

Patterson's Page

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You do not have to have kept bees for very long before you discover something called 'Beekeeping Politics', although perhaps 'Petty Politics' may be a better term. In fairness, it is not confined to beekeeping, as in many organisations politics never seems to be far away. I have been involved in well over twenty organisations, their committees and sub-committees, and I do not think many of them have been completely free of this phenomenon in one form or another.

As we are concerned with beekeeping, I will concentrate mainly on our craft, but I must be careful that I do not identify anyone. The examples I mention, either witnessed by me or from reliable sources, may be appropriate to more than one situation. We should always be careful of hearsay, as it is often influenced by the person who tells you. Politics could be for several reasons including information being withheld, personal interest, mischief, one dominant person's dislike of another, lack of knowledge and someone simply getting the wrong end of the stick.

Having been involved with so many different organisations and running my own business for 25 years I have become quite skilful at spotting some of the antics employed. I was brought up to trust people and, until I see something I consider to be wrong, that is usually the default position. Everyone can make a genuine mistake, but my suspicion is usually aroused by body language or an attempt, often clumsily, to cover something up, rather than a quick apology which can bring about a swift conclusion.

Beekeeping politics is caused by people. It is nothing new, as there are some stories of events 100 years or more ago when there were apparently massive arguments, often involving people higher up the ladder; presumably those lower down did not become national news, and so are not recorded. There are documented cases of people being removed from office, although the circumstances may well have been coloured by whoever remained to write the accounts of the feuding. There are many surviving letters that are written in rather less than pleasant terms.

The chairing of an organisation is very important. The best chairmen are good at drawing everyone together, using resources well and guiding the organisation in the direction the members wish. If they see a problem brewing they will have a quiet word. A poor chairman may be the extremes of a dictator or so weak that opportunities are created for those with their own agenda.

Some people are simply very difficult to get on with and have difficulty communicating in a pleasant manner, whether in committee or not. I firmly believe that modern business culture must take some of the blame. At work, especially in large companies, people are only trained to do their own job, often with little or no knowledge of what others are doing. They are often put under pressure to perform well, so in an attempt to appear valuable they become defensive about their position, tell others

how wonderful they are, and build defences so they feel safe. This is transferred to beekeeping, where they struggle to adapt from being a very small cog in a massive wheel to a massive cog in a very small wheel, often becoming 'control freaks'. On several occasions I have seen people take on lots of little jobs that others cannot be bothered with. It is not very long before members think they must not upset them; look at how much they do!

I gave a talk to a BKA with an audience of 60–80 attendees, where I quite innocently included a photograph of the Wisborough Green BKA teaching apiary. At question time someone asked about our teaching apiary, then another asked something like: "Why don't we have a teaching apiary?" This was quickly followed by: "Over my dead body" delivered in a rather loud and intimidating nasal roar from the back of the room. There was immediate silence! I do not know what the issue was, but it obviously had history. Why should one person deny others the chance to learn beekeeping skills at the hive under the supervision of experienced beekeepers?

On several occasions I have heard of BKA secretaries omitting committee members they do not like from meeting notices. Another common trick is to 'massage' minutes, perhaps not by recording wrongly, but by leaving out relevant and important points or decisions. This is quite a safe thing to do, because if it is picked up it can easily be passed off as a simple omission, but if it is not picked up, the minutes are signed and it will soon be forgotten.

Why do we have politics anyway? What do people hope to achieve by it? I have to admit that occasionally I get involved, but usually only to negate what I see as not being in the best interests of bees, beekeepers or the craft, but sadly there are some who consider themselves way above them. There are some people who know very little about the craft, but wheedle their way into influential positions, often because they volunteer when others do not. Once there, they sometimes see others as a threat, so resort to discrediting or marginalising them. I have seen many good, sound, knowledgeable, hard working beekeepers treated badly by others of far less knowledge, commitment or ability.

Politics is unfortunately a significant problem in beekeeping, preventing the craft from progressing and denying good ordinary and deserving beekeepers the opportunity to learn. Sadly, they are allowed to get away with it because others just want to keep bees and often find it easier to keep quiet or walk away from unpleasantness. I have seen many bad decisions made because someone is confrontational and noisy, so others back off. Emails are often a cause when written briefly and in a hurry, being misinterpreted, or in large or bold font, giving the impression of shouting. The best BKAs are strong with good leadership, so such opportunities do not arise. And luckily there are still a lot of those left.