

Footnote: The Omnipotent Cretins

The individual today is relentlessly intimidated by towering pluralistic idiots on every side. Each independently imposes its own Draconian obligations upon him according to a labyrinth of rules, which are of ever-increasing complexity, often mutually incompatible, and invariably incomprehensible. [PDF]

Size Versus Intellect

A system, they say, is more than the sum of its parts. Of a structured system, like an engine, a computer or a human being, this is certainly true. But of an organisation, like a committee, a corporation or a government department, it is not. As I have observed throughout my career, a piece of software designed by an artisan usually works. A piece of software designed by a committee usually doesn't - at least, not until it has run about an order of magnitude over schedule and over budget. I wonder what a Rembrandt portrait would look like if painted by a committee of art students instead of by the Master himself.

It seems that the larger an organisation becomes, the less of an intellect it exhibits. Its apparent behaviour becomes more and more that of an idiot. Commercial companies are like this. Government departments, being larger, are more so. The most stupid and simple-minded of all is naturally the largest of all. It is the free market, which is, in effect, the general public. However, the general public is only a passive agglomeration of individuals. It does not act collectively against any single individual. It does not threaten or harm the individual directly. The largest form of *collective* which imposes itself as a unified entity upon the individual is the 'government department'. And in so doing it usually exhibits the behaviour of a complete cretin.

The Law That Matters

The Law, as written in the Statute Books, is irrelevant. It has no effect on the real lives of real people. Only The Law *as delivered* affects real people in the real world.

What *is delivered* within the DSS interview cubicle or across the counter at the Jobcentre or the Council Offices may or may not be what is written in the Statute Books. Those upon whom it is imposed have no practical way of knowing. Those who deliver it are too overworked to keep up with the torrent of new rules and amendments which pour onto their desks day after day.

What I relate is the law as imposed on me. It is the law under which I have to suffer. It is the only law that matters.

Hard Times

Taxes - particularly those levied on property - are an unfair burden on the low-paid, especially those who are self-employed. Furthermore, the rules by which the self-employed are assessed for financial aid and relief has, for all practical purposes in my experience, proven to be wholly unworkable.

In 1976, [family circumstances](#) forced me to become self-employed. I had to start my own business. I had no capital. This meant that my family and I had to survive, for a considerable period, on low income. Our income was, in fact, far below the threshold at which I should have been receiving a rates rebate (a reduction in tax levied on my home) from the local authority, plus money from the DSS [The Department of Social Security] to supplement my 'earned' income.

But I received neither. It was not until I became officially unemployed in April of 1991 that I ever received any financial help from the state.

Rates Rebates

The local authority clerk told me that a rates rebate could be granted only if I could provide proof of what my income was going to be for the coming year. I was required to provide documentary proof in advance.

Clearly, a self-employed person cannot ever know, in advance, what his income for a year is going to be before that year has ended. In fact, he won't know until his accounts have been computed, submitted and approved by the Inland Revenue. If done by an accountant, this can take up a further 6 months.

So, unless a self-employed person be clairvoyant, or be endowed with the gift of prophecy, and thereby be able to conjure up an Inland Revenue Assessment Form from 18 months into the future, then he cannot possibly meet this bureaucratic requirement. Therefore he cannot obtain a rates rebate.

I objected strongly. In response I was told that perhaps I could try the following. I should submit a rates rebate claim form before the beginning of each rate year. On the form, in the space provided for me to tell them my income, I should write the words 'accounts to follow'.

Am I to believe that the local authority expects every self-employed person to clog up their administrative system with a rates rebate claim form just in case (for most) he happens to have a bad year and needs to make a claim?

Do such stupidly wasteful and inefficient procedures abound in other areas of local authority administration? If so, it is no wonder that the rates are such an unbearable burden on those who have no say in the amount of money taken from them each year by force of law.

Income Support

At the same time, I went to the social security office to ask if I could obtain any help since my income was so low. The clerk started to question me. He asked who I worked for. I said I was self-employed. "So you are running your own business?" he asked. "Yes." I replied. "I am afraid we only provide help for families in need. We don't buoy up ailing businesses." He said that he could consider me for financial aid only after my accounts had been formally terminated and approved by the Inland Revenue and my business was officially closed. This would take months. We had no choice but to carry on as we were and suffer in silence.

My attempts to obtain a rates rebate and 'income support' (it wasn't called that at the time) demonstrated that there was, at that time, no workable way for a self-employed person to obtain a rates rebate.

Besides, they told me that any rebate had to be repaid in full if, in a subsequent year, one's income exceeded the rebate threshold. If this be so, then the term 'rebate' is a misrepresentation. It is in fact a deferred payment. It appears that the rules have since changed. But I am not - and never can be - sure exactly what they are, and why they are different for the self-employed than for the employer-employed.

A Visit From The Bailiff

Years later, my business started to succeed and my income became good for a time. I became VAT registered. At the end of each quarter, I had to pay my excess Value Added Tax to the Customs & Excise.

During one quarter, however, I had bought a lot of new equipment and consumables. My sales had been at their normal level. As a result, this time I was due to receive a VAT refund from the Customs & Excise. Trying to be helpful, I thought I would explain, in a little note on my VAT return, how the unusual situation had arisen. I did a little sum in the margin next to the box in which the relevant amount was shown.

About a month later, I received a letter from Customs & Excise demanding immediate payment of about £1400. This was one of the figures which occurred in my little sum in the margin. I wrote back explaining, as fully as I could, that I did not owe them that amount and that, in fact, I was due the refund I had calculated. I heard nothing.

Another month later, two men turned up at my door unannounced. They said they were from the VAT Office and had come to collect the £1400 I owed. I said I did not have £1400 and that I did not owe them £1400. They asked if they could see my accounts. I agreed.

