

Councillors & Officials
as seen by Parkinson

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Institute of Municipal Treasurers
and Accountants, S.A.
(INCORPORATED)

COUNCILLORS AND OFFICIALS
AS SEEN BY PARKINSON

by

COUNCILLOR P. R. B. LEWIS, C.A. (S.A.), M.P.C.

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COUNCILLOR P. R. B. LEWIS, C.A. (S.A.), M.P.C.

1. The Municipal officials amongst you will, I am sure, agree that Councillors talk too much — and with that I agree, because at the last Treasurers' Conference held at Salisbury, I opened my mouth too wide, and poked fun at officials in the august presence of your President, and mentioned something about Parkinson's Law. I then started chasing a wee white ball in the rough, and, bad as that was, worse was to follow! I found on returning to the Clubhouse, that your President and Dr. Holmes had joined forces against me, and decided that I should be asked to provide some comic relief at this Conference by giving a paper on Parkinson's Law.

2. As you know, no Councillor likes to have to work, but on reflection, I am grateful to your President for asking me to undertake this assignment, for while at the beginning I regarded Professor Parkinson as poking fun, on re-reading his works I have realised how much basic truth there is in his writing.

3. Parkinson states that he first discovered the law during World War II. This law is that *work expands to fill the time available for its completion, and administrators multiply by a law of growth irrespective of the work, if any, they supposed to do.* General recognition of this fact is shown in the proverbial phrase "it is the busiest man who has time to spare".

4. As a first example of the correctness of this law, I would like to state that your President gave me as a D-Day for this Paper, the 15th December. In April I thought that was giving me ample time to prepare, but only

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by working all hours in December has it been possible for me to get it finished on time.

5. Parkinson gives a wonderful illustration of this law — that work expands to fill the time available to do it — when he tells of an elderly lady of leisure spending an entire day in writing and despatching a postcard to her niece. An hour will be spent in finding the postcard, another in hunting for spectacles, half an hour in a search for the address, one and a half hours in composition, and twenty minutes in deciding whether or not to take an umbrella when going to the pillar box in the next street. He says the total effort would occupy a busy man three minutes, while the elderly lady, at the end of the day, felt prostrate after a day of doubt, anxiety and toil.

6. An illustration of the fact that administrators multiply by a law of growth irrespective of the work, if any, they are supposed to do, is the sort of thing that happened in World War II. It is the story of a Corporal who is given a special job of interpreting air photographs. He is allocated a desk, and settles down to interpret air photographs. Two days later he comes back and says he needs another Corporal to help him do this. Three days later, having got his assistant, he comes back and says, "I need to be a Sergeant in order to have authority over my assistant". So he gets his own way about that, and six months later he is a Lt. Colonel with a staff of 150. In peace time things do not happen quite as fast as that.

7. One of Parkinson's earliest researches was in connection with the British Navy Estimates. He chose them because the Admiralty's responsibilities are more easily measurable than those of some other Departments, dealing merely in numbers and tonnage. The figures show that in 1914 the strength of the Navy was:

146,000 Officers and Men
3,249 Dockyard Officials and Clerks, and
57,000 Dockyard Workmen

but by 1928 the number of officers and men had been reduced to 100,000 and only 62,439 workmen, but that dockyard officials and clerks had increased in number, while the strength in warships was a mere fraction of what it had been in 1914, fewer than 20 capital ships in commission compared with 62 in 1914, but over the same period Admiralty officials had increased in number from 2,000 to 3,569. Apparently the criticism voiced at the time centred on the ratio between the number of those available for fighting and those available only for administration, it being said that Britain had "a magnificent navy on land". The point to note, however, is that the 2,000 officials of 1914 had become the 3,569 of 1928, an increase of 78.45 per cent over a period of 14 years, and this growth was unrelated to any increase in their work, because the Navy, during that time, had

diminished by a third in men and two-thirds in ships, and it wasn't expected that its strength would increase, because its total of ships was limited by the Washington Naval Agreement.

8. How, Parkinson asks, can this rise in the total number of civil servants be accounted for except on the assumption that such a total must always rise by a law governing its growth. During the period there was rapid growth in the development of naval techniques, and one might not wonder at an increase in draughtsmen, designers, technicians and scientists, but these, the dockyard officials, increased by only 40 per cent in number as compared with an increase of nearly 80 per cent in number of the men in Whitehall. It appeared that for every new foreman there had to be two more clerks in Whitehall, and from this one might be tempted to conclude, provisionally, that the rate of increase in administrative staff is likely to be double the technical staff at a time when the actually useful strength (seamen) is being reduced by 31.5 per cent. But, says Parkinson, it had been proved that this last percentage is irrelevant because the officials would have multiplied at the same rate had there been no seamen at all, and he says it would be interesting to follow the further progress by which 8,118 Admiralty staff of 1935 came to number 33,788 by 1954.

