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Bureaucracy

BUREAUCRACY HAS BEEN MADE into a new variety of sin in many people's minds, but bureaucrats doing their jobs conscientiously are on the side of all good men and true. Bureaucracy is a way of doing business, a way without which we could not carry on today's complex affairs.

The word has been degraded in everyday talk until it raises, subconsciously, a spirit of anti-official jocularity. You put a cent into the automatic machine of public opinion under the label "bureaucracy", press the button, and a sneer comes out accompanied by a picture of the fussy, briefcase-carrying incompetent whom we read about in nineteenth-century novels.

A judicious view is made difficult by the fact that while one sector of voters is as frightened by the word as are some zealous people who see sin in everything they don't like, others are fascinated by the plan to transform the whole world into a bureau, wiping out the individual and looking after mass welfare through computers.

As in most features of life, there is much to be said for and against the system of bureaucracy. The good that is in bureaucracy should not suffer by the faults of some of those who administer it, and irresponsible attacks upon public servants, workers in industry, and people who serve in social and cultural and community activities, are a luxury that no democracy can afford.

Those who speak and write against bureaucracy are in reality criticizing the system of government and business, and the bureaucrat is merely the handy scapegoat.

People of all ages are bewildered by the rapidly-changing world. Fifty years ago things seemed to be stable, with a dominant humanity cared for by the natural laws of evolution. Science and technology have diminished man's status so that he sees himself as only an atom on a small fragment of star-dust. He resents anything which seems to make him even less significant.

What is bureaucracy?

When we strip the word down to its meaning we find that bureaucracy in government is a system centralized in a graded series of officials who administer the laws and regulations passed along to them by the elected representatives of the people. Bureaucracy in business means organization by departments for the more efficient performance of operations.

Neither government nor business can be carried on without bureaucrats. They are the people who realize in practice the government's policies and the plans of business.

The civil servant knows intimately a labyrinth of rules, processes, and procedures with which there is no reason for the man-in-the-street to be acquainted. The civil servant is there to act as guide through the maze. Ideally, he protects the citizen against despotic arbitrariness.

This system is not, as some people think, an outgrowth of too much democracy. Nowhere do bureaucrats flourish so luxuriantly as under an autocratic régime where they are treated with contemptuous patronage by their superiors and find compensation only in plaguing the life out of the public. When the siege of Troy was making history and laying the foundation of sagas three thousand years ago there were civil servants scratching on their clay tablets the assessments of taxation and issuing orders to pay.

Today, the ministers of the crown have collective political responsibility for major lines of policy and for the administrative acts of thousands of civil servants of whose very existence they may be but dimly aware. The leaders are exposed to public criticism and to the attacks of the opposition, but the bureaucracy is withdrawn from these commotions. It is the civil servants who have the expertise, the mastery of the techniques, by which the purposes of the government are carried out.

How completely the cabinet ministers depend upon the dutiful discharge of functions by civil servants may be seen by comparing their position with that of top executives in business. No board of directors of an industry has to meet a committee of shareholders every

afternoon and submit to questioning on their conduct of the business. No chairman of the board has his reputation so largely in the hands of his staff as has the cabinet minister, who knows that if the staff lets him down there is a shadow cabinet in the wings ready to seize power.

This importance of the work he does may give the bureaucrat an exaggerated view of his function, and stimulate him to promote his particular department to the disadvantage of the system as a whole. He may canalize administration into a set of hard-and-fast methods without consideration of the work of other departments or of the big picture to which they all contribute. In doing so he fits himself into the disapproved class of office-holder.

Bureaucracy in business

Bureaucracy tries to replace with order and system the sometimes startling untidiness that marks much business.

Every large-scale business organization has its bureaucracy, in the legitimate sense of the word. It is an essential ingredient of everyday operations. It is simply the application of the principles of specialization and division of labour to clerical and administrative work.