They came into my house. Once in my study, one of them started to look around and write things down. I asked what he was doing. He said he was a bailiff and that he was making a list of my goods and assets on which to issue an order of distraintment. He had not told me he was a bailiff before entering my house. He had given me the impression he was merely an inspector who wanted to see my accounts.

They scrutinised my accounts. They agreed that I owed nothing and was due a refund. I told them that I had explained everything in my letter. They said they knew nothing of any letter. They had just been briefed to recover the money. I asked to see his brief. He opened his folder. It contained all of about 5 sheets of paper. They fell out onto my desk - including my letter! I asked the man to read the letter. He did. He was embarrassed. He said casually words to the effect, "Well, that's all right, then".

He advised me that it was not a good idea to make notes in the margin of the VAT form. It confused the data entry clerks. Then they got up and went away. I felt sick and distraught for days afterwards. It is very traumatic to have people with State power turn up suddenly and unexpectedly to confiscate your goods. Without my computer I could not possibly have fulfilled my contractual obligations to my clients. I had software I was developing for them. All kinds of catastrophes could have taken place before I could have resolved the situation and got it returned to me.

[I heard somewhere that the tools of one's trade are protected from the bailiff. But only, I am led to believe, up to the value of £250. The basic tool of my trade is my computer. Without it I could do no work at all, even if it were offered to me. My computer is valued at about £3000. For £250 I should think they would be able to leave me with the keyboard!]

I had no warning. No solicitor's letter. No hearing, No trial in a court of law. Whether or not the Customs & Excise acted legally or not is irrelevant. It could have ruined me there and then just over a slight error by a data entry operator. The mind of a cretin controlling the power of the law is a dangerous and fearful thing for the individual.

Authoritarian Mandate

The sheer size of an organ of government gives it overwhelming power. However, perhaps the one thing above all which makes it so fearful and dangerous is its mandate. This in effect gives a local authority the power to operate as, what is in effect, a protection racket.

The local authority, for example, decides what services it is going to provide and the level and quality with which it is going to provide them. This it does irrespective of whether any of those who will receive them can afford them or not. I, as an individual, have no choice as to what services I receive or whether I receive them. The local authority is then able in effect to hold a gun to my head and demand payment. If I can't pay, I get my proverbial kneecaps shot off.

This is the mechanics of a [protection racket](#). What commercial business can supply its customers with what it thinks they ought to have and then has the right to extort the money from them, under threat, to pay for what it has decided to supply? No need for salesmanship! No competition! No choice!

Whom They Serve

It is assumed that the reason an organisation is granted such an omnipotent mandate is to enable it better to serve the people within its jurisdiction. But one must always remember that 'he who pays the piper calls the tune'. It is not the people who grant its mandate. It is the government. The government is not the people. Neither does it represent their interests. The government represents the interests of the favoured few who own the capital, which finances the [spin machine](#), which influences the people to vote the government into power.

Consequently, each of these omnipotent cretins lives to serve the government. It has to *justify its existence* to the government: not to the people it supposedly serves. Therefore it *reports* to the government: not the people. It presents its reports in a form which looks useful to the government: not in a form which could actually be *useful* to the ordinary people within its jurisdiction.

A prime example is my local [Training & Enterprise Council](#). It provides an excellent picture of the local economy from the point of view of inward investors. But it refuses utterly to undertake the simple one-off task of writing the bit of extra code necessary to generate an 'inverse view' from its database which would be of immeasurable value to a local person trying to find *the right* job.

Over-Simplistic Rules

One human being acting alone makes all his plans and decisions within the confines of his single mind. The human brain is a 200 billion-node network. It is able to process information along a vast multiplicity of threads. It is profoundly powerful, effective and efficient at what it does. It can organise the individual's activities. It can create great works of art. It can fathom ever-deeper mysteries of the physical universe. And so much more.

Committees, on the other hand, do not have this mechanism for massively parallel communication and information processing. Its members are constrained to communicating with each other through the crude and restrictive channel of linear language. This is prone to inaccuracy and misunderstanding. It is frequently incapable of carrying a new, yet obvious, concept or intent. And it is boringly slow.

Within the individual's brain, the 'Laws of Thought' are little understood. That famous work of George Boole addresses but a narrow aspect of the rules by which the mind processes thought. The laws of thought by which a committee operates, on the other hand, have to be expressed as rules

written down in a linear script. As a result, they are necessarily and inevitably over-simplistic and inadequate for the all-encompassing purpose to which they are put. For this they are simply not of [merchantable quality](#).

To my mind, the purpose of simple scripted rules *should* be to act as a framework of guidance for making individual judgements. In other words, the individual committee member or government officer should use his 200 billion node brain to assess each situation directly and render a common sense judgement, referring to the scripted rules only if and when necessary for general guidance.

Sadly, this does not happen. In reality, all front-line point-of-delivery executives follow their organisation's over-simplistic scripted rules with [ruthless precision](#) as the sole means of arriving at a decision. They follow the letter of the law: not its spirit. The total intellect of the vast organisation is consequently no more than the set of over simplistic scripted rules whose bland syntax its officers follow with uncompromising rigidity. Their 200 billion node cranial supercomputers act as no more than dumb terminals connected to a system with no more processing power than a roll-driven player piano.

Dichotomy of Perception

Those who enact the rules in the first place are Members of Parliament and their advisers. These are of a middle to upper social designation - at or above the 'Volvos & patios' level. From their vantage point in the social order, they develop a perception of what those in *all* social classes and circumstances need and can contribute. Notwithstanding, they have no direct experience of all social classes or all possible circumstances of life. Consequently, their perception is, for the most part, based on theory rather than reality.

