

## Caro's *The Power Broker*: Brief Summary

### INTRODUCTION

In the book *The Power Broker*, Caro looks at the life of Moses, the main character, since his childhood days to his later years when he was an advocate of reforms to progress New York City, which by then had a corrupt civil service system. Although he failed to deliver as the appointed advocate, he later got a chance to work for Al Smith, the then governor for New York County in the New York State Assembly. After that, he got another chance to work for the New York mayor, Jimmy Walker, in the state senate. During this working period, Moses gained certain skills, knowledge and experience in the political affairs, and learned how power was delegated and exercised. He really needed this knowledge, because he had a plan of building roads and bridges across the city. The description of the city before Robert Moses shows that it was underdeveloped and had a minimal growth, poor transportation means and unplanned social amenities such as parks (Caro 61).

### WHO IS MOSES?

Moses kept expanding his knowledge in matters of administration, power and public relations with influential people and those in power, and in the 1930s, he had already earned himself a name in the construction of big and appealing parks around the city, as well as across New York State. With time, various projects and contractors such as Verrazano Narrows Bridge started seeking him for his skills in building bridges, roads and parks construction prowess. He charged them extravagant prices, taking advantage of his skills, reputation and popularity. With many people seeking him, Moses self-imposed himself as an unofficial (and unelected) bureaucratic leader, a position he used to gather power and even managed to make some of the leaders that were elected to

be on top of him, his subjects with (Caro 117). He achieved success when different mayors appointed him to take charge of various departments such as head of parks around New York, co-coordinator in charge of constructions and in fact, at one time, he held 12 different leadership positions. He used these opportunities to develop his leadership skills and coped with his work bureaucratically. For example, he could collect toll from New York residents and use the money for the construction of roads, bridges and parks, arguing that the same people will use the facilities anyway. However, some of the measures he took were still considered bureaucratic, because he did not consult with the state council or mayor (Caro 137).

#### THE ONE WHO BROKE THE POWER

Moses notably preferred automobile traffic as opposed to mass transit, and always made it a big deal that he had in his earlier years served in many public offices without payment, lived lavishly and usually tipped those people who sided with him and helped him especially in his affairs. According to Caro, Moses is portrayed as intelligent, politically mean and using an aggressive and rigid form of administration (Caro 153). In fact, the writer seems to have contempt towards Moses, the same way Moses was portrayed to be contemptuous towards his subjects. Due to his ability to take power cunningly from those above him by taking advantage of his skill and position in the society, Moses was nicknamed *The Power Broker*. Although he had a few controversial cases linked to him, for example, the unproven accusations that he had sexual ties with the Manhattan congressional representative, which upon interviews he vehemently denied, Moses' impact on New York City still remains conspicuous to date. For that reason, he is still referred to as the builder of the greatest city in the world. Moses left power and administration in late 1960s and later died in 1981. However, some of his

projects still remain unfinished and incomplete, for example, his Olympics and the West side project, Rebuilding Downtown project etc., which is still under work (Caro 426).

In total, Robert Moses can be viewed as a self-imposed leader who forced his way up into power, not because he had good leadership qualities, but because of his aggressiveness. He is described as a leader who loved and had lust for power and took advantage of the resources and skills at his disposal for his own pleasure, his work and the leader's influence.

However, due to various reasons, some of his projects get terminated in the midstream, while others are still in process, almost 5 decades after his departure from power. One of the main hindrances to their realization is the financial issue between him and the councils and his bureaucratic form of administration. In handling managerial positions, financing and budgeting of his projects, he needed to have a few tips on how to go about it. According to John L. Mikesell's book *Fiscal Administration: Analysis and Application in the Public Sector*, managers working for whichever kind of an organization should study finance because every day, they have resources which need to be put to use and it's up to them to know how these resources will be divided and distributed. They also need to know how to control resources and make sure they do not exhaust the finances, available resources and make sure there is no misuse and misappropriation of funds. He also points out that people who understand how an organization operates are those who understand it on the financial level. The company should, therefore, have good budget systems (Mikesell 11). Some of the strategies that Caro recommends were not applied by Moses Robert in his administration and delegation of his duties, and this had adverse effects on the implementation of his set goals and objectives. This is the reason why some of his set plans are still under implementation. For example, according to Caro, Robert Moses was facing major

roadblocks and problems with financing small game tournaments at Yale for about twenty years, and at the same time, he was being attacked by Ed Richards (Caro 1).

#### BUREAUCRACY

One major theme that stands out in the book *The Power Broker* is bureaucracy. This method of administration strongly adheres to a set of principles that cannot be changed or altered. It is a rigid form of administration, and in the current years, many governments and non-governmental organizations have been discouraging this administrative method. It is an evident form of leadership that Moses used and, in fact, it is the form of delegation that he found the moment he started working as an advocate in the reform process in New York (690). In fact, this role trained him to be a bureaucratic leader because this is where he learned practically everything about administration and work delegation. The office of the governor worked under very rigid conditions. For example, before money was provided by the accounts department for a certain project to be undertaken, a long code of procedure had to be followed. Failure to be signed by certain people such as the chief clerk would imply that no money will be provided to fund the project, which is a limiting method of leadership when delegating projects, especially in the event of an emergency. Robert Moses' bureaucratic way of going about things also played a major role in affecting the implementation of some of the projects that he started and failed to complete. The reason is that they took too long to be funded or went through a very long procedure before they finally were funded. In some cases though, bureaucracy proved to be a good method of administration especially in cases where Robert Moses fully believed in himself and had a hundred percent confidence in succeeding.

## MY OPINION

In my opinion, bureaucracy played a big role in both the success and failure of Robert Moses' projects. For example, in cases where he fully believed in himself, could see success and looked at a point from a perspective that no one else did, it really helped because he had the final voice on what was to be done. However, this form of administration did more harm than good. This is because it sent a signal of a mean and autocratic leader, who did things in his own way and this made it hard for people with fresh ideas to approach him. He also monopolized most of the industries that he was working in, such as the roads and bridges' construction industry, and this discouraged competition. Although many people believed his work to be quality, there is still a probability that there were even better ideas out there, but they could not be brought to utilization because the industry had already been frozen by monopoly. This also implied that work could not be compared to a certain standard to be defined as good or bad, and this was yet another disadvantage.

Secondly, in case of an emergency, it would be very hard for an effective corrective measure to be taken. This is because a specific code of procedure had to be followed for an action to take. This is especially important in financial matters, where a long procedure had to be followed before fund could be released. For this reason, whenever such an emergency came up, it resulted to a lot of complications and in some cases, temporary termination of the projects. In my opinion, it is for this reason that some of his projects that he initiated such as Olympics and the west side are still in progress. Holding these projects is, however, disadvantageous because even if they are improved and modernized, due to the many unavoidable changes that keep on taking place such as fluctuations in the economy, the projects will become more and more complicated.

## CONCLUSION

Bureaucracy was the main form of administration that was used in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was used and applied by autocratic leaders and administrators who had strong personalities and self-confidence, and Robert Moses was no exception. It was a rigid method of doing things, leaving no room for improvement, diversity and change.

Secondly, bureaucracy is not an ideal form of administration in an industry where changes occur every day, because it is a rigid method that will keep on bringing roadblocks and hindrances to changes that are supposed to be made. It is an especially undesirable method to apply in finance and management and this is why in the recent years, it is mainly applied in politics alone, especially the underdeveloped and developing countries.

## Works Cited

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