

Wheelchairs, Casework, and Bi-Lingual Education

by James Fallows

For the last few months I have lived in Austin, where my wife has started graduate work at the University of Texas. I left Washington less because of any specific desire to get away than because of the equal-time provisions of modern marriage; but when we started looking for a university with a good linguistics department, I was glad to find that one happened to be in a state capital. The one thing resembling Faith that Washington had given me was this: that the chasm which separates the real-life problems of the world from the little rituals that public officials carry out each day could not possibly be as immense at the state level as it is at the federal. I based this not, Lord knows, on any knowledge of the state governments, but on what I had seen of federal-land, plus a large measure of hope. Wherever one turned in Washington, the story seemed to be the same: on one hand, growing, ferocious problems demanding resolu-

tion, hungry people abroad and needy people at home, bad medical care and unnecessary highways and super-abundant bombs. On the other side were the legislators whose days seemed to disappear into meetings with Girl Scouts (James Boyd's article, "'Legislate, Who Me?' What Happens to a Senator's Day," which appeared in the first issue of this magazine, makes this point with hilarious if sobering accuracy), administrators who set off each morning to face the perils of staff meetings, and critical mentions in the press (the article on page 28 about the Social Security Administration depicts this world with an unwitting savagery worthy of Swift)—in sum, a gigantic edifice called Government that seemed to feed upon itself for inspiration and activity instead of reaching outside. In a state capital, I thought, one might not explore new horizons in national defense policy, but at least one might make a few modest incursions into life's real worries. At its worst, the flatulence

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level would be lower than it was in Washington—or so I used to think.

I have spent some of my time in Austin working for Lloyd Doggett, a young state senator who first won his seat in a special election in August, 1973, when he was 26 years old, and who was elected to a full four-year term last month.

Doggett, who represents Austin, is bright, well-spoken, and one of the two or three most liberal members of the State Senate. He had been student body president during his years at the University of Texas, and he won his first race largely with the help of the UT student bloc. In a Senate whose members include “Mad Dog” Mengden (whose colleagues yelp and bay when he takes the floor), Mrs. Betty Andujar (a lady from Fort Worth working to repeal the Equal Rights Amendment), and other conservatives of fearsome conviction and spite, he will not soon be a power. Yet, to Doggett’s neighbors in Austin, where he has lived all his life, he is a future leader of great promise, and to me he seemed the best imaginable sponsor for a brief introduction to state government.

The disappointing truth was not long in coming. An ideal state government may exist somewhere, but Texas is not the place. No one will deny that Texas has political idiosyncrasies which distinguish it from the rest of the country, yet the hamstringing features of its government seem to arise from conditions more typical of the nation than peculiar to the state.

There is, to begin with, the matter of constituent “casework,” a term I had heard in Washington, even used myself, without ever comprehending the human realities it involved. One of the most admirable features of state government is that, through the casework, it enforces an exposure to the real-life problems so easily avoided elsewhere. At least two thirds of the function of a state legislative office, as far as I can see, is to serve as a central collection depot for complaints of every sort about the way life is going.

Congressional staffs do the same thing, but in most cases they have the advantage of physical insulation from their clients; they usually deal with a piece of paper, or at worst a long-distance call, rather than a flesh-and-blood constituent waving his latest utility bill in their faces. The proximity is exaggerated in Doggett’s office, where none of the constituents is more than a short drive or a local phone call away.

I can’t say that it has not been an education to listen to these hard-luck stories. One morning I spent nearly an hour on the phone with a middle-aged woman who would not tell her whole story at once, but rambled on and on while dropping little bombshells at ten-minute intervals: “. . . of course, after they removed my stomach at the VA hospital. . . doctor says I’ll never be able to eat right again, least not after that time they cut the nerve . . . what with my arthritis acting up, I can’t get out of the house. . . after the accident with my son, the burial expenses just about ate up what I had left. . . .” The favor she was asking seemed pathetically small. For evident reasons, she felt entitled to an increase in her Social Security disability payments, but a backlog in the caseworker’s schedule meant that it would be five months before they could act on her claim.

