the multitude of opportunities available to them in the field of municipal law. Our story is compelling. Our service to our communities is indispensable. Had Dick the Butcher been properly educated on the subject, my guess is he would have started with the tax collectors!!

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