

One-Way Ticket



by Theodore Dalrymple

A government of the people, in Lincoln's phrase, has changed by degrees into a people of the government. When one considers the number of duties or obligations one must fulfill to the government, it is clear who is boss in the relationship—and it is not we, the people.

Naturally, the government offers us all sorts of benefits, some real but many notional, in return for obedience to its diktats. But it is as unreasonable to expect it to confer those benefits without taking something for itself—especially power—as it is to expect a company to sell us its products at no profit. The trouble is that governments make John D. Rockefeller look like a disinterested do-gooder.

I reflected a little on this when I received my local parking permit from the council the other day. In return for money, I was granted permission to park my car on the street on which I live without a council employee (actually a subcontractor) issuing me with a parking ticket. I accept that rationing of parking spaces to residents is necessary because there are often too many cars for the parking spaces available. (The car, incidentally, has been an aesthetic catastrophe for a small and densely populated country like England).

With my parking permit came a letter setting out my obligations. "The permit must be displayed so that all details can be clearly seen when inspected from the outside." Failure to do this might, indeed would, "result in a parking ticket issued for non-display."

"It is the permit holder's responsibility to park his vehicle in accordance with the regulations and you should be aware of the need to park wholly within the parking bay."

"The permit will expire on [date given]. The responsibility of renewing the permit lies with the holder and he should allow sufficient time for the administration process to be concluded."

The permit "does not guarantee the holder a parking space nor does it render the council subject to any liability in respect of loss or damage to any vehicle in a parking space." Indeed, the only duty that devolves on the council is not to issue a parking ticket if the car is parked according to regulations.

If my car were parked incorrectly, I should probably receive more attention from the authorities than if my house were burgled, or even if I were assaulted in the street. There is money in the former, but none in the latter. The parking regulations are enforced sometimes with a punctilio that one would expect of a regiment being inspected before a parade. Just let your wheel rest an inch or two over the parking bay's

line! One or two of my neighbors have been fined for having done so, though the person writing the ticket (and rewarded by the number of tickets he writes) knew perfectly well that the car belonged to a resident, because he walks down the street every day, sometimes several times a day.

It is not that the instructions in the letter are inherently wrong or absurd. There are reasons for them all. It is the peremptory and unapologetic tone of the letter that leads its recipient to conclude that he is a worm and the council is a blackbird out for its sustenance. The obligations flow from the citizen to the authorities and none in the other direction, and there is something almost gleeful in the way the citizen-servant-is informed of this.

And this is only a parking permit! But if I count up the number of regulations I must obey, either directly or through supposedly private companies acting at the authorities' behest, without any rational reason being given (often because there is none), it must run into the hundreds a year.

Recently, for example, one of my banks sent me an imperiously worded questionnaire about my economic activities and the source of my payments into my account, under pain of closing my accounts if I did not fill it. From where did the demand emanate, and what was its purpose (the source of all my payments appeared on my statements, so that most of the information required was already available to the bank if it cared to look for it)? Whom could I ask for an explanation? My local branch had closed, and trying to contact a human being in the bank by telephone would have been a waste of what little life I have left to me.

I didn't fill in the form, and a little while later received a computerized admonishment of the kind I received when I hadn't done my homework as a child. My accounts would be frozen within two weeks if I did not fill the form, the bank no doubt using the contents of my accounts as collateral in the

meantime.

I can imagine the answer I should have received had I been able to ask anyone the question: The government required it. Whether the government actually *did* require it would probably be impossible to find out; the requirement of the government is now a screen behind which private-sector bureaucrats, who are as bad as government ones, hide whenever they promulgate their idiocies.

In the bank's case, I should probably have been told (again, on the unlikely hypothesis that I could speak to anyone in it) that the form was a weapon in the fight against money laundering. Since my activities (and, alas, my income) have changed very little over the past twenty years, either the bank has missed my money laundering for that period, or self-evidently there hasn't been any on my part. Money laundering on my scale would be like printing the Bible on a postage stamp.

In addition, the tax form I must fill in every year is so complex that I must work more than a week every year just to be able to pay someone to fill it for me. I am required to swear that it has been filled correctly, though I don't understand more than a fraction of it.

The fundamental point is, however, that the citizen (and bear in mind that I am not quite at the bottom of the social scale, at least not yet) is now so oppressed by his duties toward authorities that they are sufficient to convince him that he is of no more significance or account than is a single bacterium in a colony of bacteria on a petri dish.

And we call ourselves free!

First published in [*Taki's magazine*](#).