

BUREAUCRACY: THE ANSWER TO ALL OUR PROBLEMS

PREAMBLE:

Webster's dictionary defines "bureaucracy " as the administration of government through departments managed by officials following an inflexible routine. As a result of my more than 35 years of dealing with both federal and state government licensing rules and regulations, grant provisions, and contract problems I have developed a number of opinions about bureaucracy that would embellish that somewhat innocent definition considerably, but Webster usually does not go into that kind of detail.

I must admit at the outset that this paper is the result of absolutely no formal research. It contains my own personal ruminations , I make no claim to objectivity, and my view of the subject has long since ceased to be one of benevolent tolerance.

As I prepared the paper, I was afraid that I might be unduly critical of the government and its effort to save and protect us from all our problems. However, after following closely the brilliant performance of the Kentucky General Assembly during the past three months -- not to mention the unique and somewhat bewildering type of leadership shown by the executive branch , I realize that my paper is unduly optimistic . It was too late, however, to make any significant changes.

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The term bureaucracy is not to be considered synonymous with government employment. Indeed, many government employees are true civil servants, who, themselves, must struggle against the bureaucracy.

THERE ARE ALSO bureaucrats in organizations other than government agencies. It is my opinion that the proportion of bureaucrats in a given organization is related to the size of the entity, i.e., the larger the organization, the more bureaucrats. But bureaucracy is actually a state of mind, an attitude, a certain approach to the conduct of business affairs.

I believe that the bureaucratic attitude is born partly of a sense of one's job having no intrinsic value. Thus, the worker must find some extrinsic reason for his job's existence.

This is precisely why self-employed individuals and those who work toward certain intrinsic goals are not prone to adopt bureaucratic methods. They have no doubt about the usefulness of their work. Thus, they struggle against any development within their organizations that tend to delay the attainment of objectives.

But the individual who has neither an intrinsic goal nor a profit motive may sense that his job is really unnecessary and then gravitate toward anything that tends to make the job appear needed.

ONE WAY TO MAKE one's job necessary (when it really isn't) is to become an obstacle to other people achieving their objectives. This is often called approving or "signing off" on other people's work or ideas. If Employee A want to attain goal #1, but he has to go through Employee B to get to goal #1, then employee B's role becomes necessary, even though it was not so before the regulation making it necessary was set up.

To translate this into an all-too-familiar situation, let us suppose that a hospital wants to establish a new health service. The doctors in this hospital know that the service is needed, because there is no other place to obtain the service, and some people will die if they do not get it. They know that the service will cost a certain amount to set up and to operate. The hospital wants to recoup the cost of setting up the service, and the doctors want to realize a certain income for their role. It would appear the procedure should be

that the hospital simply obtain the funds to initiate the service, the doctors let it be known that it is available, and the patients who need it should be brought into to receive it.

LET US SUPPOSE, however, that this community has a health planning body that must approve all new medical services. This planning body now occupies a piece of territory that is extremely valuable. Why? Because it stands between several groups of people and their desired goals or needs. It now has the power to dictate standards, procedural rules, and fees. If the rules somehow improve the procedure, insure access, or provide financial support, the effect may be beneficial. But the cumbersome administrative procedures that seem always to follow government regulation too often prove otherwise.

I cite this example with full understanding that many people have come to believe that such planning bodies are necessary in the health services, as well as other segments of business and industry. Such regulation usually begins with an earnest desire to protect the public against unnecessary, expensive or inefficient services, but typically it creates more problems than it solves. .

One of bureaucracy's chief preoccupations is trying to identify problems that need to be solved. Those discussed on a daily basis include world peace, nuclear energy, urban crime, rural poverty, race relations, mental illness, the failure of the education system, health care costs, destruction of the earth's ozone layer, the illegitimate birth rate, the spread of AIDS, inflation, equal rights for women, economic recessions, and a few others. THESE PROBLEMS ARE variously described as growing, reaching epidemic proportions, crying out for immediate solution, destined to destroy civilization as we know it, the most important problem facing the current session of congress, etc.

