

# So That's What a Bureaucrat Does

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**Q.** What is your job?

**A.** I am Assistant to the Chief of Administration

**Q.** What does your Chief administer?

**A.** Me.

**Q.** I see. How do you spend most of your time?

**A.** Holding on to my job.

**Q.** What do you do to hold on to your job?

**A.** I say "No."

**Q.** Say "No" to what?

**A.** Everything.

**Q.** Why, for heaven's sake?

**A.** Because if I said "Yes," I would lose my job.

**Q.** Can you explain that?

**A.** It's obvious. If people were free to buy and sell goods, to travel, to raise their children the way they want and so on, there would be no need for birth certificates, death certificates, travel documents, import and export licenses and all the paper in which people are wrapped from birth to death. And then where would we bureaucrats be? We would all be out of work!

**Q.** When people apply for a permit or license for something they want to do and you turn them down, how do you say "No"?

**A.** A good bureaucrat never uses the word "No" to say "No." He says: "The matter is under consideration."

**Q.** Which means that it is under a pile of papers?

**A.** Right. Or he says, "Your application has been referred to the relevant department for appropriate action."

**Q.** Which means that it has been tossed in the trash basket?

**A.** Not immediately. It lies in the In Tray until its edges turn yellow with age. Then it is tossed in the trash basket.

**Q.** How do bureaucrats think?

**A.** We don't. We have no thoughts. We have substitutes for thought.

**Q.** Like what?

**A.** We prefer circumlocutions to plain language, fat words to lean words. We say, "At this moment in time" when we mean "now." We are never "scared stiff," as other people often are; we "view with alarm." We never "think," we give "due attention" and we put matters on "the front burner." Bureaucrats are different from other people. They don't "die" in street accidents, for example; they "succumb to their injuries."

**Q.** How do bureaucrats manage to escape being thrashed to death by infuriated people?

**A.** That's easy. We distance ourselves from the public by putting our offices in imposing tasteless buildings that make people feel like Pygmies. We have doorkeepers in uniform to make people who come into our buildings feel that they are thieves and trespassers. We use a three-ring posse of appointments secretaries, secretaries and personal assistants, all of whom are there to ask people to state their business even though it is none of *their* business. We take three-hour lunches and leave at 5 o'clock.

**Q.** Don't people complain to the politicians and the press?

**A.** Of course. All the time. But no one can be held responsible. Someone else is always to blame, but that someone has no face and no name. That Someone is called the "system."

**Q.** How do bureaucrats raise their children?

**A.** We send them to the best schools where they are taught to respect hierarchy, to know the difference between an Assistant to the Director and an Assistant Director, to know what the Boss likes to hear and say it before he does, to be more interested

in asking questions than in listening to the answers—this is called "the spirit of enquiry"—and to realize that it is more important to let your supervisors think that you have been working than to work.

**Q.** What is it that really makes a bureaucratic heart tick?

**A.** Power.

**Q.** What power? Political power? Financial power? The power that comes out of

the barrel of a gun? You don't have that sort of power?

**A.** That is what we want the politicians, the financial moguls and the generals to think. But they can do nothing without us. We "suggest," we write "position papers" and let them imagine they have made the decisions. Then when they make their pronouncements we "implement" things the way we want.

**Q.** Is that why the world is in such a mess?

**A.** On the contrary, that is why it has survived this long. Bureaucrats give the world stability.

**Q.** You mean that bureaucrats keep things from moving forward.

**A.** Yes. Motion is dangerous. We keep things static. Business as before, old boy. Yesterday is another day.

**Q.** How do you get your kicks?

**A.** By controlling little people. We have residual power over them, the power to make them stand in line, to make them sweat a little waiting for the mail, to hold up their daily lives.

**Q.** And, of course, the power to say No?

**A.** And always the power to say No.

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**'What do you do to hold on to your job?' 'I say "No" to everything.'**