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Thatcher critic's radical proposals

A revolution to put Orwell in reverse

Mr Norman Strauss, a former member of Mrs Thatcher's Downing Street policy unit, yesterday repeated his criticism of the Prime Minister for failing to reform Whitehall, in a lecture entitled "The Establishment, the Constitution and Reform". Here, Professor Sir Douglas Hague examines Mr Strauss's radical proposals and argues that, however revolutionary, they should be seriously considered.

One wonders whether there may, after all, be some distant link between the two Strausses - Richard and Norman. Richard Strauss's prodigality with melodies is legend. Those from a single opera would - with conventional treatment - have lasted lesser composers a lifetime.

Mr Norman Strauss behaves similarly with ideas, packing more into one lecture than others would use during a year. On occasion, there is a need for interpretation. That is, I believe, true of his recent speech on constitutional reform. It starts from the well-worn, but topical, theme that the complexity and difficulty of modern government are setting a task clearly beyond the current system. He therefore identifies, as I would, what is essentially a management problem in the broadest sense. "Productivity and efficiency can apply just as much to ideas about improving central government as they can to, say the health service".

It is, however, an especially difficult management problem. That is I suspect, why businessmen often perform badly when brought in to tackle broad political issues - for example as ministers - rather than specific problems, as Lord Rayner had done. Business management is difficult enough in all conscience, but in business, perhaps, leadership can by itself overtake the complexity of the situation. The problems of business actually begin to look rather simple when compared with those of government. This is, of course, why solutions to governmental problems proposed by businessmen all too often seem naive.

Mr Strauss's worry is that information and technology seem to be outgrowing the competence of governments to manage them and at the same time to provide adequate satisfaction for citizens and maintain their trust. This is happening in an age when demands for information for knowledge and for participatory democracy are becoming strident. Here is the first new twist in the argument. Mr Strauss believes that "some issues are now so complex that leaders must no longer be allowed to monopolize facts, knowledge and resources. This is especially true when higher standards of education coupled with the information revolution make it possible for those with special expertise, interests or insights to comment on what is happening, and to do so to the wider benefit of society".

In Mr Strauss's view, this goes beyond freedom of information legislation, in suggesting a fundamental change in structures and organization. He sees the new technologies as giving the possibility for the government to make available not only the facts it possesses, but also insight into its thinking, analysis. decisions and strategy. As the economist Schumpeter might have said, compared with existing proposals for freedom of information, Mr Strauss's plan would be as much more effective as would a bombardment compared to forcing a door.

While this is a managerial issue, it also implies an important constitutional change. Montesquieu identified the chief characteristic of our constitution, and the secret of its success, as the division and equipoise of powers. Checks and balances on the power of the state are provided by the separation of powers into legislative, executive and judiciary.

Mr Strauss's solution is to create within the constitution a fourth separation of power. He calls this the computeracy, though there must be a more acceptable word. "The need is for a modern interpretation of and amendment to the constitutional doctrine."

It is not entirely clear what Mr Strauss means when he writes of the computeracy. At times, he appears to describe an institution - a new organ of state. It would have the vital job of creating options for the leadership: backing this work up with support systems to analyse the decisions implicit in those options: developing techniques for the introduction of new policies: making existing policies more coherent: and keeping leaders up-to-date and on their toes. He sees governments as lacking a belief in organization and methods, let alone in strategic planning.

One reaction to this idea has been to argue that Mr Strauss is simply assigning this task to a new university. There is nothing wrong in that, though it would not be like any university we know. To me, the new organ of state appears more like a combination of the American Brookings Institution, the Whitchall Think Tank and an amalgam of all the select committees in the House of Commons.

Moreover, Mr Strauss would want the government to fund the new organ. "Independent comment on government and leadership should be paid for by the state. It is a dauntingly difficult and time-consuming task, which only a state-supported and informed institution can achieve ... The administration would not have to do what was suggested, but everybody would know that this new organ carried much weight and collective expertise."

At other times, however, Mr Strauss seems to look to two kinds of expert. One is the established expert in, for example, communication and feedback theory, organization and methods, systems analysis or creative problem solving - in industry, defence establishments, computer laboratories, business schools and universities. The other kind of expert he describes as representing "a new kind of non-elected professionalism" (men like Sir John Hoskyns and Strauss?). This is because he believes that we require "an intellectual thinking-and-doing class, able to think things through more effectively, to turn ideas into practice and to make theories into reality".

Finally, perhaps most strikingly, in some moods Mr Strauss sees this new element, not as experts, but as the public at large. "The new world, with its information techno-structures and intelligent data bases, is for adults who know their own minds. And who want to glimpse the government's mind."

He sees no reason why a computer system cannot be developed which would give instant access to relevant minutes, points of view, arguments and methods of analysis, allowing the public to see how its own ideas fit in with those of civil servants and ministers. Indeed, there is no reason why such a computer system should not comprehend the point being made by the interrogator and take it at once into its own files.

In a phrase, this is Orwell in reverse: but it is Orwell on a grander scale. Big Brother does not watch us: we watch, monitor and second-guess Big Brother.

At this point, the practical man will grow uneasy. Is this not starry-eyed nonsense?

Having worked closely with Norman Strauss in various capacities over the years, I recognize him as the living embodiment of the creative man. He fizzles with new ideas; he is a one-man brainstorming session.

Inevitably, not all these ideas are immediately totally credible. It would therefore be easy, as many will doubtless do, to reject this scheme out of hand. It would also be wrong. In its present form, perhaps it is too revolutionary. But at its heart is the nugget of a breathtaking idea. It can be refined only through imaginative and unprejudiced discussion by practical men. And that is the least it deserves.

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