



A Government Concern

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Sociologists tell us that human beings cannot survive at all in isolation from one another. Man has what they call the "gregarious instinct" which added to his other abilities, enables him to profit handsomely from joint action. In other words, man is extraordinarily dependent on his fellow men. This is why, apart from biological reasons, human beings live in societies. While living in societies is both essential and desirable, it is also problematical. Indeed, most of the critical problems of human society stem from the fact that it cannot be taken for granted that the necessary co-operation will be forthcoming as it can in an ant or termite society. One writer has rightly suggested that we can understand much about human behaviour if we think of human beings as creatures with anthropoid equipment who are trying to live like termites.

In order to solve the ever-present problems, therefore, human societies have developed something which is known as government. Government is, in this sense, universal. The most primitive tribes and the most industrialised nation states have their governing processes. Whatever the religion, race, colour, or stage of technological development of a people, they need, and certainly do possess, some sort of governing apparatus. The complexity and functions of the apparatus may differ considerably from people to people. But the important thing is that it exists and requires management by men.

In some societies, the governing task may be performed by elders as an incident to their paternal functions — settling disputes *et cetera*.

In others, it may be carried on by a clearly differentiated and specialized organization and the range of governmental functions may be narrow or broad.

However diverse the processes and forms of governance may appear to be — tribal chieftaincies, islamic sultanates, tyrannical dictatorships, ruling aristocracies, or chief executives of modern republics — they have something in common : they possess authority, they exercise power.

Power may be exercised at the whim and caprice of the rulers or in accordance with sharply defined sets of constitutional standards. In either case, the success of those who hold it depends, to a great extent, upon their skill in the fulfilment of their roles as holders of power. It is for this reason that political philosophers have singled out power as the basic element of their professional interest. They concern themselves with such questions as : Who exercise power ? For whose benefit ? In what manner ? To what ends ? By what right ? According to what principles, if any ? ¹

For the purpose of this article, we shall define power as the capacity to produce intended effects, the capacity to realise one's will. We shall go a bit further and define "political power" as the ability to influence and control the minds and actions of others.

When we pause to examine these definitions, we shall find that they conform to that particular influence that is exerted by those who handle the reins of government. Thus, political power consists fundamentally of relationships — relationships of superordination and subordination ; of dominance and submission ; of the governors and the governed.

This power relationship may shade off from brute force to the most gentle persuasion. Between brute force and gentle persuasion, however, the gamut of activities that constitute power relationship is wide indeed. I personally believe that at any point in the scale between brute force and gentle persuasion, it is possible to discover an atavism of the former.

Let us take brute force and gentle persuasion as two extremes of what may constitute a scale of power relationships. And if we permit ourselves the luxury of believing that brute force belongs to the past, to the age of barbarism, we are left with persuasion, gentle or otherwise, as a tool commonly used by those in positions of power to influence and control the minds and actions of other men.

The use of persuasion by those who govern to gain consent, to influence and control the minds and actions of other men has given rise to what is generally known as "public relations". As a government function, public relations grew out of the recognition and effort on the part of government to deal with the force of **public**

¹ V. O. Key Fr. **polits, Parties, and Pressure Groups** (New York), Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, Fourth Edition, 1958. Professor Key has treated this subject lucidly in Chapter one, The Nature of Politics.

opinion as a controlling factor of human affairs. It grew out of the appreciation by those who exercise authority of the fact that human beings react to stimuli in terms of what they know about them. It grew out of the belief that in order to succeed, government must cultivate a cheerful and willing obedience! It grew out of recognition of the fact that human beings are naturally rebellious; they must either be destroyed or cajoled.

To illustrate the point a bit further, among the normal or natural instincts that are common to all human beings is one which we may describe as the instinct to refuse to accept and obey the command of another person without careful analysis and ultimate agreement with the intent and purpose of the command. This may be a lengthy description but it seems to describe what I mean.

We do not have to delve into clinical psychology nor spend years analysing the conduct of children in the kindergarten and through the years of elementary school attendance to note that the human mind is reluctant to accept a command from another mind. The natural, normal reaction to any external command is most often manifested by the immediate exclamation of the question: "Why?"

Students of psychology know that the only successful way by which to make another mind obey a wish of our own mind is to present that command or desire in such a subtle manner that it will be either unconsciously or willingly accepted by the other mind and acted upon with co-operation and approval before it has had time to analyse and resent it. But the instinct to resent is ever present and this natural and normal resentment must be overcome if we would have others do our bidding. That is why human beings have developed certain polite formulas in expressing wishes — "please Mr. or please madam", etc.

