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Free speech versus bureaucracy

Bureaucratic elites control information in order to help maintain their control. When employees speak out, this is a challenge to bureaucratic power and its corruptions.

Bureaucracy is a way of organising work. It involves hierarchy, in which people at higher levels are bosses of those below, and so on down the chain. It also involves the division of labour, in which some people do one thing and others do other things—cleaners, accountants, researchers, managers, etc. Other characteristic features of bureaucracy are rules which describe the duties of members, standard operating procedures and impersonal relations between members. Not every bureaucracy has all these characteristics. The most important features are hierarchy and division of labour. Another way of thinking about bureaucracy is as a way of organising work in which people are treated as interchangeable and replaceable cogs to fill specialised roles.

The word “bureaucracy” is popularly applied to government bodies, such as the taxation office and welfare agencies. Any sort of organisation can potentially be a bureaucracy: a corporation, a church, a trade union, an army, a political party, an

environmental group. In fact, most large organisations in the world today are organised bureaucratically.¹

There are a number of consequences of bureaucracy. Since control is exercised from the top, many at the bottom have a low commitment to work. Since knowledge can be used to exercise power, top bureaucrats are reluctant to reveal information to outsiders or to lower level workers. Since top positions in bureaucracies give power and privilege, preserving the bureaucratic structure can become a higher priority than accomplishing what the bureaucracy was set up for. Since bosses exercise control by insisting on following standard operating procedures, doing a job according to standard procedures can become more important than doing the job well.

Bureaucracy only became the main way of organising work in the past couple of centuries. It's worth recalling some non-bureaucratic ways of organising work:

- individual initiative
- family
- feudal estates
- free market
- self-managing collectives
- automation.

From this list, it should be apparent that bureaucracies have both advantages and disadvantages, depending on what the alternative is. An individual can work alone without bothering about hierarchy or division of labour, but there's a limit to what

1. Bengt Abrahamsson, *Bureaucracy or Participation: The Logic of Organization* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1977); Ralph P. Hummel, *The Bureaucratic Experience* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977); Henry Jacoby, *The Bureaucratization of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Katherine Newman, 'Incipient bureaucracy: the development of hierarchy in egalitarian organizations', in Gerald M. Britan and Ronald Cohen (eds.), *Hierarchy and Society: Anthropological Perspectives on Bureaucracy* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980), pp. 143-164; Charles Perrow, *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1979).

one person can do alone. Families can do more, but not everyone is happy with their position in a family. One of the great advantages of bureaucracy is that it promises to overcome the nepotism and favouritism that is common in enterprises dominated by family connections, which usually means dominated by a patriarch. In a bureaucracy, appointments and promotions are supposed to be decided on merit, not who your father is or where you went to school. That is a great attraction compared to feudal systems. Of course, few bureaucracies completely measure up to their promise of fair treatment.

Because bureaucracy is a system of power, it has a strong tendency to mesh with other systems of power—such as male domination. Most bureaucratic elites are men. Men get into top positions in bureaucracies and use their power to exclude women. This can be by blatant discrimination, subtle harassment or by fostering expectations of the style of a successful bureaucrat, which tend to be masculine characteristics. Male domination in a bureaucracy is then used to get other men to support the bureaucratic hierarchy. Bureaucracy and patriarchy thus engage in a process of “mutual mobilisation.”

The same process can work with other systems of power. Bureaucratic elites can be linked to:

- family members;
- religious groups;
- ethnic groups;
- ideological stands;
- people from a particular background, such as certain schools, usually from the same social class;
- personal networks of patronage, based on giving and receiving favours.

Thus, although bureaucracy is supposed to be based on merit, it is commonly “corrupted” by other systems of power. Rather than being an exceptional deviation from the norm, such corruptions are to be expected in any system based on highly unequal power. The result is that most bureaucracies seethe with rumours, power plays, upheavals, takeovers and changing

organisational structures.² This reality is covered over by the rhetoric of efficiency, merit, competition, customer orientation or whatever is the latest buzz word.