Where there is an office there is a bureau, and where there is a bureau there is a bureaucracy. The work of individuals with varied knowledge and skills is put together so as to build an efficient team. Effective organization provides a means for assigning authority, for distributing responsibility, for communicating between the experts in various activities, and for assuring a chain of accountability.

In a simpler world business was simpler. There was a boss to whom everyone reported, a boss who was everywhere, looking into everything. In large scale business the extent, complexities and speed of operation have made impossible that old system of management. No one man can direct effectively in detail a dozen or a hundred sectors of a firm's activities.

As business expands, executives find it necessary to delegate more and more decision-making authority to subordinates, and they in turn delegate responsibility down the line. The senior officials, like the cabinet ministers, cannot possibly supervise, or even know, all of the activities being carried out by departments and branches. Both executives and ministers are, however, alert to detect bureaucratic inertia, to check the inclination of some men to magnify the sanctity of their particular jobs, and to put a stop to attitudes of arrogance toward staff and the public.

One danger is that of over-organization, a state that leads to strangulation of enterprise. Business leaders do not trust organization for its own sake, but for what it accomplishes. If fragmentation of the business results when responsibility is delegated to departments it may be because communication and co-operation are not functioning.

The chain of command is important. The man at the top wants something done: he refers it to the appropriate executive or manager: it passes to the person most qualified by education, training and experience to deal with it in detail. Every person involved must depend upon the man above to give clear directions and the man below to carry out the task efficiently. Within this chain, every man, whatever his position, should be in close consultation with the man above and below.

Nothing can be more important than co-operation between heads of autonomous departments. In government and in business, efficiency and courtesy require that no decisions affecting another department be taken without the concurrence of the head of that department. Harmony is not a dead thing, like a stopped engine. It involves things and people moving together to accomplish something. An integrated bureaucracy is tied together by communication. Units working in isolation are wasteful and ineffective.

Criticism of bureaucracy

Thoughtless criticism is one of the most serious occupational hazards faced by those who serve the public. A whole body should not be indicted because of the malfunctioning of one part of it.

What are the charges against bureaucracy? That it is too mechanical, that it goes too much by the rule book, that it is neglectful of people as human beings, that it is inflexible and bullying. These are not charges which go to the heart of the system, but are criticisms of how the system is carried out by certain people.

There are people in office who claim supreme authority in all matters merely because government is supreme or their business complex is so powerful. It may be that such people try to cover their personal deficiencies by arrogance. The self-sure among them are as dogmatic as time-tables, brooking no criticism. These are personal defects, not part of the system.

Bureaucracy hurts itself most when it becomes ingrown, when it becomes its own adviser, actor, approver, and justifier. Some sectors seal themselves off from the outside world to brood in their own cloisters amid loyalties and group agreements, shielded from the disturbances of the spacious world.

Bureaucracy hurts itself, too, when it claims that its people are a special sort of first among equals; when it defines its humility by saying: "I do not think myself half so important as I really am."

It is tempting to even the smallest functionary in business or government service to clothe himself with the importance attaching to the system he helps to administer, seeking to impress on those who need its services the sense of their dependence upon the agent who renders them. Such people remind us of the sergeant-at-arms in T. H. White's story of *The Once and Future King*, which became the basis for the movie "Camelot". He took great pains to keep his stomach in, and often tripped over his feet because he could not see them over his chest.

Bureaucrats are subject to the infirmities of all mankind. As King Arthur is reported to have said: "A knight with a silver suit of armour would immediately call himself a have-not if he met a knight with a golden one."

Status-seeking is legitimate in the public service or in business so long as its pursuit does not take the place of effective work. The status-seeker is operating within the symbol system of his culture, and is using recognized symbols to demonstrate that he has qualities that are valued by his fellow men.

A few develop a superiority feeling arising from their heightened status, demanding prestige, precedence and prerogatives, and become unbearably self-conceited and bumptious. These bring about distaste for all bureaucrats. They are insensitive to their public responsibilities, and engrossed with their own pursuits. They follow the line taken by one of Shakespeare's characters: "Were I anything else but what I am I would wish me only me as I am."