But even so, a direct command worded in the very finest of polite language would not wholly overcome the natural resentment manifesting itself in a hesitation to obey. Let us take an example:

If two men, are walking along a narrow path, in opposite directions and, as the one approaches the other the one says to the other: "Get off this path, and let me pass!", the natural reaction would be for the other to look squarely in the former's face, manifest this normal instinct of refusal to obey by asking: "Why the hell should I?"

On the other hand, if the one man had said to the other, "Please Mr. will you kindly, my dear and respected sir, step entire-

ly out of the path and allow me ample space to progress on my way?" it is doubtful if the other man would hurry himself out of his position with any more agreeableness than he would have done if the request had been an out-right command.

There would be a difference in his reaction, undoubtedly, or he would pause for a moment to analyse the unusual formula, the extraordinary and verbose request and come to the conclusion that the individual making the request was either mentally unbalanced, suffering from a superiority complex or was planning some mischief. So much about human resentment for commands.

The fact remains as a basic psychological law that as soon as the average human being is old enough to feel that he is a living entity with certain rights and privileges of his own, he resents almost automatically and most stubbornly any command from an external source that appears to abrogate, to take from him or to modify his established rights and privileges.

It is to combat the collective resentment of those within their areas of jurisdiction that those who handle the reins of government, and indeed, all who wish to influence other human beings have resorted to public relations. As stated above, government public relations grew out of the recognition and effort on the part of government to deal with the force of **public opinion** as a controlling factor of human affairs.

Among the definitions that it has for it, Webster's New International Dictionary defines Public relations as "the activities of an industry, union, corporation, profession, government, or other organization in building sound and productive relations . . . with the public at large, so as to adapt itself to its environment and interpret itself to society". Others have defined public relations as the "conscious effort to motivate or influence people, primarily through communication, to think well of an organization, to respect it, to support it, and to stick with it through trial and trouble."

There are several other definitions of public relations which we will omit here. In fact, some people have gone so far as to describe it as "human engineering," "social engineering," or "the engineering of consent."²

² Scott M. Cutlip & Allen H. Center, **Effective Public Relations** Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, U. S. A. Prentice Hall Inc. Second Edition, 1958, Ch. 1.

However, public relations must not be confused with publicity, press agency, propaganda and institutional advertising. These may be parts of it but no one of these parts can be equated with the whole.

From the definitions given above, it should be easy to see that the public relations practitioner is essentially a specialist in communications. He uses his specialized knowledge of communications to deal with the force of public opinion. What then is public opinion ?³

Much has been written on the subject but generally, the term is used "to denote the aggregate of the views men hold regarding matters that affect or interest the community." It is the "social judgement reached upon a question of general or civic import after conscious, rational, public discussion." It is the power that can be exerted by such views when held by an apparent majority of citizens that we refer to when we talk of public opinion as approving or disapproving a certain doctrine or a practical proposal.

Now, the desire to cut a favourable image before the public eye, it should be noted, is one of the conspicuous characteristics of human beings. It is embedded in our ability to be proud or ashamed of ourselves. And the desire of organized groups of persons — corporations, government, etc., etc., to cut a favourable public image, to gain public support for their programmes is as old as human society itself.

A survey of the origins and growth of government public relations provides an interesting catalogue of its functions and techniques. The general tendency to regard government public relations as a 'new comer' in the affairs of men loses its validity when we probe into history.

Much of what is known of ancient Egypt, Assyria and Persia was recorded in efforts to publicize and glorify the rulers of that day. Much of the literature and art of antiquity was designed to build support for kings, priests and other leaders. Virgil's **Georgics** was a persuasive effort to get urban dwellers to move to the farms to produce food for the growing population. Caesar's Commentaries on the Gaulic Wars were propaganda weapons for himself. In the "Sermon on the Mount" Christ told his audience to

³ **The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences** published by the Macmillan Co., 1934, Vol. 12, pp 669-670 has an interesting article on this subject. Further readings on it can be done from **The Press and Society** edited by George L. Bird & Frederic E. Merwin. 4th printing, 1957, Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, U. S. A.

"Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your father who is in Heaven," Matt. V. 16.

On the government side of public relations, several examples can be given. The Romans inscribed upon their walls the slogan "S. P. Q. R." — **Senatus Populusque Romanus** or the Senate and the Roman People. This was an effort to impress upon the people that the Senate was theirs and, therefore, part of them. Later on, the Romans coined the expression : **Vox populi, vox Dei** — The voice of the people is the voice of God. In old England, kings maintained Lord Chancellors as "Keepers of the King's Conscience." In effect, all that was done by these "keepers" was persuasive effort to gain the support of the governed.