Information and bureaucratic power

Information is a crucial part of any bureaucratic system. Normally, information about operations is passed up the hierarchy and orders from bosses are passed down. In practice, neither process operates according to the ideal. Because workers are afraid of the consequences of telling the truth, they commonly tell bosses what they think the bosses want to hear. The top managers thus can become quite out of touch with what's happening. Similarly, when orders are passed down the chain, they may be ignored, reinterpreted or manipulated, in many cases just so workers can get on with the job.

Bureaucratic elites like to collect information about workers, from personal details to comments on job performance. This information can be used to control the workers. On the other hand, information about the elites is not made available to workers. In other words, surveillance is natural to bureaucracies, and much of it is targeted at workers.

Bureaucratic elites have considerable power and, as usual, it tends to corrupt. When possible, elites give themselves high salaries, plush offices, grandiose titles and special privileges. They can exercise power by supporting workers who support them personally and by penalising those who criticise or just annoy them. They can foster fear by intimidating subordinates. They can create havoc through reprimands, demotions, dismissals, restructuring and a host of other mechanisms. Just about anyone who has worked in a bureaucracy has a good idea of the sort of problems that can arise.

2. Robert Jackall, *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), describes this process with great insight.

A bureaucracy is not a free society. There are no elections for top offices. There is little free speech, and there is no free press for opponents of the current elites. Open opponents of the ruling group are likely to be harassed, demoted or dismissed. There is no independent judiciary to deal with grievances.

In fact, a bureaucracy is rather similar to an authoritarian state.³ The most important difference is that an authoritarian state can use the army and police against internal opponents. Bureaucratic elites normally can use only methods such as demotion and dismissal—there are no formal systems to use violence. (In a few bureaucracies, such as the army, force can be used officially against dissident employees.) These methods are potent enough for many purposes.

Bureaucratic elites also control information in order to maintain power in relation to other organisations. If a corporation reveals its plans to competitors, it is vulnerable to challenge or even takeover. If a government department reveals its internal operations, it makes itself vulnerable to critics, whether politicians, other government departments or lobby groups.

Finally, bureaucratic elites control information to cover up corruption and bad or dangerous decisions. Tobacco companies covered up research showing the addictiveness of cigarettes. Police cover up bribery and incompetence. Politicians pass laws to prevent release of government documents dealing with “national security” in order to cover up embarrassing actions.

Free speech by employees is a potent threat to bureaucratic elites. It threatens to undermine elite control in the bureaucracy itself, it threatens to weaken bureaucratic elites in relation to other organisations, and it threatens to expose dubious decisions and corrupt practices by the elites themselves. It is precisely for these reasons that free speech for employees is vital as both a method and a goal.

3. Deena Weinstein, *Bureaucratic Opposition: Challenging Abuses at the Workplace* (New York: Pergamon, 1979).

Arguments

Various arguments are put forward to justify the controls imposed on speech by employees. It's worth examining a few of these.⁴

- *Employees get paid. They shouldn't expect anything else.* Why not? In other circumstances—outside of bureaucracies—payment is not allowed as an excuse to deny people freedom of speech. Shareholders receive dividends. Do they lose their right to speak out?

- *Free speech will reveal trade secrets.* Perhaps so, but this isn't such a big deal. Corporations spend large amounts of money on industrial espionage, including hiring staff from other companies as well as covert listening. Free speech would make this process more honest and open.

Anyway, society benefits when good ideas are widely known. Corporate innovation can be improved when ideas “leak” out.⁵ Overall, secrecy is not an advantage, even for corporations.

Industrial societies have the capacity to produce plenty of goods for everyone. Overproduction is a far greater problem than underproduction. Therefore, one of the most important aims of work should be to provide a satisfying experience for the workers.

- *Employees agree to keep quiet as part of their voluntarily accepted employment contract.* The so-called employment contract is quite one-sided. Few workers have easy mobility. They don't have the financial resources available to employers.

- *Employers have a right to run their enterprises the way they want.* Certainly not. The “rights” of employers are

4. Many of these points are taken from David W. Ewing, *Freedom Inside the Organization: Bringing Civil Liberties to the Workplace* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), a nice treatment of the case for employee rights.

5. Stuart Macdonald, “Nothing either good or bad: industrial espionage and technology transfer,” *International Journal of Technology Management*, Vol. 8, Nos. 1/2, 1993, pp. 95-105.

restricted in lots of ways. Laws prevent hiring of some people, such as children; laws prevent hazardous working conditions; laws prevent indiscriminate impacts on the environment. Enterprises are part of society, and impacts on the society are taken seriously—including impacts on stockholders, clients and other enterprises.

