

## BUREAUCRACY

### Friends of the Earth (Canberra) \*

Bureaucracy is an important modern phenomenon. Until a few hundred years ago, bureaucracies were found in only a few special parts of society. Now they are widespread, and continue to penetrate more and more aspects of life. Bureaucracy is a way of organising the work and interactions of a large number of people by the use of hierarchy, a high division of labour and a system of rules and standard operating procedures. Bureaucracy is the organising principle of most government departments, corporations, armies, political parties, communist regimes, trade unions and professional bodies.

People concerned about environmental issues often are frustrated by bureaucracies. Many corporations and government bodies either cause or contribute to environmental problems.

- \* Mining companies exploit minerals and energy supplies.

- \* Chemical companies create dangerous substances.

- \* Electricity authorities develop centralised supply systems based on coal or nuclear power.

- \* Forestry commissions engage in clearfelling, destruction of native forests for pine and other environmentally damaging practices.

- \* Food processors and agricultural chemical companies press for monocultures, heavy pesticide use and factory farming.

- \* Automobile manufacturers and main roads departments promote a car-based industrial and transport system.

Many bureaucracies are unresponsive to public concern about environmental or other social problems with which they are linked. Perhaps the best known case in Australia is the Tasmanian Hydroelectric Commission, which not only produces hydroelectric power but also utilises political power. Other bureaucracies are sometimes willing to study and occasionally promote environmentally sound policies. But often this occurs only after massive efforts by lobbying or public protest. There seems to be few ways for bureaucracies to respond to community concerns as part of a continuing process of communication, learning and adaptation between members of the bureaucracy and of the community.

Members of Friends of the Earth in Canberra have recognised that bureaucracy is a key obstacle in coming to grips with environmental problems. We are also aware that the problem is associated with bureaucracy as a form of social organisation rather than with the individuals who work in bureaucracies, who almost without exception are well-intentioned. We have studied some of the important writings about bureaucracy and gained an understanding of how bureaucracies operate in society. But we also wanted to see how others saw bureaucracy from the inside. To do this we decided to talk to some of the people who worked in a division of the Department of National Development and Energy (now Resources and Energy). Since we were interested in the

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experiences of people in bureaucracies, we could have chosen just about any government department. We chose the one we did mainly because we knew something about energy issues and so could understand more of what people had to say about their work.

During the latter half of 1982 we contacted most people within the division chosen and invited each individual to talk with us informally and give their personal views about issues of job satisfaction and decision-making in the department. Many people were uninterested or apprehensive about doing this, so we can only comment on the views expressed by those who were willing to be interviewed. We also had a meeting with several senior officers in the Department to hear official views. We are grateful to all those who talked with us for their participation and for the insights they provided.

### **Insights from the Interviews**

Our aim in the interviews was not to perform an empirical survey of opinions, but rather to compare our understanding of bureaucracy with the views of people at different levels within one. For example, we knew of alternatives to bureaucracies but wanted to find out if others were aware of them.

There were three main areas which we explored in our interviews. One of these was decision-making in a bureaucracy, and the related issues of hierarchy and the division of labour.

Respondents generally identified a strict hierarchy in the Department. Many believed however that the rigidity of the system depended significantly on the attitude of particular superiors. Some superiors encourage feedback and liaise more with lower level staff, while others are more authoritarian and stick strictly to the established lines of command. Most respondents saw the problems with the public service – including resistance to new ideas and lack of feedback – as due to personalities rather than structures. This contrasts with the view, which is common in studies of bureaucracy, that the bureaucratic structure of the public service pressures people to act in ways which conform to the hierarchy and that some adapt to this pattern immediately, while others retain differing degrees of independence.

It seemed to us that respondents did not identify one particular pattern of decision-making in the Department: their explanations continually focussed on personalities. For example, they thought that good or bad decisions stemmed from particular superiors.

Several respondents commented that although staff at all levels were free to suggest changes and ideas, the hierarchy appeared to provide a filtering system for advice from below: high level staff were often slow to move on new ideas or opposed them. This filtering effect had a substantial effect on the kinds of proposals which people from below put forward, producing a kind of self-censorship in which only ideas which were likely to appeal to superiors were suggested.

Several respondents also commented that those who did not 'fit in' or whose ideas were too divergent from the norm were not favoured and either remained in low level positions or left the department. Thus the system selected people

who fitted into the structure and who did not rock the boat too much.

