

CAUSES OF RED TAPE*

Red tape is delay, numerous regulations, inflexibility, unresponsiveness to customer desires. A certain amount of it is inherent and ineradicable in any large-scale enterprise, public or private. The reasons for government red tape are definite and apparent. In the first place, it must act through law and adhere to statutory provision. Private business can usually make exceptions, but public employees must abide by the law or be punished. The second reason is that government is expected to treat all persons equally, none with special favor. Here, again, business enterprises are not so circumscribed in what they can do; but if government began playing favorites, there would be no end of it, and popular indignation would become greater than it does with the grossest cases of red tape.

Public employees often find that it is more important to be consistently correct than to be constantly trying to please the customer. It should be possible to do both, of course, but the customer-is-always-right attitude is sure to result in petty inconsistencies and breaches of regulations. Government could stand such exceptions more than it does. When the executive is progressive and fearless, customer responsiveness and consistency are combined. The nervous-old-woman type at the head of public departments is what hurts government's reputation.

In the third place, red tape is an inevitable by-product of faulty organization. Delay is usually caused by the employee's need to get authority or confirmation for a certain act. When authority is direct and immediate, government can be as prompt as any other organization of equal size. The object should be to simplify lines of responsibility, to delegate authority farther down the line. Difficulty arises when a staff service, such as finance, comes to have operating responsibilities. Then, instead of serving the responsible

executive, it ties him up in Lilliputian threads.

Another case in which red tape is a reflection of bad organization is found when many duties or services are thrown into the same department, causing both the public and the officials to become confused. Contrast this with an organization which furnishes only one service, such as telephone communication. The objective is clear—the best telephone service at the cheapest price. Everything in the organization can be planned to that end, and all service is judged by that standard; but when the services are many, the adequacy with which any one is handled suffers correspondingly.

The police functions of government give it a reputation for red tape. Restriction is universally disliked. "Officiousness" is a symbol of governmental administration. As service functions increase, there is less of this. Salesmanship becomes the motif. Moreover, it is possible to train control officials in manners and more acceptable attitudes. The greatest change in police administration during the last generation is the training of patrolmen to consider what the public thinks and feels. The idea of policemen being given lessons in politeness may seem funny, but this is actually what happens in the larger departments.

The eradication of government red tape is not hopeless. In a government of laws, there is always bound to be some of it; but if administrative faults were corrected and if public employees were convinced of the desirability of a sales attitude, the amount of it would be no greater than in other organizations of like size. But is there an unbridgeable gap between what might be done and what will be accomplished?

* By Marshall E. Dimock, Associate Professor of Public Administration in the University of Chicago, in his *Modern Politics and Administration*, pp. 252-254.