

IN COMMITTEE - AS OTHERS SEE US

File 6.
A 6/5

A TALK BY CLLR. P. R. B. LEWIS, C.A. (S.A.)
DEPUTY MAYOR OF JOHANNESBURG, AT A LUNCHEON
GIVEN BY THE CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF SECRETARIES
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Said Robbie Burns in the last verse of a poem
entitled TO A LOUSE --

O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae money a blunder free us,
An foolish notion

which, translated into standard English, would go something
like this --

Oh, would some Power grant us the gift
To see ourselves as others see us!
It would from many a blunder and foolish
notion free us.

Now that the meaning of this verse has been made clear, I
would like to tell you an amusing story apropos the Scots
and Burns. Colonel Deneys Reitz, whose grandfather was
President of the Free State Republic, was brought up on
Burns, his grandfather having translated some of the works
into High Dutch. At a banquet in Glasgow, at which he
was endeavouring to launch the distribution of South African
fruit, Col. Reitz said that when he was a young lad he
thought his grandfather had written the poems, and that
they had been translated into indifferent English by a poor
Scot called Robert Burns - it is on record that the Scots
on that occasion were not amused, and Col. Reitz did not
further the selling of South African fruit!

How many of us know the rest of the poem? "Guy
few", as Burns would have said. The lady is in church,
dressed in all her finery, and very proud of her new bonnet,
which she hopes is attracting the approving glances of her
fellow worshippers. It is not long, however, before those
seated behind her are very aware of the goings-on of a louse
moving about the lace and trimmings of her bonnet, and think
how strange it is that a louse should be on the hat of so
fine a lady.

Are not we, in our different spheres of activity, and with our various positions, often like the lady in church in her new bonnet - often unaware of our shortcomings, not least amongst them being the way we conduct ourselves in Committees? Let us take a look at some of our foibles.

There is a biological science founded by Parkinson, which he has called Comitology, this being the study of the life cycle of the Committee. The Committee, he claims, is not a structure, but an organic growth. It is planted, it springs up, it sends out branches which are sub-committees, it flourishes, blossoms, decays and finally dies, and in dying scatters the seed from which other Committees spring up. That is the basic concept of Comitology, but there is much more to it than that.

The ideal Committee consists of five members - five is a very good number for a Committee - it allows for two members to be sick or absent at one time! Five members are easy to collect, and when collected can act with competence, secrecy and speed. But the difficulty is to keep the number to five. Some people feel excluded; they feel they should be on the Committee, and not being on it, they criticise. In Russia the answer to that would be simple: the critics would be liquidated. In the West the answer is different. We bring them on the Committee. As to which method is the more humane is not known, but the fact of bringing them on the Committee is gratifying in a way - it removes their nuisance value when excluded, and implicates them in the decisions made. But it has another effect. It enlarges the Committee - the Committee gets bigger - the numbers rise from 5 to 7 to 9 to 11, finally reaching what is technically known as the co-efficient of inefficiency. This lies between 19 and 23.

The most immediately obvious of the disadvantages is the difficulty of assembling people at the same place, date and time. One member is going away on the 18th,

whereas another does not return until the 21st. A third is never free on Tuesdays, and a fourth never available before 5 p.m. That is only the beginning of the trouble, for, once most of them are collected, there is a far greater chance of members proving to be elderly, tiresome, inaudible and deaf. Relatively few were chosen from any idea that they are, or could be, or have ever been useful.

A majority were brought in merely to conciliate some outside group. Their tendency is therefore to report what happens to the group they represent. All secrecy is lost and, worst of all, members begin to prepare their speeches. They address the meeting, and tell their friends afterwards about what they imagine they have said. But the more these merely representative members assert themselves, the more loudly do other outside groups clamour for representation. Internal parties form and seek to gain strength by further recruitment.

When the Committee is a large one, conversations develop at either end of the long table at which the Committee meets. Now when these different conversations develop at either end of the table, agreement becomes impossible. Nothing can be agreed because the members are not even discussing the same topic, and at that stage the original five members get together and say, "Next time we'll meet together the day before and settle everything then", and, of course, from that stage it does not matter how large the main committee becomes, because all the work has been done beforehand in any case.

One fascinating field of Comitology is known as "Comparative Chairmanship". This is the study of how different types of Chairmen get their own way by different methods. There is the Confusionist Chairman who allows all members of the Committee to talk simultaneously on any topic for approximately 25 minutes. When there is a pause for breath he suddenly raps on the table and says, "Well, we all seem to agree on Item 1, we will now proceed to Item 2!". No one knows at that time what has been agreed, but they can read it afterwards in the Minutes, which were compiled by

the Chairman, of course, before the Committee actually met.

Another is the Rubberstamp Chairman. He acts in a high-handed manner, as though he has not a Committee to consult. Having acted, he then merely calls the meeting together, pretends he is consulting them, and does all the talking from the Chair. The members of the Committee know that while he is endeavouring to make it appear that they are being consulted, the matters before the meeting have already been done, and as a line of least resistance they agree to fall in with the Chairman's wishes.