9. Parkinson believes that the basic cause of this multiplication is that the Executive's interest is always to multiply subordinates rather than rivals. If I am an administrator, and I begin to feel overworked, I think it is because I have more work to do — actually, it is either because I am getting older, or, perhaps, even because of decreasing energy. I could divide the work in two and call in another administrator to do half of it. If I were A and he were B, the work would thus be shared between A and B. But I don't do that, because if I brought in B on my own level there would then be a question as to which of us should succeed the man senior to us both, we'll call him X, when X at last retires. That does not suit me at all. So instead of bringing in B on my own level, I prefer to appoint two subordinates, C and D, at a lower level, and I can keep them both in order because each is terrified that the other will succeed him when I succeed X. And, of course, they follow my good example, and when C and D in their turn feel overworked, they call in two subordinates each, and so we get E and F and G and H, and by that stage we have seven people doing the work previously done by one, and this will surely mean promotion for A. All are working hard, and the original one, A, is working harder than ever, and this is the phenomena of the rising pyramid of administration, and the higher the apex the broader, of course, the base.

10. Parkinson also believes that officials make work for each other. If we go back to the seven persons in our previous illustration, can you not imagine the following situation. An incoming document may well come

before each of them in turn. Official E reads it and decides that it falls within the province of F, who places a draft reply before C, who amends it drastically before consulting D, who asks G to deal with it. But G goes on leave at this point, handing the file over to H, who drafts a minute that is signed by D and returned to C, who revises his draft accordingly and lays the new version before A.

11. What does A do? He would have every cause for signing the thing unread, for he has many other matters on his mind. Knowing now that he is to succeed X next year, he has to decide whether C or D should succeed to his own office. He had to agree to G's going on leave even if not yet strictly entitled to it. He is worried whether H should not have gone instead, for reasons of health. He has looked pale recently — partly but not solely because of his domestic troubles. Then there is the business of F's special increment of salary and E's application for transfer to the Traffic Department. A has heard that D is in love with a married typist and that G and F are no longer on speaking terms — no one seems to know why. So A might be tempted to sign C's draft and have done with it. But A is a conscientious man. Beset as he is with problems created by his colleagues' existence — he is not the man to shirk his duty. He reads through the draft with care, deletes the fussy paragraphs added by C and H, and restores the thing to the form preferred in the first instance by the able (if quarrelsome) F. He corrects the English — none of these young men can write grammatically — and finally produces the same reply he would have written if officials C to H had never been born. Far more people have taken far longer to produce the same result. No one has been idle. All have done their best. And it is late in the evening before A finally quits his office and begins the return journey to his home in Parktown. The last of the office lights are being turned off in the gathering dusk that marks the end of another day's administrative toil. Among the last to leave, A reflects with bowed shoulders and a wry smile that late hours, like grey hairs, are among the penalties of success. Is Parkinson wide of the mark in his theory that officials make work for each other?

12. Parkinson also claims to be the founder of the latest of the biological sciences, which is Comitology, which is 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.

13. When first seen under a microscope, the ideal Committee consists of five members — five is a very good number for a Committee — it allows

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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 Soviet Russia there would be a simple answer to that. In Russia the critics would be liquidated. In the western world we have a different answer. We bring them on the Committee. As to which method is the more humane Parkinson does not know, 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.

14. 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. But 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 perhaps 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.

15. 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.

16. The subject of Comitology is developing every day. New discoveries are being made, new work being done. One fascinating field is known as 'Comparative Chairmanship'. This is the study of how different types of Chairmen get their own way by different methods. For instance, the Confusionist Chairman is one who allows all members of the Committee

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to talk simultaneously on any topic for approximately 25 minutes. When they 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.

17. Another type of Chairman is one I would like to call the Rubber-stamp Chairman, who has acted as though he had 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 the Chairman 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.

18. The next type of Chairman I would like to suggest is the Side-track 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 to pay X R7,500: 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 we construct the road, we are going to do it departmentally or call for tenders. Discussion then 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 nobody 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 on the Agenda would probably then be agreed to, no one ever having raised a query as to whether the compensation payable was correct or not.

19. Then we have the Chairman who arrives at the meeting without having read his Agenda. You have all experienced this sort of thing and I don't need to elaborate.

