

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Where are you, Cyril Northcote Parkinson?

Putin must be behind this

My confidence about our almost total reliance on and confidence in information technology was always shaky, but it took a big hit on the morning of July 19 this year, around UK time 10:10 a.m.

We'd landed at Heathrow Terminal 2 ("The Queen's Terminal") ahead of schedule from Calgary by 20 minutes and rolled in towards the gates. The captain came on the intercom:

"This is the captain speaking. You may have noticed there are a lot of planes around. Our gate is occupied by a Turkish Airlines 747. Seems flights are delayed. An Internet problem. I'll get back to you on this."

A passenger looked up the news on their phone. "Some virus that's infected systems worldwide."

"It'll be Putin," I thought.

Terminal 2 was a zoo. Getting to Terminal 5 for the connecting flight was slow but didn't matter. All flights were delayed, some cancelled. An update "patch" sent out by a firm in Texas (CrowdStrike) had contained a flaw affecting Microsoft in computers worldwide, especially those in the travel industry and health care. This led to a seven-hour wait which gave me time to nurse my wrath.

I had CrowdStrike shares. "Sell," I emailed my bank, though they never got the message. "I want these geniuses to go bankrupt. I don't care how much they're down. I need some tax losses anyway after the jump in the capital gains tax."

The CrowdStrike shares dropped maybe 25% but are recovering. There seem to have been few consequences for this company.

I was frustrated. But it led me to thinking about computers, information technology, the internet and its good, bad and really dark side. Talking on Facetime to someone on another continent is great, but has the internet really led to efficiencies in our lives or just convenience in doing some things? And what about effectiveness?

And in the practice of medicine has computerization improved efficiency and effectiveness? And what about the quality of education? Information technology and the internet have improved some aspects of our life quality – facetime communications, recording and analysis of large amounts of data, or quick communication by email or text. But what about human interaction, dealing with individual problems, or its effect on childhood learning? There are good reasons to doubt it's had a uniformly beneficial effect. And this got me thinking about Parkinson's "laws."

Bureaucracy and Parkinson's "laws"

I thought about the huge increase in the Canadian civil service since 2014 despite increased use of IT. Are we seeing a post-modern example of Parkinson's "law of bureaucratic work expansion?"

According to the Public Service Commission of Canada, the federal public service reached over 274,219 employees in 2023, an increase of 40.4% since 2014-15 ... all the time with a concomitant increase in the use of IT. The federal government's payroll on March 31 of this year listed 367,772 persons compared to March 31, 2015, when the civil service payroll had 257,034 persons – an average annual growth rate of more than 3.6%. This is double Canada's average annual population growth of about 1.6% during the same period.

A few days later I was talking to my daughter in Los Angeles who was trying to access a social insurance number for her son who had been admitted to University of Victoria. He's a dual American and Canadian citizen. He got an email telling him he had a SIN and just to log in to get it. But to get the number he needed to be "registered." But to register he needed a provincial ID number, or a Canadian bank account (which requires an SIN to set up.) But if you're living in the USA, despite all these previous emails, she received an email saying you have to wait for the SIN to be mailed to you. She's still waiting. She was getting mixed messages talking to the folks in Ottawa.

"Sounds like you're experiencing Parkinson's law of work expansion," I said.

"What's that?" she said.

"You've never heard of Parkinson's laws? They're not really 'laws,' more like adages or observations that apply to any group of people relating to the public, especially government bureaucracies."

And the next day I was talking to my accountant. I'd received two letters from Canada Revenue Agency – one announcing a reassessment of my 2020 income taxes for over \$11,000 and a second demanding payment of over \$11,000 for 2023 taxes. My accountant and I accessed my government tax account. It turned out both were mistakes – false alarms. I owed nothing.

"Are you finding your work more complicated than it was a few years ago?" I asked her.

"Oh yes. Quite a bit."

"Perhaps you're suffering the result of governmental ignorance of Parkinson's laws," I said.

"And what are those?" she said, patiently.

Surprised she'd never heard of Professor C. Northcote Parkinson, a naval historian and management commentator, who wrote in the 1950s, I summarized as follows: "The federal public service listed over 367,000 on the payroll in 2023, a big increase since 2015, and it continues to expand. The effect of this expansion, you might assume, would result in more efficiency especially with the increased use of information technology. But according to Parkinson, the opposite occurs. More employees result in more complexities, which can lead to more inefficiencies. This phenomenon was described by

him in the 1950s in articles and several books, but he seems to have been forgotten in Canada by recent governments.”