In the traditional governmental systems of the Federal Republic of Cameroon, examples are not lacking of solid links between the rulers and the ruled. One has only to examine the systems of governance in various parts of the Federation to appreciate the fact that our traditional leaders have never been oblivious of the necessity of "keeping in constant touch", of maintaining sound relations with their subjects.

In the Bamoun traditional governmental set-up, there are Nkoms ⁴ who are placed in different sections of the Sultan's domain and whose responsibility it is to inform the Sultan of happenings and development in their respective areas of jurisdiction. In the Bali, Bamenda 'fondom' there are **Fontes** ⁵ (or Quaterheads) who are a link between the fon and his subjects.

Nor do we lack excellent examples of public relations practice in our traditional systems of governance. In the littoral areas of the Federal Republic of Cameroon where the fangs of colonialism did their greatest damage, most of the traditional public relations practice must unfortunately, remain in the realm of undocumented conjecture. Non-the-less, many in West Cameroon will long remember the late Chief J. Manga-Williams and the famous feast he made, inviting representatives from towns and villages around Victoria. During the days of feasting, women's organizations sang songs in which they glorified the Chief. One of the most popular songs ran thus :

⁴ I am grateful to Mr. Mouliom Moise, Director of Personnel Services in the East Cameroon Ministry of Public Service for his lucid explanations of the Bamoun system of government. Mr. Mouliom is Bamoun.

⁵ I am grateful to Mr. Fonyonga, body-guard to the vice-President for his invaluable explanation of the Bali traditional government.

A GOVERNMENT CONCERN

*Manga King'a boso, Manga
Manga King'a boso, Manga
Eh Manga, eh Manga
King'a boso, Manga.*

Translated into English the song may read :

*Manga, the paramount chief, Manga
Manga, the paramount chief, Manga
Yes Manga, yes Manga (is)
The paramount chief.*

It would be difficult to deny that such a demonstration of popularity or support, whether engineered by the late Chief's henchmen or the result of genuine feelings of loyalty had great psychological impact. Because of space considerations, I am obliged to restrict the number of examples of public relations practice in the traditional systems of governance in the Federal Republic of Cameroon.

From the foregoing, however, it should become evident that government public relations involves an effort to bridge the gap that is likely to exist between those who handle the reins of government and the people they govern. Perhaps it is about this gap that Aristotle thought centuries ago when he posed the question : "The environment is complex and Man's political capacity is simple. Can a bridge be built between them ?" Certainly, the foundation stones of Aristotle's bridge must be informative, candid, interpretive and continuous reporting by government and more accessible channels to government for citizens. This is the premise upon which modern government public relations departments are built.

Centuries ago, when people of various nations were swayed by monarchic absolutism, government public relations involved the writing of books and stories, the making of inscriptions and paintings with a view to publicising, glorifying and building support for monarchs. The building of support also means, by implication, the building of support for their programmes.

The growth of popular representative government carried with it, in its public relations, the fundamental persuasiveness of ancient public relations. Only the tools, degree of specialization and intensity of effort required today are relatively new. The necessity of this elaborateness shall become clear in subsequent paragraphs.

However, as it is practised today, government public relations involves activities that are designed to build and maintain sound

relations with the public at large, so as to adapt the government to the people it represents and to interpret government activities to the people. To achieve these ends, all tools of modern publicity are utilized — the press, the radio and television. This marks a great leap from what government public relations used to be decades ago. The factors that induced this growth are many and complex ; but we shall examine an obvious few.

Representative government began in town meetings at which every free citizen participated. The activities of the town authorities were simple and understandable by all. But the growth of modern governmental activities from local, to state and to the federal level brought about a complexity that created in the citizen a gap of remoteness and a feeling of bewilderment coupled with apathy. Furthermore, in a democratic set-up, those who steer the ship of state are placed in their positions by citizens' votes. As such, they are obliged to render an account of their stewardship to the people they represent. Again, effective administration requires citizen participation and support. So complicated, and yet so closely interwoven with the everyday concerns of the man-in-the-street are governmental actions that it is essential that good relations and good understanding should exist between the former and those whose decisions affect his life at every turn.

Then again, effective administration must grow out of the lives and problems of the people rather than be imposed from above and government public relations can play and does play a vital role in the cause of good administration by exploring the impact of new social forces, discovering strains and tensions before they become acute and thereby encouraging a sense of national direction. This is imperative if any government must avoid that sharp and undesirable cleavage that is likely to exist between it and the people it represents. Undesirable cleavage, I think, is the best phrase to describe that gap whose existence can so easily destroy national harmony and well-being. Government public relations is, therefore, important. It fulfils a most necessary function — it bridges a gap ! And because it is important it must not be performed lackadaisically.