The truth is, they do not really know. They can only guess. And their guesses are based solely on what is conveyed to them through the symbolic syntax of written reports. If they lack any part of the spectrum of experience of their subjects, then they can [never truly understand](#) their subjects' lives, needs, circumstances and difficulties. Hence the rules they enact are inevitably rules designed for an *imagined* rather than the *real* world.

Those who enact the rules are the servants of the favoured few who own the capital, which finances the spin machine, which influences the people to vote them into power. It is not surprising, therefore, that they follow in the spirit of their masters - the spirit of self-interest. Consequently, the rules they enact are biased towards the interests of their masters rather than the people. They seek to minimise what they provide for the poor in order to minimise taxation of the affluent.

To this end, they are engaged in an on-going process of tuning their rules so that, by default, they always fail safe on the side of authority at the expense of the individual. And like the terms and conditions of their corporate masters, their rules always place the onus upon the poor to know about, and claim, any benefits to which the rules reluctantly entitle them.

The Fail-Safe Default

Engineers have long been conscious that the systems they design should drop automatically into a safe condition if they lose power or develop a fault. Government agencies have now started to do the same. But with whose safety are they concerned - that of the citizen or that of the state?

Car accelerators are spring-loaded to shut the engine down to idling speed if pressure is released. Machine tools have panic bars which automatically shut off the motor if somebody leans against them or falls towards the machine. A relay breaks secondary circuits it is holding if the supply to its

coil is broken. Engineers have always used such contraptions to ensure that machines will stop unless they are being specifically told to keep going.

One of the greatest challenges came with the advent of computer control. Digital commands can freeze when power fails instead of falling to a safe condition. When I was working on [flight simulators](#) in the late 1960s it was vital that commands sent to the powerful hydraulic rams controlling the motion of the aircraft flight deck did not freeze in a dynamic state. Many computer controlled systems of this nature employ a 'heartbeat' sent out continually by the controlling computer program. The mechanism being controlled is designed to drop into a safe state of inactivity if ever it ceases to receive the regular heartbeat signal from the control software.

The whole purpose of these techniques is not to ensure the safety of the machine or system, but to ensure the safety of its human users - they whom it is designed to serve.

Technology Transfer

Traditionally, an administrative system fulfilled its purpose under the control of those within it. The individual members of the public, who were subject to it, followed its rules. The rules were actively enforced directly by human beings. The idea of making the rules inherently fail-safe therefore seemed irrelevant.

Information technology brought engineers and administrators together. As a result, administrators became aware of engineering techniques. They soon realised that making the rules inherently fail-safe could save money. If they failed safe, it would not be necessary to maintain such large agencies of enforcement. Rules which embodied the principle of passive fail-safety would tend to be self-enforcing.

Previously it had been up to the State to find and enforce its claim for taxation upon the individual. Under the new fail-safe rules, the State took automatically, or held back, money from the individual. If the individual were to get back what was due to him, he had to prove his claim and then take positive initiative to get back from the State what was owed to him. But unlike the State, the individual rarely has access to a legal expert. He is therefore rarely likely to know the amount to which he is truly entitled.

The whole system of government administration is now being deliberately re-designed to fail safe on the side of the State, always leaving the individual short-changed.

The Example of Tax on Interest

An example of where this onus, which was once on the state, has been transferred to the individual is taxation on interest. Once upon a time, the interest I gained on any savings was accounted at the end of each tax year, and the appropriate tax deducted. If in a given year I did not make enough profit to pay tax even when the interest was added, then no tax was deducted on the interest. All neatly calculated after the event so that everything that needed to be known was known, and there was no need for future adjustments or arguments.

Now, unless I can 'supply evidence' *before the start* of a tax year that my income will not exceed the tax threshold during that year, then tax on interest in that year is automatically deducted at source. A bank will only stop deducting tax from the date when I can supply evidence that my income is below the tax threshold. Obviously the self-employed cannot supply such evidence until about 6 months after the close of the year in question, by which time accounts have been ratified by the Inland Revenue. By this time it is too late.

Under the new fail-safe rules, tax gets deducted anyway, and there is nothing within the bounds of practicality that a self-employed individual can do about it. The procedure has been deviously redesigned so that unless the individual is aware, knowledgeable enough, skilled enough and aggressive enough, his money just naturally falls into, and stays in, the government's coffers.

The Example of Direct Debit

Perhaps the most effective and devious mechanism which the corporates and their puppet governments has foisted upon the individual in recent times is direct debit. I will never again, of my unencumbered free will, sign a direct debit mandate. Direct debit is an experience I never wish to repeat. I know of others who have had even worse experiences with it than I have. Once set up, the individual payer can have the Devil's own job if ever he has cause to terminate a direct debit. It may never happen to the vast majority of people, but to whom it does, it can be catastrophic.

You can tell your bank you want it stopped, but they won't do it. You have to *ask* the payee organisation to stop taking your money from your bank account. And they simply may not oblige for a whole variety of reasons:

- It is not their policy to return subscriptions once taken.
- They have conveniently lost or mislaid your letter.
- It's buried at the bottom of a first-in-last-out pile handled by someone off sick.
- They question your authority to stop it under their terms and conditions.
- They simply ignore you and all your communications.

Meanwhile money is regularly and relentlessly disappearing from your bank account.

Driven to desperation, I once tried to stop a direct debit finally by closing my account altogether. However, on the date of the next direct debit event, the bank automatically reopened my account, complete with an unauthorised overdraft. I then got a nasty letter from the bank (which they charged for, thus increasing the overdraft further). They also registered my name with three credit black lists. I am never sure whether or not they ever removed it. I cannot afford to find out.

