Presidential Evolutions in the System Dynamics Society
2012 President's Speech
David N. Ford
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Thank you for the opportunity to serve as the President of the System Dynamics Society and to speak with you today.

Today I'm going to tell you a story in three chapters of some of the many things that are happening in our Society. It is a story from a presidential perspective of closing feedback loops and feedback loops that aren't closed – yet, a story of opportunities lost and opportunities still before us, a slice of who we have been and who we are, and a few ideas about who we can become. So I invite you to relax and listen to "A Presidential Tale of Recent Evolutions in the System Dynamics Society."

Chapter 1
It was a dark and stormy night. President Elect Rogelio Oliva of the System Dynamics Society stared across his desk, out the window of his office, and into the thunderstorm that had swept east from Austin and now drenched the Texas A&M campus. His thoughts were as clouded as the skies above. In just a few months it would be 2010 and he would be president.

"How can I best help the System Dynamics Society move forward while I am president?" he thought, "How can I remove our barriers to growth? How can we exploit our opportunities to grow and improve? What new opportunities are we currently missing?

Being a structure and process kind of guy, the president elect searched for clarity about the current process and about who did what to lead the System Dynamics Society. He found a very hard-working home office, a dedicated inner circle of volunteers who pretty much always had one job or another in the Society, and a larger group of participants in Society leadership. But what puzzled the President Elect was that he could not discover what all the vice presidents and other officers were responsible for and for how long they had held office. Lots of people had lots of opinions, but nowhere was it made clear or documented. So he wrote "Clean up the roles and responsibilities of the VPs" on his Presidential To-Do List.

He also recalled from his time on the Policy Council repeated struggles to find conference sites and the challenges faced by the Society when conferences cost more than they received in revenue. "There must be a better way. We should be able to exploit the learning curve if we go back to places we've been before. What if we had default conference sites that we returned to if no better site was proposed?" So "Investigate default conference sites" went onto his To-Do List.

The next day the President Elect's work to rewrite a paper for *Management Science* was interrupted by a buzz from his cell phone alerting him of a pending meeting. "Just as well to take a break. Getting papers accepted in leading journals is getting harder and harder." He looked at his phone. "Oh, yes, lunch with Professor Ford from Engineering. Perhaps he will have ideas about those SD Society issues." Lunch went fine, but all Professor Ford wanted to talk about was his challenges as a managing editor of the *System Dynamics Review.* Both men felt strongly that, as a primary face of the Society and system dynamics, the *Review* should publish only the best system dynamics. Both knew that anything they could to do improve the *Review* would increase the field's reputation and use, thereby growing the Society. But how to do that? "Continue to improve the *SD Review*" was added to President Elect Oliva's To-Do List.

Unknown to either man at the time, Professor Ford would become the President Elect of the Society a year later and would support President Oliva's work to improve the *Review.* But early in the Oliva administration the distance between the Oliva presidency and the Ford presidency was an ocean wide, the Atlantic Ocean to be specific, because David Lane of the London School of Economics and Political Science would be President in 2011. Fortunately, the three men had been friends for years.

"I'd like to hear what David Lane thinks." President Oliva suggested to Professor Ford over dessert. "Perhaps the three of us can talk about these issues." This began a series of discussions among the president, president elect, and president elect-elect about leading the System Dynamics Society. This practice would slowly but surely change the Society in important ways.

President Oliva started to work on his presidential To-Do List even before he became president. He studied previous SD conferences based on location and reported his finding to the policy council. The result was a vigorous discussion of default conference sites that brought out the potential benefits as well as concerns about the impacts on the geographically distant parts of the Society. That discussion resulted in a motion at the winter PC meeting in 2010 to find and adopt default sites.

As president, Mr. Oliva continued his work on his To-Do List and made good progress. He improved a draft of the roles and responsibilities for the Society VPs and was able to eliminate a vice president position that had not been functional for a long time. He convinced George Richardson to chair the publications committee and helped him find a replacement for Brian Dangerfield, who was stepping down as Executive Editor of the *Review*.

President Oliva ended his term knowing that he had initiated many changes in the Society that had the potential to greatly advance the Society, the SD community, and system dynamics.

Chapter 2

It was a dark and stormy night. President David Lane of the System Dynamics Society stared across his desk and out the window into the infamous London fog. His thoughts felt as impenetrable as the mist.

The Society's 2011 winter policy council meeting had gone well enough. Both Past President Oliva and President Elect Ford had attended. President Oliva had provided context and background for his initiatives to improve the *SD Review* and he and President Elect Ford had promised continued support, greatly increasing the chances of ideas becoming reality. Over meals before and after the meeting the three friends discussed ideas in ways that just aren't possible except in person. "Hmm. This cooperation among the three presidents is working well." President Lane later mused while on his way back across the Atlantic.