Many solutions, plans, strategies, corrective programs, reform acts, task forces, intergovernmental committees, and special commissions (not to mention epic movies) have been made, set forth, formed, or proposed for each problem, and not one has ever had, to my knowledge, any appreciable effect on either problem.

Proposals include higher taxes, population control, lower taxes, less government spending, better schools, more government spending, more attention to religion, more Democrats in office, less attention to religion, more Republicans in office, doing away with elections altogether, strengthening the United Nations, and dissolving the United Nations, just to mention a few. Not one of these plans has ever worked, and most have never been tried. THE CLOSEST THE government ever seems to get to a problem solution is to establish what is called a process, as in peace process or budget. process. We have a peace process in Bosnia and one in the Middle East , and a budget process in Congress. That should tell you what a process is worth.

Another of the government's favorite pastimes is to establish priorities. This is supposed to be a prelude to a solution, but it doesn't work. When the federal government first decided to get involved in community mental health, they established five basic priorities, which, at the time , were clear and practical. Later, they added two or three more, and things got a little less clear. Last year I went through old correspondence and counted 37. One of these is "stressed farmers", a product of the land devaluation of the 1980's. Another is "bus crash victims", obviously appropriate for the Radcliffe community several years ago but hardly a pressing need in communities that do not even have busses.

This is not to say that some problems don't get resolved. Take the energy crisis, for example, which seems to have eased considerably in recent years -- but not due to anything the government did to solve the problem. None of its proposed plans worked; we never reduced our use of energy or our dependence on foreign oil supplies, the substitutes for fossil fuel never provided much relief -- but the problem is no longer an issue.

OR CONSIDER THE OUTCOME of the cold war -- which everyone says we won. The hawks say we won it, because we kept a large defense establishment, while the doves say we won it, because we used restraint and got a ban on nuclear weapons. In my opinion, we really didn't win it at all. The Soviet Union fell, because socialism failed, so our major opponent ceased to exist. It ended in default, the way a boxing match ends , when one

fighter fails to show up. Hopefully, solutions will be found to some of our other problems, but don't expect them to come from government agencies.

The government likes to establish planning groups, so it hires a lot of planners. These people have a philosophy and a language all their own. they begin with what they call a statement of the problem, then they proceed to get descriptions (usually from people who know nothing about the matter) of the ideal situation, i.e., how things ought to be. Next the planner extracts from his group a set of goals, followed by something called objectives, which are not to be confused with goals, being shorter range improvements that are desirable but relatively inconsequential. These are followed by action steps or methods, then barriers to the actions. Next come actions steps to remove the barriers, and so on it goes. I am not sure how far it can go, because the process usually founders by this time, its real purpose being not to solve problems but to evolve plans, and one can sustain interest in that for only so long. KERA was developed by this method. And it was, of course, the approach used by the secret health reform task force whose product is also a secret, bearing no definite relationship to current bills in congress.

The bastardization of language may, indeed, be one of the bureaucracy's most serious -- at least most irritating -- offenses. Words like empower, scenario, impacting, infra-structure, prioritize, optionalize, and agenda drift through government papers like snow flakes in a storm -- each a little different, but none with clear form.

The current administration has talked of "reinventing government", a vague if wistful dream that most of us know will evaporate in the morning mist of political reality. As support (as if such were needed) for such re-invention, Vice-president Gore cites 22 pages of regulations explaining how to make brownie cookies, including how many raisins and nuts should be included. What is not explained is how many nuts it takes to explain how many nuts you need to put into a brownie cookie. A chilling thought: this is the government which is designing a health care program.

THERE IS NO WAY of estimating the stultifying effects of bureaucracy with its inestimable capacity for deadening incentives. But one wonders how many progressive ideas may be going for naught because of the bureaucratic screens through which they must be sifted.