When there is control over speech, those who decide on and exercise the control have power over others. This power is corrupting. It can be used to cover up abuses by elites and to attack those who might challenge the elites. This is precisely how it is used in practice.

Most people believe that “good speech”—speech that is informed and enlightened—should be encouraged. Elites argue that they must control the “bad speech” of others so that only “good speech” is allowed, namely only things that have their approval. But there is a different way to challenge “bad speech”—by challenging it with dialogue and debate. Only by encouraging people’s capacity for critical thinking and argumentation will “good speech” become the genuine voice of the people.

Whistleblowing⁶

Generally speaking, whistleblowing is an act of dissent. Researcher Bill De Maria gives the following more specific definition. Whistleblowing is:

- an open disclosure about significant wrongdoing
- made by a concerned citizen totally or predominantly motivated by notions of public interest,
- who has perceived the wrongdoing in a particular role
- who initiates the disclosure of her or his own free will

6. One excellent treatment is Myron Peretz Glazer and Penina Migdal Glazer, *The Whistleblowers: Exposing Corruption in Government and Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). For more information, see <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/dissent/>.

— to a person or agency capable of investigating the complaint and facilitating the correction of wrongdoing.⁷

In this narrow sense, whistleblowers are usually government or corporate employees who speak out to expose corruption or dangers to the public or environment. Whistleblowers thus practise free speech as a method of exposing problems that they perceive in their workplace. This seems to be a good thing: what could be more worthy than pointing out corruption or hazards so that they can be dealt with?

The problem is that whistleblowing is commonly a threat to powerful interests, typically the employee's superiors. Rather than rectifying the problem, it is common for whistleblowers to come under attack. They are threatened, ostracised, harassed, transferred, reprimanded, vilified, referred to psychiatrists, demoted, dismissed and blacklisted.

David Obendorf was a veterinary pathologist who worked in Launceston, Tasmania for the state's Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries (DPIF). He became concerned about government cutbacks to disease surveillance services, which he believed were important for preventing outbreaks of disease among stock in local farms. His public statements were not welcomed by his superiors. He was transferred across the state to Hobart into a policy position for which he was not trained or suited. Then he was transferred back to Launceston into an office with no computer, no light fitting and broken castors on the chair. More seriously, the information was spread around the locality that he was gay (true), that his partner had died of AIDS (true), that he had AIDS (false) and that his statements were a product of "AIDS dementia" (false). The rumour-mongering undermined his credibility in the conservative rural area in which he worked.

7. William De Maria, "Quarantining dissent: the Queensland public sector ethics movement," *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 54, No. 4, December 1995, pp. 442-454, at p. 447.

The curious thing about this case is that everything Obendorf said had been acknowledged in DPIF's own documents. The difference was that he was making the points accessible to the public in talks and statements to the media.

For years, rumours had circulated that some Australian diplomats, especially in southeast Asia, regularly had sex with children, but little or no action was taken to investigate or stop the practice. Alastair Gaisford, an employee in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in Canberra, Australia, was one of a small number of DFAT workers who spoke out about paedophilia in the foreign service. In 1996, DFAT officials took disciplinary action against Gaisford. As well, they asked Federal Police to raid Gaisford's home to collect documents.

The government minister in charge of DFAT, Alexander Downer, had made a public statement inviting anyone with information about paedophilia in the department to come forward. But this rhetoric made little impact on DFAT top bureaucrats, who went ahead with their harassment of Gaisford. There was much more initiative taken against DFAT whistleblowers than to get to the bottom of allegations about paedophilia.

In general terms, whistleblowing can be thought of as the exercise of free speech to challenge injustice. The hope of the whistleblower is that when top officials realise the problem, they will take action to deal with it. What they commonly discover afterwards is that bureaucratic elites are far more concerned about covering up the problem than dealing with it. In all this, information and credibility are crucial elements.