It was with this case that I began to perceive the truly disheartening aspect of constituent service. I called the Social Security office and found out that the backlog did exist. There were cases just as urgent piled up ahead of this one, and there was nothing she could do but wait. Short of congressional action to increase the staff, there was no apparent solution. I called the woman back, apologetic for my failure, and found to my surprise that she was nearly overcome with gratitude—simply because I had spent some time on her case. This and similar episodes have helped me understand the real tragedy of constituent service.

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lator's office is looking for results. Occasionally they are; at this very moment, for example, the commissioners of Burnet County, are aggrieved because the state has declined to purchase a large parcel of ranch land and turn it into "Mormon Mills State Park"—and because Doggett could not reverse the decision. It is fortunate such high expectations are rare, because in only a handful of cases can the legislator or his staff actually remedy the complaint. Most of the correctable cases involve routine administrative errors: One woman called after she received a county tax bill which, due to a computer error, was 12 times larger than last year's. This I was able to correct. But in the hundreds of other instances in which no relief is at hand, the evil genius of modern government makes itself clear. Even at the state level, government is so arranged that the only place people can call for help is the legislator's office. At the same time the arrangement ensures that the legislator's staff can do nothing about the complaints it receives. I felt as if I was performing a valuable therapeutic function—but nothing more—when commiserating with a constituent. In short order I became an expert at the "where-will-it-all-end?" style of conversation about such perils as The High Cost of Government, The Threat from Organized Labor, and The Terrible Slaughter of Those Baby Calves Out Near Waco. Once I had conveyed the impression that Senator Doggett and I, his devoted minion, had done everything we could—short of producing results—to alleviate their problems, most constituents went away happy. Through trial and error I even decided upon the best parting touch: "If there's anything else I can do for you, please don't hesitate to call."

In the course of making casework phone calls to different state agencies, I glimpsed a few aspects of state government they don't teach you in the new-federalism seminars. In Washington, there is a school of thought

founded on the premise that the federal bureaucracy is padded; the articles on pages 19 and 28 of this issue explain some of the reasons for this concern. But the idea still runs counter to the energies and instincts of the federal city, where the newspapers report the daily doings of the government, and the limousines and crowded schedules create an aura of urgency and importance. At the state level, however, no one bothers to disguise the ancient principle that a public job equals an easy life. Around the grounds of the state capitol building sits a legion of men in cowboy hats and faded khaki jackets. Their function is to make sure that no one but a legislator parks in a legislators' spot, which requires them to get up from their seats on the lawn several times each day. This reminder of the "public job" is the first thing state employees see when they arrive at work each morning.

If the states are more honest in avoiding the pretense that every public servant is making great sacrifices for the public weal, the candor has its drawbacks in the grumbling resentment one encounters when trying to get something done. In September, for example, I made phone calls nearly every other day to

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one man rather high up in the state's budgetary office. I needed answers to two questions and each time I got a sleepy reassurance that things were moving right along. By mid-November the answers had not appeared, and I doubt they ever will. In fairness, I should point out that the legislators' offices are generally more a-bustle than the administrators', and that one agency, the Legislative Council (which drafts legislation), works as hard as a group of Nader's Raiders.

So far this picture is incomplete because it omits legislation. From what I have seen of preparations for the 1975 session, my hopes are not high. In making their preparations, the legislators have seemed to split into two groups, depending on the kind of bills they will support. The majority, made up of the Republicans and the big-money Democrats, controls the state finances and dispenses the kind of "franchising" favors Thomas Edsall discusses in his article on page 49 of this issue. The remainder, excluded from this group by background or taste, is left to propose its "progressive" legislation. Some of this, of course, is potentially significant. To give two examples, Doggett and others like him will push bills next year to control the strip-mine operators who have been casting covetous eyes at the state's lignite and uranium deposits, and to regulate the state's utility companies. At the moment the telephone and electric systems in Texas suffer less public control than they do anywhere else in the country, and the monthly bills show it.

