

PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE ADMINISTRATION OF SOCIAL LEGISLATION

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Since the beginning of the twentieth century, and more particularly since the World War period, the number and complexity of the problems which have confronted government in the United States have shown an almost phenomenal increase. The growing body of individual and social relations whose adjustment is of concern to the community or the Nation as a whole, and the increasing complexity of our institutional organizations have placed upon government the responsibility for an expanded area of activities. Along with this expansion of governmental activities there have perforce developed more direct relationships and more numerous points of contact between government and individuals.

The development of government has tended to parallel that of the industrial organization of the country, in the growth of large-scale activity as well as of specialized technical functions. In this development, necessary to cope with the range and variety of services which our people have delegated to government, it is essential that channels of public information be maintained so that the people may know how these tasks are being performed, and administrators may know to what extent they are meeting responsibilities delegated to them. Such an interchange of information, opinion, and interpretation is essential in maintaining, under the circumstances of twentieth-century life, the public participation in public life which in the United States has always been synonymous with democracy.

The growing importance of the "public relations" function in governmental administration has been strikingly illustrated in the administration of the social security program. The legislative framework of that program presents administrative problems of a magnitude and complexity perhaps never before encountered in this country. The Social Security Act, and the State and local legislation related to it, intimately affect the lives and everyday activities of millions of individuals. If the intent of such legislation is to be carried out, it is obvious that those responsible for its adminis-

tration must enlist the active support and cooperation of a very substantial body of men and women outside the actual administrative force. No matter how efficient and capable the staff of the administering agency itself, it cannot wholly succeed unless at least the large majority of the individuals affected participate actively, day by day, year by year.

How is this cooperation of the public in the administrative process to be achieved? Obviously it will not be won by ignoring public opinion, or by handing down *ex cathedra* rules and regulations, formulated without regard to the reactions of the individuals concerned. A first requisite in administration of any legislation, and more particularly of social legislation, is the careful cultivation of a widespread and thorough understanding of the legislative intent, of the needs out of which the legislation grew and the objectives which it seeks to accomplish, as well as the specific administrative procedures through which the objectives are to be sought. In short, a program of adult education on a very large scale is necessary, and the administrative agency will fall short of its objective unless it takes reasonable steps to promote popular understanding of the law.

Recognition of this necessity came at an early stage in the organization of the Social Security Board. The Social Security Act established public policy in fields which were very largely new to this country. The application of the policy clearly involved the direct participation of millions of individuals. Establishing the old-age insurance program alone called for the immediate voluntary cooperation of some 26 million workers and about 2 million employers in providing necessary information to establish a recordkeeping system. It was necessary for these workers and their employers to share in procedures with whose nature and purpose they were not familiar. Employers had to receive, fill out, and return certain forms, and to receive supplies of other forms and information materials to distribute to their employees. The employees were similarly obligated to obtain forms, supply necessary information, and return

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the forms to the Social Security Board through one or another of several designated channels.

If, instead of 26 million, only 16 million, or 6 million, had been sufficiently aware of their rights and obligations under the program to fill out the necessary forms accurately and promptly during the initial period of enumeration in the fall of 1936, the whole administrative task might have failed of achievement or been seriously delayed. The expense of setting up the necessary record system would have been enormously increased, and the execution of the public policy enunciated by the Congress would have been jeopardized. The conclusion was inescapable that one of the first essentials of administration was the provision of public information with regard to the program.

Enlisting public cooperation in carrying out the objectives of legislation, however, involves more than mere distribution of information. An effective public-relations program requires not only understanding of the program by the public, but also understanding of public attitudes by the administrator, which means constant attention on his part to the climate of public opinion in which the law must operate. Every phase of administration must be adapted to public sympathy and understanding, in the interests of efficiency and economy in administration.

In the establishment of its old-age insurance records, the Social Security Board had not only to inform the public, but also to be aware itself of public attitudes toward the program, and to formulate its administrative methods in contemplation of these attitudes. The techniques of administration could not be so unusual as to arouse public antagonism, and they could not impose such burdens on individuals, both employers and employees, as to cause opposition. The methods adopted, on the other hand, had to be sufficiently dynamic to stimulate interest and overcome inertia. The process of enumeration as a whole had to be sufficiently automatic so that, once set in motion, the necessary opportunity for the individual to comply would be practically guaranteed.

This two-way flow of information and cultivation of understanding constitutes the public-relations function which present-day social and economic complexity and motility impose upon the administrator of social legislation, if the legis-

lative will is to be achieved with economy and dispatch. It is the task of studying and adapting to public attitudes and desires, and, at the same time, informing the public and stimulating understanding on the part of the public. Under present-day conditions this public-relations function is not a luxury; it is an indispensable part of the administrative process itself, made necessary by the need for public understanding and cooperation.

