

BUREAUCRATIC MANAGEMENT

THE PETER PRINCIPLE RIGHTLY DESERVES its reputation. But the cruellest irony associated with the book — one which Laurence Peter and Raymond Hull might themselves have predicted — has been its total inability to change the procedures it exposes. Bureaucracies abound, subdivide without pause, and multiply without being fruitful. People continue to ascend power structures to their level of incompetence and to wield power incompetently. And despite the many talented people in government, business, education and other institutional organizations, the institutions themselves increasingly appear to reward the institutionally predictable.

The “good” principals and presidents and power brokers — by which one means those individuals whose talent for efficiency has not come at the expense of imagination or intelligence or human insight — repeatedly assert their individuality against the systems they must contend with. Perhaps because it is individuality they value, and individuality which gives them value, they have not been able to impose *their* character upon the systems. To sacrifice the individuality is little answer, for the value would disappear whatever organization took it over. And the confrontative politics which bureaucratic organization engenders are merely elaborate war games engineered by would-be generals who lack any other kind of war to manage. Faced with this play of power, most people are cast in the audience’s role, but in the process they also accept a reversal of character models. On the stage are the puppeteers, and in the audience are the puppets. And appreciating the Peter Principle does not cut the strings. It expresses an ironic defence of sorts against power, an indictment which asserts a perennial independence of attitude, whatever the appearance of behavioural control might suggest to the contrary. But this independence, too, may be an illusion. As bureaucracies increase in anonymity, they can rely more and more successfully on apathy and fear to increase their power. The power to deny independence is not then a distant step for them to take, and

the fact that it is taken daily in the name of stability does not make it any the more laudable. But how to combat the anonymity? and how to combat the fear?

The problem with fear is that, because “bad” administrators are always unwilling to admit to their terminal level in the Peter-principle hierarchy — and hence are afraid of being caught out by those above them — fear is self-perpetuating. The powerless are afraid for their security of the powerful, who in turn are afraid of the responsibility which their position implies. So they defer authority upwards. They take no decisions without higher approval, which the higher authority — interpreting any application for the approval of something novel as an administrative escape mechanism rather than the birth of a valid idea — seldom if ever gives. So no ideas move up from the imaginative and intelligent, because there’s an unimaginative and unintelligent barrier between such originators and anyone with both authority and wit to appreciate them. Characteristically the people who act as that barrier cannot laugh, cannot listen, do not hear, and will never admit to a mistake. Without power they would be pitiable; with power they are intrinsically dangerous. Already empty themselves, they deny their particular society of its life’s blood. And much of the time they even do so unknowingly. Relying on an inherited structure, they cannot see that it continues to live only if actual individual people continue to animate it. Declaring themselves for stability and order, they cannot appreciate how necessary a little disorder is if human lives are to continue to be creative. Wielding power rigidly, they cannot distinguish between authority and autocracy, nor allow options and opportunities to others lest these in some way undermine their own fragile hold on security, whether political or moral or whatever.

Anyone who has encountered classically bureaucratic acts will recognize the coupled fear and ambition in the people who perform them. Government’s impulse to centralize — to centralize everything — is like nothing so much as an American wagon-train encircling more and more tightly round Confederation Square in defence of a set of mind it has never allowed to be refreshed. And the centrifugal impulse of Canada’s regions seems to emerge from a series of confrontations between aspiring centralists, each with his own definition of centre and power and truth. Opposition counter-impulses to regionalize everything would set up mini-wagon trains all across the country, all denying the flexibility that comes from open and inter-regional communication. The possibilities Canada has repeatedly represented — the possibilities that derive from co-ordinated individual options — can only prosper in a more open atmosphere: a climate open to imagination and ideas among the recent and the junior and the mobile as well as the established and the senior and the fixed. To set up controls over imaginative possibilities is to deny the options that people ought to have by right.

Literature and the other arts are not as free from such management as many humanists would like to believe. When Jack McClelland, speaking of publishing,

distinguishes diametrically between "Toronto" and "the regions," he draws apparently unquestioningly on an acceptance of a centralism of his own definition — shared by many, perhaps, but not by the nation at large. Yet it affects the publishing industry, the possibilities of communication, and the fact of book distribution, not to mention other kinds of imaginative enterprise. When the Canada Council defines in advance that it will support only modern dance in Vancouver and only ballet in Winnipeg, it looks at a centralized master plan rather than at the talent or enterprise it could be fostering. Yet it affects individual human beings. When most of the morally outraged who rail publicly against vice choose language and books as their target rather than violence and the barrenness of administrative imagination, they betray their own insecurity about themselves and their transparent political ambition. Yet they cause nervous bureaucrats to run at once in protective circles. When paper matters more than people, and the ease of access to a target more than the justifiability of reaching it, a society is in a precarious state. To help it, the imaginative and creative and intelligent have to stop running from the fear of being called elitist; they have to stop minimizing their talent; they have to stop suffering the mediocre when their society needs able people and sound ideas; they have to assert the rights of the creative and intelligent to a stimulating public education; they have to start reassessing what are problems and what are solutions in Canada, and they have to do so unafraid of their own and their country's future.

W.H.N.

PRISONERS

P. K. Page

One can spot them at once
 although not
 as one might suppose
 by their handcuffs, which of course, they wear
 or by their rage
 their air of guilt
 their wounded pride
 but by the sharp-nosed
 clean-shaven man in drip-dries
 who sits indifferent
 invisibly shackled
 at their side.