But perhaps even better, President Lane had convinced President Elect Ford to join him on a trip to the home office in Albany, New York before the policy council meeting. The drive from Boston to Albany had proved very helpful in building the critical relationships between Roberta and the two presidents. In Albany, both he and the president elect were amazed at the array of operations that the home office performed to keep the Society running – and the constant planning for multiple conferences on top of that! "How did we ever run ourselves before we had a professional home office?" Both presidents left with a strong impression that the home office was working above capacity. They committed themselves to resist the presidential temptation to make changes which required the home office to do more and more without providing more resources.

President Lane supported the work of his predecessor to improve the *SD Review*. He also saw changes in the journals that *SD Review* competed with for attention and influence. Indeed, it became clear that, in light of those changes, the *Review* had to keep getting better just to maintain its current standing, and get better even faster to improve its place and ability to promote and grow system dynamics in the crowded field of related publications. This caused President Lane to dub this particular challenge a "red queen's race" after part of the book *Through the Looking-Glass* by Lewis Carroll in which Alice says to the queen, after running almost to exhaustion but finding herself where she began:

> "Well, in our country," said Alice, still panting a little, "you'd generally get to somewhere else — if you run very fast for a long time, as we've been doing."
> "A slow sort of country!" said the queen. "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

And "running twice as fast" seemed to be what the *Review* needed to do!

Over breakfast the day after the policy council meeting President Lane met again with Past President Oliva and President Elect Ford. But now the topic returned to default conference sites. More than one of them was concerned about a possible unintended side effect of a default conference site policy, that the Society could weaken it relationships with chapters and memberships far from North America and Europe. So they developed a plan to use Society funds to create a Capacity Development Fund specifically to address this risk and to grow the Society and the field. President Lane agreed to get the process started. President Elect Ford agreed to keep the effort funded and active. Past President Oliva agreed to shepherd the first applications through a review process.

Back in his London office, President Lane reflected again on how he could best help the Society improve. The Society's development was being constrained by a basic contradiction. Almost all the efforts to improve the Society required a consistent leadership effort over several years, but the Society president, who largely selects the focus while in office, served for only one year. So good ideas had often been initiated but then withered and died on the vine after the president passed the mantle of SD Society leadership to the next president. "How could the Society get continuity of presidential leadership and improvement over time?" he wondered. The president paused for a long time in reflection. It seemed that individual initiatives by well meaning presidents should not determine the future of the Society. The Society needed to know where it wanted to go, and have a plan for getting there that could guide presidents in choosing what to work on while in office. In other words, President Lane was convinced that the SD Society needed a strategy to lead it into the future…and our society currently has no strategy. Several previous presidents had tried and failed to create a strategy for the development of the Society. But President Lane felt that this was important enough that he should do his best to get a strategy developed.

But it couldn't be done in just a year. "Perhaps the past president and the president elect would like to discuss this opportunity," he mused. A flurry of emails and a Skype call later, and President Lane knew that his two friends, and therefore the adjacent presidents, agreed. They would work together to promote the development of a society strategy.

After the call President Lane turned and addressed the bust of Newton that resided in the corner of his office, "Sir Isaac, what we've got in this Presidential Truimverate is a Triangle of Trust, Triple Partnership in Power, a Potential Troika of Triumph, as it were. What if we could continue the cooperation across Presidents that Rogelio and David Ford and I have used so far after we are no longer Presidents? " From the shadows one of Sir Isaac's eyebrow's rose in a Spock-like indication of interest.

The three presidents met repeatedly at the Washington DC conference, continuing their discussions and plans. But now there was an important difference. Kim Warren, the man who would be president after David Ford, joined them, temporarily making the triumvirate into a quadrumverate. There was much agreement among the Presidents, including support of previously started initiatives. In addition, President Elect Warren introduced some new ideas. In particular, he started discussions of actionable ways to increase the participation and roles of SD practitioners in the Society. Many of these discussions returned the presidential discussions to the need for a strategy for the Society. Consistent with all he had heard and learned, President Lane's Presidential speech at the conference in Washington DC focused on the need for the System Dynamics Society to develop a strategy for our practitioners and educators and academics to guide its development decisions.

Chapter 3

It was a dark and stormy night. President Elect David Ford of the System Dynamics Society stared across his desk and out the window into the thick of a thunderstorm the size of Texas. His thoughts swirled like the leaves across the lawn.

Roberta had schooled him in his preparation for the winter policy council meeting, and Kim Warren would visit the home office before that meeting, effectively extending President Lane's vision of a rolling presidential triumvirate. Assuming Ed Anderson was approved to be the next president elect the triumvirate would become a quadrumverate again. Perhaps the continuity across presidencies could be continued. But what would guide these and future presidents?

