

CONFESSIONS OF A COMMITTEE JUNKIE

Daniel Kleppner

While hiking recently I met a physicist friend whom I had not seen for a while. When last we met he had been moody and depressed, but now he was full of joy, bubbling with enthusiasm. I commented on the change and he told me that something important had happened. He seemed anxious to talk about it, and as we walked along I listened to his tale. Here, as accurately as I can remember, is what he told me:

"You are quite right that things were not going well for me. My colleagues were nudging me to do something about it, and even the department chairman and the dean were dropping pointed comments. But I refused to believe that there was anything seriously wrong until my wife delivered an ultimatum. So, I gave in. And that is why a few days later I found myself timidly opening a door that was discreetly labeled 'C-J-A.'

"Inside, about a dozen people were chatting. 'Welcome to Committee Junkies Anonymous,' boomed one of them, a man who seemed quite dignified except for being a trifle wild-eyed.

"Are you the chairman?" I asked. There was a horrified silence. Finally he spoke. 'We have no chairman here. We do not permit chairmen, or chairwomen or any sort of chair. And we don't permit presidents, directors, convenors or facilitators.'

"Sorry," I said. 'Actually, I don't really belong here. Just thought I'd look in because a friend told me it might be interesting.'

"Oh yes," someone mocked, 'we've heard that before.' The group gathered around and fired questions.

"Have you been to any committee meetings today?"

"Only a single, short one."

"How many committees are you on now?"

"I can't remember."

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"You can if you want to.

"Well . . . possibly 5 or 6.'

"Possibly 10 or 12?"

"Possibly."

"Name them.

"There is the library committee, and the graduate committee, and the admissions committee, and the curriculum committee, and the safety committee, and the library committee . . .'

"You're repeating yourself—you're hiding things from us. Have you ever helped run a conference?"

"Once or twice."

"So you have served on organizing committees?"

"Naturally."

"And program committees?"

"Of course."

"And steering committees and planning committees and finance committees . . .'

"Well, maybe some . . .'

"How about search committees, promotion committees, facilities committees, welcoming committees, farewell committees, anniversary committees . . .'

"Yes, but . . .'

" . . . and executive committees, publications committees, prize committees, ad hoc committees, committees of the whole, standing, seating and sleeping committees . . .'

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes—but I've never heard of sleeping committees."

"Sure you have! And have you been on lecture committees, colloquium committees, visiting committees, assessment committees, oversight committees . . .'

"Yes . . .'

" . . . and have you ever served on a parking committee?"

"No."

"Good—there's still hope. But have you ever, are you now or do you plan to participate in forums, commissions, task forces, panels or roundtables?"

"As a matter of fact . . .'

"How about committees on committees?"

"Well, actually . . .'

"I think we've heard enough,"

someone interrupted. 'No doubt about it,' he said to me. 'You're a committee junkie. I know, because I, too, am a committee junkie.'

"These words seemed to trigger the group, for someone else exclaimed, 'I am a committee junkie!' and then they all repeated it in unison.

"Hold it!" I shouted. 'I am *not* a committee junkie. I can stop serving on committees whenever I want to.'

"Then why don't you?"

"Because I don't want to. One has an obligation to serve when one is needed. If I refused to serve, then. . . Without committees there would be no . . . be no . . . ' I was having difficulty focusing my thoughts.

"Without committees there would be no committees,' somebody added helpfully.

"Precisely."

"And do you intend going on this way?"

"Of course . . . certainly . . . but not exactly . . . I'm not sure . . .'

"Are you trying to say 'No'?"

"When you put it that way . . .'

"Good! We understand and we can help. The cure isn't for weaklings, but we survived and so can you. All set?"