In a tiny minority of cases, whistleblowers are congratulated for pointing out a problem, which is promptly dealt with. I will set these exceptional cases aside in order to concentrate on the typical response: cover up and attack the whistleblower. Authorities will deny that there is any problem. They will refuse to supply documentation. They will undertake reprisals to stop the whistleblower and to deter others.

To have any chance of success, whistleblowers need good documentation. That means that before speaking out, they should collect lots of information, for example copying relevant documents and perhaps getting statements from others. When the crunch comes, authorities often lie. They may deny that documents exist. They may destroy evidence. They sometimes even produce documents that have been altered or totally forged. An important piece of advice for many bureaucratic dissidents is not to speak out immediately, but instead to lie low and collect information, in order to have an irrefutable case.

Whistleblowers typically try formal channels first. They raise their concerns with their immediate boss, the top boss, an internal appeals procedure, an ombudsperson, a member of parliament, a government oversight body, the courts, and any other official body that seems relevant. The most common experience is that formal channels don't work. This seems a sweeping statement. Bill De Maria and Cyrelle Jan collected information from hundreds of whistleblowers who had taken their cases to dozens of different official bodies. Less than one out of ten appeals to an official body gave any sort of positive response.⁸

There is evidence that significant corruption is found in most large police forces. Citizens who complain about corruption usually get nowhere. Police who report corruption by their colleagues can seldom survive in the force. Harassment of police whistleblowers is commonly severe and sometimes brutal.

Why don't the official channels work? At this point it is valuable to remember that bureaucracies are hierarchical. Those higher up are the superiors of those further down. Whistleblowers expose shortcomings by those higher up than they are. This threatens the hierarchy. Internal appeals procedures are set up by bureaucratic elites and are either staffed by elites or employees

8. William De Maria and Cyrelle Jan, "Behold the shut-eyed sentry! Whistleblower perspectives on government failure to correct wrongdoing," *Crime, Law & Social Change*, Vol. 24, 1996, pp. 151-166.

dependent on them. The result is a strong reluctance to support a person lower down against anyone higher up.

Outside appeal procedures are little better. To take the side of a mere employee against those at the top of an organisation is a frontal challenge to the elites, who are likely to have friends and allies in other organisations. Appeal bodies such as ombudsmen typically have limited funds, limited mandates and little power to bring about change. No wonder they tread softly.

A cynic might suggest that formal procedures and bodies are set up precisely in order to lure dissidents into never-ending appeals, which bog them down in technicalities and trivialities while nothing is done about the problem. Whatever the intent, this is the effect of many procedures and bodies. Information about the problem is kept inside the organisation where it can do little damage.

Whistleblowers usually have far greater impact when they go outside the organisation and official channels, instead taking their message to a wider audience. Media coverage is a particularly potent challenge to a bureaucracy. It takes the issue out of the hands of the bureaucracy and into the eyes of the general public. Top bureaucrats absolutely detest publicity.

Sending a letter to the head of a bureaucracy seldom has much of an impact. Getting the same letter published in a newspaper has a much greater impact. The bureaucrats will all read it, knowing that thousands of others will be reading it too.

Some whistleblower protection laws actually specify that whistleblowers will not be protected if they go to the media. Instead, they have to go to government agencies set up or designated to receive complaints from whistleblowers. This is a good way to keep the problem “in-house.” Media coverage allows lots of people to hear about the problem.

It may seem strange recommending media coverage as a benefit to whistleblowers when I have argued that mass media should be replaced with network media. Right now, both bureaucracies and mass media are systems of information inequality and are subject to the corruptions of power. Some-

times one such system can be used against the other, such as when government regulatory bodies restrain large media corporations and when media coverage exposes abuses in bureaucracies. The important thing is not to rely on these sorts of controls, which amount to one powerful group restraining or undermining another. A strategy against corruptions of information power should aim to undermine all these groups.

Sometimes the media will not cover a story, perhaps due to the influence of local vested interests or fear of defamation. The old-fashioned leaflet is one option. Richard Blake, a public servant in New South Wales, helped set up a reform group. The members produced leaflets and on some occasions handed them out to other employees as they entered government buildings. With electronic mail, the potential for distributing information is even greater.

