



Nothing to Wear: A Second Fitting

by Brittany Molenaar

You should know this story. Don't be silly, of course you do! You know, the one about the two con artists who come to town claiming to weave cloth so fine that anyone too stupid or unfit for their job can't see it. Then the grand, vain Emperor, who loves clothes more than he loves governing, pays them a fortune to weave him this fine airy cloth. The Emperor, unwilling to be suckered, sent his greatest experts to follow up, assess the process, and confirm the validity of such an excellent work. He wasn't a dummy; he knew how to dot his I's and cross his T's. However, when his ministers go to the trouble of inspecting the empty looms, they fall victim to the vice of social pressure and, for fear of being called a dunce, praise them and confirm their finesse and sophistication, because none of them wants to be called the foolish one. Their fear further emphasizes their insecurity about their incompetence, which allows the Emperor to parade through town in nothing at all. Everyone cheers because, undoubtedly, nobody wants to be identified as the brainless one.

Until a child, too innocent and bold to be hindered by such harsh social reproach, then says, *"But he hasn't got anything on."*

In the original, the whisper spreads through the crowd, and the Emperor keeps walking, holding his head even higher, while the chamberlains carry his train that isn't there.

That's where most people stop reading, and this is where we start.

The Child Who Was Not Believed

Her name was Wren, and she was nine, and of course, she was right.

When she said it, the Chamberlain of Public Confidence patted her on the head, told her she was pretty, then announced, *"Children see what children want to see."* The crowd laughed, relieved, the way people laugh when someone else has taken the risk and, in that moment, knowing that the Chamberlain was the expert, and not wanting others to know that they saw what a simple 9-year-old girl could see, made the superior the greater voice that they wanted to believe.

Wren noticed something then: being right and being believed are not the same thing. The Chamberlain was believed because he had a chain of office, a balcony, and a voice that carried.

Wren may have had a point, but a point is not a platform.

Pause here, my dear reader and let me ask you: who gets believed in your town by default, and who has to prove it twice? What does the Chamberlain have that Wren doesn't, and is any of it the truth?

Then the next morning, the whole town was grumbling.

The baker complained that the cloth tax had doubled the price of flour. The washerwoman fretted that she'd been told to press a robe she couldn't find. The clerk at the Treasury, who used a wheelchair and therefore watched every parade from behind a wall of people's backs, huffed that he'd never seen the Emperor clothed *or* unclothed but would like some say in either case.

Grumbling is cheap, and much like other towns, it didn't come in short supply. Bellyaching is a way of life, and it makes life interesting because it keeps the gossip mill running round. Although, on its own, it has never moved a single parade.

The Chamberlain counted on that. *Let them grumble*, he said. *Grumbling is harmless all on its own, and it always passes through this town like the weather.*

Pause here, my new friend. If the whole town was unhappy, then why hadn't anything changed? What's missing between "we're angry" and "we're going to do something about it"?

Wren witnessed all of this, which motivated her to do something unusual. Something truly strange, and even unexpected, especially for a nine-year-old girl her size. She made a list. Not of complaints, since everybody had those. She created a list of **what people had**.

- 1- **The baker had money.** Not much, but enough to buy ink, paper, and plenty of bread for meetings, because nobody comes to a meeting without bread.
- 2- **The old weaver had expertise.** She took one look at the Treasury receipts and said, *"Forty bolts of golden thread and no golden thread was ever delivered to any loom in this city. I would know. I'm the only one who still owns a loom."*
- 3- **The clerk had the ledgers.** He also had an abundance of time on his hands, because nobody ever invited him to the balcony.
- 4- **The church had a meeting space,** and it had a bell. The bell turned out to be a very good **communication network**: one ring for "come to the meeting," two rings for "bring the chairs."
- 5- **The printer had media access.** He'd printed the Emperor's proclamations for twenty years now, and was delighted to print something honest for once.
- 6- **The retired magistrate had legal knowledge.** She pointed out that the city charter required receipts for public money, and that "it's invisible" is not a receipt.
- 7- **The Weavers' Guild was an organization.** It had dues, a membership list, and a habit of showing up on time.
- 8- **The guild in the next town over had a relationship** with ours. They had been scammed by the same two men the year before, and they even had letters.
- 9- **And everybody had volunteers,** simply meaning that they had themselves.

Then, truly enough, there was **leadership**, which surprised everyone with eyes to see and ears to hear. This leader wasn't the loudest person. This leader wasn't even the biggest person. This leader wasn't a man, nor were they even the richest person. The leader was simply the person who kept asking, *"Who isn't here yet?"*

And that was Wren.

Pause here, again. Look at that list closely, because none of it is anger. Grievance is the match, and resources applied are the dry wood. Which item on the list do you think mattered the most? Which one could they have done without? I will let you decide.

