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# The Politics of Human Welfare

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## *Introduction*

An examination of the *Interim Emergency Report* of the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (May 6, 1969) and the continuous flow of federal documents and bulletins issued by professional societies concerned with the education and care of handicapped children cannot help but make one uncomfortable with the serious discrepancy between the needs such children have and the resources available to fulfill these needs. At the outset, I want to make clear that only an exquisite denial of reality—or an unhinged mind—could permit one to be anything but painfully uncomfortable with the share of the public treasure now assigned for programs, services, and facilities on behalf of handicapped children and their families. Having said this—and enjoining all readers of this journal to examine, for themselves, the seriousness of the above statement and, especially, to devote particular attention to the Council for Exceptional Children document that follows this paper. (See Table I, Comments on the Politics of Human Welfare) I invite your attention to, for want of a more precise term, political problems that go beyond legislation, buildings, that go beyond fiscal commitments. Again, it is not that I wish to depreciate the critical importance of laws and resources toward the attainment of appropriate programs and services for the handicapped. Rather, I am certain that we have consensus concerning their importance and that, possibly, our concentration on those matters have caused us to neglect or misunderstand other—equally important—political considerations.

Putting the above another way, I believe that too many of us—this writer included—have confused legislation, buildings, and new resources with progress. We have confused activity—doing something for the sake of doing something—with progress. We have confused new labels and new programs and new categories as necessarily being concomitant with progress. It is certain that there is a great deal more activity today than ever before in the fields concerned with the education, treatment, and care of the handicapped. There is a sea of legislative programs, much of which is positive and facilitating and some of which is alarming. There are many new buildings, institutions, and mental health centers in opera-

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tion, or on the drawing boards, with fiscal authorization for their construction. There are more funds than ever before and more people—more competent people—available to manage these funds and serve the handicapped. There *has* been progress and there is every reason to expect that things will continue to improve, that the lot of the handicapped will improve—that, within his lifetime, the handicapped child may no longer be thought of as the “least of the least.”

However, although we have progressed in our work on behalf of the handicapped far beyond the expectations of the corps of pessimists and doomsday-prophets that, to our misfortune, are far too numerous in our professional and general population, we have not progressed nearly as far as our public relations claim or our humanitarian yearnings demand. Progress in our work has been steady and encouraging; yet, on the other hand, it has been very slow to obtain and painful to achieve. For, in all too many situations and, especially, for such groups as the mentally retarded and the emotionally disturbed—little has changed, really changed. In all too many situations, there is but an illusion of change. The illusion is there, for things do not change *differently* now for those children from the ways they have not changed before. The new buildings, and new laws, and new personnel have, for too many handicapped children, not changed their day-to-day lives and opportunities. I believe that things will not become very much better for these children until we begin to understand “facts of life” that go beyond legislation and the allocation of human and physical resources.

### *The System*

During the past year, I was on leave from the University, serving the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as Director of a state-wide mental retardation program in the Department of Mental Health. The following is my attempt to bring some illumination to those who haven't experienced “government from the inside.” Admittedly, I take a very narrow view of things and I have had a very limited experience. To the degree that the reader finds me fair or unfair to certain kinds of individuals or operations, he will better understand that in a system such as that which I describe, in part, it is not unusual to be both fair and unfair and to be treated both fairly and unfairly. Therefore, at the beginning, I want to share my conviction that, in this system, decision-making is a reflection of the System and its capacity to view good deeds or poor deeds rather than of individuals and their particular attributes or liabilities. However, it is not possible for me to discuss the System other than in terms of individuals. Stated another way, it is my impression that the System does more to change individuals than individuals do toward changing the System and, consequently, the individuals are a re-

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flection of the System rather than the System being a reflection of the influence of certain individuals. In this regard, I maintain that in whatever ways the reader evaluates abusive practices and ill-considered programs perpetrated on handicapped children, it would be erroneous to the extreme to place primary responsibility for these evils on certain individuals or types of individuals. That is to say, we can continuously replace people or add new people or create new positions and not—in any but trivial ways—change the conditions we agree must be changed. For, in fact, it is very probable that those people replaced were as anxious to change conditions as those who had been pressing for their replacement. Essentially, I have concluded that adding new “good” people to a sick System does not make the System appreciably healthier but it does effect the “good” people and they, eventually, behave in much the same ways as those they've replaced. The goal, then, for any of us truly interested in improving the lot of the handicapped, is to better understand and, then, change a System which promoted inadequate or inferior care and treatment. It seems that, heretofore, our goal has been to change the people and, thus, rescue a System that, by this time, we must recognize as without hope.