20. The branch of Comitology to which Parkinson has devoted special study is the branch dealing with the Finance Committee. In this regard

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Parkinson's conclusion is that *the time spent on any item on the agenda is in inverse proportion to the amount involved*. Let us for a few moments consider some items which might be found on the Agenda of a Finance Committee.

21. 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 R15,000,000: and the Contractors, Messrs. Dolittle and Dally, consider the work will be completed by June, 1965. 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."

22. Very 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, or 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 it would not be cheaper to buy electricity from Escom. So what happens is this. The Chairman thanks the Engineer for his explanation, and calls for comments. 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.

23. 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 of the shed are laid on the table. At last here is something all members can comprehend! On throwing the matter open for discussion, Cllr. Bloggs comments as follows: "Surely, Mr. Chairman, this sum is excessive. I note the roof is of aluminium — would not asbestos be cheaper?". Cllr. Chipps says he agrees with Cllr. Bloggs 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 the staff already, that they are never satisfied, and that if a bicycle shed is erected, the next thing we will have to do is 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 that it is being placed in the wrong place, and that the design is faulty, and that provision is being made for too many bicycles. After this the debate is fairly launched, and discussion goes on for over an hour, and finally it is agreed that the shed can be erected at a cost of R500: at which price the shed will lose a considerable portion of its usefulness.

24. The third item on the Agenda is the sanctioning of a payment to a workman of R2.00 for tools stolen from a depot during the night. Imagine

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the possibilities of a discussion on this item. How do we know the tools were stolen — surely R2.00 is the cost of new tools — how long had he used the tools — where was the nightwatch at the time. At this stage someone is bound to raise the question of this being a matter of principle, and creating a precedent, and all this for R2.00. This item, in any language, should be good for discussion for at least half an hour.

25. Is this not all very true? We know that Parkinson is poking fun, but next time you are at a meeting just watch what happens, and see if you do not agree with Parkinson that it is the unimportant, the trivial items, on which all the time is wasted, and weighty matters, which are worthy of more consideration, are glossed over. Just see if Parkinson is not right that time spent on any item on the Finance Agenda is in inverse proportion to the amount involved.

26. I have often wondered if officials, in arranging items on the Agenda, do not take this into consideration. Do you not think it possible that items are so arranged on an Agenda that a trivial item, on which endless discussion can take place, is made to precede a very difficult item, which officials doubt if they can get through. Is it not possible 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 trivial matters, are likely to agree to the remaining items on the Agenda so that they can finish on time and get home to dinner.

27. Parkinson's third law is of far more interest to this Conference. It is that *Expenditure always rises to meet Income*. When an individual has a rise in his salary and goes home and announces it, he, or perhaps his wife, is sure to decide how the additional income is to be spent. So much on an insurance policy, so much on this, and so much on that — the extra salary is silently absorbed leaving the family barely in credit, and often, in fact, with a deficit which is actually increased. One of the senior officials in our Council told me the other day of what happened to him. His wife's mother had decided to give each of her daughters R100: The official's wife was delighted at receiving this amount, and decided that at long last she could have the lounge chairs and settee re-covered, which her miserable husband had failed to provide, and she immediately chose the materials and had the work done, spending R110: in the process. But what was the result when the new settee and chairs were installed? You can just hear the wife's exclamations, "Jack, look at the carpet, and the curtains, they look terrible!". You can imagine the rest. The poor fellow had to scratch to find the money for the curtains and the carpet, and perhaps even had to paint the walls. Expenditure rises to meet income, and generally exceeds it!

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28. It is widely recognised that what is true of individuals is also true of Governments. Whatever the revenue may be there will always be the pressing need to spend it. But between Governments and individuals there is this vital difference, that the Government rarely pauses even to consider what its income is. This is the difference between an individual and the Government, an individual tries to limit his expenditure to his income, but the Government, or the Municipality, decides what it wants to spend and then levies taxes to provide the funds that it has decided to spend. Let me give you another example of whatever the revenue there will be a pressing need to spend it.

29. In Johannesburg it was decided some years ago to erect a Civic Theatre. It was then estimated that the cost of a theatre to seat 750 people would be R292,000: It was later decided to change the site of the theatre to the new Civic Centre, and the estimated cost of a theatre to hold the same number of people was now R450,000: as it was felt that on the new site it should be more lavish. When tenders were received, however, the cost had increased to R525,000: At this stage it was decided to increase the size of the theatre to accommodate 1,020 people, and on this basis the tender received was R605,000: Is it asking you to stretch your imagination too far when I suggest that between the time of the approval of the second venture and the final stages, the plan was altered, additional amenities provided, and perhaps there might even have been trouble with acoustics requiring alterations, so that the final cost of the theatre will probably be R777,140.

