

The Power of Stupidity



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Chapter 5 – Parkinson’s Law

While there has always been scarce depth of thinking on the problem of stupidity, there are some remarkably good studies about “why things go wrong.” One of the most interesting is *Parkinson’s Law – The Pursuit of Progress* by Cyril Northcote Parkinson. This “classic” was published in 1957 – and fifty years later it’s even more relevant.¹

It’s essentially serious, but it’s also amusing. This is one of those rare and unusual books that discuss a complex subject with lucid simplicity and with a refreshing sense of humor. It includes illustrations by Osbert Lancaster (in other editions, by Robert Osborn) that aren’t just entertaining or “funny” – they pleasantly help to understand the meaning of the text (while they are irksome for bureaucrats and pedantics.)

In spite of its success, it was – and it still is – an “uncomfortable” book, often disregarded by management theorists, ignored or forgotten by people running organizations. The reason is obvious. It says too many embarrassing truths – and, that is even more irritating, it does so in plain and brilliantly readable English.

It was disturbing and distressing when it was first published. It is even more so today.

¹ It was originally published as an article in *The Economist* in November 1955, and expanded to become a book in 1957. It was reprinted many times, until 2002, but now it seems to be “out of print”, though copies can be found in libraries and in the “second hand” market. Several other books by Parkinson were published, developing some specific concepts and subsidiary “laws”. Parts of the book are summarized in www.vdare.com/pb/parkinson_review.htm Some explanations are online – such as www.adstockweb.com/businesslore/Parkinson's_Law.htm

Parkinson's Law is generally quoted as «*Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.*» But this book also explains why organizations grow, regardless of any increase or decrease of what they are supposed to do, as a result of hierarchic mechanisms and functional anomalies.

Fifty years ago it was mostly a case of structures growing, with increasingly complicated internal relations. Parkinson explained that an organization of a thousand people can use all of its time and resources communicating only with itself, without generating anything worthwhile for the outside world.

Nowadays those problems still remain – while there are additional complications in the opposite direction. Personnel cuts are often a rough and brutal short-term tool to increase profit (and it's even more so with mergers and acquisitions.) The size of organizations decreases for non-functional reasons – and quite often this is done without reducing the over-staffing in useless or cumbersome roles.

This bizarre combination of bulimia and anorexia is one of the most serious diseases in all sort of organizations – business, government, politics, private or public service. The bigger they are, the worse it gets.

The basic problem is that an organization, like a living organism, is driven by an urge to grow and reproduce itself. But while life, as such, has value for the sheer sake of existing, this is not so for business enterprises (or any other public or private organizations) that deserve to exist only if they are doing something useful for someone else – and for society as a whole. Growing, if and when there is a need for more of what they are doing – or shrinking when their usefulness decreases, disappearing if they no longer serve a purpose.

This is a constant in all human ventures, regardless of whether they are for profit or for other purposes, such as institutional, political or public service.

Another of Parkinson's observations is that the amount of time and attention spent by management on a problem is in inverse proportion to its real importance.² This can't be taken as a "general rule" and it isn't always so. But anyone familiar with how organizations really work knows that it happens quite often.

There is also a disease called "The Law of Delay."³ When a problem is urgent, serious, taxing and complex, the people in charge avoid responsibility by delegating and delaying, doubting and hesitating, fussing and discussing, postponing and dismissing, until it's beyond repair.

In the state of exaggerated and paranoid haste in which we are living (as we shall see in chapter 16) it may seem that "delay" is no longer a problem. But the fact is that it's as bad as ever – and often getting worse.

² This is also known as *The Law of Triviality*: «*The time spent on any item of a committee's agenda will be in inverse proportion to the sum of money involved.*»

³ *The Law of Delay*, with other comments by C. Northcote Parkinson, was published as a separate book in 1970

Imaginary urgency and haste with no reason often lead to setting aside whatever doesn't appear to have an immediate solution. The result is the combination of two mistakes: deciding in a hurry on things that needed more thinking, while putting off decisions that it would have been better to take at the right time.

The resulting confusion leads to more blundering haste, combined with a confusing buildup of problems that wouldn't be there if they had been handled properly at the right time. This isn't only an unmanageable mess, it's also a never-ending vicious circle that makes things even worse.

We have already seen several disasters caused by this syndrome. But the fact is that decision systems are decaying in many organizations while they appear to survive – and their collapse will come as a “surprise” if we continue to ignore the termites of mismanagement that are lurking inside them.

Another disease explained by Parkinson is called *injelitance* – “the rise to authority of individuals with unusually high combinations of incompetence and jealousy.” «*The injelitant individual is recognizable from the persistence with which he struggles to eject all those abler than himself.*»

This isn't new, it has been causing all sorts of problems since the origins of human society – and it's proliferating in the complexities of the world as it is now. There are two closely related subjects: the rise of incompetence, as explained by *The Peter Principle* in the next pages (chapter 6) and the stupidity of power, as we shall see in chapter 10.

Stupidity is not mentioned, as such, in *Parkinson's Law* and in other analyses of “why things go wrong.” But it's pretty obvious that those destructive behaviors are stupid – and it's even more stupid that, fifty years after they were so clearly diagnosed, they continue to happen, with added complications making them worse.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it