Reign of the Administrators

Under the guise of earnestness, Britain's bureaucracy inclines to bullying and ineffectiveness.

by Theodore Dalrymple

George Orwell said that he did not like to meet authors because he might have to review their books one day, and it is

hard to be honest about the work of a man with whom one has enjoyed a pleasant lunch.

I know this problem in another context. I long refrained from criticism of Boris Johnson from a—no-doubt misplaced—sense of personal loyalty because I knew and liked him when he was editor of *The Spectator*, for which I wrote at the time. I lunched with him two or three times, and our relations were always friendly. He was amusing and laughed at my jokes. What more could I have wanted? It is indeed not easy to be critical of a man with whom you have enjoyed lunch: Orwell was right.

I had reservations about Johnson as prime minister, but even when asked directly what I thought of him during an interview, I refrained from answering. A friend, who had taught Johnson history, warned me that underlying the veneer of frivolity was more frivolity—that is to say (if it is not a contradiction in terms), a profound frivolity. I nevertheless hoped that some core to his character might exist, like the graphite rod of a nuclear reactor, but it emerged that there was none, unless one counted the search for office.

It would be too easy, however, to attribute Britain's manifold problems to one man's incompetence and lack of principle. This would be to evade thinking about the deep cultural roots of the country's present malaise, some of them traceable, it is true, to past political choices: but when policies are entrenched, they become cultural.

The opposite of frivolity is not seriousness but earnestness, which is, if anything, even worse than frivolity, for it persuades the earnest that they are working with the best of intentions and dissuades them from consideration of the actual effects of what they do. Earnestness is a kind of moral chain mail that protects against the slings and arrows of outrageous criticism. It also encourages an unholy alliance between sanctimony and self-interest. It dissolves the distinction between activity and work.

In Britain, under the influence of earnestness, a collapse has occurred in the standard of public administration, such that it now inclines both to bullying and ineffectiveness, to making an immensity of shadow work and avoiding real work. Public administrators have found the secret of being frantically busy and doing nothing at the same time. Hypertrophy of rules and interference go hand in hand with anarchy and inefficiency. Those who work in the public administration or are paid from the public purse are assured of pensions of which those who do not work for it or are not paid from it can only dream: and they believe, of course, that they deserve this immense privilege, for, unlike others, they have worked all their lives for the public good rather than for private advantage. That the administrators are protected from the hazards of inflation by their index-linked pensions naturally gives the rest of the population the impression that the people are now there to serve the government, not the other way around.

Every day, one encounters evidence of the incompetence and unseriousness of the public administration, of activity without real purpose. My house stands opposite a church, largely rebuilt in Victorian times. Around it is an oval road with Jacobean, Queen Anne, Georgian, and Victorian houses. To park their cars in the road, residents must buy an annual permit, at a reasonable cost.

For several years, an old man has parked his battered, unsightly car in the road without a permit. With great punctuality, he receives a parking ticket that, with equal punctuality, he removes from where it is placed and throws, with what might almost be called magnificent contempt, into the front of the car, for all to see. A pile of parking tickets can always be seen in his car, probably exceeding 50. No attempt apparently has ever been made to collect the fines supposedly consequent upon the issuance of the tickets. The uniformed parking wardens who issue them say, correctly, that

it is not their job to pursue the car's owner to get him to pay up: they only write the tickets and solemnly take photographs on their official phones of the license plate and the affixed ticket, so that the miscreant cannot claim, as an explanation of his nonpayment of the fine, that he never received it. Like everyone, the wardens can see that the car owner tosses the tickets aside, but they keep issuing them, nonetheless. Their work may be pointless, but it must be done.

When contacted about the situation, the council, which would receive the fines if paid, says that the car owner is an old man with no money, so that it would be pointless to try to recover anything from him. It's clear that the council considers that in excusing the old man his fines, whose total probably now exceeds that of the value of his car, it is acting compassionately.

About a month ago, however, the council stuck a notice on the car to the effect that if it were not moved, it would be towed away. The man tore the notice off with his accustomed contumely. The car still has not been moved, though if that happens, the old man will no doubt experience it as an injustice: after all, he has gotten away with ignoring violations for years, so why not now? What is different about now?

At every turn in Britain, one discovers the same lack of straightforward intellectual and moral probity, a form of corruption worse than the financial kind, insofar as the latter is—in principle, at least—easy to correct. But to correct moral corruption, once it takes hold, is like trying to unscramble an egg.

In recent days, I have heard the following stories from people whom I trust to tell the truth—and furthermore, with some documentary evidence in support. A distinguished professor with an international reputation has tried to obtain an appointment on her mother's behalf with her general

practitioner—or rather, with the group practice at which she is registered, since no particular doctor takes responsibility for her care. The mother was widowed not long ago, her husband having been for 40 years a general practitioner in the area; his patients loved him so much that, when he died, many attended his funeral, though he had retired 20 years earlier.