In recent years, government agencies have met the need for adequate public information services by setting up special units within their organizations and have made use of all available channels of communication to carry out their informational activities. In the Social Security Board, the function of public relations was established as an integral part of the administrative organization. An informational service was created to plan, coordinate, and carry out public-relations activities.

The purpose of the Informational Service is to promote efficiency and economy in administration of the Social Security Act. It helps to remove frictions and eliminate wastes which occur when the public fails to understand the program and its administrative necessities, or when the administrative agency fails to understand public reactions. The Service is the organized public-relations arm of the Board, serving to promote successful adaptation of the Board's work to the public, and of public understanding to the Board's administrative necessities by distributing information and by studying public attitudes and reactions. In addition, Informational Service advises the Board and its officers on public relations and information matters, cooperates with other Federal agencies concerned with portions of the social security program, and consults with and advises State public assistance and unemployment compensation agencies on their public-relations problems.

In every phase of this work, close integration is maintained with policy-forming and administrative functions. Such integration is essential to the successful operation of the public-relations program and its contribution to economical and efficient administration. Execution of the Board's public-information programs in each of its three major fields of operation—old-age insurance, unemployment compensation, and public assistance—as well as in the more general phases of its work, has required the closest possible cooperation between the Informational Service and the opera-

ting bureaus, the Board, the Executive Director, and the regional and field staff.

Phases of public-relations work other than informational activities involve the necessity for coordination and integration to an even larger degree. Analysis and interpretation of public attitudes, for example, involve processes in which all parts of the administrative organization must participate. Experience has shown that expressions of opinion in the press, on the radio, and in other typical media are not the only measures of public attitudes toward governmental activities. Reports from field office managers, analysis of correspondence, and similar tests, therefore, play an important part in this phase of public-relations activities. Similarly, in the application of the results of analysis of public attitudes to administrative operations, collaboration between administrative and public-relations personnel is essential.

It must be recognized that the special unit within an administrative organization which is designated as the public-relations arm of the organization does not and cannot have exclusive responsibility for these functions. On the contrary, the public-relations function is carried out, well or badly, wherever and whenever any representative of the organization comes in contact with any member of the public. Wise administration, therefore, seeks the effective execution of at least the elementary public-relations techniques at all levels within the organization. It is as important that a telephone operator should promote good public relations by going beyond mere courtesy and promptness to display genuine human interest in the problems of those who call as it is that a field office manager should sympathetically appraise the misunderstandings or assuage the antagonisms of those upon whom the program brings an unfamiliar impact. An information clerk's voice contributes to efficient administration through promoting good public relations just as do procedural or policy decisions made with a view to what the affected public will accept and cooperate in executing.

If the exercise of the public-relations function is implicit in the whole administrative process, its recognition as a special technique, with the ensuing trend toward the setting up of special units within the organization, has served to help meet an expanding need of democratic government, and to promote economy and facilitate the

carrying out of the legislative intent. Special public-relations units cannot make the whole contribution of which they are capable, however, if their increased specialization is permitted to isolate them from the administrator or the actual processes and procedures of administration. Such isolation, moreover, gives rise to the danger of subordinating the basic objective of public-relations activities—the promotion of efficient administration. The moment public-information projects stray from this fundamental concept they lose their effectiveness as administrative tools, if they do not, indeed, forfeit their justification for existence.

Not only is the good public-relations program directed as a whole toward facilitating economical administration, but also each individual project aims directly at the accomplishment of a specific end. This does not necessarily mean that the objective of a given public-information activity need be confined to a narrow and technical administrative point, such as instructing the public in how to fill out a particular form. On the contrary, the objective may be broad, such as that of informing the public as to the fundamental economic, social, or other factors contributing to the need for the particular legislation. But to be justifiable, the objective should be specific, predetermined, and related to the realization in fact of the public policy expressed in the law.

There may have been a time, in an earlier stage of our development, when the administrator could pursue his leisurely way neither thinking nor caring whether the public understood his reason for existence, his problems, objectives, or methods. That is not the situation in our modern, mechanized, interdependent, fast-moving, changing social organism. Methods of communication have been vastly speeded up for every institution. In a democracy, government cannot afford to become isolated from the people. It must use effective modern methods to keep aware of its environment, on the one hand, and to keep its environment informed, on the other. Thus it promotes adjustment, reduces "frictions," speeds up accomplishment, does more to meet the needs and desires of people with less cost and fuss. Thus the administrative end of government contributes in an important and democratic way to the actual realization of the legislative objective.