

Real and Imaginary

by "Vector"

ON COMMITTEES

There's this friend of mine, see, who's the proud father of a seven-year-old son. One day, junior returns from school bursting with excitement and announces that his class is working on a new project, to wit, the manufacture of a papier-maché cow. You know — wire netting framework and that kind of lark. Pa, suitably impressed, asks questions, and in particular what son's contribution is going to be.

"Well, actually," says junior, voice trembling with pride, "teacher's appointed me chairperson of the crumpled horn committee!"

In these troubled times it's reassuring to know that our educational system is solidly behind us, nurturing our tender plants so that in the fullness of time the young idea will emerge completely meeting-orientated and ready to pull their full weight in British Industry.

I feel sorry for our forebears. I just don't know how they managed to cope in the B.C. (Before Committee) era. For, incredible as it may seem, Graham Bell, Edison, Marconi *et al.* seemed to have functioned on a bull-at-a-gate, suck-it-and-see basis and entirely without benefit of committees. That they got anywhere at all can only be attributed to beginner's luck. Fluking their way through, you might call it.

Yes, it's a great pity that the old-timers hadn't latched on to the committee approach, which, as all thinking men agree, was the greatest single invention since the wheel and girls. For, properly employed in industry, it confers two major boons; it's an almost foolproof safeguard against getting the sack and it creates an intense eager-beaver atmosphere without actually getting anything done.

Consider the instance of Blutswet and Teeres Ltd, electronic equipment manufacturers in a smallish way of business. In days of yore if one of their engineers had an idea (and they sometimes did) he'd wheel it along to the Chief Engineer. If the Chief liked it, he'd say go ahead and if it, subsequently proved to be a success — well, Chief Engineers were paid to spot winners. If

it didn't, another C.E. was appointed sharpish. Each position of high responsibility carried a built-in chopper; that was what it was all about.

How primitive! Thank goodness we have none of that barbarism nowadays! In the interim period Blutswet and Teeres have prospered and now constitute a democracy by committee. Their Research Dept. dream up an idea and, after lots of meetings, pass it to Development who hold a lot more and tag every electron involved so that they'd know it again if they met it in the street. The prototype is then processed through various channels and is eventually offered to the Commercial Manager; by this time it's not nearly such an original idea as it once was because a lot of water has gone under the bridge and those fiendish Japanese are believed to have got something similar up their kimonos.

In short, the new equipment is a dodgy potato and the Commercial Manager has been too long in the business to stick his neck out. So he sets up a committee of senior executives to brood over the project and eventually to advise him on a straightforward digital yes-no basis.

Naturally, they do nothing of the sort. They have serious responsibilities like week-end cottages, cabin cruisers and Mercedes cars to think about and they know just as much about hedging bets as the Commercial Manager. So they promptly appoint another set of committees at the next level below them. Thus, if we start off with a top-brass committee of ten (a reasonable figure) and each of these appoints a coven of similar size to advise him on his own peculiar interests in the equipment, we already have 110 good men and true involved in committee work.

But that's only the start. The lower (but still quite senior) stratum have no intention of facing a firing squad either, so they in turn delegate subordinates to . . . but I needn't go on because you know the picture anyway. And naturally, everybody on a committee has to hold a prior meeting with a few immediate colleagues in order to establish what he's got to say at the meeting. So, in no time at all, half the personnel at Blutswet and Teeres are involved in reporting to somebody or other. There are steering committees, whose members are specially selected for their complete lack of a sense of direction, and there are also things called working parties. Nobody has yet discovered what a working party is supposed to do. Nevertheless, momentous issues are being solved all the time. Somewhere in the morass a sub-committee has been haggling for months as to whether the chassis should be stoved in baby blue or a crackle finish.

The immediate consequence of decision-by-committee is that a mass of paper ascends to high heaven and flutters down to the IN-trays beneath. These memoranda require the utmost

care and deliberation in their composition; they must be verbose enough to impress the committee conveners but at the same time they mustn't actually say anything; particularly anything that could be construed as a recommendation one way or another. This continuous interdepartmental to-and-froing of memos has been unkindly described as a closed oscillatory circuit using paperwork coupling.

But at long last the moment of truth can no longer be delayed and, from the information dredged up, the Commercial Manager reluctantly decides that the new equipment shall go into production. The lengthy business of tooling up, buying in components and producing working drawings begins, and, of course, this necessitates a whole lot of new committees. Then, just after the point of no return, those perfidious Japs, who have no sense of the correct procedures, bring out something better on immediate delivery. But do heads roll at Blutswet and Teeres? They do not. The buck is passed down and down and you can't sack a committee complex consisting of half the factory, with at least three trade unions behind them.

There are, broadly speaking, two distinct categories of meeting-attenders. There are the dedicated committee-men and those who have been co-opted protestingly from their lawful occasions to pronounce judgement on a technical issue. The latter are the sacrificial lambs who can (and assuredly will) be put on the altar should appeasement be demanded from on high.

Professional committee men come in various types. There is the Chairman, born with an agenda in his hand, who has an inexhaustible fund of Rabelaisian anecdotes with which to jolly the meeting along but who is known to have the ear of Sir upstairs, so watch it. Then there are at least two members of any given meeting who like to hear the sound of their own voices and are adepts at saying nothing at interminable length. There is Terribly Ernest, a junior executive from Trends and Tendencies Department; it is his first meeting and he's anxious to make a good impression upon his seniors.

Another well-known frequenter is Humpty Dumpty, so adept at sitting on the fence. There's the Doodler who spends the meeting sketching positions from the Kama Sutra on his pad. And then there's the Ancient, in his prime when the new-fangled triode was ousting the crystal detector; nobody is at all sure who he represents. He just sits in dour silence until the meeting's over and then totters off to a blue movie. And then there's — but you know them, anyway.

Meanwhile, back on the Works Floor the machines are on short time and the pound's taken yet another turn for the worse. H'm; it looks as though we'd better convene another meeting.