

Can Institutions Ever Remain Honest?

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Thomas Jefferson wrote, in a [letter to Edward Carrington in 1788](#) that "The natural progress of things is for liberty to yeild [sic], and government to gain ground."

I have been reflecting a great deal on institutions in general, bureaucracies, governments, societies, foundations, and what not, and drawing upon my own experience as a member and occasional leader of such entities, I am moved to draw certain conclusions. These conclusions are themselves most relevant to my abiding interest in the machinations of power and the corruption that, it seems, inevitably occurs.

Many years ago I sat on the board of the American Psychiatric Association, the first Member-in-Training to have been elected to a two-year stint. During that time a petitioner presented herself to the Board, requesting reimbursement for legal fees that resulted when she initiated actions against a supervisor, another psychiatrist, who had engaged in a relationship with her. He - her supervisor - should have known, and acted, better, notwithstanding the fact that no coercion was involved.

I vividly remember that, after her presentation, Board members responded. We were sitting in a circle with a fairly large circumference, and at about the halfway point during the sequence of responses a shift occurred. Sympathy with the petitioner took a sudden turn and in the end, after the Board had heard from its lawyer about the risks of setting certain precedents, the petitioner's request was refused. That turning tide ... it occurred so quickly, so intangibly, but so very definitely in the end.

At that time as I sat, witness to the proceedings, I had the impulse to resign my position and walk out. But I didn't. I most certainly should have, because my action would have been a statement in support of what I knew, in my bones, was correct. I have regretted my inaction after so many years to this day. At the very least, however, it gave me a glimpse into the

machinations of large structures, institutions and organizations, which, by some mysterious and almost ethereal – I was about to say ‘alchemical’ – process, end up betraying the very principles they espouse.

In retrospect, my walking out or not walking out wouldn’t have made any difference to the decided outcome of the petitioner, and I was either too immature or too cowardly to have voted with my feet – although, to my credit, I did vote, officially, in favor of the petitioner’s request.

Years later, in my role as the president of a large psychiatric group of private practitioners fighting against the inroads of managed care, I also noted the large gap between those who actively worked for the cause, and those who merely wished to reap the benefits that organization could provide. It was all too easy to feel scorn for the inactive body of members and embark on initiatives without their consent, even if these initiatives were positive and beneficial. We were a small group, however, never more than 88 in number at our peak, and those of us in positions of decision-making power did not abuse our privilege. Had we grown larger, and had the stakes been higher, I have little doubt that the temptations to dismiss the lazy multitude would have resulted in some form of corruption. You see, there is always an inner circle. Thankfully – or ruefully – enough, I got mainly grief for my years as president and I noted that as soon as members benefited from group action they felt no loyalty to stay on board. For example, when one psychiatrist, through our connections, had obtained a part-time job, he felt no need to renew his membership. Eventually our association died a quiet and natural death by disbanding without fanfare.

We are surrounded by organizations, structures, institutions, governments, parliaments, congresses, corporations and other bodies, and they, in their formidable complexity, wield tremendous power. They grow large, they amass funds, they are distant from the many minions who either vote or contribute to their being, and as a result a very definable line separates those who run such organizations from those whom they purport to represent.

When the New Zealand government locked down its entire citizenry, ostensibly to protect the health of the nation, it did so with no discussion, no debate, and by ignoring any dissenting input. When thousands gathered on the grounds of Parliament – the people’s grounds – to protest the mandates that issued from their so-called representatives, not one member heeded our requests or our pleas to hear us out. Not one member of Parliament, our body of elected representatives, deigned to step foot onto the grounds and meet and talk about our grievances, or our opinions. In the inglorious end they allowed the stormtroopers of the state to invade and attack peaceful petitioners who had the courage to believe in their rights of bodily sovereignty and political voice.

Rousseau famously declared, at the beginning of [The Social Contract](#), that ‘Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.’ The chains he refers to are imposed by the very institutions that arise ostensibly to protect us. They grow, they grow more, and they grow every more distant, and at a certain point those within the institutions regard those whom they rule as underlings. They, in fact, enslave us and work against the beating hearts of the populace, the more to preserve their isolation and supremacy.

I am not against the principle of organization, I am not against the coherence of groups, I am not against entities that allow for cooperative strength, that marshal talents and energies on behalf of constructive enterprises.

But I believe that these groups, *unless stringently checked, and unless stringently restricted in size and number*, inevitably betray the principles that justified their coming into being.

At the juncture within which we find ourselves now, victims of and participants in the Corona Wars and the push to control and surveil every aspect of human behavior, we have an opportunity for renaissance. We have an opportunity to revise our conceptions of structure and to implement organizing bodies that work for, and not against, its members.

Imagine the coordinated body of cells, relatively small but cooperatively linked, that compose the human heart.

And now imagine the political counterpart, something perhaps like the Swiss cantons, that will revitalize our system of governance by eschewing the insidious pitfalls of accumulated power.

I hope I live to see that day.

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