

Ben Anderson Eulogy  
by Issac Kramnick

I rise to say a few words about the incomparable Ben Anderson, a colossally influential and courageous scholar, and his membership in one particular imagined community, one within which he spent some 40 years--the Cornell Government Department.

Ben came to Ithaca as a graduate student in the early 1960s and in 1967 began his teaching career in the Government Department, never really to leave it until his retirement in 2002. He arrived in Ithaca and to the Government Department during the tumultuous years when Cornell was one of the national epicenters of campus anti-Vietnam-war protest and civil rights activism.

When he joined the Government faculty some of his colleagues were the leading campus conservatives, like Alan Bloom, Clinton Rossiter and Walter Berns, who saw themselves defending the barricades of academic tradition, collegiate hierarchies, and law and order, from the barbarous attacks of student radicals.

The obvious political exception within the imagined community called the Government Department was George Kahin., Ben Anderson's mentor, a nationally renowned anti-Vietnam war activist, who helped create the "teach-in" movement in the United States.

Ben Anderson was very much the disciple of George Kahin,. Like Kahin, he combined meticulous scholarship with passionate political engagement... Anderson's essay refuting the official story of the September 30 Movement and the anti-communist slaughter of almost a million people in Indonesia led to him, like George, being banned from that country from 1972 until the end of Suharto's dictatorship in 1998.

But Anderson differed from Kahin in one very important respect. George was a consummate inside player, who was deeply interested in and involved with Government department politics. As I would have occasion to learn, a department chair who had not consulted with George on a pressing matter--- or even one that was not so pressing --- would in all likelihood come to regret it.

Not so Ben. He was rather indifferent to and uninterested in Government department politics... Despite this, he almost always attended department meetings, though he seldom weighed in. Wearing always his Indonesian long white safari shirt, Ben sat at the meeting table invariably holding a copy of the New York Times, open to reveal the crossword puzzle, which he proceeded to work on with a pen throughout the meeting, smoking his small cigars or cigarettes as he quickly filled in the blanks. Smoking indoors was allowed then—in the last century. At some point, late in the meeting, his pen would drop, as if to announce: "I have completed it". Our meetings were on Wednesday, by the way, for those of you who may be wondering about the relative difficulty of his Times crossword puzzles.

Like many communities, real or imagined, the government department had an identity crisis, which took place during Ben's years as an Assistant professor in the late 60s. The department had been housed throughout the 60s in Sibley at the north end of the Arts quad, along with the History Department. By 1970, however, The College of Architecture, Art, and Planning wanted all of Sibley, so Government and History had to go.

Already called Old Rusty, because it was changing color as soon as it was built, Uris Hall was constructed in 1970 on a parking lot next to Day Hall, as the new home for social scientists at Cornell. The Economics, Sociology, and Psychology departments were going to move in. Government had to make a decision: should it go to Uris with the Social scientists or to McGraw Hall where History was going.

Led by traditionalists like George Kahin, the Government Department, which had never imagined itself as a "political science" department, consulted its soul, and voted to join History in McGraw Hall where the two would be paired for more than 35 years. Government imagined itself not as a quantitative social science community, but as institutionally and historically focused. That decision was made over many department meetings with George Kahin arguing and persuading, and with Ben Anderson doing his crossword puzzles.

The decision not to go to Uris provided a congenial departmental home, in which over 30 years, Ben could produce his qualitative and historical scholarship, including of course, in 1983 his magnum opus, *IMAGINED COMMUNITIES*, which brought him international acclaim, while shining a tiny spotlight on his home, the historically branded Government Department.

One of the most important, and frequently cited, historical studies of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Imagined Communities* has been translated into over 30 languages, and with the possible exception of Nabakov's *Lolita*, it is probably the most important book written by a Cornell professor since World War II.

Ben died just a few days after correcting English proofs of his memoir, "A life Beyond the Boundaries". Initially written for Japanese academics, and printed there in 2008, it will be released in English by Verso Press in March. In an excerpt from it, published several weeks ago in *The London Review of Books*, Ben described what he considered the three most important influences on his scholarship, and, alas, the historical-friendly Cornell Government Department does not make the list. The influences are: firstly, his brother Perry Anderson, and his *New Left Review*; secondly, Jim Siegel, then Cornell's distinguished post-modernist Professor of South East Asian anthropology, with whom Ben taught several popular courses; and thirdly, the students in the South East Asia Program. To be sure, Ben does. In passing, credit his experience in Cornell's Government Department, especially with colleagues in its sub-division of comparative politics, as important in providing him insights into the complexities of comparison as a scholarly enterprise.

Ben was a superb teacher for the Government Department. With legendary courses on militarism, nationalism, as well as South East Asian politics. And he served on an unbelievably large number of graduate student committees.

After the news of his death, tributes from his former Government students, many of them leading professors of Government or political science around the world, poured into the Government Department. I choose just one to share with you, to stand for all of them, since it perfectly captures his legacy. It is from Prof. Jeannie Morefield, who teaches at Whitman College in Washington State. She wrote:

“Very few people have had as much of an influence on the way that I think as the brilliant Ben Anderson. I was fortunate enough to study with him at a moment at Cornell when his wide ranging, historically motivated, politically alive scholarship inspired graduate students to write the world- and write politics- differently. I am saddened by his death but incredibly grateful for his life.”

It seems somehow fitting that Ben, a citizen of the world, died in Indonesia. But it also seems to me entirely appropriate to declare with great pride that the identity of this brilliant intellectual was bound up with Cornell’s Government Department, a community that was, and remains, both imagined and real.