

Compliance with Untruth

Shostakovich, in his memoirs (whose authenticity some have disputed), describes a minister in the Soviet Union praising a great Soviet cultural event, such as (says Shostakovich) the closing of a theater. Not very long ago, the medical director of the hospital in which I used to work sent an e-mail to all its staff describing a forthcoming glorious event in the hospital's long history, namely its closure. This, he told the staff, was a great opportunity; at last we were masters of our own fate.

Who the we were to whom he referred he did not actually say: presumably they did not include the staff who would not be re-employed when a new hospital to replace the old was supposedly built. Nor did he say in what way the we who remained would be masters of their fate in a way in which they had not been masters of it before. Certainly, the glossy propaganda-type news-sheet that the hospital, in common with all other British public hospitals, had put out and distributed to its staff before the closure, in which the Chief Executive was surrounded by workers as happy and smiling as the peasants in the Soviet press at the height of a famine, never spoke of anyone *not* having been the master of his fate. The medical director spoke inspirationally without inspiration, as it were. This was not truth speaking to power, but cliché speaking to fear and impotence.

The hospital had a long and distinguished history, and as the book published on its centenary showed, was a source of local pride. It had even had an architectural magnificence before the state-sponsored modernizers, with their indifference to or even hatred of aesthetic considerations, started on improvements, after which it quickly became a visual nightmare. But for a long time it retained its distinction, with doctors of national and international eminence in their fields.

What was striking, however, about the response to the medical director's announcement of the closure—"No longer can we blame others for thwarting our ambition, the ball is in our court and the game is ours to lose," to quote its immortal prose—was its absence. Here was another dog that did nothing in the night-time, just as revealingly as the inactive dog in "Silver Blaze."

In fact, silence is what greets virtually all pronouncements by the highly-placed in our bureaucracies, no matter how idiotic or malign they may be. Fear has been successfully inculcated, whether by accident or design, in almost all such bureaucracies, so that people are afraid to speak frankly even to their close colleagues, for walls have ears and saying something deemed *offensive* or *discriminatory*, failure to use the currently approved aseptic terminology, or criticism of the current policy (which, of course, can change as quickly as Eurasia's enemies in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, if Big Brother so decides), can lead to disciplinary action that is time-consuming, anxiety-provoking, and emotionally wearing, and that can affect an individual's prospects of promotion irrespective of the outcome. On the immemorial principle that there is no smoke without fire, a person against whom a complaint is made, no matter how frivolous, becomes known as a troublemaker or loose cannon, and therefore unsuitable as a member of a conformist team.

Far from calming tempers, the treatment of offense taken as *prima facie* evidence of offense given, which is now standard policy in British bureaucracies, pursuant to which, for example, a person is deemed to have been bullied if he merely feels he has been bullied, inflames them. It puts a weapon into the hands of the oversensitive, the paranoid, the fragile the vengeful, and the malcontent. It creates a climate of fear and recrimination; by doing so, it not only makes people manipulable because fearful people are easy to manipulate, but gives powers of adjudication to those higher in the

administration, thus having an infantilizing effect on lower levels. An office becomes a kindergarten, in which one child runs to teacher and says, "Please, miss, Joey just pulled my hair," and the other responds, "She pulled *mine* first, miss!"

The hierarchy treats its staff in trivial matters as if it were made of eggshell as a *quid pro quo* for an authoritarian manner in more important ones. If you can get people to concentrate on their feelings rather than on their thoughts or on rational arguments, the threat of rebellion against, or worse still, public exposure of, idiocy is much reduced.

Not that sterner measures by the bureaucracy are neglected in the event of any sign of dissent among the lower orders. The staff of a hospital which I used sometimes to visit were one day sent a form to fill in by the personnel department—now charmingly known as *human resources*, as if people were a kind of ore to be mined—that asked them for their race, religion, and sexual orientation. This, said the covering letter, was so that the hospital could continue to pay them properly. No explanation was forthcoming as to the relevance of race, religion, or sexual orientation to rates of pay in the hospital.

On the form were seventeen races, seven religions, and (if I remember rightly, which it is possible that I do not) six sexual orientations. At any rate, there were several hundred possible categories of employee, all to be paid correctly according to the category into which they fell. Perhaps *fell* is not quite the word: for according to the form you could choose the race that you were, and the hospital personnel department would consider you to be the race you *felt* yourself to be. If you felt Polynesian (which, unfortunately, meant that you would have to declare yourself as merely *none of the above*), then Polynesian was what you were, at least for administrative purposes. As for sexual orientation, I am afraid that the briefest of looks into Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* would have exposed the woeful

inadequacy of the classification used by the personnel department, whose work, I suppose, is not conducive to imagination about the sexual possibilities of the human race.

There was no outrage or revolt over this form, in which the absurd vied with the sinister for dominance, and many of the staff completed it, as if frightened not to do so.

Now, it so happened that at that time I supplemented my income very slightly by publishing some of the official circulars I received in my hospital from either the government or the administration, accompanied by a little commentary (not much was needed), in a political weekly. A medical secretary of my acquaintance in the hospital in which this form had been distributed knew this and handed the form on to me. I duly published it, with a little light mockery; the secretary then copied the article and posted it on several notice boards in the hospital.

The management found out that it was she who had done this: someone must have informed on her, just as happened to Josef K. She was summoned to the management's office and given a stern warning that she would be dismissed if she ever did anything similar again. An intelligent woman—actually more intelligent than the managers—she was, in effect, told not to think for herself but accept passively whatever was required of her.

Such overt intimidation is not the only means of assuring compliance and silencing opposition. One means of controlling professions that are potentially dangerous for the government and the bureaucracy it thinks that it controls (even if the potential danger from the professions is actually very slight and more a figment of the imagination than real) is to emasculate its members by forcing them to comply with regulations that are patently absurd and have nothing whatever to do with professional fitness or competence.