Middle Articles

CONTEMPORARY THEMES

Democratic Direction*

SIR JAMES HOWIE,† M.D., F.R.C.P., F.R.C.PATH.

British Medical Journal, 1970, 4, 793-795

As surgeons you are all in the position of having to provide effective direction and to accept clear personal responsibility for your own actions and those of others. This is what makes surgeons what they are. To a varying degree, however, you will also have had to combine your effective actions with consultation; so it may be of interest if I try to resolve the contradiction apparently inherent in the idea of democratic direction.

In formulating my ideas of four essentials I have drawn on personal experiences and impressions derived from holding a variety of posts and offices in universities, the National Health Service, and voluntary organizations, including the Church. Obviously, my thoughts and recommendations commit nobody except myself and are not applicable without appropriate adaptations in exactly the same way to each of these different fields; but I believe that the basic principles may have a general validity. In any organization, I see need for: (1) a chief executive, (2) a clear distinction to be made between "deliberative" and general discussion, (3) competent and characterful officials, and (4) a means of controlling executives.

A Chief Executive

Directors or presidents can be tolerated only if they discover how to combine action with consultation. Their problem is how to keep the actions free from hindrance and ambiguity and yet to base them on a sufficient measure of consent. The most difficult element of democracy is to ensure that indefinitely prolonged discussion does not paralyse action or serve as an excuse for averting or postponing decisions. Decisions are painful; and people need to be deprived of plausible excuses for dodging them. This can be achieved, as I believe, only if a single named person is made clearly and finally responsible for deciding at what point there has been enough consultation, for seeing that clear decisions are made, and for making sure that necessary actions are then both begun and completed. This is why I am an unrepentant supporter of the system whereby presidents are chief executives, hospital units have chiefs, universities have principals, families have fathers, and—dare I say it in Scotland—churches have bishops. Equally, however, I am sure that bishops should be set in presbyteries (as the Bishops' Report proposed in 1957), that fathers should learn or be taught how not to set on edge the teeth of their children (and wives!), that principals should guard academic freedom, and that chiefs of units should encourage the juniors to think and express their own thoughts.

It is not too difficult to combine effective action with adequate consultation either when only a few people are involved, as in families or hospital units, or when time does not press for early decisions. But it often happens in real life that even large organizations may be required to give embarrassingly quick responses to pressing requests for comment—or to find

themselves passed over. Let an organization acquire a reputation for being unable to speak its mind without what appears to the political or administrative bosses as tedious and intolerable delay, and that organization will inevitably suffer again and again the indignity of not being consulted even about matters where its role and its interests are clearly involved. This fact of life is why I think that all organizations require a single, unambiguously identifiable executive head. What can be guaranteed to produce weakness—even chaos—is a situation where no member of the executive dares even to begin effective consultation, let alone action, because he is merely one among equals. Of course the dangers are obvious. It is true that power tends to corrupt. But I think that a really effective system of checks and balances can be devised which allows and indeed promotes efficient action and yet keeps the chief executive in order and indeed sharpens his efficiency.

Two Different Kinds of Discussion

Deliberative Discussion

There is nothing so productive of decision and action as individual responsibility. But no individual has all wisdom or can stand alone against all comers. Hence the need for chief executives to have deliberative discussion before committing their organizations.

By deliberative discussion I mean the kind of discussion whose purpose is to consider issues carefully with a view to reaching decisions and accepting joint responsibility. Its outcome must be unpredictable; and those who engage in it must be well-informed people who lay themselves open to the persuasion of all the others involved. It must lead also to the formulation of plans of action and to the definition of arrangements for their efficient execution. Experienced chief executives welcome such discussions. They clear the mind and lead to much better thought and action than could be produced by an individual acting alone. The highest number of people who can profitably engage in deliberative discussion is a crucial point, and it is variously estimated. Much depends on the chairman—on how well he is prepared and on his ability to time his interventions, keep his team in harmony, and identify what is practicable. Experienced executives usually opt for 12 or fewer as the maximum number of such groups. Challenged on his figure of 12 as the maximum number, one experienced administrator said: "Well, that's the top number I can manage; and there is biblical precedent for it."

For six years I was chairman of an executive committee of nine. It met regularly at monthly intervals and could be called together more often if required and at very short notice. Its members were almost all good at keeping to the point; they read the papers circulated before the meetings; and they knew the importance of what they did. When there was need for great urgency they often empowered one or more of their

* A lecture given to the West of Scotland Surgical Association on 10 October, 1970.