We noticed that the Department has a relatively high proportion of people with economics degrees compared with scientists, engineers and social scientists. The dominance of economics and of economic criteria in the decision-making process and for evaluating proposals has many negative consequences. The standard economic framework is a very restrictive one, which deals with most environmental risks, for example, only as an afterthought — as ‘externalities’ — and usually accepts existing physical infrastructure and lifestyles as givens. The prevalence of economists in the public service, especially in powerful positions, means among other things that renewable energy sources and other environmentally advantageous options are evaluated from a singularly unfavourable perspective.

We asked most interviewees whether they had ever had a conflict between their personal views and the things they were required to do. They reported that such conflicts almost never occurred, and that when they did they were almost always resolved by submerging their personal views. This was rationalised as being a ‘professional’ attitude. Indeed, many respondents had almost completely come to view the world from a public service orientation. For quite a few, especially those at higher levels, it was impossible to distinguish personal and official views.

A second main area covered in the interviews was job satisfaction. At all levels most people indicated general satisfaction with the aims and functions of the Department. They generally felt that the Department had the potential to be socially relevant. This finding may be somewhat unrepresentative, though, since a high fraction of respondents were from areas of more obvious social relevance.

Several replies drew attention to the lack of job satisfaction at the lower levels, although often dissatisfaction was masked by anticipation of mobility or change. Those higher up the hierarchy often felt dissatisfaction with particular decisions and with their own relative lack of power. People who were satisfied often were those who saw their work as bringing results or as being responsible or worthwhile in terms of community goals or their own beliefs. For those lower in the hierarchy, there were decreased opportunities for the use of discretion and interpretation, and for determining goals. Work tended to be perceived as more boring and less satisfying and less personally fulfilling. The fact that some respondents felt that having a satisfying and responsible job was more important than an increase in pay or other material incentives illustrates the great importance attached to job satisfaction.

To reduce the frustration caused by constant rejection of proposals or re-drafting of letters, most respondents saw that they had to pitch their arguments in a certain way so as to conform to ‘political realities’. Some suggested such an approach was necessary to obtain promotion, after which one’s power to influence decisions and one’s job satisfaction would increase. We noted that few mentioned that after many years of conforming with the official line and finally attaining a senior level, they might have a vested interest in retaining

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the status quo and their new found power.

Others (generally at more senior levels) suggested that even while conforming to these 'realities' it was possible to effect some changes, eg. by the addition of subtle, persuasive sections in briefings, recommendations, speeches, etc. Those who did not wish to pursue this road to power and satisfaction usually devoted more time to and gained more satisfaction from activities outside their jobs. Those who were committed to rising in the hierarchy to achieve power (whether they were at high or lower levels) usually saw those who were more interested in outside activities as lazy. On the contrary, studies of bureaucracy and several of our interviews suggest these people were disillusioned with the existing structure and procedures.

The Departmental elites saw their Department operating as one big happy family. They also suggested that the only answer to overcoming routine and boring tasks in low-level jobs was for the individual to gain promotion to areas where the work was more challenging and the chance to influence decisions was greater. But plainly this answer to personal boredom and dissatisfaction will only work for a handful of people. After all, the pyramidal structure of a bureaucracy depends on a large number of people at the bottom whose jobs are inevitably unsatisfying.

The third and final major area raised in the interview was the question of how the bureaucracy might be restructured to be both more satisfying to work in and more responsive to community interests. Only a minority of respondents saw this as an important problem. There were a number of suggestions presented, such as taking ideas directly to people high in the hierarchy above one's immediate boss, job exchanges between the public service and outside groups (including environmental groups), and the use of the freedom of information legislation. The most common idea was that the bureaucracy could only be changed by political initiative from the top, such as by a reforming political party. This was not seen as very likely. There was little general awareness of alternatives to bureaucracy and, even among those sympathetic to change in bureaucratic structures, little idea of how change might come about. Quite a few respondents made a strong point that it was a waste of time to try to change bureaucratic structures, so convinced were they of the necessity of the present structure.

Many people were uninterested or apprehensive about being interviewed. After several initial interviews, we were asked by a senior officer not to contact people during office hours on the premises. We then obtained written permission from the Secretary of the Department to hold interviews outside working hours and off the premises. Despite this official permission and the complete confidentiality of the material, it became apparent that many staff were afraid to be interviewed and express their real views because of possible repercussions. For example, one person we called said he would have liked to be interviewed if it did no harm to him and was of some benefit to us, but he said this was not the case. In addition, several people expressed their disapproval of our method of approaching members of the department directly instead of going through official channels. Both the fear of personal risk and the dis-

approval of our methods illustrated for us the difficulty community groups face in interacting with bureaucracies in ways not controlled from the top.