There is no doubt in my mind, however, that many of the great achievements of history would never have occurred if they had been subjected to the modern government planning, licensing, regulation, and monitoring that we know today. Can you imagine what the Declaration of Independence or Bill of Rights would be like if crafted by the current congress? Or the Gettysburg Address written by today's speech writers? I am sure that the voyage of Columbus would never have occurred.

Though criticized in recent years as a case of racist exploitation of the happy aborigines that inhabited what we now know as America and as a spoiler of a virgin, pristine environment, Columbus' voyage still stands as one of the great turning points in the history of mankind.

His modest, though profit driven goal, was to establish new trade routes to India, so, he sought Spanish government support for the project. Such trade routes would be of great value both to European countries and those of the east. Neither would be exploiting the other. The Europeans wanted to buy, and the easterners had goods to sell. There was no thought of one ethnic group dominating the other. Most people scoffed at the idea of the voyage, because their geocentric ignorance made them think that such a thing was not possible. Queen Isabella was fascinated by the possibilities and is said to have pawned her jewels to finance the project, perhaps the most profitable investment ever made by a first lady. (But perhaps not.)

But suppose the Spanish government had had Departments of Commerce, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services, plus congressional committees, an equal opportunity commission, and a host of other groups who could lay claim to some authority to approve and/or monitor such projects.

It is likely that Columbus would have had to do a needs survey, a feasibility study, and an environmental impact plan. He would have had to name goals, measurable objectives, and methodologies that would prove that the well being of the Spanish people would be improved by such a project. More than 50 per cent of the committees considering the proposal would have to have been made up of people who did not make their living in exploration, naval operations, or international commerce.

Columbus would certainly have had to hold at least one public hearing, duly advertised in the manner that such things were in those days, and open to all Spaniards. Each citizen would have had the right to question the project, criticize, and to present a list of reservations as to why such a venture might either damage the well being or violate the rights of any particular group of citizens.

He would have had to respond to such a hearing, taking note of all the objections set forth. If he got past that hurdle, he would have had to have a complete description of the anticipated voyage, with time lines, detailed specifications for all three ships, and proof that all Spaniards had had an equal opportunity to become members of the ships' crews. After receiving a final set of deficiencies he would have had to prepare a plan of correction that would have multiplied the number of ships in the fleet, increased the cost several times, and changed the ultimate destination. Indeed, there is a good chance that before he got out of the harbor, that the Indians would have discovered Europe, and the entire course of history would be changed.

OR CONSIDER THE FLIGHT of Charles Lindbergh, who made trip similar to that of Columbus, except in the opposite direction, by means of a different mode of transportation, and without government assistance. The impressive thing about Lindbergh's flight was that he supervised the construction of his own aircraft. He departed from many of the assumptions of his day (on the basis of which others had tried and failed in a similar effort), and he made the flight alone. There was very little written about it before it took place, and the log he kept as a record consisted of only a few lines. No self-respecting

planning body would ever approve such a hair brained scheme, because it is obvious that the plan came nowhere near coordinating all the various theories, prior efforts, and competing plans for transatlantic flight. Lindbergh had not been examined by human factors psychologists to ascertain that he was mentally alert and had sufficiently good reflexes to handle the flight. There had been no public input into the preparation of the project, he had no federal grant, no legislative oversight, and no university affiliation. Indeed, from an accountability standpoint the whole project was a fiasco and would have been an historical embarrassment except for the single fact that it was a great success. The flight was not perfect, but it went more smoothly than my last flight from Nashville to Atlanta, and it cost a lot less.

But I suspect that bureaucracy is unavoidable --like ants at a picnic or vacation visits by your wife's relatives. Maybe we just have to learn to live with it like osteoarthritis, presbyopia, and prostate trouble -- you can complain, tell jokes, or try to keep it a secret, but it's part of the human condition. Vice president Gore has my best wishes in his ambitious plan to re-invent government, but I fear that his youthful enthusiasm is in for a disappointment. Some changes, however desirable, can never be, and we might do well to accept that fact. 1