The mother, 82, had suffered a stroke, following another serious illness that had left residual effects. She now had a problem that needed a face-to-face consultation with a doctor to resolve, but the practice refused to grant an appointment until the patient first filled out an online form. The doctors would then review the form to decide whether the patient deserved an audience (a better term than "consultation," in the circumstances).

In the modern world, not to use the Internet, as this old woman did not, is almost a criminal offense: at any rate, it deprives one de facto of many rights. At least she could have her daughter fill out the form for her, though it was so complex that it took more than half an hour to complete, and—by ukase of the practice—it could not be submitted during the weekend or outside of working hours, and only on the day it was filled out. The true purpose of the ukase, I surmise (though it came with the usual unctuous bureaucratic genuflections to efficiency and the best possible patient care), was to let the supplicant—again, a better term, in the circumstances, than "patient"—know just who was boss.

The form allowed for various choices in describing one's medical problem. But such a net is of necessity coarse mesh and cannot catch all diagnostic fish. Not to worry: the electronic form issued instructions as to what to do if none of the choices covered the case in hand. The first step was to consult a pharmacist. The second was to go to the National Health Service Self-Help helpline. The third was to contact the medical practice to seek further advice on how to fill out the form. The seventh circle of hell was nothing, compared

with this.

I will reproduce some instructions given to the patient's daughter, in order to give a flavor of patients' obligations, and those of their relatives, toward the doctors:

> *Clink [sic] on the link above and select I want help for my condition. If the condition isn't listed you will see at the end of the list there is a question: Can't find your health problem? Please select Get other advice and then select Contact my GP Practice: it will then ask you whether you are submitting the request yourself or on behalf of someone else—please select and follow the next steps.*

This was the advice given to the professor, after she complained in writing, by a person with the title Patient Experience Manager. One would think that anyone agreeing to a job title like that must be without a sense of either irony or shame: she must obviously be thinking primarily of her pay and her pension, for her job seems to be that of ensuring that the only experience a patient has is of trying to obtain an appointment by filling out a form.

One could always use the telephone, but anyone with experience of general-practice receptionists in Britain knows that many exhibit about as much human sympathy as a great white shark—that is, if you can get through to them at all after listening to a snatch of "Greensleeves" for 45 minutes, with intermittent messages to thank you for your patience. Besides, the patient in question had difficulty speaking because of her stroke. The Patient Experience Manager wrote to the professor: "We have had to move across to this way of working to ensure we are prioritising medical need, but we are also working on how to be more flexible with vulnerable patients."

This flexibility was illustrated by the following. The old woman received an appointment for a blood test. Having mistaken the time (1:40 PM for 1:30 PM), she arrived ten

minutes late and was told that, as she had missed her appointment, she would now have to make another—an 82-year-old, recently widowed lady who had suffered a stroke! The cruel shamelessness of this response hardly needs emphasis: for it even to have crossed anyone's mind to demand another appointment is a symptom of the deep apparatchikization of some—perhaps many—people's minds.

I turn now to the case of another distinguished professor, a leader in his scientific discipline, who found it unbearable to work any more in his university environment. He had grown tired of hearing people talk of "white privilege," when he himself was the scion of an impoverished (white) working-class family in Rotherham. Anyone familiar with Rotherham will know that the working class there, or perhaps I should say the formerly working class, is hardly born with a silver spoon in its mouth. The very expression "white privilege" was a denigration of his own efforts, as if all his scientific work emanated from his upbringing, a kind of automatic writing induced by society as hypnotist.

The university administration found time to admonish him for addressing meetings by beginning: "Ladies and gentlemen." Some audience members might be uncomfortable with being thought the one or the other, the administration warned, and while no actual complaints had emerged—well, one must think ahead. The administration had, in effect, developed a new category of human relations: anticipatory complaint.

The investigation and adjudication of complaint in a quasi-judicial manner is the perfect instrument for increasing the powers of administrators. That is one reason it wants its workforce, those in subordinate positions, to be as supersensitive to racism and bullying as possible, defining both racism and bullying by the perception of the supposed victims, often requiring no objective correlative of the accusation. This creates an atmosphere of constant suspicion, mistrust, fear, and pusillanimity throughout the institution

and promotes the very phenomena it is supposed to reduce or eliminate, for nothing intimidates as much as the threat of being found guilty if accused. While such an atmosphere is hardly conducive to securing the aims of the institution—in the case of universities, high-level teaching and research—one should remember that these are not the aims of the administration. Wokeness is the perfect ideology for the hegemony of an administrative class that it would be an insult to much of humanity to call mediocre.

