

RESEARCH REPORT

A NOTE ON COMMITTEE BEHAVIOUR PATTERNS

THE PURPOSE OF a committee agenda is the structuring of the committee's deliberations. This report is primarily concerned with the reactions of a committee to agendas of differing lengths.

In 1958, Parkinson¹ propounded his now famous First Law — 'Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion' — and, with specific reference to committees, his Law of Triviality which stated that the time spent on any item of the agenda would be in inverse proportion to the sum of money involved. Both these propositions seemed so obviously true to people with experience in management, administration and committee work that they have since become part of Western folklore.

Table I

MEETINGS HELD DURING 1977-8

<i>Date of Meeting</i>	<i>Number of Agenda Items</i>	<i>Number of Decisions</i>	<i>Duration of Meeting (in minutes)</i>	<i>Minutes per Agenda Item</i>
4/ 8†	34	38	155	4,5
1/ 9†	24	27	100	4,1
14/ 9	10	10	100	10,0
29/ 9†	21	21	115	5,4
6/10	4	4	45	11,2
27/10†	25	12	150	6,0
3/11	13c/f+3	18	115	7,2
17/11*	2	2	5	2,2
24/11†	27	23	155	5,7
2/12	10c/f+3	11	90	5,6
5/ 1†	12	14	140	11,6
19/ 1	3	5	130	43,3
2/ 2†	19	21	180	9,5
23/ 2*	1	1	25	25,0
9/ 3†	23	24	145	6,3
15/ 3*	1	2	10	5,0
12/ 4†	28	29	165	5,9
26/ 4	3	4	85	28,3
4/ 5†	15	19	100	6,6
1/ 6†	14	20	135	9,6
19/ 6	3	4	140	46,6
6/ 7†	18	22	160	8,8
TOTALS:	22 315	331	2 445	7,7
MEANS:	14,3	15,0	111	

†Regular meetings,

*Meetings held prior to another meeting, i.e. meetings with a fixed end-time.

¹G. N. Parkinson, *Parkinson's Law or the Pursuit of Progress* (London, J. Murray, 1958).

This note describes the behaviour of a committee of a Local Authority during 1977-8. While there is considerable evidence for the validity of the first Law, there is none for the validity of the Law of Triviality.

The basic data is set out in Table I² which shows a difference between the total number of agenda items and the total number of decisions (i.e. items on the minutes of the committee). This difference was, in fact, greater than is implied by the totals; on 27 October and 24 November, 13 and 10 agenda items were carried forward, respectively, to the next meeting.

A committee's ability to adjourn, re-convene or cut short a meeting, that is to vary the time available for the completion of its work, would lead one to expect only a small variation in the time spent per item. In practice, if the agenda was short the committee spent an average of 26 minutes per item; if however, the agenda was long, the average time per item dropped to 4, 5 minutes. It would seem that the committee reacted to a short agenda by perceiving a longer time available per item and talking longer; and that a long agenda produced the opposite result.

Table II

AVERAGE TIME PER AGENDA ITEM

<i>Number of Agenda Items</i>	<i>Number of Meetings</i>	<i>Total Number of Agenda Items</i>	<i>Total Time (in minutes)</i>	<i>Time per Item (in minutes)</i>
1- 5	7	17	440	25.9
6-10	1	10	100	10.0
11-15	4	53	465	8.7
16-20	3	53	455	8.6
21-25	4	93	510	5.5
26-30	2	55	320	5.8
> 30	1	34	155	4.5
TOTALS:	22	315	2 445	7.7

($r = -0.56$).

The possibility of the relationship shown in Table II being a chance relationship is extremely remote. It is equally unlikely that all the petty items were dealt with in meetings with long agendas (or, if one accepts the Law of Triviality, in meetings with short agendas). The most likely explanation is that committee members, knowing that they have a short agenda, subconsciously talk longer and that the chairman's control varies similarly.

The relationship between the number of decisions taken and the time per decision is similar to that between agenda items and time per item — the fewer the decisions, the longer it took to take them. With fewer than 5 items on the agenda, a decision took 20 minutes; with more than 30 items, just over 4 minutes.

² The primary source of data is the minutes of one of the standing committees of a Local Authority between August 1977 and July 1978.

Table III

AVERAGE TIME PER DECISION

Number of Decisions	Number of Meetings	Total Number of Decisions	Total Time (in minutes)	Time per Decision (in minutes)
1-5	7	22	440	20,0
6-10	1	10	100	10,0
11-15	3	37	380	10,3
16-20	3	57	350	6,1
21-25	5	111	755	6,8
26-30	2	56	265	4,7
> 30	1	38	155	4,1
TOTALS:	22	331	2 445	7,4

At its regular meetings, the committee had before it the minutes of at least three other committees. The members could therefore, if they wished, 'lengthen their own agenda' by discussing items which appeared on the minutes of the other committees. This accounts, in the main, for the difference between the number of agenda items and the number of decisions taken by the committee. However, two-thirds of the extra items appear in the minutes of meetings with an agenda shorter than the mean and only one third in the minutes of meetings with an agenda longer than the mean. The figures are set out in Table IV.

Table IV

EXTRA ITEMS

Number of Decisions	Number of Meetings	Total Number of Agenda Items	Total Number of Decisions	Additional Items
1-15	12	70	96	26
> 15	10	222	235	13
TOTALS:	22	292*	331	39 †

*23 items carried forward from one meeting to the next and appearing twice in Tables I and II

† 33 extra items on regular meetings.

The ratio of agenda items to decisions is 1,06 in meetings with a long agenda and 1,37 in meetings with a short agenda. If the number of agenda items can be taken to prognosticate the length of a meeting, and the number of decisions as a measure of the work actually achieved, Table IV is a good example of work expanding to fill the time perceived to be available.

The committee did not, however, act in accordance with the Law of Triviality. There was no correlation between triviality and the time taken, by the committee, to discuss the item. An item involving ZR\$3 000 and another item involving ZR\$7,8 million both took about 25 minutes of the committee's time; an item involving ZR\$93 000 took 2 minutes while another involving ZR\$74 000 took 35 minutes. Despite the general belief that small sums generate more discussion than large sums, it is more probable that the determining factor is the level of understanding of the committee members. A well understood subject will generate more discussion than a subject which is not understood.

The behaviour pattern of another of the standing committees was similar. An analysis of the agenda length and the time per agenda item for its regular meetings during 1977-8 revealed an average agenda of 46 items with an average time per item of 4 minutes. However, if the agenda reached 55 items the time per item fell to 3 minutes; and if the agenda only had 30 items, the time per item was 5 minutes. Although less marked than in the behaviour of the first committee (with an average agenda only one third as long) the association between short agendas and longer debate was present. The opportunity to discuss extra items was not available to the second committee.

The figures presented in this note show that committee debate does expand to fill the perceived time available, but it should not be presumed that this is undesirable. A sense of urgency occasioned by a long agenda can lead to incisive debate and decision-taking. On the other hand, a lack of urgency occasioned by a short agenda can lead to deeper consideration.

University of Rhodesia

J. D. JORDAN