

On 13 May 1964 Lord Ashby FRS, a Member of ISR's Editorial Board and one of Britain's most distinguished scientists, gave the A.H. Compton Memorial Lecture at Washington University, St Louis, Missouri. To commemorate Ashby's 80th birthday in August 1984, I republished it in ISR. It is the distillation of a lifetime's experience and it is as relevant today as on the day it was delivered. At the end of his Memorial Lecture, Ashby attributed to Compton humility, tolerance, a faith in science and its ethical principles, and especially a world view unlimited by nationality, language or race. In my opinion, these same attributes characterise the life of Eric Ashby.

Beginning with the process of decision-making, even in small groups, for a family, club or college, this is difficult and one of two things may happen: either the group fails to make a decision and it may disintegrate, or someone in the group assumes its leadership. It depends on his skill whether the group's aims are fulfilled, and such is the task of a University Administrator. He has to have the authority and power, and the art of using authority, to secure the consent of the group. The good administrator is not a boss, but a persuader.

Even science and scholarship need administration today, Ashby insisted, as their work is no longer independent of others, and their consent or even acquiescence must be secured. In the universities of today, where expenditure is counted in millions, professional administrators are essential and must act as channels of communication between higher learning and society—and to keep these channels open and fresh, is a challenge to anyone.

Contrary to other human groups, like industry or the army, where decisions are made at the top and filter down, policy at a university originates in the laboratory, at the bench, in the library and round the lunch table. These foci of decision-making have to be coordinated, if the integrity of the organisation is to be preserved. However, there are no rules for the administrator of higher learning, and he must grope his way in darkness towards his principles.

Ashby who had been Vice Chancellor of two British Universities, Belfast and Cambridge, discussed in some detail a practical example of decision-making at this level of administration, and quoting Laplace he found a 'happy tact' an essential part. In his précis of the art of high administration, Ashby gave many examples, no doubt from his own experience. One of his conclusions was that the University President, or Vice Chancellor, should be regarded by the faculty as a delicate machine, integrating information and producing decisions.