There was a plethora of initiatives large and small that President Ford's predecessors had begun that he could support and keep moving: changes at the *SD Review,* the Society Governance Committee, and the use of the Capacity Development Fund to retain and build the Society's relations around the globe. So President Ford chose to focus his presidency on implementing what he considered to be the most critical open issues for the Society. Two issues struck President Elect Ford as paramount.

First, it would soon be 2012. In January of 2010 the Policy Council had approved the selection and use of default conference sites, one in North America and one in Europe. Boston had been selected as the North American site starting in 2013. But little progress had been made on finding the European default site that could host the conference in 2014, and potentially many times thereafter. And time was getting short. So the president worked with Andreas Grossler, the Vice President of Meetings, to form a group of society members with an interest and the willingness to gather the requisite information about possible sites. All suggested locations were considered. The long list had a dozen or so cities. Both impacts on conference participants and impacts on the Society were described. Slowly the list narrowed and the information about each

remaining site increased. Roberta, by far the most experienced in the group about organizing our conferences, crunched numbers in a massive spreadsheet for each site to estimate the financial impacts on the Society. Others prepared a comparison of impacts on individual conference participants. President Ford liked to believe, "The data will speak for itself if it is presented objectively." So the results of the analysis were sent out to the team for review and discussion. This led to Vice President Grossler recommending Delft in the Netherlands to the Policy Council at the St. Gallen conference as the European default site. The Policy Council approved Delft as the European System Dynamics Society default site.

The second issue that President Elect Ford focused on was the development of the Society's strategy. President Lane had articulated the need at the conference in Washington DC, but what did President Ford know about developing a strategy? Lucky for him, he had a strategy development expert nearby waiting in the wings, Kim Warren, the Society's next President Elect. A brief discussion later, and President Elect Warren was leading the Society's strategy development work, with President Ford remaining closely involved in the work.

The Society's strategy efforts struggled a bit at the beginning of 2012 but gained speed as the winter turned to spring, the spring into summer, and as the strategy committee morphed and changed its membership and learned how to work together. By the conference at St. Gallen they had a draft vision for the Society and an initial plan to move toward that vision. That draft vision read as follows:

> System dynamics will transform society by making improvements to decision-making in government, commerce and other organizations, globally. Powerful examples of its impact will be publicized and widely known amongst the general public, and people with authority will be aware of how system dynamics can raise the effectiveness of what their organizations seek to do. Organizations will employ or seek support from large numbers of experienced professionals with deep skills that are defined, recognized and valued. Those professionals will emerge from Universities and other training institutions which provide high-quality training, drawing on an extensive resource of accessible and rigorous teaching materials. The topic will be understood and respected throughout the academic community. System dynamics will feature in all parts of the education system, leading to widespread public understanding and demand for better policy-making throughout society.

The draft strategy also identified ways in which the Society might grow, including:

- Documenting and promoting examples of excellent system dynamics work

- Teaming practitioners with SD education experts to create special SD-based events for kids

- Increasing Society resources by expanding the products it sells

- Spreading system dynamics through other, more established academic disciplines as well as through developing it as a *separate* discipline
- Certification of SD skills to develop and promote SD practitioners and other system dynamicists
- An expanded web presence focused on marketing SD to users

Many people heard the draft vision and these ideas for the first time at the St. Gallen conference in President Ford's speech. They thought "Hmm, some good ideas. But I would change this one, and add this one I've been thinking about, and…" Then they remembered that it was a draft strategy, so they still had an opportunity to contribute to the Society's vision and strategy. So they made a mental note to themselves and spoke with Kim Warren or another member of the strategy committee after President Ford's speech about how they could contribute to the Society's strategy development effort.

The development of a strategy for the System Dynamics Society was off to a good start. But President Ford remained concerned about the SD strategy work, specifically about whether it would reflect the breadth of the Society and garner widespread support within the community. So he decided to conclude his presidential speech with the following words,

"My fellow system dynamicists, our Society's strategy won't work if it is David Ford's strategy, or Kim Warren's strategy, or David Lane's or the Strategy Committee's, or the Policy Council's strategy. Our strategy will only work if it is a strategy for all of us. And it can only be for all of us if it is by all of us. Don't let the System Dynamics Society strategy short-change your part of system dynamics! Are you a grey-beard of System Dynamics, have you just been with us a few years, or is this your first SD conference? It doesn't matter. The Society's strategy needs your input. Do you consider yourself an SD Practitioner, or an Academic, or an SD Educator, or a developer or provider of SD tools? It doesn't matter. The Society strategy needs your input. Race, color, creed, nationality, age, gender, educational level, occupation – they don't matter. It is our Society's diversity that makes us strong. We need to use that diversity now to create a vision that works for all of us and a plan that we can implement to attain that vision. Ladies and gentlemen, that is not only the way that we can grow system dynamics into all it can be: it is the only way we can grow system dynamics into all it can be."

The end

Thank you.