

A terrifying menace

JOYCE HARRIS

Let us consider bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is "government by bureaux; usually officialism; government officials collectively."

A bureaucrat is "one who endeavours to concentrate power in his bureau." So bureaucracy has to do with government and with power.

In order to govern at all those who govern must be empowered to do so whether they are given that power by common consent, whether they take it without consent, whether they choose to delegate it.

In a totalitarian state or a dictatorship power has generally been taken without consent. In a democracy power is given by the consent of the majority through duly constituted elections.

Delegated power is common to both categories of government, but by its very nature is more common in democratic than in totalitarian countries.

Dictatorships thrive on centralised power which is more easily controlled from the top. Bureaucracy is far more likely to develop in democratic countries, where there is a greater inclination to delegate power and its accompanying responsibilities. There are few so-called democratic countries in the world today which do not tend towards bureaucracy, to a greater or lesser extent. In some countries it is rife, and South Africa is a typical example.

When the government of a country is benign; when those in power genuinely have the interests of all citizens at heart; when civil servants are trained and expected to be "civil", then no doubt bureaucracy can be efficient and beneficial, though even in such circumstances there will always be those officials who exercise their authority simply to exploit the power which has been vested in them or to feather their own nests. For power has a nasty habit of corrupting.

Because of the vast complications and networks inherent in the governing of a large, modern, highly populated state, some form of bureaucracy would appear to be inevitable, but it can only function beneficently when it can be controlled by those whom it controls

— when, in fact, there is an alert and watchful public holding the power of the vote and a bureaucracy of officialdom that is aware of this.

But in a country where power is vested in the hands of a racial group which is exclusive of other groups, a country which is not homogeneous, and a country where the large majority of its citizens are deprived of the vote, then bureaucracy becomes an additional instrument for the exercise of uncontrolled and uncontrollable power.

In his dealings with the general public, particularly those who do not have the vote, there is very little to prevent the petty official from exercising his power according to his state of mind, his prejudices, his carelessness, his ignorance, his temperament, his enjoyment of the authority vested in him or simply the mood of the moment.

This is not to say that all officials behave in this manner. Many of them may be highly conscientious about the carrying out of their duties. The point is that the opportunity undoubtedly exists for such behaviour, and that it undoubtedly does occur.

Power in South Africa is delegated to bureaux — a process which starts in the top echelons and extends down through all aspects of government and its administration until it affects the lives of all citizens.

These restrictive laws are administered by bureaucratic officials who are in no way answerable to the people they are controlling because the power of the vote is denied to them.

Such people have no redress. They may appeal to higher officials, but they are caught up in a bureaucratic net from which they cannot wriggle free. They have no right of appeal above a certain, well-defined level of the bureaucratic state, and little, if any, contact with those at the top of the scale who would have the power to change the laws or to control the injudicious actions of those officials who are administering them.

Their lives can be blighted by an official who makes an unconcerned or unintentional error in the stamp he puts into a reference

book or the place of birth he assigns to them. Such errors are very difficult to rectify. They compound themselves and are in turn subjected to the exercise of power by other officials who, by the very nature of things, will give more credence to their colleagues than to the individual who is appealing to them for help.

Government officials exercise a power — if not of life and death then of total control — over the people with whom they deal, and these people have no compensatory control over them. Bureaucracy is always open to abuse, as is all exercise of power, but in the South African context it is wide open to exploitation even though this might sometimes or even almost always be unintentional.

The laws of this country are such that every official, even the pettiest, wields an authority over the lives of his fellow human beings that may well be beyond his capacity to contend with. Government officials are human beings, with all the fallibilities and inadequacies of human beings, but their resultant in-

competence can have the direst effects on the lives of others which are out of all proportion to the status and achievements of the officials concerned.

It is, in fact, grossly unfair to vest such inordinate powers in ordinary people — unfair to them and unfair to those who must deal with them. It imposes responsibilities on people who may be unable to shoulder them and puts others almost totally at their mercy.

Bureaucracy is not necessarily evil, but it contains great potential for evil, and in South Africa it is evil both for the Government officials and for the voteless millions.

In order to be both effective and acceptable bureaucracy must be contained, and it can only be contained in a truly democratic country where everyone has the vote and the government and its officials are vulnerable. When the law not only protects government officials but gives them unbridled power whilst emasculating the powers of the people, then officialdom becomes invulnerable and bureaucracy a terrifying menace.

Obituary

It is with the deepest regret that we record the death during November of Miss Maudie Bower and Mrs. V. Forest, both valued members of the Somerset West Branch.

Mrs. Forest was for many years the well beloved Chairman of the Branch, and had it not been for her courage and determination, I do not think it would be in existence today.

In spite of increasing physical incapacity, she attended every stand until a short time before her death. Her total committment to the Black Sash is an inspiration to us all.

Cape Western Region.