What procedures and programmes, then, does government public relations adopt to fulfil its essential functions ? The primary duty of government public relations is to act as a channel of information. This is why in most countries, this government **service** is rightly referred to as the information service (or information ministry). This means that the information ministry has the responsi-

bility to give the people knowledge about their government as well as give the government knowledge of the people it represents.

Whenever the government requires information about policy, about future plans or about the past conduct of affairs to reach the general public or any section of it, it will be the responsibility of the department of public relations (i. e. its information services) to get in touch with the appropriate instruments of publicity — principally the press — and to see that the information reaches those for whom it is intended.

This may be done by periodical "hand-outs" — typed or duplicated statements handed out to press representatives, by press conferences, by advertising campaigns (planned by the department of public relations or passed to an advertising agency), by exhibitions, lectures, cinema shows, radio talks, features, etc.

On the other hand, whenever an interested party wishes to know what the government has to say on some particular problem (except, of course, classified information) they will turn to the ministry of information. For example, coffee growers in a particular district may wish to be advised by the Secretary of State for Agriculture on methods of eliminating a particular pest to their crop. The ministry of information will have it as its duty, after obtaining all the information it can muster to help the coffee growers, to turn out pamphlets that will fulfil their needs. This means that the ministry of information, as mouth-piece of government, must have liaison, must be in constant touch with all sections of government.

To win public consent for new laws ; to overcome apathy and bewilderment towards new and complex functions of government ; to keep citizens informed of the services and functions provided so that they may participate and gain full benefit from them ; to interpret public opinion to law-enforcement agencies in order that regulations will be realistic and acceptable ; to convince citizens and help them understand the need for administrative rules ; to build a reservoir of good will and support for government — these are some of the principal functions of modern government information services.

Interpreting the complexities of government requires trained experts. So complex are the demands of the public and so clever are the questions of newspapermen that the information officer must be well versed in the ways of up-to-date publicity. He must, in particular, know the newspaper world. He must have a good grounding in those subjects that are generally referred to as the

"humanities" in order to be able to understand his public, his environment, his society and its contemporary developments.

Undoubtedly, it is because of the overwhelming importance of these points that an increasing number of appointments as information or public relations officers are going to men and women with press experience. It must be stressed here that this is no job for the administrator; for the administrator's life has never been geared to giving out information but to withholding it — a practice that might have contributed to what has become known in ordinary parlance as "red tape".

In the Federal Republic of Cameroon, like in all other new nations of Africa, the ministry of information has an onerous task to perform. This stems out of the fact that this nation has only a short past as a nationality. This means that the concept of loyalty to the nation has neither roots in experience nor in tradition. It is the offspring of a situation in which the basic psychological identification of the average Cameroonian has for centuries been with those who spoke his own dialect and shared similar customs and the basic solidarities have been those of lineage and clan. The situation creates problems that militate against integration, against national unity; and I am sure that some of our leaders have these problems in mind when they make their constant pleas for national unity.

Before independence, it was customary, even patriotic, to refer to the colonial government as "they". Nationalist movements had taught their followers to think of the colonial state as "they". With the attainment of independence, the need for a rapid reversal in outlook from opposition to support of the state's authority should be clear to everyone. This can be done by rigorous enforcement of the law, with the imposition of harsh penalties for infractions of it. But the government must also create a climate in which laws are obeyed even in the absence of regulatory forces. Government must create in its citizens that diffuse sense of attachment which political philosophers call "loyalty".

This is where the information ministry comes in. To organize it to perform its duties efficiently is not such a Herculean task as doubting Thomases would have us believe. If money can be voted and the organizing task be placed in the hands of people who know what they have to do, the information ministry can bring about a great transformation in this nation.

Of course, problems of personnel recruitment exist. To solve them, it would be necessary to create attractive conditions of serv-

A GOVERNMENT CONCERN

ice so as to attract the best brains within the nation. It would also be necessary to recruit a number of foreign experts. I am not against this ; but I am fiendishly opposed to the recruitment of foreign experts without a corresponding programme for training Cameroonians to take over from them.

If such a programme does not exist, Cameroon will make herself the architect of a situation in which "technical advisers" become recurring decimals in the field of Foreign Aid. An independent nation must do as much as possible for itself. This is as true of government information as it is true of any other field of government activity.





Photo
Roger Lagrave