Parkinson’s famous observation (published in *The Economist* in November 1955) started off: “It is a commonplace observation that work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.”

Law or adage?

It’s more of an adage than a “law.” Adages are wise sayings or observations. They express general truths grounded in experience or common sense. Parkinson’s adage has become more succinctly stated: “*In any bureaucracy, work expands to meet the time available for its completion.*” So, in contrast to the assumption by most people, including politicians and taxpayers, that a rising number of civil servants reflects a bigger volume of work that will be done more effectively, he famously demonstrated his law using the British navy as an example that this may not actually happen.

In Britain in 1914, when there were 62 ships of the line in commission with 146,000 officers and men crewing them, there were some 2,000 admiralty officials administering them fairly efficiently. By 1928, there were only 20 ships of the line crewed by 100,000 officers and men, but there were now 3,569 admiralty officials administering them. By 1954, with even fewer ships and crew to administer, the number of admiralty officials had risen to 33,788 ... all due to a proliferation of departments and increasingly complex new forms, reviews and processes.

He also showed (for those interested in colonial history) that Britain, in 1935, administering many colonies throughout the world, had 372 colonial office officials. By 1954, that number had expanded to 1,661 ... after the vast majority of these colonies had become independent! Some on the progressive wing claim that we still have colonial administration.

And so, the increase in numbers of federal office workers in Canada – what was the justification? Well, it must be due to the increased complexity and volume of work. But hasn’t the institution of computerization and the internet meant to have simplified much of that work? And now, with the additional help of artificial intelligence, won’t the work possibly be done by a reduced cadre of government staff?

According to Parkinson, this will be very unlikely. He explained that the likely reasons for the decrease in efficiency had less to do with increased volume of work and more to do with human nature and behaviour. The process of promotion in many governmental departments, together with the increased difficulties in decision-making when more people are involved in the process, contributed to the decreased efficiency.

In most bureaucratic systems, the pathway to promotion and an increase in salary and pension is to take on an increased volume of work and if necessary, increase its complexity, perhaps by expanding (and hopefully improving) the instructions or language on a form so that one may require an assistant or two to supervise the new process. Having an assistant is likely to result in an increase in status and pay scale, triggering rises in pay all round with more appointments of mid-level staff to supervise this rise in numbers. If something is simple, you don’t need as many people to administer it – hence “*work rises to meet the time available to perform it.*”

Parkinson enunciated a few other adages and observations related to bureaucracies – but also of relevance to any group of people such as companies, universities or even

medical practices. For example, I have it on good authority that in an Ontario university department of orthopedic surgery, the middle administrative staff has doubled over the last three years but with a concomitant decrease in the appointment of clinical support staff with the required orthopedic skills.

The “law of triviality.”

A couple of years after his law of work expansion, Parkinson came out with the “law of triviality.” All of us who’ve languished in poorly chaired committee meetings know the veracity of this law: *“The time spent on any item of the agenda will be in inverse proportion to the sum [of money] involved.”* This is also called “bike-shedding” and occurs when an inordinate amount of time is spent discussing minor or insignificant details while neglecting the important issues.

It’s a forerunner of “social loafing” and “group think” and originated from an apocryphal meeting in the UK on a plan to build a nuclear plant where the cost of the plant was 24 million pounds and involved a discussion time of 2.5 minutes. The committee then went on to discuss the building of an onsite bicycle shed, which was estimated to cost 1,000 pounds, but discussion lasted 45 minutes.

An extension of the law of triviality is his “law of buildings.” Here the argument is about the temptation to plan institutional buildings to perfection, whereby perfection of layout leads to endless discussions and arguments and is achieved only by institutions on the point of collapse.

Perfection of planning can be a symptom of decay. An example of this is the building that housed the League of Nations, finally completed in 1937 at a time when the League was falling apart. I can only hope the new Calgary Cancer Centre, which is finally opening in October 2024, is not another example!

Prof Parkinson’s work is worth reading in relation to any administrative structure (including medical) – especially in Canada where his work seems to be sparsely known. Stand by, you’ll be hearing more about him from me in the next year.

Editor’s note: The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author’s and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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