

In Memoriam

It is with great sorrow that we announce the passing of longtime LASA member **Donna Lee Van Cott**. We have lost a prolific writer, tireless field researcher, and generous colleague. Dr. Van Cott was known widely to students of Andean politics, indigenous rights movements and political institutions. She was an esteemed friend and colleague to many in LASA, and was one of the most promising—and successful—scholars of her generation.

Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Connecticut when she died, Dr. Van Cott was perhaps best known to LASA members as the founder of the Section on Ethnicity, Race, and Indigenous Peoples, which she headed from 2003-2005, and which now has several hundred members. Her academic career, launched with a Ph.D. from Georgetown University's Department of Government in 1998, was capped by three critically acclaimed monographs: *The Friendly Liquidation of the Past: The Politics of Diversity in Latin America* (2000, University of Pittsburgh Press), *From Movements to Parties in Latin America: The Evolution of Ethnic Politics* (2005, Cambridge University Press), and *Radical Democracy in the Andes* (2008, Cambridge University Press).

David Samuels of the University of Minnesota characterized Van Cott as “among the very best and most influential political scientists who studied indigenous politics in Latin America,” but also lauded her dynamic style and sharp humor. “She had stage presence, a sense of humor, and an engaging, even entertaining presentation style, while remaining serious and professional. This is a rare combination, and was impressive to see.”

A careful balancer of institutional and societal considerations, the first of Van Cott's major works, *The Friendly Liquidation of the Past*, covered the constitutional reforms of the 1990s fostering greater ethnic group participation (especially in Bolivia and Colombia). Her next book, *From Movements to Parties in Latin America*, which won the 2006 Best Book on Comparative Politics Award from the

Organized Section on Race, Ethnicity and Politics, addressed the propagation of ethnic political parties in four Latin American countries (including Colombia and Bolivia), and their concomitant failure in two others (Argentina and Peru). Finally, her last book, *Radical Democracy in the Andes*, published just last year, assessed the record of indigenous parties in power at the local levels, principally in Bolivia and Ecuador.

Taken together, Dr. Van Cott's books narrate the institutionalization of passionate and professional indigenous movements that evolved from social movements to political parties, to mayors and city councils, and the vitality of these transitions. Her work was vital in chronicling the conversion of these movements to governments as a demonstration of their capability and determination. Always adhering to the highest standards in field research and writing, Van Cott's objective and critical depictions of the struggles of movement leaders trying to retain their original policies and yet appeal to constantly wider groups of constituencies, have had an enduring impact on the study of Latin America's indigenous peoples, on ethnic politics, movements, and parties, on constitutional change, multicultural rights, and on local governance.

A Fulbright Fellow, former associate at the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington and former fellow at the Helen Kellogg Institute for International Peace at the University of Notre Dame, Van Cott received numerous awards and was a coveted speaker. Van Cott testified before the U.S. Congress, and presented work regularly in forums from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Quito, Ecuador, including many policy venues and international institutions like the United Nations, the U.S. State Department, and the United States Institute for Peace.

In addition to her extensive publication record and her active participation in professional associations like LASA, Van Cott was a passionate teacher and mentor. According to Mala Htun of the New School for Social Research, “Donna was always willing to

share her data and she even gave me transcripts of dozens of her interviews to use in my own research. Thanks to Donna, indigenous politics is a mainstream topic of scholarship and an essential component of coursework on Latin America. I can't think of anyone more passionate and knowledgeable about indigenous politics in Latin America.”

Van Cott's energy in the lecture hall was perhaps no surprise given her musical background. A talented guitarist and singer, Van Cott released *Eclipse*, an album of her music, in 2000. Her artistic energies also produced poems which were published in *The New Formalist* in 2008. She ends a poem titled “Advice” with the following lines:

*No one ever gets to ever do all
they were meant to do. Bite into what
is true. Remember, nothing is too big to lose
or too small.*

Donna Lee Van Cott perhaps did not get to do all she was meant to do, but she will be remembered for her impressive scholarship, wicked sense of humor, and the encouragement she gave to so many of us. In memory of her tireless work to try to diminish the resource gap between U.S. and Latin American colleagues, donations are being accepted by the LASA Secretariat in Dr. Van Cott's name to the LASA Travel Fund for Latin American Scholars.

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