

INTRODUCTION

PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE: THE PRESENT

Throughout the Commonwealth, personnel management in the public service has traditionally followed a highly centralised pattern. Central agencies have played an extensive role in staffing, classification, and the setting of pay levels. Traditionally, line ministries and departments have been somewhat passive recipients of centrally recruited and administered staff.

Contemporary pressures on management are challenging this centralised model but it is not simply a question of reallocating responsibility from the centre to the line. Change must take account of the distribution of powers among central agencies, and in particular the role played by autonomous Service Commissions in appointments, promotions and discipline. In response to such pressures, some Commonwealth countries – notably Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand – began redistributing responsibilities at the centre and delegating central agency powers to line departments during the 1970s and 1980s. In many other countries, however, personnel management remains highly centralised.

In countries retaining a centralised model, selection and disciplinary decisions are taken by Service Commissions which, in essence, were established to keep politics out of public service staffing. The role and powers of Service Commissions are constitutionally entrenched. This constitutional base of Service Commissions was considered necessary to protect the integrity of public service management at a time when the onset of independence brought many uncertainties with it. Changing circumstances have created some tensions between fixed constitutional provisions and the need for change in the public service. In many cases, the result has been complex and sometimes tense relationships between the key actors involved in managing personnel in the public service – a less than ideal foundation for the very necessary debate concerning the future of the public service.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

Service Commissions face a particular challenge at a time of rapid change in the public service. Driving change in the public service requires an organisational base able to respond to political concerns while co-ordinating managerial reforms. The constitutional entrenchment of the Service Commissions makes them intrinsically unsuited to this task. However, sustaining change in the public service, maintaining standards and identifying emerging concerns, requires a strong central agency

removed from operational responsibilities and insulated from political pressures, and here Service Commissions must take the leading role.

The distinctive nature of autonomous Service Commissions provides them with distinct competencies but equally distinct limitations in assisting programmes of public service reform. This is the case for all the agencies involved. However, Commissions are purposefully and quite properly orientated towards resisting pressure. The particular challenge which they face is to adapt and prepare themselves for a new role, while releasing some of their current responsibilities to others. Their task is to champion merit, integrity, neutrality and excellence in the public service, not to protect a particular organisational form.

SCOPE AND AIMS OF THIS PUBLICATION

This publication discusses these difficulties and explores possible solutions. Specifically, it looks at the decentralisation of personnel management, the implications this has for the role and powers of Service Commissions, and how Commissions have responded to delegation proposals. It attempts to shed light on possible divergencies in governments' and Commissions' views on public service management issues. Finally, it explores options for achieving change.

The publication includes a particular focus on small and island states within the Commonwealth, drawing comparisons with a broader range of countries. It draws particularly on the experience of countries represented at a working group meeting entitled "Managing Human Resources for Results: The Strategic Options," which was held in Valletta, Malta, from 15 to 17 May 1995. Participants at this meeting came from Australia (State of Victoria), Barbados, Britain, Canada, Malta, Mauritius, Singapore, South Africa, and Trinidad and Tobago. A full list of participants is appended.

Background information was obtained by way of a questionnaire sent to participants prior to the working group meeting. Acknowledgements are due to respondents for the comprehensiveness of their responses. The paper also draws on the proceedings of the meeting itself. Except where otherwise specified, however, the views expressed should not be ascribed to particular participants or the institutions they represent.

The views of the participants at the working group meeting have been supplemented with the observations and experiences of many senior officials and managers responsible for public service reform across the Commonwealth.

TERMINOLOGY

A note needs to be made on the use of terminology. Some public services interpret terms such as selection, appointment, recruitment and promotion in very specific ways. Nuanced interpretations are avoided here for simplicity. *Selection* is taken to mean the process of choosing someone to fill a vacancy, whether by internal *promotion* or external *recruitment*. An *appointment* is the act of placing that person in the vacant position.

Similarly, some academic writers draw distinctions among terms such as delegation, devolution, and decentralisation. Here they are taken as synonymous and used interchangeably for variety's sake.