### *Decision-Making and Accountability*

In most political systems concerned with human welfare—at least those I have been most intimately associated with, a department of mental health and public school programs—few people are forced to make decisions because few people have accountability for specific programs or activities. Obviously, those people who are accountable for specific activities must make decisions. How are these decisions made? A better question might be, “What causes an individual to make one decision rather than another decision?” My experience as an administrator puzzled me for many months because I was completely unable to “read” the System insofar as decision making is concerned. For example, several of what I considered to be very reasonable requests were denied by various business offices without explanation or apparent reason. Other requests were ignored. Still others were quickly and categorically honored to our complete satisfaction. There was no apparent logic to these responses to our requests for assistance. There was no discernible pattern. I could not convince myself that I was “getting on” any more adroitly or poorly with these colleagues in other offices. It seemed as if some mad table of random numbers was at work here, approving one thing, denying another, and ignoring the third. On occasion, when I asked for an explanation of a decision, someone quoted a law or a regulation or a departmental policy. It must be admitted, that in each instance when I did require

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an explanation, there was some law or regulation or policy that seemed to add credulance and wisdom to the decision. However, on another occasion, a similar request—in equal violation of the regulation or policy—would be granted. All one can do is speculate about the mind of the decision maker—as, obviously, one cannot read his mind and, equally obviously, there is no discernible or logical pattern to his activities.

My speculations have led me to three insecure and tentative conclusions:

1. It is much simpler and less perilous to make no decision or to decide negatively than to decide positively.
2. The System makes it more satisfying to decide negatively than to decide positively.
3. The process of working with laws, regulations, and policies often causes certain individuals to prohibit activities and developments rather than to promulgate such activities and developments.

Because so few people have accountability and, consequently, so few may make a final decision about a matter, most requests for one thing or another pass through several hands, if eventually, they are to be approved. With the exception of upper echelon business office personnel, there are few so-called “middle-management” professionals who make final *positive* decisions. In innumerable situations, these individuals may make final *negative* decisions, i.e., they have the authority to deny approval of a request but they do not have the authority (or do not believe they have the authority) to approve the request. Our laws and regulations are written in such ways that very few individuals appear to have authority to approve a request, but a great many people have authority to either ignore a request or deny a request. Further, to approve a request for funds, personnel, a specific program, a transfer of personnel, or some other change from the “usual” is to, in effect, approve the wisdom of that action and certify the legality of that action. To ignore or deny the request permits the decision-maker freedom from accountability for his decision, yet permits him to make a decision. Inasmuch as the laws, the regulations, and the policies are not always without ambiguity and, in fact, are frequently open to multiple interpretations and unresolved discrepancies, one can more easily find his safety in that part of the law or policy that permits the decision-maker to ignore or deny than in that part that permits him to approve and, thus, requires him to stand behind his decision.

To summarize the above discussion, on the one hand, few individuals I have encountered in government are authorized to make final positive decisions. While, on the other hand, those who have such authorization are reluctant to approve—and, thus, endorse—requests that come onto their desks. One can speculate that the consequence of all of this is that

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many more negative decisions are made than positive decisions. Whether that speculation is true or not is not possible to prove. However, whatever the essential cause or causes are, I have observed that there are many more negative than positive decisions made in governmental agencies that I have been associated with.

#### *Final Comments*

Time and space allocations do not permit me to do more than mention all the problems that I consider fundamental to understanding the politics of human welfare. That discussion and an elaboration of the aforementioned remarks, must await the publication of a book I recently completed, a book concerned with human abuse and public policy. Especially, two of those problems—what I choose to call the “we-they” syndrome and the meretricious system and un-civil service—should be noted. In government, there are too many “we-they” dichotomies emanating from and funneling to the seat of authority. My observations lead me to believe that these dichotomies are always pragmatically real yet, in essence, artificial, more destructive than constructive, and usually based on various forms of bigotry, ignorance, and disrespect for particular “types” of individuals, their jobs or training, or their location of employment.

Simply, to illustrate what I mean by the “we-they” syndrome it may be helpful to list such common dichotomies as they refer to: “professional staff-business staff,” “unions,” “central office-the field,” “mental health-mental retardation,” “parents-professionals,” “physicians-non-physicians,” and “legislators-executive staff.”

The beautiful concepts of the merit system and the civil service, concepts that are basic to our fundamental form of democratic government, have fallen on evil days. There is not very much I can say about merit in state government and the civil service system except that I believe we must find a better way to recruit, select, promote, and encourage state civil servants, from the most unskilled level to positions requiring highest attainments in education and experience. We must face squarely the knowledge that time is always on the side of the mediocre. A system based on “putting in one’s time” for promotion or more favorable assignments and duties is a system that promotes mediocrity; it is a system that programs for and reinforces thoughtlessness and inefficiency and, consequently, these are the products it deserves. In principle, I support a merit system and the concepts of civil service. However, I do not believe that our system today has merit—both as a system and as a way to reward deserving employees. Nor do I believe that the civil service is anything but another kind of spoils system, one that is different from Boss Tweed’s, but one that is—based on similar operating principles for the purpose of achieving similar objectives.

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Lastly, I want to conclude with a statement of belief. I am optimistic that in spite of the aforementioned concerns, the "System" will change, things will be better for the handicapped, and those of us who have the opportunity will utilize more efficiently the politics of human welfare. For many reasons, most of them not mentioned in this paper, I believe this optimism is based on sound theoretical and pragmatic foundations. However, if for no other reason, I am optimistic—or people such as myself would never have been permitted to study the things we have studied and say the things we have said here.