Not only was the professor admonished not to start his e-mails to his colleagues by using "Dear" as a form of address, and to abandon all honorifics such as "Dr." or "Professor," thus indicating both the smallness and the thoroughness of the administration's termite-like mind (as the Marquis de Custine put it in his book, *Russia in Eighteen Thirty-Nine*, "the Tsar is both eagle and insect"); he was also asked to indicate "his" pronouns, with the insulting implication that the administration was solicitous of a state of mind so fragile that it needed its protection to avoid implosion. Irritated, he replied that "the professor" and "the professor's" would do: which did not endear him to the administrators.

The commissars of equity, diversity, and inclusion had so insinuated themselves into every committee and every hiring decision that they were like spies. For a man who had achieved his eminence by dint of ability and hard work, at a time when, however imperfect, these things still counted for more than the dark arts of bureaucratic ascension, and who still valued the primary academic goals of universities, life became intolerable. He left the university, which he had tried to serve faithfully. It was now a place in which saying what one did not believe was obligatory and saying what one did believe was forbidden, as has always been the case in any totalitarian country: and this in an institution supposedly dedicated to the search for and propagation of truth! It reminds me of what Mrs. Haldin says in Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*: "In

Russia, all knowledge was tainted with falsehood. Not chemistry and all that, but education generally." Increasingly, even chemistry is being tainted with falsehood.

Before the professor left the university, the Department of Human Resources, already a horrible renaming of the Personnel Department (the humble issuer of employment contracts), had become the Department of People and Culture, a name that out-Orwells Orwell. One of its functions, presumably, was to prevent, sniff out, or punish thoughtcrime in the university and to eliminate culture as it was once conceived.

None of the above, alas, is in any way unexpected or unusual nowadays. On the contrary, it is the "new normal." The atmosphere of suspicion, fear, querulousness, lying, hypocrisy, pusillanimity, denunciation, and paranoia, all in the name of some vaguely defined justice, that Conrad describes in Russia before its second revolution (which, of course, made all of it a thousand times worse), is now commonplace. In human affairs, there is no new thing under the sun, and examples of almost anything can be found in history: it is prevalence of things that changes. I do not recall ever having lived in so pervasive an atmosphere of untruth as that of the present. It is as if a demon of untruth had not merely insinuated itself into institutions but into men's souls. The faculty of truth, like all other faculties, withers with disuse. A kind of cynical skepticism results, leaving power as the only reality—exactly as Nietzsche suggested.

What accounts for this? No explanation can be final. As the Haitian peasants say, behind mountains, more mountains: behind explanations, more explanations. I suggest, though, that the incontinent expansion of tertiary education has much to answer for, producing graduates whose knowledge or skills are divorced from any real economic function. (I am not suggesting that the only purpose or function of education should be economic.) The economy must somehow absorb these graduates, despite their economic uselessness, or they would become

dangerous, like the underemployed lawyers of the French Revolution. The easiest way to employ them is by expanding bureaucracy, and extending regulation serves this end. Wokeism encourages this expansion, for it can make indefinitely shifting and imperious demands in the name of righting wrongs, many yet to be discovered.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, no doubt unwittingly, contributed to the advance of politicized bureaucracy in Britain. With a naïveté that now appears surprising, she believed in management as a science, independent of what was to be managed: if you could manage a pig farm, you could manage a nuclear power station, and vice versa, without knowing anything about pigs or nuclear physics. She believed that public-sector entities should be run as businesses, without making the proper distinction between being businesslike and being businessmen. We ended up with businessmen who were not at all businesslike, except in their arrogation of perquisites to themselves. She thus created a nomenklatura as well as an apparatchik class; and her later successor, Anthony (Tony) Blair, consciously or not (it matters little which), saw an opportunity and expanded both. The chief executive of one of the hospitals in which I worked said, just before a general election, “My job is to get the government reelected.” Failing that, her job was to ingratiate herself with the new political masters.

These processes are not unique to Britain. In hospitals, schools, and universities in the United States, the overgrowth of bureaucracy has been startling. But Britain is peculiarly susceptible to the retarding effects of this frivolous but earnest bureaucracy. It has little industry left; it imports half its food and much of its energy. It has a large public debt, much underestimated in size because it does not include public-pension liabilities. It has run a government deficit for decades; its commercial deficit with the rest of the world approaches 10 percent of GDP. Private debt is astronomical.

Both government and individuals are addicted to living beyond their means, the country consuming far more than it produces, a profligacy achieving the status of a custom. It is hard to think of strengths that might offset these defects.

This, then, is a time for seriousness—but what we will likely get is earnestness as the handmaiden of overweening personal ambition, the looting of the public purse, and a spiral of impoverishment.

First published in *City Journal*.