In 1989, David Rindos took up a senior lectureship in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Western Australia. Soon after, he became acting head of the department and was told of serious problems affecting students, including sexual relations between staff and students, favouritism and discrimination. He reported these problems and as a result came under attack himself, eventually being denied tenure in 1993 in spite of more than adequate teaching and research. He pursued his case through the university's formal channels and then tried the Industrial Relations Tribunal, the University Visitor, the Ombudsman and the West Australian Parliament, as well as using Freedom of Information legislation to obtain documents.

The university hierarchy refused to set up a full-scale investigation of the problems originally raised by Rindos and asserted that all proper procedures had been followed in the case of his tenure. In this situation, a lone individual has almost no chance of making any impact on a resolute administration. Rindos and his supporters were able to make progress through publicity. They alerted archaeologists around the world about the tenure denial and subsequently dozens of leading archaeologists wrote to the university in support of Rindos. Media coverage

gradually developed. The local *Sunday Times* published many supportive stories. However, the daily *West Australian* published nothing at all until 1996, when it ran a week-long massive attack on Rindos. By this time, though, quite a number of powerful people were convinced that the whole thing needed an independent investigation. Although the university set up its own in-house investigation, the West Australian parliament established a wide-ranging inquiry.

Along the way, Rindos used electronic mail, and occasionally the ordinary post, to powerful effect. He had a mailing list of supporters and interested individuals around the country and beyond. He sent out accounts of the latest events and text of stories in the local media. One of his supporters, Hugh Jarvis in the United States, set up a web site with large numbers of documents about the case. In fact, there was so much material that it became difficult to make sense of the issue at a glance.⁹

Rindos did not gain reinstatement before he died unexpectedly in 1996 at the age of 49. In addition, he was subject to extremely damaging attacks on his reputation. But he was relatively successful compared to most whistleblowers, who not only suffer harassment and lose their positions but also get bogged down in formal hearings without any real challenge to the things complained about. Rindos achieved a wide degree of recognition about problems with the university and attracted a considerable level of support. As well as using formal channels as methods of redress, he used them as means for generating publicity, for example alerting the media to his submissions, letters of support, documents obtained under FOI, and so forth. He even had a limited success in putting the focus back on the original problems about which he complained rather than on the university's treatment of himself. In December 1997, the parliamentary committee made its report. It was quite critical of the university.

9. See <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~hjarvis/rindos.html>.

The goals of bureaucracy

Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* is a stimulating and disturbing book.¹⁰ It is an analysis of the Holocaust—the mass extermination of Jews and other peoples by the Nazis—and how it relates to social institutions in modern society. Bauman believes that the Holocaust has profound implications for our understanding of society, but its study has been relegated to a few specialist areas.

The term “modernity” refers to characteristics of society that have developed only in the past few hundred years, including bureaucracy, rationality, science and, more generally, the separation of ends from means. For example, some scientists work on solving particular puzzles involving reaction rates that are important for modelling the dynamics of nuclear explosions. The scientists work on the way to solve the problem, namely the means. The government and weapons lab administrators decide how to use the research, namely the ends.

Bauman's argument is that bureaucratic rationality was one of the essential factors that made the Holocaust possible. Hitler's goal was to remove the Jews. Various means were tried, such as emigration, but when these failed extermination was the “logical” conclusion, given the premise. The efficient and compliant German bureaucracies carried out the required tasks to reach the “final solution.”

The usual explanation of the Holocaust is that it was either a reversion to barbaric behaviour or as something that only related to the Jews. Bauman says, to the contrary, that the Holocaust was made possible by precisely those features of society that made it “civilised.” These features remain today.

The “ideal” bureaucracy is highly efficient, with workers doing their tasks promptly and reliably. The goals of the bureaucracy are set by others, such as government, owners or top management. The ideal bureaucracy is like a well-function-

10. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

ing piece of equipment. The controller decides how to use it and the machine responds. In the jargon of social science, bureaucracy is a “purposive-rational system.”

There are at least two types of bureaucratic whistleblowing.

Procedural whistleblowing

The target here is improper procedures, such as faulty record keeping, neglect of duties, diversion of resources for private purposes, false claims, misuse of money, favouritism, stealing, bullying, blackmail and the like. Some workers are not doing their jobs properly or are actively subverting the aims of the organisation. Procedural whistleblowing exposes the problem that the bureaucracy is not working like it is supposed to, that it falls short of the purposive-rational ideal.