Framing and the War

Those swift imposters had won the war with one sentence: *Only the unworthy cannot see the cloth.*

Now, think about how clever that is. It turns a question about the **cloth** into a question about **you**. Anyone who speaks up isn't reporting a fact: they're confessing a flaw. It's a clever frame that makes silence feel like intelligence.

The town couldn't win by reporting a fact, nor would they win by confessing a flaw. They needed to put their brains together, and what they required meant working smarter, not harder. They didn't want to argue about whether they were obtuse, so they changed the question.

The printer's pamphlet read:

IT'S NOT THAT WE CAN'T SEE IT.

IT'S THAT WE PAID FOR IT.

*Forty bolts of golden thread. Zero deliveries. One very cold Emperor!
Meeting Thursday. Bring bread. Bring chairs. Bring your neighbour!*

Framing the grievance is what made an impact.

Suddenly, the narrative changed from "a child insulted the Emperor" to "where did our money go?"

That question is much harder to laugh off from a balcony.

Pause here, intelligent reader. What changed? The facts didn't change between the parade and the pamphlet. Only the frame did. What made the second frame work? How did a township of laughs become a community of helpers overnight? How did changing the frame change who could hear themselves in it?

Who Isn't Here Yet?

The first meeting was a triumph. The second was nearly a disaster.

The Chamberlain's spies reported, smugly, that "the movement" was only a small guild consisting of the bakers' friends. They had a point about the money, but the night-shift lamplighters couldn't come to a Thursday-evening meeting. Also, the families who spoke the river dialect couldn't read the pamphlet. They were a pretty bunch of nobodies. They were such a laugh that even the clerk had to be carried up the church steps, which he found undignified, and he took ten minutes to say so.

Wren, their determined tiny leader, asked again: *Who isn't here yet?* The assembly looked around, found too many empty chairs, and she promptly pivoted to a better question: *Why?*

One simple question changed everything.

The result? Their community held a second meeting at dawn for the lamplighters, and the baker followed suit by opening his doors early. A grandmother, once a schoolteacher in her younger years, who had waited forty years for someone to ask her, reprinted the pamphlet in the river dialect. The meeting moved to the ground-floor market hall, and the clerk chaired it, because he was the one who had read the ledgers.

Then something wonderful happened: The movement got bigger. More importantly, it got **harder to dismiss**. The Chamberlain could wave off a guild. He couldn't wave off the entire community.

Pause here. Being heard isn't just about speaking louder. Sometimes it's about moving the meeting. Whose voice in your community depends on someone else changing the time, the place, or the language?

Fifty-One to Forty-Nine

Then the movement nearly ate itself.

The bakers wanted the cloth tax abolished, today, preferably by noon. The old weaver wanted it *kept*, because scandal aside, it was the only money in the city ever meant for looms. And the palace tailors had quietly joined the meeting with a worry of their own: if the Royal Wardrobe shut down, they'd be out of work, and they hadn't stolen anything. They'd just been told to stitch air.

Someone shouted, *"Let's vote!"*

They voted: fifty-one to forty-nine, abolish the tax.

The bakers cheered. The weavers and tailors stood up to leave, and everyone could see the exact expression the town had worn at the first parade on their faces: *we've been told to see something that isn't there*. This time the invisible thing was "a decision everyone agreed to."

Wren looked at the assembly, and then to the forty-nine people heading for the door. *"If they go home, the losers,"* she said, *"then all we've done is build ourselves a smaller balcony."*

The clerk, who had spent years reading other people's numbers, asked a different question. He didn't ask *What do you want?* He asked *What do you need underneath the wanting?*

This settled things, and forty-nine people decided to listen, and an integrative democracy began to take shape.

- The bakers didn't need the tax gone. They needed **cheap flour**.
- The weaver didn't need the tax. She needed **working looms**.
- The tailors didn't need the Royal Wardrobe. They needed **work worth doing**.

Laid out like that, it stopped being a tug-of-war and became a puzzle. They introduced a halved tax, making flour more affordable. The other half went to a **Public Weaving Hall**, where the palace tailors taught anyone who wanted to learn, so that real cloth could be made from real thread. They chose to be honest and transparent about their dealings, and they nailed every receipt to the door, where anyone could come and look.

Nobody won fifty-one to forty-nine. Everybody won a hundred to nothing.

Pause here. A vote is supposed to tell you which side is bigger; it doesn't tell you what anyone needs. When is majority rule enough, and when does it quietly turn the losing side into the next group of unheard people? What did the clerk's question uncover that the vote couldn't?

The Second Parade

On the day of the next royal procession, the Emperor stepped out in his newest invisible ensemble, which the common called *a winter collection, very warm, you wouldn't understand*.

The entire city met him, standing firmly and quietly in the square. The clerk sat at the front, where he could finally see. The magistrate held the charter. The weaver held the empty receipt book. The neighbouring town's guild had sent a delegation with their letters. The lamplighters had come straight from their shift. The palace tailors stood beside the bakers. The grandmother read their demands aloud in two languages.