Many large corporates and other organisations offer absolute guarantees that direct debits will be stopped on request and that you will be reimbursed and compensated promptly in the event of an error. But what do they mean by prompt? A day? A week? A month? Ninety days? To somebody like me on [very low income](#), having an erroneous direct debit running wild for a month could be catastrophic. We would have no money to live on.

But supposing one of these large corporate or official organisations - for whatever reason - simply doesn't sort it out. What is your remedy? Why, of course, as they quite rightly say, you have your rights and remedies under the law. But how long would 'due process of law' actually take? A month? Never. Three months? Possibly. A year? More likely. Meanwhile, the money carries on disappearing. With this in mind, how are you going to finance your case? For one on my level of income, by the time reimbursement and compensation came, my family and I would have long since starved to death.

Compare this with the alternative. When you want to stop paying, you simply stop writing the cheques. Totally fail-safe - but for the individual: not for the corporate or official leviathan with whom he is dealing.

Onus on the Individual

Whether trying to re-claim undue tax, or whether claiming a so-called 'benefit', the onus is now always upon the individual to provide 'acceptable evidence' of entitlement - acceptable that is to a

bureaucracy whose brief is obviously to search with best endeavour for a reason not to pay. Its procedures always 'fail safe' or default in favour of the State and against the individual.

The powers-that-be maintain an implacable disregard for the individual, making neither allowance nor dispensation towards the individual, while government passes ever more legislation to ensure that any error or delay places its financial burden squarely on the individual, always 'failing safe' on the side of authority.

How The Rules Are Encoded

The enactors of the rules then encode them into written form. The rules thus become frozen into narrow linear scripted syntax. To the Members of Parliament who wrote them, they convey their view of society and how it should be regulated.

However, those who deliver and expedite these rules are different people. They are not Members of Parliament. Some are lawyers and judges. But most are not of or above the 'Volvos & patios' level in the social order. Some are minimally skilled front-line juniors at Jobcentres and DSS offices. Others are VAT clerks and Inland Revenue inspectors. Each necessarily interprets what the [symbolic representation](#) of the rules means against the context of his [own perception](#) and understanding of life.

Those who make the rules regard the generic individual as even more stupid than the organisations which dispense them. For this reason, they usually encode the rules not into a natural language (eg English), but into a set of questions printed on a [tick-box form](#). What most don't realise is that what is on the form is not English. It is an artificial language which comprises no more elements than there are questions on the form. Anybody trying to use it to claim a 'benefit' is unable to express anything about his circumstances which is not exactly co-incident with one of the questions on the form.

Consequently, what Members of Parliament meant to convey by a given piece of syntax, and what a Jobcentre desk clerk understands by it, are as different as their respective social levels and life experiences. And both are at least as different again from the social level, life experience, needs and circumstances of any given benefits claimant. The rules as enacted are a world apart from the rules as delivered.

I therefore question the fitness of these rules for the purposes for which they were enacted. By what criteria did comfortably paid Members of Parliament and their civil servants determine the amount my family and I 'need' to live on (whatever the word 'need' may mean). Did some of the most prominent of these people first [test their rules](#) upon themselves for prolonged periods and document their experiences before subjecting us unfortunates of society to them? Or did they determine the amount merely by thought and theory from the safe distance of their affluent life-styles?

How The Rules Are Delivered

An endless torrent of publicity material continually tries to convince the individual that these omnipotent cretins are there to serve: not to oppress. They present a polite and conciliatory disposition.

But this is simply wrapping. Their intrinsic ethos is undeniably authoritarian. Their quest is to subjugate the individual through constraint and denial. By threat of deprivation, they rake those they perceive as idle escapees back into the bondage of corporate enslavement.

Although their staff are obviously trained in the psychology of veiled interrogation, their veneer of professional politeness can never hide their organisation's callous attitude of patronising suspicion towards its subjects.

Official Suspicion

Public relations experts are working hard to revamp the image of the government department as a customer-oriented service. But a leopard cannot change its spots. Its new veneer of professional politeness will never hide its inborn ethos as the exigent lord of its erstwhile subjects.

On 17 May 1979 my son Roderick died. He was only 3 months old. He was what is referred to as a cot death. We were devastated. All other thoughts evaporated into irrelevance. Including my rates bill [rates = a U.K. tax levied on one's house] which had arrived a day or two before.

Despite the upset, I actually mailed my payment of the bill the day before its payment deadline at the end of the month. It must have arrived on the day, but not before the Local Authority had issued a court summons against me. When I received the summons I wrote and explained what had happened. I received a blunt reply saying that the deadline for payment was 'Date 1' and that my cheque had been received on 'Date 2'. Date 2 was 3 days after Date 1. Date 1 was a Friday. Date 2 was a Monday. They did not withdraw the summons.

I wrote a letter to the head of finance expressing my fury and bewilderment at such an attitude. He was conciliatory. He said that in the circumstances he would waive the cost of the summons. He excused his staff by describing them as "over-zealous". Not quite my description.

At that time, most people had the option of paying their annual rates bill in two halves 6 months apart. However, when a summons was issued, the whole amount had to be paid in advance. Despite the withdrawal of the summons, I still had to pay the whole amount in advance. At the time we were recovering from the period of low income resulting from my transfer to self-employment 3 years earlier.

This example is extreme. But it is driven by the same attitude which officialdom always has towards the independent individual. It adopts the stance that if the individual fails to meet a statutory obligation, it is because the individual is being deliberately erstwhile or negligent. It is because the individual is committing a misdemeanour. It could never be because the individual is in trouble. It could never be because the individual has been overwhelmed by circumstances. It could never be because the individual is in need of a little timely human kindness.