† Director, Public Health Laboratory Service.

number to act on their behalf, and report their action. The minutes of the executive were scrutinized critically by a council of 26 members, which met five times a year; and the council's report was submitted to an annual general meeting which just over 2,000 were eligible to attend. As a rule some 70 members attended the annual general meeting; and in the six years I do not recall a really fundamental disagreement with the decisions or actions of the executive, though some of them were very fully examined. The circumstances were favourable, for 2,000 is not a large organization and the interests of the members were pretty well defined. My own conclusion is that nine was a very good number for this kind of work. Certainly I should not expect good deliberative discussion from more than 12.

If an organization is large and its members' interests are not homogeneous, the deliberative body will need to have the character of a cabinet. For deliberative discussion it will have to remain a small number, 12 or fewer, and the chief executive will be its permanent chairman during his term of office. He will direct in the sense of never losing sight of the wood for the trees, as some portfolio carriers so often do, and he will be the chief public representative and defender of the policies of the organization, and of particular aspects of such policies as are his special responsibility. The larger and the more varied are the interests of any organization, the more necessary it is for the cabinet to be strong enough to curb a too wilful chief executive and to support a weak one. But the strength of the body is secured, not by increasing its number, but by forming it from the heads of departments, or geographical regions, or particular branches of the organization—whichever is most appropriate. No arguments, however, such as those concerning "equal" representation of all conceivable interests, must allow the members of the deliberative body to exceed a number of the order of 12. If that number is exceeded the discussions cease to be deliberative in the sense which I have tried to explain.

The cabinet of a large body differs from the executive of a smaller one by being composed of heads of departments, regions, or interests instead of office bearers. Its function of deliberative discussion is the same; and it is essential. Naturally the deliberative body must be set within a democratic constitution, whose provisions should elaborately safeguard the rights of the general body of members over against the powers vested in the cabinet or executive and council. The essentials of such a constitution are fulfilled by the Board of Trade's requirements for the granting of a Section 19 Licence.

Of course, the advice of any cabinet or executive must be open to be challenged in some intermediate body, such as a council. The knowledge that this may be expected controls both the chairman and the cabinet or executive. On major issues, if they are not good judges of what they can successfully defend the members of a cabinet or executive have been poorly chosen and ought not to remain in office. Once a year the opportunity should arise to get rid of them; if they are any good it will not be taken.

General Discussion

There can never be too much general discussion. Indeed there can never be enough. The great thing is to provide the right conditions for it. The worst thing is to fail to recognize that it differs absolutely from deliberative discussion. General discussion, in its essence, is advisory and consultative. If it is mistakenly organized so as to be or appear to be deliberative it will fail to reveal the objectives and policies which will unite an organization; and that is its real purpose. Moreover, the policy-making decisions of large gatherings too often turn out to be sadly wrong, partly because large gatherings cannot always appreciate the delicate touch needed not to disrupt negotiations in train—and so cannot be encouraged to discuss them publicly. Another common difficulty is that too many of

the orators best able to sway large gatherings are surprisingly often not accurately informed about facts. Moreover, time is almost always against adequate discussion, and it is not easy for people to let themselves be seen to change their minds in such company even by what they may well admit to themselves is superior argument.

It is dismaying to see gatherings of anything from 100 to 1,000 delegates or representatives assembled for an annual conference trying to deal in from one to five days with anything from 10 to 500 motions (or compromise or condensed motions) in the belief that this is how policy should be made. Phrases are reworded; commas are shifted; verbs are substituted; clauses are transposed; amendments are discussed; motions as amended are put without the conference being quite sure what it is deciding; points of order are debated; questions are turned into speeches; all is done against the clock; and the delegates or representatives leave for home trying to assure themselves and their constituents that in a single day or week they have laid down policy for another year by a fully democratic process of general discussion. "This is our parliament," they often say, overlooking the point that the Westminster Parliament is in session day after day, and week after week, and that what is done on the floor of the house is no more than a fraction of the total work.

For president, cabinet or executive, and council not to know the minds of those representing the general body of members at the assembly or conference is fatal. But they are least likely to become well informed if the general discussion is organized to make it appear that it can be deliberative. It is far better, as I think, to lay before such large conferences a number of short well-prepared papers showing briefly the real substance of the issues on which the president, council, and cabinet or executive need to hear a full, uninhibited, and possibly even diffuse debate, without the constraints of time or the obfuscations of amendments and amendments to amendments. Let the people speak! Let the chairmen of committees, the heads of departments, the office bearers, and the president be put up to explain and defend their proposals, and let it be ascertained, by a show of hands if necessary, if they have or have not the support of the meeting for the essentials of a particular objective or policy as it is expounded. If they have not the necessary support, let them go back and deliberate again in the light of what they have heard. Executives are in for trouble if they disregard or do not know the sentiment of their members. Certainly conferences and general meetings are necessary; but do not foster the illusion that a large body of representatives or delegates, seldom fully informed and almost always short of time, can sensibly be looked to for precise forms of wording which are to bind the policy of the organization for another year—no matter what changes time may bring. This is the road to weak and self-contradictory lines of action.