Yet another type is the Sidetrack or Branch Line Chairman; the Chairman who allows anything to be discussed on any item of the Agenda. Let us take as an example an item on the Agenda of the Council to pay Mr. X R7,400: compensation for the expropriation of his stand which is on the route of a new expressway. It had previously been agreed that the expressway be constructed, and provision has been made in the Estimates for the compensation. Does it require much imagination to visualise the following happening? The Chairman asks the City Engineer how the expressway scheme is proceeding. Another member of the Committee asks whether, when the road is constructed, it is going to be done departmentally or by tender. Discussion ensues as to whether the City Engineer's Department is the right body to do it. One member tells of what he saw on the way into the city in the morning, when not one in a construction gang was at work. Nearly all the Bantu were leaning on their shovels at the time he passed. The City Engineer then intervenes and tells of his difficulties with first-line supervision, but points to the success of the new incentive bonus schemes in the Cleansing Department. A member of the Committee feels that the people in the Cleansing Department are being worked too hard, they always seem to be running with their rubbish bins. At this stage let us hope that a plaintive voice is raised to ask the Chairman what item on the Agenda is being discussed. The item would probably then be agreed to, no one ever having raised a query as to whether the compensation payable was correct or not.

Now there is a branch of Comitology to which Parkinson has devoted special study, and it is the branch dealing with the Finance Committee. In this regard his conclusion is that the time spent on any item of the agenda is in inverse proportion to the amount involved. Let us consider some items which might be found on the agenda of a Finance Committee.

The first, say, is the consideration of a tender of R15,000,000: for the erection of a new Power Station. The City Electrical Engineer might be asked to give a report on the item, which would probably be to the following effect: "Gentlemen, you will see from the report that the general design and lay-out of the plant has been approved by the Council's consultants. The total cost will be R15 million and the Contractors, Messrs. Dolittle and Dally consider the work will be completed by June 1970. You have already agreed in principle to the erection of this plant, and the funds have been provided for in the Estimates. I shall be happy to give you any further information you may require."

Few members of the Finance Committee know how a Power Station works, or the difference between a kilowatt and a volt, whether the design is upside down, back to front, or sited where services such as water, etc., are available, or whether or not the tender is in any way reasonable, or the time proposed adequate, or whether the plant offered is the best available. So this is what happens. The Chairman thanks the Electrical Engineer for his explanation, and calls for comments, but the members of the Committee are not going to display their ignorance about the matter, and in a few minutes the item is agreed to.

The next item on the Agenda is the erection of a bicycle shed for the use of the staff, an estimate having been received to complete the work for the sum of R700: Plans and specifications are laid on the table. At last, here is something all members can comprehend. On throwing the matter open for discussion, Cllr. Bogg comments, "Surely,

Mr. Chairman, this sum is excessive. I note the roof is of aluminium, would not asbestos be cheaper?". Cllr. Chipps agrees with Cllr. Bogg about the cost, but the roof in his opinion, should be of galvanised iron. Cllr. Gripe doubts whether the shed is necessary at all. He feels too much is being done for staff already; that they are never satisfied, and the next thing that will have to be done is to erect garages. "Where is all this going to end?", he asks. Cllr. Chipps does not agree with Cllr. Gripe. He feels the shed is needed, but it is being erected in the wrong place, and the design is faulty, and provision is being made for too many bicycles. The debate is now fairly launched, and discussion goes on for over an hour, and finally it is agreed to erect the shed at a cost of R500: at which price it will lose a considerable portion of its usefulness.

The third item on the Agenda is the sanctioning of a payment to a workman of R2: for tools stolen from a depot during the night. Imagine the possibilities of this discussion! How do we know the tools were stolen; surely R2: is the cost of new tools; how long were the tools in use; where was the nightwatchman at the time? At this point someone is bound to raise the question of this being a matter of principle - and creating a precedent - and all this for R2: This item, in any language, should be good for discussion for at least half an hour.

I have dealt with Committee Chairmen. What about Committee members? Do you not all know the Committee member who remains silent in Committee, but makes a great show and hullabaloo if the public or press is present. The persons who do not listen or read their reports and agendas, and then ask questions, the answers to which have already been given. The persons who waste time at meetings just because they like the sound of their own voices; those "holier than thou" individuals who make a great song and dance about "it being a matter of principle". Those who claim to be making a point of order so that they can make a speech, and those who reiterate points of view that have already been more ably made by someone else. Those persons who interrupt when another is

speaking, and so out-shout him that he cannot finish what he intended to say, Those who cannot see a situation in a larger context than that which affects their own interests. I believe that, in general, meetings could be completed in half the time if members would analyse their behaviour in the light of these observations.

Is not all this very true? We know that Parkinson is poking fun, but next time you are at a meeting note what happens. See if you do not agree that it is the unimportant, the trivial items, on which all the time is wasted, while weighty matters, worthy of more consideration, are glossed over. Check Parkinson's statement "that time spent on any item on the Finance Agenda is in inverse proportion to the amount involved". I have often wondered if officials, in arranging items on the Agenda, do not take this into consideration. Is it not possible that matters are so arranged that a trivial item, on which endless discussion can take place, is made to precede a very difficult one, which officials doubt if they can get through? Is it not possible, too, that officials sometimes raise red herrings so as to divert attention from the items which are difficult? Members of the Committee, having wasted a tremendous amount of time on unimportant issues, are likely to agree to the remaining items so that they can finish on time and get home to dinner.

Yes, I think it is well for us sometimes to sit back and see ourselves as others see us. If a Committee member, to note where time is wasted most; if a Chairman, to pause and think into what category of Chairmanship you fall, and, if an official, to pause and think whether officials want to make work for each other.

These provocative thoughts are Parkinson's, not my own - the characters depicted are purely imaginary, and have no reference to persons either living or dead - least of all to any person I have ever met! But, if the cap fits.....

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