Imagine a world in which the Local Authority's first response to the individual in such a situation is to come round to see if he is in trouble and in need of a little help, understanding or kindness.

Being Self-employed

Two decades ago, when I actually worked for an employer, my personal 'rights' and obligations with regard to state officialdom were dealt with by my employers. I rarely, if ever, had any direct encounters with government organisations. However they may or may not have regarded me as a working individual, I was never aware of it.

When I became self-employed I engaged an accountant. He handled my dealings with the Inland Revenue and the DSS. He insulated me from them. He died. His practice was taken over by a much larger practice. The bills rose. And rose. I could not afford them. Being a programmer, I had long since written a bespoke accounting suite for my own self-employed business. It was tuned exactly to how I worked. It produced accounts all the way to balance sheet, profit and loss and VAT reconciliation. All I needed an accountant for was to check and 'rubber stamp' my accounts.

I discovered that within this large practice of highly qualified partners, my accounts were given to a young junior to do alone. One year, the accounts they returned to me disagreed considerably with my computer output. During an ensuing visit to their plush offices, I saw that the junior was working

them out all over again from the individual bills, invoices and cheque stubs using a pencil, paper and pocket calculator. I decided to go home and take their accounts apart by fine detail. By this time they had already been forwarded to the Inland Revenue and approved.

I discovered that they had calculated my *gross profit* at 19%. My business at the time comprised 5 revenue-earning elements. Each operated at a prescribed mark-up. The largest was 15%. It is an arithmetical impossibility for these to generate a combined gross profit of 19%. I sacked my accountants and told the Inland Revenue that I was from now on going to produce and submit my own account directly to them.

This they did not like at all. It soon became obvious that as a self-employed individual, I was, by default, automatically assumed to be the stereotypical wide-boy - a bit of a lad - a geezer - with a natural propensity for all manner of fiddling. They refused to re-open the already approved account submitted by my former accountants. I was lectured on how long it took to train as an accountant, and of his exclusive 'trusted' status. I nevertheless resolved that I was going to take charge of my own accounts.

This bears witness to the true nature of State officialdom. The Inland Revenue exists for the purpose of extracting taxes from a populous whom it assumes does not want to pay them, and who will by all means seek to avoid having to do so. The beguiling overtures of a 'Taxpayer's Charter' do not perturb the ethos of suspicion under which it systematically and relentlessly endeavours to expedite its prime directive.

Being Unemployed

Shortly after I realised that the recessive market could no longer sustain my business, I went for an interview at my local Jobcentre. During the interview, I was warned to declare any and all income. I was also told that having been formerly self-employed, I was naturally the most likely to be suspected (of precisely *what*, the interviewer did not say). Officialdom do not like self-employment. It would rather that every working person be he labourer, artisan or professional, work for a corporate master who can be trusted to pay the taxes of those he employs.

At the time of writing I have been unemployed for just over 10 years. During that time, I could not fail to notice - indeed feel - that officialdom has quite a different attitude to the unemployed than it does to the employed. One's sense of freedom is drastically reduced. One becomes less the respected adult and more the naughty child.

When I 'sign on' at my local Jobcentre each fortnight, I have to wait in a queue until one of the front-line operatives is free. The lower-ranked operatives are pleasant and reasonable. They often just allow me to 'sign' and then leave. The more senior ones are stricter. They always require me to show some form of documentary evidence that I have been seeking work during the past fortnight. However, they are usually satisfied with what I present.

My personal 'client advisor' is a rebel within the system. He genuinely tries to help. He appreciates the difficulties of ageism and length of unemployment. I don't seem to see him any more. I think he has been deemed to have failed with me and the other 'long termers' he has been trying to help.

Patronising Attitude

However, the real professionals are different. Occasionally, the person in charge of the Jobcentre comes onto the front-line. The seat opposite her place on the front line is referred to as the 'electric chair'. She is uncompromisingly strict. We refer to her as the Führer. Her initial approach is one of overt suspicion and correction. This is well illustrated by the following encounter.

My 'signing time' is 10:30. I always arrive at the Jobcentre at 10:20. The queue is often slow. One day, I arrived at the 'electric chair' at 10:55. The Führer's patronising first question was, "Were you *really* waiting in that queue for half an hour?" Her tone implied that I was late and that she was scolding me for being so. It also carried the veiled threat that if I had gone over the half-hour of grace, she would have refused to 'sign' me pending an official inquisition to determine whether or not my excuse for so being were acceptable. I do not know how long I was in the queue. What I do know is that the time I spent reading the job cards + the time I spent in the queue amounted to 35 minutes. I resolved in future to note *and write down* the time I join the queue.

This attitude makes it plain that though I, as an unemployed person, am in name a 'client' or 'customer' of the Employment Service, I am automatically and in reality viewed by authority as a churl. I must be kept in line. Watched. Disciplined.

Fastidious Procedure

Throughout the past 36 years since I left college, [my skills](#) have lain entirely within the realm of computer software development. Notwithstanding, it is now mandatory, for me, as for all unemployed, to look through all the job cards posted on all the boards in the main concourse of the Jobcentre before joining the 'signing' queue. Presumably this is to see if they contain any jobs which match my skills. Were I to refuse to do so, the Führer would refuse to 'sign' me, as would any other operative whenever she were present on the front line. The jobs cards on display are arranged on boards according to job categories, which are:

- Drivers (vans, trucks)
- Hotel & Catering
- Building workers
- Shop assistants
- Cleaners
- Salespeople
- Care Work
- Clerical/Office
- Miscellaneous
- Latest Vacancies
- Local Jobs
- Jobs in Other Areas

The first 9 categories are by job type without any generic indicator as to where they are located. The next 2 categories are geographic without any generic indicator as to what type of jobs they contain. The last category are presumably jobs they have not yet got around to categorising. As a classification system, it is an inconsistent mess. Common sense suggests to me that all jobs should be placed in categories according to job type. The geographic dimension should be indicated by some other means like colour coding the cards to correspond to colours on a wall mounted locator map. Each 'customer' would then only need to scan his relevant category, and, if necessary, glance at the locator map to see where it was.

