

COMPLAINING TO THE OMBUDSMAN AS AN URBAN PHENOMENON

An Analysis of the New Zealand Ombudsman's Clients

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Theorists of the city including Simmel, Park, Wirth, and Kornhauser have posited that city life produces an urban man who differs in significant sociopsychological respects from his nonurban brother. Although disagreement rages about the specifics, characteristics such as impersonality, indifference, anomie, alienation, and isolation recur in the literature. However, it can be argued that these characteristics are concomitant with modern life rather than a product of the urban condition. A governmental institution increasingly mooted as a cure for such feelings is the Scandinavian Ombudsman.¹ Since his major function is to solicit governmental complaints, an analysis of a national Ombudsman's input could not only help define the institution's public policy role but also illuminate some societal urban-nonurban differences.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This article, which is a part of a much larger study entitled "The International Transfer of Political Institutions: A Behavioral Analysis of the New Zealand Ombudsman" (Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1970), is revised from a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 7-11, 1971. That paper is available from the author in care of the Department of Political Science, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, 73069. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of David R. Morgan.*

This article investigates the complaints to the New Zealand Ombudsman, who was the first Anglo-Saxon Ombudsman and the model for most subsequent ones.² New Zealand is both highly urbanized and highly bureaucratized. Adopting the criterion of percentage of population living in cities over 20,000, New Zealand is the world's sixth most urban country; the United States ranks ninth. New Zealand's percentage of working-age population employed by its various government and public enterprises is the world's highest (Russett, 1964: 51, 70). According to New Zealand's 1966 census, 62.6% of the population lived in urban areas (the smallest of which was 28,000). Our analysis determined that significantly more of the Ombudsman's complainants, 72.4%, were urban. Thus, the Ombudsman is basically an urban complaint mechanism. The remainder of this article compares the urban and nonurban complaints.

SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF COMPLAINTS

Although there are almost exactly as many women as men in New Zealand, women are traditionally politically quiescent. Men predominate as the Ombudsman's complainants, but significantly more women are found among urban complainants; 29.5% as compared with 20%. Thus, the well-known finding that urban life leads to increased political participation is given a sexual dimension.

Not surprisingly, due to the dependence of older citizens upon governmental benefits, about one-fifth of the complainants—nearly double the number they “deserved” according to the census—were from retired people. Significantly more of them had urban than nonurban addresses, possibly because of their age group's demographic distribution or because those in cities more likely to be bereft of primary ties, would feel more anomalous and, hence, complain more.

Evidence on the file indicated that nearly 15% of the complainants possessed a university or equivalent degree. This

considerably overrepresents the societal distribution and is surely explained by the well-established correlation between education, efficacy, and participation. Significantly more degree holders were urban than not, but the difference is not greater than the disproportional distribution of educated people in urban areas.

Marital status could be determined for about three-quarters of the complainants, and for them nearly 75%—a figure very close to the national totals for adults—were married. Thus, the facile hypothesis that maritally marginal people, whether they be spinster, bachelor, widow, widower, or divorcé(e), would find the Ombudsman to be an attractive vent for the frustrations born of their loneliness is rejected for the entire sample. However, after controlling for urbanity, the hypothesis is confirmed. Almost 40% of the urban complainants were maritally marginal as compared with only 16.5% for the nonurban.

We must be very cautious about occupation, for classifications could not be made for about half (evenly distributed between urban and nonurban addresses) of the complainants. For demographic reasons, complaints from the professional, the executive-administrative-proprietary, and the white-collar classes are predominantly urban; whereas the farmers are not. However, it is surprising that quite similar numbers, 32.3% and 30.6%, respectively, of the urban and nonurban complainants were manual workers.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF COMPLAINTS

Since complainants' letters were personal documents, they revealed some psychological characteristics. Initially, it was clear that complainants were "normal," and only 3.5% were confirmed or apparent psychotics. However, complaints were not necessarily unemotional. Just over one-fifth of them were described as urgent; urban writers were significantly more likely to do so, by 9%. They were not significantly more inclined to

ask to be made an exception to an established rule; only one-tenth of the sample did. Nor were the urban complainants significantly more likely to view the government department as personally hostile to them. About one-third of the complainants displayed such a perception.

Forty-five percent of the complainants mentioned the occurrence of a recent personal social change. Such matters as alterations in financial, health, occupation, or marital status predominated. Urban complainants were more likely to mention such changes, but the differences between them were not significant.

THE COMPLAINTS AND THE OMBUDSMAN

Further insights into the complainants can be obtained from an analysis of their complaints and the Ombudsman's disposition of them. Complaints were predominantly against the major agencies of the welfare state. Significantly more, 65.1 compared to 48.8%, of the urban than nonurban complaints were against welfare state departments. In coding the complaints' subject, it appeared that they could be dichotomized into offensive and defensive categories. Offensive complaints attempted to extract something from the government, whereas defensive ones sought protection against a governmental claim. Over 70% were offensive, but nonurban complaints were somewhat more offensive than urban ones; this is partly explained by the fact that complaints against the Agriculture Department were largely offensive.

The Ombudsman investigated significantly more (52.5%) urban complaints than nonurban (39.7%). This is probably a measure of the former's more sophisticated understanding of the Ombudsman's jurisdiction. That interpretation is confirmed by the Ombudsman's disposition of the cases. Just over half the urban complaints were declined, discontinued, or withdrawn, but significantly more, 64.4%, of the nonurban ones suffered a similar fate. Urban complainants were somewhat more likely to

be helped by the Ombudsman, 7.9% compared to 5.0%; and they were much more prone to submit complaints which the Ombudsman dubbed unjustified, 42.9% versus 30.6%.

Based upon our New Zealand findings, the Ombudsman's public policy impact is principally upon society's urban sector. Analysis of the complaints lends support to urban theorists' conceptions of differences between urban and nonurban man and may support the arguments of those who campaign for urban Ombudsmen.

NOTES

1. In addition to the ten national Ombudsmen, such cities as Dayton, Ohio; Seattle, Washington; San Jose, California; and Jerusalem, Israel have recently established Ombudsmen, and many others are considering it.

2. These data were generated from a content analysis of a chronologically based sample of the complainants' unstructured letters to the Ombudsman. Between September 1962 and March 1969, 4,280 complaints were lodged. Ten percent of them, 439 complaints, constitute the sample, which tests revealed was highly representative of the universe (see Hill, 1968, for a general analysis of the New Zealand Ombudsman).

REFERENCES

- HILL, L. B. (1968) "The New Zealand Ombudsman's authority system." *Pol. Sci.* 20 (September): 40-51.
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