Goal-related whistleblowing

The charge in this case is that the organisation’s goals or purposes are inappropriate. For example, a pharmaceutical company could be challenged because it puts the pursuit of profit above public safety, even though it obeys all laws and regulations. Many bureaucracies seek their own survival above all else, even at the expense of their original goals. Goal-related whistleblowing can challenge bureaucratic elites to pursue the original, formal stated goals of the organisation, or to pursue different, better goals.

Both of these sorts of whistleblowing are important, and often they are combined. The message from Bauman is that challenges to procedural shortcomings are not enough, and even bad, if the goals are wrong. The German bureaucracies mounted a programme of exploitation and extermination that was far more deadly than any of the spontaneous anti-Semitism that preceded it. Jews were identified, categorised, sent to work and death camps. Detailed records were kept of ancestry, belongings, labour output and so forth.

It is possible to imagine procedural whistleblowers in Nazi Germany who pointed out that some categories of Jews were

being given special treatment, that goods produced by slave labour camps were being diverted for private use, or that there were scams associated with purchase of chemicals used in the gas chambers. Procedural whistleblowers might expose those who protected Jews, such as Oscar Schindler. Since there was massive corruption in Nazi Germany, no doubt such whistleblowers existed.

By contrast, goal-related whistleblowers would have challenged the extermination programme itself. They also might have tried to gum up the works, to make the bureaucracies less efficient in their deadly business.

The lesson from Bauman is that we need to pay at least as much attention to the goals of bureaucracies as to their methods. But challenging goals is especially difficult, since there is no formal way to do so. The procedural whistleblower at least has the option of appealing to rules and approaching appeal bodies that are supposed to administer justice (even though they often fail to act against corruption). The goal-related whistleblower has the more overtly political task of challenging the fundamental direction of the organisation.

In countries occupied by the Nazis, there were many dissidents—but not enough. The tragic fact is that the leaders of the most influential institutions—churches, corporations, scientific organisations—did little or nothing to oppose Nazis plans.

Challenging bureaucracy

Whistleblowers have a slim chance of changing a bureaucracy because they are essentially lone critics of a powerful elite. The only real prospect of change comes through collective action, and even this is likely to be a long and difficult process.

In Schweik Action Wollongong, a group with which I've been involved, we examined seven cases of challenges to bureaucracies.¹¹

- The Movement for the Ordination of Women challenged the Anglican Church patriarchy in Sydney.

- Vince Neary blew the whistle on corruption and safety problems in the State Rail Authority of New South Wales.

- At the end of the 1800s, the “modernist movement” within the Roman Catholic Church questioned various aspects of church dogma.

- In the 1970s, attempts were made to reform the repressive prison system in New South Wales.

- Beginning in the 1960s, Dutch soldiers created unions and successfully pushed for better conditions and greater freedoms.

- A massive public movement appeared in the 1980s to oppose the Australian government's plans for a national identity card.

- Women organised for a decade to oppose sexual discrimination at the Port Kembla steelworks of BHP, Australia's largest company.

In each case, we tried to learn lessons from the struggles. Here are our conclusions.

It is extremely difficult to change bureaucracies

Most bureaucratic elites, however corrupt they may be, are never challenged. Bureaucratic elites have enormous power to squash opponents, for example the way the Vatican crushed the Modernists.

11. Brian Martin, Sharon Callaghan and Chris Fox, with Rosie Wells and Mary Cawte, *Challenging Bureaucratic Elites* (Wollongong: Schweik Action Wollongong, 1997; http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/dissent/documents/Schweik_cbe/). The group is named after the fictional character Schweik (or Svejik), a soldier who created havoc in the Austrian army during World War I by pretending to be extremely stupid. See Jaroslav Hasek, *The Good Soldier Svejk and his Fortunes in the World War*. Translated by Cecil Parrot. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

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The challenges that are made usually aim to change policies or personnel, not the structure of bureaucracy itself. The campaign against the Australia Card didn't aim to change the Australian government bureaucracies. It had success in stopping the proposed identity card, but the government's basic goal was achieved through other means.

