

COMMON DIRECTIONS FOR CHANGE

NEW PRESSURES ON THE PUBLIC SERVICE

At the time of drafting the constitution for independence, in most former colonies the public service was fairly small and performed a relatively limited set of functions. This situation has changed dramatically. Public service management now faces pressures from five directions.

- Size* The public service is many times larger and performs a greater diversity of tasks than at independence, placing strain on the original centralised management structures.
- Complexity* The responsibilities of the public service are no longer restricted to the core functions of law and order and basic infrastructure development. Social, economic and technological developments require public services of growing complexity and sophistication, placing further strain on management structures.
- Turbulence* The growing sophistication of the economy requires that government departments keep up with constant and accelerating change in both technology and policy. Flexibility and responsiveness are paramount in this environment.
- Expectations* The public expects more. The service's performance in areas such as service standards, cost-efficiency, equity and transparency faces increasingly critical evaluation.
- Workforce* Social change, increased mobility, and the development of the private sector have produced an increasingly fluid labour market. This poses problems to the public service in attracting and retaining qualified staff, particularly as growing complexity means that the need for specialist staff is greater in many sectors. Centralised management makes it difficult to adjust personnel policy in step with the changing labour market.

If the public service is to play its vital role in achieving and maintaining national competitiveness for the 21st century, it must be equipped with management structures that will enable it to meet these challenges. It must also develop a value base which encourages responsiveness and welcomes change. Changing values and attitudes are fundamental to changing the roles of all agencies involved in public service personnel management.

CHANGING VALUES

Traditionally, the public service has assumed that uniformity, a hierarchical chain of command, and a lifetime career, support the key public service values of probity and integrity, and selection by merit. Current pressures on the service – and in some cases the service's failure to respond adequately to those pressures – have produced new values. These include accountability for results rather than process, responsiveness to policy directions and client needs, a commitment to efficiency, quality and transparency.¹

The new values have led to some of the old ones being questioned. Does uniformity mean consistency or stifling rigidity? Does hierarchy allow for effective control or multiple layers of red tape? Does a lifetime career make for impartiality or obsolete skills and comfortable sinecures? These values are under particular challenge when comparisons are made between management styles in the public service and the private sector.

Although traditional public service values such as probity and merit remain unquestioned, they are being redefined under the influence of the new ones. Merit, for example, used to be interpreted largely as non-politicisation in staffing. Promotion by seniority could be counted as an expression of the merit principle under this interpretation, since it ensures near-absolute objectivity. By contrast, merit is now increasingly taken to mean selecting the best candidate for a position, even at the cost of some subjectivity. This interpretation denies any intrinsic connection between seniority and merit.

In emphasising achievement, newer public service values embody some tensions.² Nevertheless, they have powered a set of reform initiatives with many common elements which have been taken up across the Commonwealth.³

NEW INITIATIVES IN PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

Current reform initiatives in personnel management centre around five themes:

¹ Nick Manning, unpublished background paper prepared for the working group meeting (London, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1995).

² Peter Aucoin, "Administrative Reform in Public Management: Paradigms, Principles, Paradoxes and Pendulums," *Governance* vol. 3 (1990) pp. 115-137.

³ See other publications in this series.

- a move away from promotions by seniority towards other, more merit-based selection mechanisms;
- the opening and widening of career paths in order to enlarge the field of competition for positions;
- the use of effective performance appraisal systems underpinning the development of performance rewards and enabling career advancement to be linked to good performance;⁴
- improvements in incentives and reward systems for top management to make departments more responsive to policy direction;
- a concern to make the composition of the public service more representative of social diversity, both as an end in itself and to deliver greater equity in the service's treatment of different social groups.⁵

Reform initiatives stemming from these moves are an expression of governments' desire to become more efficient, effective and equitable in their operations, and to be seen to do so by the public. More immediately, they can reflect governments' dissatisfaction with the type of public servants promoted under current arrangements, and the political pressures for change triggered by frustration.⁶

All these personnel management reform initiatives have an impact on the work and responsibilities of the Service Commissions. The delegation to departments of some responsibilities for selection, promotion and discipline is widely seen as a key device for ensuring that merit is assessed very directly in relation to the work at hand. This is a frequent source of concern for Service Commissions and they can resist such changes on the basis that they represent an attempt by government to

⁴ The experience of Malta and Trinidad and Tobago indicate that the second step – linking performance appraisals to rewards – is more difficult than introducing the appraisal system itself.