In any case, I think it plainly obvious that my [curriculum vitae](#) does not - and never will - equip me for any of the job categories on offer. The only category which may remotely capture a suitable job is 'Miscellaneous'. This category is invariably filled with unskilled jobs, most of which are part-time. None is ever likely to lend itself to my skills and experience.

From time to time, when my case comes up for review, I have been told that anyone who is unable to find a job, within their normal trade, after having been unemployed for a certain length of time, is required to take any job on offer at any level of skill and pay. This 'length of time' varies between a fortnight and six months, depending on who is speaking. Notwithstanding, my personal experience uncompromisingly confirms that [downshifting](#) (as it is called) simply does not work.

Dreaded Encounter

Having looked through the job cards, as required, I join the 'signing' queue. I move up the queue. I try to anticipate whether I will be called by one of the ordinary front line operatives (relief), or whether I will end up in the 'electric chair' (panic). Oh no! It's the 'electric chair'.

She asks to see my evidence of job search. "Ya vol Frau Führer!" I tremble to myself as I hand my report to her. She scrutinises it. I see the cogs turning in her brain. "Has he searched *every* day?" she seems to ask, as her laser eyes scorch the paper in the dates column of my report. She combs through the cut-out job ads I stapled to the back. Silent minutes pass like hours. Suddenly she initials and dates the report and hands it back without a word. She 'signs' me. Then, with instinctive professional politeness, she wishes me luck with my pending applications for the 'graduate' jobs for which, being 58 years old, I have no hope of being considered.

I am thus forced, fortnight after fortnight, to follow the blind rules which never even attempt to address the real problems. I am eternally bound to this [futile chore](#), which serves no purpose but to dissipate my energy and feed my stress. Their beguiling literature assures me that these organs of government are my caring servants. Their actions leave me in no doubt that they regard me solely as an erstwhile subject of their exigent lords.

Open To Interpretation

Capitalism generates disparity. With no means of redistributing wealth a capitalist society would rapidly constipate. Many think the fairest way of redistributing wealth is by means-testing and targeting the poor according to their needs. However, there are systemic reasons why this can't work.

Each government department deals with a client or claimant unilaterally. It does not co-ordinate with any of its peers. At least, their impact on my life bears the character of this being so. The DSS assumes that a claimant *is receiving* what it understands to be his entitlements from the Local Authority, the Inland Revenue and others, and even different departments within the DSS itself. And it processes a claimant's claim on this basis.

The notion that the Local Authority may interpret the claimant's entitlement differently is immaterial. Whether or not he is actually receiving that to which it deems him to be entitled is ignored. The onus is always on the claimant to make sure that he does.

One front-line operative (counter clerk) can interpret a claimant's entitlement one way while another in the same department and branch can interpret it differently. Even the same operative can interpret the same claim differently at different times, depending on how he feels or how tired he is.

A Grant Refused

By the time my daughter had finished the 6th form, we were on a low income. We could not afford to finance her tertiary education. She needed some saleable skills with which to be able to 'earn' her living. O-levels and A-levels did not provide these. She would have to go to college. She was a late developer. By the time she left the 6th form, she was already 18 years old. Her school told us that it was now a universal national rule that any person who started on a full time educational course while under the age of 19 years was exempted from having to pay the course fees. On questioning why the age given was 18 years in the East Herts College prospectus, the school told us that the rule had been made recently and that it used to be 18, but the 19 year age would prevail since it was now a nationally universal rule.

With this understanding, my daughter applied for a course at the East Herts College to begin that September. She went for an interview and was accepted. She waited for a letter of acceptance and an enrolment date. None came. She telephoned the college several times throughout the summer to ask when the term started and when she should enrol. She was told that they would let her know. Finally, in September, she rang up and they said that enrolment day was that very day. She went there to enrol. There she was asked for £500 in fees. She said that she was under 19, but they said that nonetheless the fees were payable and that furthermore, the travel grant we were expecting would not be paid.

It is interesting to note that another girl (a school friend of my daughter's) on a very similar course was awarded the grant. Her father's income, so I heard, was over *3 times* mine for that year. He had the same number of children. Yet he had no trouble getting his daughters fee's paid and a travel grant. He is a clergyman.

A Solution - In Part

Faced with my daughter's situation, my only course of action was to try with all haste to find a similar course for her beyond the jurisdiction of Hertfordshire. I succeeded. By the Friday of that week I had found a course with a spare place at the Cambridge Regional College. I asked specifically about fees. The registrar assured me that since my daughter was under 19 at the time the course started, her county council would have to pay the fees. I was sceptical and explained the problems with Hertfordshire. Sensing my concern, the registrar telephoned the Shire Hall in Cambridge to make absolutely sure that my daughter would not have to pay fees. The relevant officer at the Shire Hall assured the registrar that the fees would be paid by Hertfordshire, as they were legally obliged to do under the new nationally-binding rules.

My daughter joined this course. Naturally however, the cost of travel has been hard to bear since Hertfordshire would not even consider paying travel costs to a course at a non-Hertfordshire college when a similar course was available at a Hertfordshire college (albeit at an unaffordable fee).