### **The Nature of Bureaucracy**

The interviews helped us in understanding better the operation of bureaucracies as seen from the inside, and supplemented our studies of the nature of bureaucracy. The characteristic features of bureaucracy are hierarchy, a specialised division of labour, rules describing the duties and rights of members, a set of standard operating procedures and impersonal relations between staff. In an ideal bureaucracy, individuals become interchangeable parts with uniform, circumscribed functions. For the most part our interviews confirmed this standard picture.

One of our conclusions is that the frustration, the lack of job satisfaction inside bureaucracies, and the lack of responsiveness to community interests stem from the hierarchical structure of bureaucratic organisation. This structure decreases job satisfaction for those inside, so that the unlucky majority who have fewer opportunities for discretion and for integrating work into a whole task find their jobs boring and unsatisfying. But it also means decreased responsiveness to community groups and a hidden political agenda.

It is often taken for granted that bureaucracies are neutral administrative machines and that the hierarchical mode of organisation is the most efficient. However, we believe that a bureaucracy is better viewed as a political system. Oppositions within bureaucracies are the rule rather than the exception and are similar to political oppositions within authoritarian states. Those who work in bureaucracies are not permitted freedom of speech in public dissent from policies and learn to submerge their own convictions and values in those of the organisation. This is quite similar to the way all citizens are treated in authoritarian states. The restraints on bureaucrats are legitimated by the claim of administrative neutrality.

Bureaucracies should not be seen in isolation from the rest of society. In many cases particular bureaucracies can be seen as the tools of political masters, whether this is the government or a corporation. But the choice of a particular organisational form – bureaucracy or some other form – as a tool is just as important as the choice of an axe or a butter knife to butter bread: the tool is easier to use for some purposes than others. Tools and bureaucracies are both products of society and an influence on the direction of society. ‘Political masters’ cannot simply do anything they like with bureaucracies, because bureaucracies are only suited for doing certain sorts of tasks, and this shapes the expectations of political elites about what should be done. Furthermore, political parties, parliaments and corporations are bureaucratic in form themselves, partly because this allows them to mesh more easily with government bureaucracies.

The political or value commitments of bureaucracies – the hidden political agenda – are often disguised, but usually come to the surface when there are dissidents within the bureaucracy. People who offend against the hidden interests of the bureaucracy, and especially ‘whistle-blowers’ – those who make

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public their dissatisfaction or their dissenting opinions – are subject to numerous penalties. For example, they may lose their chance of promotion. When David Berthelson, as a private citizen, made certain criticisms of the Department of Defence to a parliamentary committee, the response of the Department was basically to dismiss the criticisms and to apply pressure to restrain David Berthelson.

The division of labour involved in bureaucracy is not so much designed for technical efficiency as for concentrating and maintaining elite power and control. A similar process occurs in technological change. The selection, design and use of many technologies, such as nuclear power and numerically controlled machine tools, enable control of workers and maintain existing power structures. According to Stephen Marglin's analysis of the origins of the industrial revolution, the grouping together of workers in factories was actually less efficient than previous work organisations in terms of output of goods from a given input of resources and labour. But the factory system forced employees to work longer hours and gave the owners rather than the workers control over the output. The owners thus had a surplus to invest. Bureaucratic structures function in a similar way to control those who work in them, to filter out alternative arrangements and to maintain basically conservative policies.

Several things follow from this view of bureaucracy as a political form of organisation rather than as a neutral administrative system.

\* First, there is nothing intrinsically virtuous in being a model public servant and working through the system. On the contrary, voicing dissent inside or outside the bureaucracy should be considered to be as ethical as voicing political dissent in a democracy.

\* Second, it is legitimate for community groups to interact directly with those who work in bureaucracies, rather than proceeding through the hierarchy and 'the normal channels'.

\* Third, attempts to overcome the linked problems of bureaucracy for workers and communities by attempting to make it conform more closely to the model of administrative neutrality and accountability are misconceived. A better approach would be to recognise the political character of bureaucracy rather than trying to disguise it and to adopt structures which enable workers in bureaucracies to relate their work directly to community goals.

### Alternatives to Bureaucracy

Are there any alternatives to current bureaucracies? Is it possible to organise work in a more decentralised and participatory way, and still maintain efficiency?

One well tested alternative to hierarchical work organisation is the autonomous work group. This is a group of say 4 to 12 workers – typically at shop floor level – who collectively decide on how their job will be done and how the tasks will be divided up or rotated. Sometimes such groups develop spontaneously, as in the case of coal mining in Britain prior to mechanisation and at the shopfloor level in many heavy industries. There have also been a wide

range of planned experiments with autonomous work groups. In most cases the technical as well as the social aspects of the work are reorganised, and so this alternative is sometimes referred to as socio-technical design.