⁵ Nick Manning, op. cit. See also Sandford Borins, "Government in Transition: A New Paradigm in Public Administration," report on the inaugural conference of the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management, Charlottetown, Canada, 28-31 August 1994 (Toronto: CAPAM, 1994), esp. pp. 4-10.

⁶ In Britain during the 1980s, the Prime Minister became actively involved in senior level selections – until then an in-house affair – to ensure that appointees had the dynamism she sought. Her involvement raised fears of politicisation. See Royal Institute of Public Administration, *Top Jobs in Whitehall: Appointments and Promotions in the Senior Civil Service* (London: RIPA, 1987).

set a policy direction in an area which the constitution has established as the sole prerogative of the Commissions.

BROADER ASPECTS OF PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM

The pressure for improvements in the performance of the public service are impacting on all aspects of its functioning. Financial management, organisational design, and very particularly the size and cost of its operations, are under question in most settings. Other publications in this series explore the common elements of public service reform programmes in some detail⁷, but in summary it can be observed that reform programmes require a clear focal point for change with the capacity to drive some practical strategies at all levels in the public service. This raises some key questions for the Service Commissions.

On the one hand, their constitutional position orientates them towards stability rather than towards change. Quite correctly they respond uneasily to political pressure. As public service reform is always driven to some extent by political concerns, the Service Commissions are unlikely to act as the focal point for change in public service reform programmes. On the other hand, changing the policy framework for personnel management underpins most areas of reform.

In effect, change is required but the key lever to effect that change lies with the Service Commissions which are, quite properly, wary of using it.

⁷ See *From Problem to Solution, Strategies for Improvement Series: No.1*, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1995.

The Service Commissions at independence

Even in those settings where there was little apparent disagreement between Whitehall and the colonies, preparations for independence masked a multi-layered debate with inevitable tensions between paternalistic concern for a new democracy, and determination that real power should be passed to a local administration. At independence, the Constitutions of many Commonwealth countries reflected these tensions by enshrining several ideas in the Service Commissions which do not sit easily with each other.

At face value, Service Commissions simply continue the tradition established in the 19th century by the U.K. Civil Service Commission which was created ostensibly to protect "the English public from unfit appointees"⁸ by testing the qualifications of persons entering the public service. In a sense, the British were merely handing down the benefit of experience.

There was, however, another strand of thinking. A second set of ideas saw the Commissions, as established prior to independence, as interim institutions likely to be developed further as independence matured and national self-confidence developed further. "Under this legal arrangement, the locus of power clearly remained with the executive representatives of the Crown. Nevertheless, it represented an effort, albeit a cautious effort informed by a policy of constitutional gradualism, to decentralise control over the public service."⁹

Paternalism completes the complex picture. In constituting Commissions so that "no question of nepotism or political wire-pulling can arise"¹⁰, the Commissions were intended to deal with a concern that the new national leaders were likely to be less self-controlled than their colonial predecessors. "English governors could be entrusted with the care of the Civil Service, but not local elected officials".¹¹

These three dynamics – maintenance of a successful British tradition, a concern to avoid sudden and unmanageable change, and paternalism – were inevitably ingredients in the independence mix. Service Commissions embody the continuing tensions that these, not entirely compatible, ideas produce.

⁸ Some notes on Public Service Commissions in the Commonwealth Caribbean, Collins B.A.N., 1967, Vol. 16 No. 1, Social and Economic Studies, pp 1, published by the Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica.

⁹ Dr Kenny Anthony, General Counsel, Caribbean Community Secretariat, in an unpublished communication to the Commonwealth Secretariat.

¹⁰ Report of the Commission of the Unification of the Public Services of the British Caribbean Area (1948-49), Holmes, Sir Maurice (chairman), p.43.

¹¹ Collins B.A.N., op. cit.