They didn't throw anything, and they didn't need to. They didn't even grumble because they only needed to ask for three simple things:

1. **No public money spent on anything the public isn't allowed to look at.**
2. **A seat at the table for anyone the decision affects**, and no vote taken until someone has asked what each side needs.
3. **Meetings held where everyone can get to them**, in words everyone can read.

The Emperor looked at the crowd. He looked down at himself, and for one long, chilly moment, the people could see him calculate whether admitting the truth would cost more than marching on in such an airy, chaffy costume.

For the first time, it would.

He swallowed his pride, and he signed. Someone kindly handed him a sensible cardigan, which was the very first thing the Public Weaving Hall had ever made.

The crooks, it turned out, heard word of the assembly's vastness and had already left town, like they always do. People with integrity choose to stay and fix things.

What the Old Story Leaves Out

Andersen gave us the most famous moment in the history of honesty: a child tells the truth, and the Emperor stands exposed. But read the ending again. He *keeps walking*. Truth alone didn't stop the parade.

What stops parades is a collection of normal, everyday people organized around the truth, with money for ink, a room to meet in, someone who can read the ledger, someone who knows the law, a bell everyone can hear, friends in the next town, and a leader whose only job is noticing who's missing.

A few questions to leave you with:

- 1- Why would a leader rather freeze in public than admit he was fooled? What does that tell you about what leaders fear losing?
- 2- Why did the ministers, people *paid* to see clearly, pretend to see cloth?
- 3- When the movement first formed, who did it leave out by accident? Would it have won without them?
- 4- The town could have won by majority. Why did it choose not to? Is a victory that leaves forty-nine people out really a victory for "the people"?
- 5- And the hard one: **if you are the person who isn't being heard, and nobody is asking "who isn't here yet?",** then what?

The story's answer is this: **you take the inventory.** Don't list what you're angry about; you already know that. List what you *have*. A skill. A room. A printer. A friend in another town. A language someone else needs. Find the others who are grumbling and turn the grumble into a list, the list into a meeting, and the meeting into a frame people can't laugh off.

Once they're all in the room, ask the second question that won this whole thing: not *what do you want?* but *what do you need underneath the want?*

Then look around and ask the first one again:

"Who isn't here yet?"

Behind the Story

This story was inspired by the thoughtful work of a good, kind professor from the University of Lethbridge who passionately teaches his students to think critically, Dr. Yale Belanger. It might not always feel like it, but you are making a big difference to the next generation. You are a favourite to many.

Resource Mobilization Theory

Core question: What resources allow people to turn dissatisfaction into organized political action?

Resource Mobilization Theory, closely associated with sociologists **John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald**, starts from a simple observation. Grievances alone don't explain social movements. Plenty of people are unhappy without ever organizing. Movements emerge and last when people can **mobilize resources** such as money, leadership, organizations, volunteers, expertise, communication networks, meeting spaces, legal help, media access, and relationships with other organizations. Wren's inventory includes each of these.

The theory changed how researchers saw protesters. Instead of irrational crowds, movements came to be understood as **strategic political actors**, people making choices about what they have and how to use it. The framing battle in Section IV connects to a companion idea, **framing theory**, which studies how movements define a problem, so others recognize themselves in it.

Resource Mobilization Theory developed in **American** sociology, but it's widely used to study **Canadian** movements, including organized labour, environmental organizations, feminist organizations, disability-rights organizations, and Indigenous advocacy organizations. Contemporary Canadian research also applies it to digital organizing, where the "church bell" is now a group chat.

Memory shortcut: Resources → capacity to mobilize.

Integrative Democracy

Core question: How can a community make decisions that include everyone instead of just outvoting the minority?

Aggregative democracy treats politics like adding up a tally. Everyone states their preference, the bigger number wins, and the losers wait for the next election. It's fast and fair in a narrow sense, but it can leave the same groups losing again and again.

Integrative democracy treats politics as a conversation that changes the people in it. The idea goes back to **Mary Parker Follett**, who distinguished domination, compromise, and *integration*. Her famous example takes place in a library. One person wants the window open; another wants it shut. Compromise would mean leaving it half-open, which helps neither. The integrative answer was to open a window in the *next room*: fresh air, no draft. Neither side gave up what it

really needed. **March and Olsen** later developed the contrast between aggregative and integrative visions of democratic governance.

In the story, the 51–49 vote is aggregative. The Public Weaving Hall is integrative.

How the Two Theories Fit Together

Resource Mobilization Theory explains how unheard people **get into the room**. Integrative democracy explains what to do **once everyone is in it**, so that winning doesn't just create a new group of losers.

Memory shortcut: Resources → get in the room. Integration → leave no one outside it.

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