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Reprint from Volume 11 Number 19

September 23, 1999

## *Dealing with Government VII* *Who's on First? - Patrick Brown*

Many people will remember a classic Abbott and Costello routine in which the names of the players on a baseball team were identified as Who, What, and I Don't Know. Once Abbott had explained this, Costello remarked, 'It must be confusing as hell.'

Nowadays, Costello might say it was as confusing as government. The Ottawa-based Alliance for Public Accountability recommends strongly that anyone trying to understand government should 'identify the controlling mind' behind any particular proposal. Unfortunately, this exercise may produce results something like Abbott and Costello.

Government is actually specifically designed so the 'controlling mind' can't be identified. This is partly because of the political structure and partly because of the process.

The political structure separates elected people from appointed people. (As previously noted, they are all politicians; it's just that some of them are elected.) Elected people are theoretically responsible for government actions and programs. This means that they take all the credit when a program appears to be successful, but are unwilling to take the blame if it isn't. Taking blame is what appointed people are for.

This convention is unfair, since in both cases, credit or blame generally falls upon the uninvolved.

### **Revolving Staff**

So here's the first defensive technique: keep moving. This is because the people who actually devised the scheme are long gone by the time the chickens come home to roost.

### **Committees**

The second is safety in numbers: if the program in question can be credited to (or blamed on) a committee, responsibility is diffused. The most useful committee for this purpose is one that is already disbanded; the closest live equivalent is an interdepartmental or better yet intergovernmental committee.

Sometimes committees that are anxious to influence events publish reports; this will invariably lead to the committee being disbanded very soon (and the report shelved). Committees sometimes publish 'interim' reports, with the clear implication that there will be a 'final' report later. Experienced committee

people will know that this means that the 'interim' report can be ignored because it's not 'final'.

All these techniques are fundamental to the basic objective, which is to make sure nobody actually has to take responsibility for the program. And bear in mind that whoever takes responsibility (or credit, blame, etc.) is almost never the controlling mind. (Look at any Premier or Prime Minister.)

### **Nobody's on First**

One of the things that makes the search for the controlling mind difficult is that there may not be one. This awkward fact may be well covered up by the basic obfuscation methods described above, but it is all too common an occurrence. This is partly because most government programs are designed to kill as many birds as possible with one stone. (Some say that this is only possible if you have all your ducks in a row.) Usually if you aim at too many birds, you'll miss them all. However, they will fly away in all directions, and may disappear from public view for a while.

The process of arriving at a decision of this type is usually so involved that no one person can be present at all the meetings, read all the E-mail, or understand all the tradeoffs. So there's no controlling mind, right? Or maybe no mind at all.

### **Consultation**

Another way of obscuring responsibility is to carry out lots of consultation: with other departments, with other governments, or (horrors!) even with the public. This will produce lots of original ideas, many of them self-serving. Then compromises will have to be devised, and these compromises will in no way resemble any of the recommendations made. However, they did result from the consultation process, so this way you may be sure they cannot be tracked to any particular individual.

### **Spreading the Blame**

If you are identified as the source of a disaster, do not panic. Do not talk about the disaster, or its actual cause. If necessary, promise a lengthy investigation, or call the RCMP. Instead, impugn the motives of your accusers, attack the media, or name someone completely uninvolved. In a few cases, you can blame 'the system'—but they are starting to catch on to that one.

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'This article was published (September 23, 1999) in 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing across the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria to Nanaimo.'

Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada. Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.  
Email: [islandtides@islandtides.com](mailto:islandtides@islandtides.com). Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>

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**Accepting the Credit**

Try not to do this unless you are sure that someone else is available to take the blame, if there is some (you can never tell, but bet on it). If possible, take the credit as often as possible; all

government programs should be announced at least three times. (The public is not fooled, but it feels good.) Be magnanimous towards yourself and your boss (easier if you are the boss; see premier, prime minister, etc. above.) ✍

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