I wrote to the education department at Hertford to ask why a county in which I was not - and had never been - a resident was willing to grant my daughter her education fees, while the county in which she had lived all her life was not. I did not understand the reply I received from them. Neither did my daughter's sixth form teachers who also received a copy of the letter. They said it did not in their opinion answer my questions or make clear why Hertfordshire County Council is empowered to make policies which can override laws made by Parliament.

The upshot was that my daughter's opportunities, rights and privileges in education seemed to be determined not by her being British, but by whether she were a citizen of the Democratic Republic of Cambridgeshire or a subject of the Feudal Despocracy of Hertfordshire. And also, it seems, by *who* her father is or is not.

Why my daughter was refused a grant, while her friend was awarded a grant, though her family were richer, appears to be something to do with a nebulous thing called 'discretion'.

According To Need

It appears that the county administration has a limited budget for educational grants. There is therefore bound to be insufficient money to be able to fulfil the needs of all applicants. Its officers must therefore decide which applicants shall, and which shall not receive an educational grant. To make fair decisions, they must follow a consistent procedure. This must enable them to determine

each applicant's (or parents') ability, or lack thereof, to pay for their education themselves. It must test their means.

Time and cost prevent the officers from interviewing each applicant. Their sole source of information from which they must make their decision is the application form. This is a very narrow channel of communication. It cannot convey much. It certainly lacks depth and presence. Systemically, it contains insufficient information to enable them to arrive at a logical decision. The officers must therefore resort to intuition. They must use their discretion.

A household is a very familiar thing. It is also very small. But as an analysable system, a domestic economy is more diverse and complex than any other element of society. A complete and accurate data model of any family's circumstances can't possibly be accommodated on a grant application form. There are far too many variables. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. So is making a decision from inadequate data.

Officers of a county administration are therefore unequipped to be able to make a fair and accurate decision concerning to whom a grant should or should not be awarded. Furthermore, being so unequipped to make a logical decision, the officers concerned must eventually resort to intuition, which is invariably coloured by political expedience. This is hardly fair, since those most in need have least political influence.

Clerical Bloody-Mindedness

Driven from above by political pressure, front line clerks in government departments are bent on interpreting 'the rules' to the advantage of their employers, irrespective of the hardship it may inflict upon the hapless individual.

My wife suffers from a [mental illness](#). The controlling drugs she has to take make her too slow to hold an outside job with an employer. Nevertheless, she helped me with my business and I paid her a wage for doing so. During March 1991, I realised that my business was not making enough money to support my family. So on 1st April 1991 I registered officially unemployed.

Some months later, a person (I'll call her Harriet) came from the DSS to assess whether the amount of state [welfare](#) we were receiving was 'correct'. In the course of so doing, she scrutinised our bank statements. She noticed that my wife was receiving a regular payment which she had been receiving before I became officially unemployed. It was a monthly standing order from my account to hers. It had been, in effect, her salary for helping me in my business. She used it for buying the food and other domestic consumables.

Since it was to my wife, and not to an outside employee, I had not bothered to cancel the standing order. It was simply money going from my account to hers. Had she been an outside employee, obviously I would have stopped the standing order when that person's employment finished. Since it was my own wife, I did not see stopping it as urgent.

Harriet asked me what it was. I told her. She said my wife was still receiving her salary for two months after I had registered as unemployed. I agreed, but told her why I had not bothered to stop it immediately. Harriet said that the 'documentary evidence' showed that my wife was still receiving a salary after my unemployment had commenced, and that therefore she would have to deduct it from the amount of the welfare to which we were entitled. I objected, saying that the money had come out of my account into hers. No money left the family. No money entered it.

My account was what the bank designated a 'business account'. My wife's account was a private account. I did not have a private account. Harriet therefore decreed that what entered my wife's private account was income, but what left my business account was a business loss. She said that

State welfare did not support business losses, so the income my wife had received had to be deducted from the 'benefit' to which we were entitled.

Of course, she still counted the balance in my 'business' account as part of the family's 'savings'. She did not regard it as a separate entity from that point of view. As a result of this, we lost £398.66 (1991) in benefit. This may not seem much to most people. But when you consider that, on State welfare, it was then 9% of our entire annual income, it was to us astronomical.

Whatever fancy accounting label the money goes under, the net change in the family's means resulting from my paying money from my account to my wife's - for whatever reason - was zero. I repeat: nothing came in: nothing went out. This is typical of the circular-reasoning-of-convenience which petty bureaucrats apply in nit-picking their way through bits of legal syntax while ignoring the obvious reality of the situation.

To my mind it is pure bloody mindedness, which in this case appeared to be invoked by nothing other than adverse personal chemistry between clerk and claimant. It is also a form of bloody mindedness that causes other people - including young children - great deprivation and hardship.

My Autumn 2001 Welfare Crisis

29 August 2001

At my scheduled jobsearch review, I told my Client Advisor at the Jobcentre that [my son](#) was mentally ill and needed a full time carer and that I had applied for Invalid Care Allowance. I went on to tell him that consequently I could not attend the 'voluntary' 13 week Intensive Activity Period . He said that he would cancel my Intensive Activity Period and that I should continue to look for jobs and sign on until the Invalid Care Allowance payments started and my transfer over to Income Support had taken effect. He said I should ring the Invalid Care Allowance office in Preston to ask if my claim had been accepted.

I rang the the Invalid Care Allowance office. They told me the following. My claim had been accepted and would take effect from 06 August 2001. However payments would not start until 27 October 2001 but that the first money would not be in my bank account until 12 November 2001.

I rang my Client Advisor at the Jobcentre, telling him what the Invalid Care Allowance Unit had told me. He told me to apply for jobs and come in to sign on as usual until Income Support took over from my Jobseeker's Allowance.

30 August 2001

Jobcentre stopped my Jobseeker's Allowance, leaving my mentally ill wife and me with no source of income.

