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In Praise of Parkinson

Let us now praise Parkinson. That's C. Northcote Parkinson, the British historian who coined Parkinson's Law: Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion. This is one of the stunning insights of our time, and yet when Parkinson died the other day at 83, America's major newspapers barely noted his passing. The Washington Post buried his obit on page B7. The New York Times stuck it on page A19. Boo, and double boo. What a lousy sense of history.

We live in an age of bureaucracy. We all work for big companies, big government, big universities, big media, big hospitals—or have to deal with them. Parkinson was our most penetrating (and funniest) observer of bureaucracy. How could he be so casually dismissed? Maybe because his truths, once revealed, are so obvious that they seem less impressive than more esoteric axioms that, on inspection, usually aren't true.

Every passing day confirms Parkinson's relevance. Successful bureaucrats, he said, are driven by two guiding forces: (1) "to multiply subordinates, not rivals"; and (2) "to make work for each other." Every official who feels overworked appoints subordinates, who (feeling overworked) do likewise. Bureaucracies left to themselves—that is, left to create make-work—ultimately self-destruct. They become immobilized and can't adapt to change. Witness the collapse of the Soviet Union and (a lesser example) the turmoil at General Motors.

We also learn from Parkinson why deadlines

are essential. Because work can be endlessly elastic, nothing would ever get done without deadlines. If this column were not due today, I would be writing it tomorrow. And the next day, and the next. I would write it forever, because there would be forever to write it. Deadlines may inspire superficial thought, but without deadlines there would be no thought at all.

Some of Parkinson's scholarly works ("British Intervention in Malaya, 1867 to 1877") aren't inviting. His reputation rests mainly on "Parkinson's Law" (1957) and its successor, "The Law and the Profits" (1960). These books brim with wisdom and merriment. No committee can succeed with more than 21 members. At that point, "it is hopeless. It is dead." It will produce only "drivel." A few committee members may quietly "exchange little notes that read, 'Lunch with me tomorrow—we'll fix it then.'"

At meetings, people talk in inverse proportion to how much they know, Parkinson observed. Those who don't know much can blab endlessly and exhaust all their knowledge during the span of a meeting. They are not inhibited by ignorance, because they don't know what they don't know. By contrast, the well-informed can't possibly explain everything during one meeting. Anything they might say would insult others by exposing their ignorance. A bad career move. Better to shut up.

Every successful career, Parkinson explained, passes through 10 stages:

1. Age of Qualification (3 years)
2. Age of Discretion (7 years)

3. Age of Promotion (5 years)
4. Age of Responsibility (3 years)
5. Age of Authority (7 years)
6. Age of Achievement (9 years)
7. Age of Distinction (6 years)
8. Age of Dignity (3 years)
9. Age of Wisdom (7 years)
10. Age of Obstruction (?)

However, many careers start successfully and then finish badly:

6. Age of Frustration (9 years)
7. Age of Jealousy (4 years)
8. Age of Resignation (5 years)
9. Age of Oblivion (?)

Parkinson's Second Law, though not as well-known as the first, is almost as important: Expenditure rises to meet income. He also added a qualification: Expenditure not only rises to meet income but tends to surpass it. Translation: The more you have, the more you want. This explains why the wealthy are not always happy or even solvent. A few years back, a couple of the Texas Hunt brothers (who had been billionaires) went bankrupt trying to corner the world silver market. They should have read Parkinson.

But Parkinson mainly intended his Second Law to explain the constant rise in government spending. Governments, he said, would spend whatever they had—and perhaps a bit more. Raise taxes and you raise spending. Lower taxes and you might lower spending. Alas, the qualification to Parkinson's Second Law may be more valid than the law. Governments (especially

ours) show little embarrassment in spending well beyond their taxes.

Parkinson liked to quote Thomas Jefferson on the value of small government. "I regard economy [in government] among the first and most important virtues," Jefferson said. Without it, "we must be taxed in our meat and our drink, in our necessities and comforts, in our labor and in our amusements." And finally: "If we can prevent the Government from wasting the labor of the people, under the pretense of caring for them, they will be happy." (President Clinton, an eager spender, poses as an heir of Jefferson. Parkinson would have said: "Surely, sir, you jest.")

Our debt to Parkinson exceeds his own insights. He inspired imitators, who have devised other—if lesser—laws of life. For example, the Peter Principle ("Every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence"). I was about to put Murphy's Law ("If it can go wrong, it will") in this category, but on checking, I discover that this law came earlier, in 1949. Its author was Ed Murphy, an aircraft engineer. Referring to a technician, Murphy said: "If there is any way to do it wrong, he will."

Oh, well. Parkinson isn't the font of all wisdom. Just a lot. As a Brit, he "regarded most Americans as illiterate," said The Times of London in its obituary. We can forgive him this, because he helped us understand and made us laugh. Thanks, pal.

ASSEMBLY JUDICIARY

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SUBMITTED BY: Chairman Anderson

AMERICAN