30. Now this is where Parkinson's law comes into the story. Some well-wisher of the theatre agreed to make available to the Council a certain piece of ground which was to be sold, and the proceeds used towards the capital cost of the theatre. Is it also stretching your imagination too far when I suggest that there was a considerable lapse from the time the ground was given until transfer was taken, and the Council was in a position to dispose of the ground, having by this time obtained the Administrator's approval to the sale. When the ground was originally granted it was anticipated that the sale would release to the Council a capital grant of R100,000. Owing to the delays in obtaining transfer, and the change in market conditions, when the property was finally sold the amount available towards the capital of the theatre was not R100,000: but R220,000. What would you expect the reaction to this additional R120,000 to be? It could have been: Well, thank goodness, the theatre has cost us far more than we contemplated, but with this windfall it will bring it within our original budget, remembering that at the time the theatre was planned the expected rentals were based on the expected capital cost, and fixed on that basis. Not on your life! The reaction was — now we can have the curtain we were wanting. Can we now build the open-air auditorium we had planned for the future?

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31. Another example of what happened recently was in connection with an area of ground which had been bought for Non-European housing. This area was remote from the City, and the Council decided that it was no longer suitable, and would be transferred from the Native Revenue Account to the Estates Branch. The value placed on the ground was R150,000. Here was a windfall, and items which had previously been cut out of the Estimates suddenly raised their heads, and not only was the R150,000 spent, but some of the items on which it was spent were:

1. Building of a swimming bath
2. Development of recreational areas
3. Floodlighting and electrification of a stadium

items which in future years would necessitate maintenance and recurring expenditure, so not only was the money spent, but future budgets were committed to recurring expenditure.

32. Parkinson suggests a revolutionary change in Government and Municipal budgetary estimates. He suggests that instead of Departments preparing budgets of their Revenue and Expenditure, that the Cabinet or Council, or whatever body is in control, should fix the expenditure that is allowed, and allocate a fixed sum to each Department. He feels that Executive Officers, if given limited but fair amounts to run their Departments, would know where economies could be effected. Once they understood that development in one direction would be conditional upon economising on another, they could be safely left to run their Departments. He feels that this would make officials accept more responsibility, would leave them free to display initiative, and make them recognise that cost and value are but different aspects of the same idea.

33. Do you not feel that our present system requires revision? I know that in our Council, at Estimate time, there are so many figures to be considered that it is almost impossible for Councillors to deal adequately with the Estimates. At first there are the Estimates based on the requests by Departmental Heads. When the City Treasurer collates these Estimates, he suggests the cuts that are necessary to bring the overall position into line. Then there is a rushing hither and thither, and often jockeying by Councillors, to see that particular fancies are not eliminated from the Estimates, but once the Estimates are approved everyone heaves a sigh of relief and relaxes.

34. Thereafter, from time to time, items appear on the Agenda for passing. The fact that the item has appeared on the Estimates creates a feeling almost of reverence towards the item — "It is on the Estimates, what are we worrying about?" and it is very rarely that expenditure of money already approved in the Estimates is queried. What of an item which was not

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provided in the Estimates, which will result in an excess vote? Such an item gets all the scrutiny and examination that should have been devoted to each item on the Estimates. Would it not be true to say that when Departmental Heads prepare their estimates they ask for more than they hope to get? They would be fools if they didn't, because they know they will be asked to cut, so they have something in reserve so that they can get what they wanted in the first instance. Is it not true, too, that in drawing estimates provision is made for a full complement of the authorised staff on establishment, even though for years some positions have not been filled? Is it not true, too, that once having got a post created on establishment, officials are reluctant to abolish a post because they know of the difficulty they had initially in having the post created?

35. I think it is as well for us sometimes to sit back and see ourselves as others see us. Next time you are attending a meeting of a Committee, just sit back and see if it is not true that the unimportant items waste more time than the important ones. If you are the Chairman of a meeting, pause to think into what category of Chairmanship you fall. If you are an official pause to think whether officials want to multiply subordinates or create rivals, and do officials make work for each other. Is it not time that officials were given more authority in the expenditure of their Departments? Would it be a bad idea if officials were given more discretion in the spending of money? Do you not think that officials could cut down their budgets if there was a bonus attached to the saving of expenditure?

36. Mr. President, I hope I have not given this meeting the wrong impression — that these provocative thoughts of Mr. Parkinson are my own. I would like to make it clear that the characters depicted are purely imaginary and have no reference to persons either living or dead, least of all to any persons I have ever met! Should the cap fit however . . .

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