Sometimes, though, a campaign to change a policy can lead to changes in the bureaucracy. The women's campaign against BHP hiring practices led to a degree of change in the company, namely a less anti-women working environment. This was a significant change, even if the basic hierarchical relationships remained.

A collective challenge is needed

A lone whistleblower like Vince Neary has little chance of success in changing a bureaucracy. Speaking the truth is seldom a good strategy just on its own. It's also necessary to mobilise other supporters on the inside or outside.

The idea that bureaucracies are similar to authoritarian states is a useful one. To challenge an authoritarian state requires a careful strategy. Building support is crucial. Courageous individuals are needed to make open challenges, but these have to be planned in ways that build further support. Some of the methods that can be used in mounting a challenge are:

- careful documentation of problems;
- holding discussions and meetings;
- circulating leaflets and publishing letters and articles;
- liaising with the media;
- building links with outside groups;
- using a variety of methods of nonviolent action, from rallies to pickets and occupations.

The Dutch soldiers' movement carried out its campaigns effectively. By organising a union and operating collectively, the movement accomplished much more than any number of isolated protesters could have. A military bureaucracy is very

similar indeed to an authoritarian state, but even states can be toppled through nonviolent action.

An alternative is needed

To have any chance of achieving lasting change, it is vitally important to have an alternative. Most challenges to bureaucratic elites do not even imagine the possibility that there are alternatives to bureaucratic systems, hence they are unlikely to lead to lasting change.

Struggles to change bureaucracy are usually lengthy

The Movement for the Ordination of Women took ten years to change the official policy of the Anglican Church in Australia, and even that was not enough to transform the male-dominated power structure. Attempts to reform prison structures may require decades and there is the constant danger of a reversion to traditional hierarchical systems.

Is it a good idea for activists to make plans for years or decades? Certainly it helps for some to have a long-term vision. But how many people would join a campaign that was expected to last years? Most people get involved with the idea of a quick victory, and some of them then become committed through their experiences. How to build a long-term campaign is a difficult challenge. Bureaucracies by their nature have the long-term commitment of workers, especially the elites. It is far easier to go along with the prevailing way of doing things than to constantly push for change.

Legitimacy is a key to change

If citizens withdraw support, even the most oppressive regime will collapse. Bureaucracies are similarly vulnerable. But just saying “withdraw support” is inadequate. The question is how. Challengers need to understand, through analysis or experience, how the bureaucracy maintains loyalty, how communication systems operate, how links are made with other organisations, how power is exercised against dissent and how people’s beliefs and commitments are forged. Not easy! Furthermore, just

understanding how the system operates is not enough. It's necessary to know what actions will bring about change.

Action research is needed

There's a great need for study of the process of bureaucratic change from the grassroots, of experimentation with alternative ways of organising work, and of testing out various ways of probing and challenging bureaucracies. Even just raising the idea that bureaucracy is not the only way of organising work is significant. The idea of democratic alternatives to bureaucracies, not just policy or personnel change within bureaucratic structures, needs to be put on the agenda of activists pushing for a more participatory society.

Challenging bureaucracy: the role of information

Elaborating on these lessons, here are some suggestions relating to information. Information is not the only issue, but it is an important one.

Understand the situation

It is vital to be well informed and to have insight into the dynamics of the organisation. If one reacts to injustices solely on the basis of anger or frustration, without a careful analysis of the situation, the danger is that action will be useless or counter-productive.

It can be helpful to read analyses of bureaucracy and about organisations similar to one's own. Even more helpful is to write one's own analysis of what is going on and why. Writing helps to clarify thinking and indeed is a process of thinking. There are many questions to address. Who has power? How is power maintained? What developments are likely in the future? Who can challenge the system? What are the prospects for change?

Have a goal

What is your aim? To rectify a particular problem, or to transform the bureaucracy? Actually, it's possible to combine

these, by working on particular issues that, if resolved, help move towards the long-run goal.

One possible goal is “transparent organisations.” Activities of any sizeable organisation should be totally open for inspection, whereas the activities of ordinary individuals and small groups should be considered private matters. Similarly, the activities of individuals in positions of power or responsibility should be open for scrutiny, whereas the activities of most people in most circumstances should be considered private matters. For example, a person acting as a delegate representing a large number of people could not expect the same degree of privacy in their delegate role as in other circumstances.