If it is hard to avoid a sense of *déjà vu* when creating a new regulatory commission (Doggett and his allies seem to feel a little like the drafters of the Interstate Commerce Commission, aware of how quickly their work may be perverted), it is even harder to imagine that the bills that finally pass will not have large holes knocked in them by the special interests. As a result of the frustrating politics of the Texas legislature, the occasional people who seek office because they

actually want to do something, rather than merely distribute favors, soon find themselves confined to passing legislation of the "United Way" variety, or what liberals refer to in their speeches as "human needs" legislation. This involves such corrective measures as better child care laws, expanding bi-lingual education, and protecting the rights of the handicapped. The first two laws I encountered in Doggett's office were a proposal to grant free park admission to the elderly, and one to provide all "mobility-impaired" drivers with special license plates which would entitle them to special parking places near the entrances of buildings.

It is no meaningless thing to pass bills like these; one of the most important on Doggett's agenda, and one which has a good chance of passing, will ensure that people in wheelchairs are able to get in and out of public buildings. But it is another sign of the barrier between intention and execution in modern government that legislators like Doggett are able to do no more than this. Within the federal government, people feel powerless, the issues are too abstract and the institutions too far removed from the problems they are supposed to address. Down at the roots, where the problems are closer at hand, everyone spends his time either passing out bank franchises or doing what he can in small humanitarian ways. The problems—in Texas, some of the worst poverty in the nation, nestled amid the bejeweled wealth of Dallas and Houston—limp along and the idealistic trim their expectations. There is so much casework to do each day, so many visiting delegations to welcome, that there is neither time nor incentive to think about the basic priorities. It is the genius of modern government to so fragment authority and so isolate the real centers of power that those who *can* do rarely see what they should be doing, and people at every level nurse the comforting hope that somewhere else proper attention is being paid. ■

political book notes

*Public affairs books
to be published in December.*

Administrative Law: The Formal Process. Peter Woll. Univ. of California, \$11.75.

The Buses Roll. Robert Coles. Norton, \$8.95/\$4.95. Sandwiched between some fine photographs of black and white school children is a Robert Coles essay which fails in its attempt to explain why school integration worked in Berkeley, California, and didn't work elsewhere.

The Cold War Begins. Lynn Etheridge Davis. Princeton, \$15.

A Discourse on Statesmanship. Paul Eidelsberg. Univ. of Illinois, \$16.

Food, Shelter, and the American Dream. Stanley Aronowitz. Seabury, \$7.95/\$2.

Freedom Under Siege: The Impact of Organized Religion on Your Liberty and Your Pocketbook. Madalyn Murray O'Hair. J. P. Tarcher, \$7.95. The author continues her crusade against organized religion. Much of the time she's right, but her lack of sympathetic understanding of the problems and needs of churches and church-going people is simply staggering.

Politics and Higher Education. John D. Millett. Univ. of Alabama, \$6/\$2.95. The author laboriously outlines the funding problems of Ohio's state colleges, based on his 19 years of experience in the educational system. A narrow topic is made more parochial by Millett's staunch refusal to provide even a hint of human interest: "I have not wanted to indulge in any criticisms of persons or in any recriminations about motivations." He does, however, find time to stress that "mutual respect and dependence between politics and higher education" is important for the future of education, the "last great hope of Western civilization." It's must reading for anyone interested in the 1953 enrollment figures at Bowling Green.

The Politics of Rights: Lawyers, Public Policy, and Political Change. Stuart A. Scheingold. Yale, \$10. A persuasive analysis of what lawyers can and can't do about our social and political problems. The author has the good sense to realize that "if you want fundamental change, legal tactics are much