04 September 2001

I received the first (retrospective) intimation of the above by a letter dated 31 August 2001 from the Manager of the Jobcentre. I telephoned the Jobcentre saying since they had stopped my Jobseeker's Allowance I had absolutely no income until 12 November 2001. An operative (I'll call her Jane) said I would continue to receive JSA until the Income Support took over. She said I did not need to come and sign on any more, but that I should return the tear-off slip in my ES40 document. She said that although I had been on Jobseeker's allowance, I would have to apply all over again for Income Support. My son's Income Support application took 58 days. He literally had no income for 58 days and was [never reimbursed for the first 6 weeks](#).

So to date I have been told three different stories by the Jobcentre. My Client Advisor told me to keep signing on until Income Support took over. The official letter said I would receive nothing after 31 August 2001. Jane told me not to come in any more but that my Jobseeker's Allowance would continue to be paid until I started to receive Income Support.

05 September 2001

I received, completed and returned an application form for Income Support.

08 September 2001

Received and answered a letter from the Income Support office containing a wrongful request for bank statements which, according to the Income Support form itself, were not required in my case because my family's total '[savings](#)' amounted to less than £2500.

10 September 2001

I telephoned the Jobcentre again asking them to clarify the three conflicting stories. I was told by a woman who did not give her name, although I recognized her voice as that of the woman with a hearing aid and a northern accent, that indeed she had stopped my claim from 30 August 2001 and that I would have to wait until the Income Support office had processed my claim. That could take 3 months. She added that if I returned my ES40 she could pay me up to the date from which I had applied for the Income Support. This was officially 4 Sept 2001.

When I persisted with my question asking what I and my mentally ill wife would live on for the three months until the Income Support payments came through, she implacably repeated that she could not pay me anything from 30 August 2001. Such as she must indeed have to undergo an extreme process of de-humanisation in order to be able to do that job. I certainly could never debase myself sufficiently to be able to cut off a vulnerable family with absolutely nothing to live on. It takes the cold steel of a British DSS bureaucrat to do that.

Anyway, it is a good job I telephone. The previous story was that I would continue to receive my money until Income Support took over.

11 September 2001

I received another letter from the Jobcentre confirming that my Jobseeker's Allowance had been terminated on 30 August 2001.

12 September 2001

I took my ES40 form to the Jobcentre to sign off as required. On it I gave the reason for my claim stopping as:

"Because I have to care for my wife and son who are both mentally ill."

I wrote that my JSA had been stopped by the Jobcentre on 30 August 2001 and that I now have no income and no written evidence that I will get any and that this violates [Article 25](#) Clause 1 of my human rights. I wrote also that I had applied for Income Support as soon as I knew my Jobseekers Allowance had been stopped but that my Income Support had not started and that my application for it had not so far been approved or even acknowledged.

This leaves me with the problem of, with no savings, to exist until all the money arrives (I'll believe it when I see it) on 12 November and some unknown date probably in December. This is based on the bold assumption that my application for Income Support will be approved, which of course, it may

not be. I wish I had learned how to shoplift when I was younger. It is a necessary skill for survival in the United Kingdom when you are a poor and vulnerable carer. But I am bound to get caught.

14 September 2001

Received letter from DSS and a giro cheque for the JSA covering 30 August until 4 September - the date I applied for Income Support.

15 September 2001

Received letter from DSS notifying me that I had been granted Income Support (which in effect replaces my Jobseeker's Allowance).

So ended a very stressful fortnight. It may seem that my fears of destitution were unfounded. But remember, my son still has not received any income whatsoever for the first 6 weeks of his illness after having been dismissed from his employment without notice.

Of all involved, the claimant is the least equipped and worst placed to negotiate and arbitrate a consistent interpretation of his circumstances and entitlements. Without any universal protector, he is buffeted and squashed between these different autonomous covens of rule-driven idiots with whom he is forced to deal.

In the context of the above, I must however say that I have occasionally encountered a rebel - an operative who is actually human who, despite being critically constrained by stupid rules, strives diligently to help his 'client'. Sadly, such noble beings rarely survive for long. They either get converted to the corporate ethos, or are eventually side-lined by a ruthless rule-worshipping Büroführer.

Unacceptable Failure

From the point of view of the subject individual, *government organisations* clearly do not fulfil their purported purposes to a 'merchantable' standard. In fact, for all too many they are downright dangerous and destructive. From the point of view of their architects (those who enact the rules and engineer the instruments of their delivery) they are perfectly successful.

The dichotomy of view results because each evaluates them through different criteria. The first is an individual view. The second is a global view. To the government, these organisations work because (so we are told) they produce the correct result *most of the time*. They work in the majority of cases. To the unfortunate among the individuals with whom they deal, they simply don't work.

The government view is derived from capitalism. They consider human individuals as a commodity in the same way a wholesaler regards his fruit. Most of his vegetables arrive fresh. A percentage of waste is acceptable. Government agencies (so we are told) deal with most people fairly. A percentage of unfortunates is acceptable.

I once wrote and implemented an accounting system. It processed invoices and other transactions. Would it have been acceptable to my client if my software processed 99% of invoices all right, but allowed 1% to go wild? I think not. Yet it is acceptable for a [national insurance](#) system to leave an odd sick individual untreated and destitute while paying out to multitudes who hardly need it. And it seems not to matter when a self-employed person on low income is denied a desperately needed rebate which is granted automatically to a person on the same income working for an employer.

Sentient beings are not inanimate commodities. Every person on this planet is equally precious. The parable of the lost sheep is the perfect model by which the collective should deal with the individual. If the system [fails for one, it is a failure](#): 99% is not good enough.

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