The principle here is that since power tends to corrupt, those with more power (even if only temporarily) must be more open to scrutiny than others. Since organisations typically have more power than individuals, all of their activities should be “transparent”—open to scrutiny by any interested person. This is, in effect, a demand that organisational elites relinquish much of their power over both subordinates and outsiders.

There’s a connection here with campaigns against surveillance. In campaigning for transparent organisations, the primary aim is to undermine the legitimacy of organisational secrecy (“privacy” is the wrong word) while maintaining the legitimacy of individual privacy. With less legitimacy, disruption of surveillance systems would come to be considered acceptable, even admirable. Institutional change would become more viable. Workers could organise more effectively. Spy agencies would be under threat. If organisational elites were exposed to intense scrutiny, they would be more likely to favour systems that provided services without discrimination, such as collective provision.

Collect information

Detailed and dependable information is needed about the problems. This can be hard to obtain, since bureaucratic elites prefer to restrict information to those who are trustworthy.

Furthermore, when they come under threat, elites may lie, bend the rules and destroy documents. Another big difficulty is disinformation, namely incorrect information that is intentionally spread in order to manipulate opponents or bystanders.

To collect information, it is useful to save documents (including copies in safe places). But it is easy to become overwhelmed by paper or computer files. Just as important as having documents is understanding their significance. Taking notes on events and comparing impressions with others is important.

Spread information

Having information is only a beginning. It's no use if it sits forever on some shelf. To have impact, information needs to be circulated. The general principle in challenging the hoarding of information in bureaucracies is to "spread" it, namely make it available to those who can make use of it.

- Survey results, for example on the morale of workers, can be circulated to all workers.
- Information about hazards to workers can be given to the workers affected.
- Documents showing mismanagement can be distributed to interested people inside and outside the organisation.
- Honest accounts of how the organisation operates can be circulated to everyone.

Anyone who openly circulates information that might damage elites is likely to become a target. Therefore great care needs to be taken in the process of spreading information.

One approach is to circulate information anonymously. This requires extreme caution, such as producing leaflets on word processors and photocopiers that can't be traced, and avoiding leaving fingerprints or even a stray hair. An alternative is to send email messages using anonymous remailers. Even with such precautions, good guesses about who the author is are sometimes possible by close scrutiny of the writing style and the precise information circulated.

Another approach is for an outsider to circulate the information. This could be a journalist, researcher, ex-employee or activist group—preferably someone with nothing to lose if the organisation mounts an all-out attack. The outsider has greater freedom than any insider, but needs reliable information from insiders in order to be a credible commentator.

Sometimes insiders are able to speak out and retain their positions due to personal circumstances or to links with outside supporters. An example is Hugh DeWitt, a physicist at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, a nuclear weapons design lab in California. DeWitt has long been a critic of positions taken by lab managers, for example disputing their arguments against a comprehensive nuclear weapons test ban. On several occasions DeWitt came under attack from the lab management. That he has maintained his position is due in large part to support from prominent figures and activists on the outside.

Mobilise on the inside and outside

The experience of whistleblowers shows that to build a movement for change, support from outside the organisation is essential. To achieve this, reliable information and reliable means of communication are needed.

As long as the struggle takes place inside the organisation, the elites have an enormous advantage since they control financial and human resources as well as the main systems of communication. When the struggle moves outside the organisation, challengers improve their odds.

Employees do not have freedom of speech. If supporters on the outside speak out, it is more difficult to mount reprisals against them. This is the basis for the leak, in which an insider gives information to an outsider, such as a journalist, who can release it without as much risk. Outsiders need insiders as much as vice versa. Only insiders truly understand organisational dynamics. They have the insight into operations and ways of thinking that is essential to developing a sound strategy.

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Challenging bureaucracies is no easy task. For workers and clients to transform a bureaucracy into a participatory organisation in which free speech is cherished is one of the great challenges of our age. In spite of so-called “freedom of information,” top bureaucrats continue to use information as a means of control. In spite of the rhetoric of democracy and participation, most large organisations are highly resistant to any genuine change. Continued experience in making challenges is vital. Only by repeated attempts can insight be gained into the process of bringing about change. For this, it is important that lessons be learned and communicated to others.