No man in business or government will offend so long as he cares more about the substance of his job than about its trappings. He is more concerned with using his mind in the discharge of his duties in an efficient and honourable manner than with embellishing the façade of his position.

Absolutism and red tape

A vital criticism of bureaucracy is its inclination to absolutism, its disinclination to discuss or listen to different opinions, its illusion of final authority. Power that is inherent in authority requires discretion in its use. Prince Philip said to a conference on the human problems of industrial communities: "Just once in a while put yourself into the position of being pushed around and see how you like it."

Authority used for the sake of lording it over fellow-creatures or adding to personal pomp is rightly judged base, and such tyranny degrades those who use it.

A less valid criticism says that bureaucracy is a system in which a worker's personal abilities are seldom put to serious test because every action and reaction are anticipated and laid down in the books. Rules are necessary to assure order in everything from issuing a passport to awarding a million dollar contract, from protecting individuals from exploitation to administering the country's armed forces. But rules do not provide a formula to apply to every situation.

The letter of the regulations must not be allowed to replace the spirit of the law. A static, well-regulated system may look neat and tidy and provide pretty graphs, but it does not solve problems associated with human nature. A classic example was the case of the First World War holder of the Victoria Cross who was discharged from the Second World War Home Guard in Manchester because his Russian parents had never been naturalized, and therefore he was ineligible under the regulations.

Or consider the case of the Montreal bus conductor who charged a fare for a mouse. Ten-year-old Judith said he demanded a fare of eight cents for her pet mouse George, who measures 3½ inches from nose to tail. A bus company official commented: "He must have misinterpreted the regulations."

Red tape is the particular aversion of some critics of bureaucracy. It was Dickens who made this synonymous with the inefficiency and stupidity of fussy and short-sighted officials. The use of red tape is not confined to government officials, but may flourish in any organization that has authority over human activities.

The compiling of facts and figures is necessary if the business of the country is to assess and project itself successfully. The "red tape" that is objected to is symbolized by an incident on the day of the allied landings in Normandy. A landing-craft was destroyed and its fighting men were thrown into the sea. Fifty of them were picked up by another landing-craft which had put its tanks ashore. The skipper had orders to return directly to England, and he refused to run in to the beach to disembark these fifty fighting men.

About routine

A certain amount of office routine is necessary for the functioning of any administrative system. How far it gets ossified and develops the ills possible in bureaucracy depends upon the vigilance of the leadership.

It is necessary to re-examine all routinely performed tasks from time to time, no matter how well they seem to be functioning, to see whether some should not be discontinued or modified to fit current requirements. This does not call necessarily for intervention at floor level, but for the creation of a climate.

A meticulous regard for system and routine may provide safety for those who fear that new ways might be too much for them, but it does not contribute to the exploration and development needed in a business venture. The danger is that the chief activities of everyone will become the compiling of reports and reading intra-office memoranda. Commenting on the rising tide of paperwork, Sir Halford Reddish quipped: "We used to quote rabbits as the typical example of fertility. I am not so sure that forms do not breed even faster than rabbits."

As a consequence of absorption in shuffling paper, men and women with the capacity to originate and develop find themselves buried deeper and deeper under forms, reports and charts. This has a stultifying influence, one that makes men unable to cope with the unexpected and unpredictable. An organization may be functioning at only fifty per cent efficiency because of the dead weight of routine that holds workers back from becoming innovators.

It takes courage and energy to take people out of grooves. One way to cure or avoid stagnation would be to start deliberately to install mavericks and needlers and askers of questions in the ranks of departments.

Updating bureaucracy

If one is a bureaucrat the thing to do is to avoid developing the unpleasant and inefficient traits. It is part of the bureaucrat's business to have an orderly mind, but this orderliness must not be allowed to become the chief aim of life.