"Evidently I nodded yes, for they pushed me into a room and locked the door. The room was bare except for a hard chair and a few loudspeakers. From the speakers came murmurings. It seemed to be a group waiting for something to happen, irritated by the delay. Finally came a voice. 'The meeting will come to order. We'll start with the minutes. Heep? Where's Heep? Has anybody seen Heep?' After much discussion about Heep's whereabouts, he turned up, apologized for being late and read exhaustive minutes of the previous meeting.

"The committee seemed to be involved with formulating a plan for reasserting US scientific leadership. They proposed to accomplish this by establishing a new international standard for weights and measures based

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solely on the US system. The plan seemed irresistible, because it would also enhance the nation's competitive position: This it would accomplish by wrecking the metric system.

"The principal recommendation was to redefine the speed of light as exactly ten billion inches per second, making the inch the legal unit of length.

"I call for a motion to accept the minutes," said the chair. "I object," someone said. "The account of our debate on peck versus bushel is totally unfair. As you should recall, I never actually said that the peck is 'asinine.' I merely argued that the bushel is a more natural unit of volume . . ." And with that he launched into a rambling discussion of peck and bushel, ending with a motion that the minutes be corrected. "Seconded," said someone impatiently. "Let's get on with it."

"But somebody else objected, saying that the peck people were tired of being pushed around. The argument went back and forth, round and round, becoming more and more unbearable. I was on the verge of screaming when the sound faded out.

"My agonies, however, were just beginning. It seems that C-J-A has an enormous recorded library of committee meetings, for as soon as one faded out, another faded in. Soon I was listening to a curriculum committee debate whether first-year university physics would attract more students if general relativity were introduced before constant acceleration. Somebody proposed reducing Newton's laws from three to two. The motion was passed, but then re-

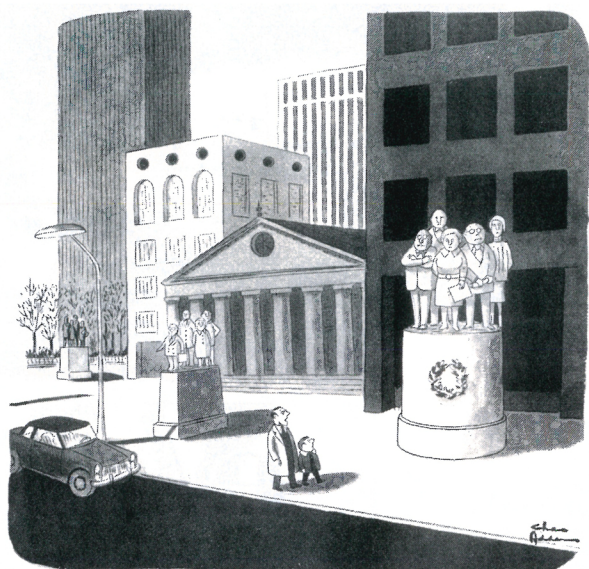
scinded when the committee couldn't agree which law to drop. I can't recall where the discussion went, because I became totally disoriented. I can't even remember the meetings that followed, except that now and then I was taken out for a little food and a few hours' rest. My mental condition deteriorated to the point that I lost track of everything.

"When I eventually regained consciousness, it seemed like a new world. Not only had I lost my craving for committees; the very idea of being on a committee had become unthinkable. Since then life has been sweet, both professionally and personally. I have become cheerful, productive and friendly.

"But I can't forget what I had become, and from time to time when we hear of someone in trouble a few of us get together at C-J-A and help the junkie make the break. Every now and then I become overwhelmed by the thought of committee junkies everywhere who aren't even aware that they have a problem. When I reckon the cost to the nation in lost productivity and the enormous suffering of their families, I can't help feeling distressed."

And that is the end of my friend's tale. I thought that he had exaggerated his problems, but he seemed so hopeful and happy that I did not want to dampen his enthusiasm. So I simply said, "I see what you mean."

"Good!" he exclaimed. "I knew you would understand. In fact, I am forming a little committee to deal with the problem. I trust that I will be able to count on you." ■



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"There are no great men, my boy—only great committees."

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