The experience with autonomous work groups has been highly successful. No one is forced to join a work group, but for those who do, job satisfaction, creativity and initiative almost invariably increase. In addition, productivity is maintained and usually increased. Because of greater job satisfaction, turnover, absenteeism and sabotage are reduced.

To take only one of many possible examples, in an experiment at a pulp mill in Norway, work was reorganised so that skills were upgraded and job rotation was introduced in limited form. The results included:

- \* improvement in quality and costs of production;
- \* better communication and teamwork between operators;
- \* many suggestions from the workers for technical improvements.

Because of the practical advantages of greater industrial democracy, many companies are trying out this alternative.

Alternatives to top-level management structures in bureaucracies are not so well tested, but there are some examples worth considering. Although bureaucratic organisation is widespread in modern society, it is a development mainly of the past two centuries. Before that, communities were more self-sufficient and autonomous, and communicated through networks. There is no technical reason why greater self-sufficiency, networks and federations could not serve instead of many of today's bureaucracies.

There are many times in which a choice must be made between centralised and decentralised systems. For example, the technology of nuclear power, by its large size and high capital cost, potential danger and dependence on experts, is linked with the centralised political and economic control associated with large bureaucracies. By contrast, energy efficiency and use of small-scale decentralised renewable energy technologies would allow more individual and local community control over energy planning, and favour interaction via networks.

To take another example: with television, communication is rigidly controlled and passes from the few to the many. On the other hand, the postal system allows unfettered communication from the many to the many.

One little tried alternative to the usual management structures is the 'lot' or 'jury' system. Coordination and management functions — for example for a group of autonomous work groups — would be handled by a committee whose members were drawn by lot from all relevant workers, in the style of ancient Greek democracy. The committee would have a gradually rotating membership to preserve continuity, and would be able to call on experts. Although inexperience might still be a problem, the great advantage of not having permanent managers is that coordinators drawn by lot would be less vulnerable to the blandishments of vested interests. This system would also make it harder for power-seeking individuals to attain dominance. Decision-making would be shared around and real meaning given to the word democracy.

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Coordinating committees would not have to be restricted to workers, but could include consumers, pensioners, and others affected by the enterprise in question. In this way organisations could be made more responsive to a wide range of community interests.

When people get a chance to participate in a meaningful way in decisions affecting their lives, there is usually a great upsurge of popular involvement, enthusiasm and creativity. For example, the opportunities opened up by the Solidarity movement in Poland, before the military coup, led to an enormous groundswell of democratic involvement in not only trade unions but also in other areas such as the media and the arts.

A non-bureaucratic alternative to a department of energy might take the form of a set of autonomous groups of skilled people, each focussing on particular problems such as energy efficiency, energy self-reliance, safety, etc. A coordinating committee to monitor the progress of these groups might be composed of individuals, chosen by lot for a fixed period, from the groups themselves, from energy workers, from energy producers and consumers and others in the general community. With such an arrangement, workers would have continual feedback from and accountability to community interests. They would also be better able to see their work as part of a whole and put it in the context of community concern.

If workers had more say in what are now management decisions, would they just use this power to pad their pockets? The available evidence shows otherwise. The best example is the alternative corporate plan developed by the workers at Lucas Aerospace in Britain. Instead of concentrating on aerospace components, the workers suggested using their skills to produce kidney machines, road-rail vehicles, heat pumps and other products filling a real social need. Not only are the proposals by the workers very oriented to community needs, but the whole exercise has released an enormous creative potential in workers, a potential left untapped by the traditional management structure.

The alternatives to bureaucratic organisation have their strengths and weaknesses, and some of them have barely been developed. Our aim here is not to spell out precise directions for particular departments, but to suggest that there are some alternatives that might well be investigated.

### Further reading:

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Trevor A. Williams, *Learning to Manage our Futures: The Participative Redesign of Societies in Turbulent Transition* (New York: Wiley, 1982).

Have you agreed or disagreed with the ideas in this article? We would be interested in hearing about your reactions. Please pass them on to

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**Editors Note:**

This paper was given to us by Brian Martin who lives in Canberra and who works as an applied mathematician. Brian has been active for many years in the radical science, environmental and peace movements. Brian spoke on Bureaucracy at the conference and although the paper is not an exact transcription of his discussion, it does broadly outline many of the areas and ideas raised by him in the session. A further discussion of his ideas on bureaucracy and its relation to the War Industry is contained in his most recent publication *Uprooting War*, Freedom Press, 1984.

1984 and **SOCIAL CONTROL**



**PAPERS** from the  
«1984 and SOCIAL CONTROL»  
**CONFERENCE**

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at the "1984 and Social  
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