When a bureaucrat exercises spontaneity in his dealings with people, and develops the instinct for realizing what people are thinking, he becomes not only a more effective worker but a happier worker: he gets more enjoyment out of life.

Whatever mystical practices go into the birth and development of an idea or plan, it must be brought within the understanding of those who will be affected by it.

The cult of secrecy has been growing. Some bureaucratic officers regard themselves as belonging to an exclusively intellectual body, lock themselves in their ivory towers, never let their precious documents be seen on the pretext that they are too secret, and carefully file them away in a safe. The public wants to know the "why" as well as the "what" of a situation, in understandable terms.

Some formulas drawn up by systems people in conference rooms may have important advantages within the bureaucratic walls but are not adapted to the practical needs of daily life on the outside. Take, for example, the metric system of measurement. It took imagination and flair to decide upon the metre as being a ten-millionth part of the distance from the pole to the equator, but it was found more convenient to scratch two marks on a platinum rod for practical application.

Properly to exercise authority requires that a man know his job, know its purpose, and give respect to those with whom he deals. He needs broad views, so as to perceive the best ends to be sought and the best means to those ends; to distinguish between what is effective and what is ineffective and between what is important and what is unimportant. Even if he be a top-ranking specialist he cannot function effectively if all he brings to the desk is his specialty.

Dealing with the public

The ideal bureaucrat who has dealings with people will be as alert to serve the interests of his most humble client as he is to uphold the government's or his firm's interest. He cannot excuse himself from this by saying that the procedure which irritates the client will simplify book-keeping or make things tidier.

A deep-rooted respect for the individual is an essential part of the democratic system, setting democracy apart from totalitarianism. Each citizen is a very special case. No two have jobs, families, memberships, hobbies, interests, and problems that are exactly identical. "The greatest insult you can offer to the human race," said Francis Neilson in *The Cultural Tradition*, "is to regard it as a herd of cattle to be driven to your selected pasture."

It is, then, vitally important to see that as government and business increasingly affect the lives of people there should be a corresponding increase in the care that is taken to make the intrusion as acceptable as possible. People have the right to expect that their affairs will be dealt with efficiently and expeditiously and that their personal feelings will be sympathetically and fairly considered.

This responsiveness of those in places of authority to the individuality of those with whom they deal is increasingly necessary in days of technological dominance. The man behind the counter or the desk needs to lend a willing ear, using tact and good humour, to the needs, complaints and importunities of impatient people. The iron hand needs a velvet glove.

The replacement of book-orientated dictatorial service by a more person-directed service will not affect material efficiency adversely, and it will make life more satisfying for both its giver and receiver. The man behind the counter can raise his own status in his own mind, and in the mind of the person he serves, if he gives not only what is expected but something better than the client thought he wanted.

Utter objectivity is a correct and fruitful aim in science, but it is an inhuman attitude not to be adopted in dealing with people. In a democracy such as Canada the rules must be flexed within reason to fit individual cases. Obstinacy in holding to a ruling in the face of contrary facts turns a man into a nuisance.

The other side

It is possible that much of the reaction of the bureaucrat is sparked by the negative or hostile approach made to him. Perhaps much that is objected to as being "bureaucratic" is in the mind of the beholder.

One simple and generous thought will help the man in the street in his dealing with bureaucrats. Remember that this is the first time you have tripped over this problem, and it irritates you, but for the man to whom you turn for help it is the hundredth time the same question has been asked. He will answer you efficiently, according to his knowledge and experience, but do not ask that in addition he console you. If he is slow to do what you want, do not write him off as being stupid or obstructive. He may be waiting until he digests all the evidence before giving his opinion.

For their very existence both government and business demand this sort of deliberative approach to problems. Certain restraints and restrictions are not only necessary; they are inevitable; and, despite the endless jibes thrown their way, they are desirable when the broad view is taken.

The thing to do is to view the contacts between bureaucrats and the public from both sides, and for both parties to make the effort necessary to make the contacts as pleasurable as possible.