A pathetic waste of time may be guaranteed by calling together for deliberative discussion too large "representative" groups (often of 30-40 people), loading them with the paperwork and presence of an array of well-meaning officials, giving them a distinguished figurehead type of chairman, and charging them with precisely defining decisions and actions. Such bodies are too large for deliberative discussion without being large enough or representative enough to provide a forum for general discussion. Yet such expensive committees are commonly summoned. As one wise and experienced official said of such committees: "They spend hours keeping minutes." Certainly they are so composed as to be generally unfitted for any more significant role. Among other disabilities they are too large to be called together quickly enough or often enough to fulfil a deliberative function.

It is important to add one point. General discussion is not something reserved for annual conferences. Wise executives and officials are easily accessible to their members. They get out of their offices and go around as much as they can; they

readily make appointments to see petitioners, even repetitively importunate ones; and they call together small and highly expert advisory groups, working parties, and committees and pay great attention to what their deliberations reveal is in the minds of the members on well-defined particular issues. This is a part of general discussion.

Competent and Characterful Officials

Competent, characterful officials are a priceless asset. Presidents and other executives come and go; but officials remain. The chief official must be very close to the president; and if these two cannot work in harmony the organization is headed for disaster. One danger is that a really competent and characterful official may develop his own policy and seek to make it that of the president and executive. Nobody should doubt that officials have their preferences on matters of policy; nor should their influence be thought of as something to be set aside without consideration. The professional judgement of an official of experience and loyalty should be known. What is important is that it should not be final. The good official must know and advise fully and precisely on what may be said against any policy as well as what may be said for it—whether he likes or dislikes the policy. His duty to the organization is to see that its executives know and face the probable results of what they are doing. It requires great character on the part of an official to know when he must fall silent and let the executives make up their minds; and great competence to know how best to safeguard the organization from the consequences of wrong decisions, for these will never be wholly avoided.

Obviously the balance between the senior official and the chief executive must be based on mutual respect and their common loyalty to the organization. Senior officials usually have longer terms of office than chief executives and must suffer many temptations to use the power which this gives them, especially if the chief executive proves to be unsuited to the post—a discovery which is sometimes surprisingly delayed until the duties of office reveal the full facts. I cannot help thinking that too great discrepancies over periods of tenure must be avoided. I ask myself, for example, how a presbytery clerk or clerk of assembly of perhaps 20 years' experience can avoid the danger of exerting undue influence over a moderator who—as one of them put it—is “it” for one year, then “ex-it.” This kind of gross discrepancy in periods of tenure of office clearly has dangers and weaknesses; but organizations need competent and characterful officials to ensure that executives make their recommendations in the light of properly analysed information and not by intuition and guesswork only—although surely nobody would affirm that these should never play some part. What must never happen is that the chief administrative official should become, or appear to be, the sole spokesman for the organization simply because no one executive has been clearly defined as the head. This is apt

to happen if the president is merely a figurehead and none of a group of equal executives is empowered or expected to accept final responsibility.

Controlling the Executives

I have already referred to the one sure method of controlling executives: sack them quickly if they are not good enough or cannot be trusted. During the war Winston Churchill made the point to Stalin and Roosevelt that he alone of the three could at any time be dismissed from office at short notice. This is the real control which the annual conference of the general body of members must retain over the president and other executives. It is the substance of democracy. Give the chief executive whatever limit of tenure is appropriate. It should not be less than three or more than 10 years if my estimate is correct; but it should never be guaranteed for more than a year at a time. This allows the executives to get on with the job but still remain fully accountable. In practice, men so empowered and yet controlled can work well; and they will not often even come near to being sacked. Those with a crude appetite for power for its own sake are easily discerned once they are in office—though not always before that—and those who aspire to leadership for the glory of the office must face the two truths that leadership is service and that thin-skinned democrats do not survive.

Conclusion

The words “democracy” and “direction” denote conceptions which may seem to be incapable of being fitted together. However, it is essential that their union should be made effective. Action without discussion is apt to be arbitrary and therefore liable to be disowned, even if it may happen to be wisely conceived. Discussion and consultation readily become plausible excuses for avoiding the pain of decision and the effort of action. Successful arrangements require: (1) a named person as chief executive who presides over deliberations but personally carries final responsibility for representing the organization and for defending and explaining the shape of its agreed policy and actions; (2) a clear distinction and understanding of the difference between “deliberative” and general discussion; (3) the choice of competent and characterful permanent officials who advise on but do not make decisions on policy; and (4) a constitution which limits the tenure of office of the chief executive and his principal supporters and holds over them the real possibility of dismissal within the year if they prove to be incompetent or otherwise unworthy of confidence.

The important differences between the conditions required for useful deliberative discussion and for truly effective general discussion are particularly important.