

FUTURE CHALLENGES

No public service reform programme can be complete. History does not come to an end; new challenges and new opportunities will combine with unfinished business from the past to maintain pressure for further change.

NURTURING THE PUBLIC SERVICE

There is a strong relationship between accountable government and effective public administration. Successful public service reforms are not neutral technical activities which can be undertaken regardless of the context, they rest on open political debate and democratic constitutional structures.

The experience of the last three decades indicates strongly that there is no hidden hand guiding and protecting the institutions of the public service. Public service organisations can decline in effectiveness and service quality as readily as any others. Any distinctive strength or integrity in the public service derives from a network of people and institutions which collectively buttress its ideals. Remove or fail to build enough of the network and the public service structures will result in the decline of the public service over time.

Many reform programmes have necessarily focused on technical possibilities for changing the public service and its systems and have achieved very significant improvements. It is possible that in focusing on the technical aspects of the public service, reform programmes may have paid insufficient attention to the potential weaknesses in the supportive network within which the public service operates.

STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONS THAT PREVENT DETERIORATION

Further attention must be given to effective structures outside of the core public service – the Office of Ombudsman, the Human Rights Commission, an effective Audit Commission – and the capacity of government to establish investigatory commissions with the power to reveal administrative deficiencies and enforce sanctions. There is a strong relationship between democratisation and effective public administration. Effective accountability is dependent on the existence of sound institutions, effective political leadership and democratic constitutions.

STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONS THAT DETECT FAILURE

Consideration must also be given, particularly in Commonwealth developing countries, to setting up consumer groups and associations which put adequate

pressure on the government for the improvement of public services. There is a paradox in developing countries in that although the quality of public services is much lower than those in developed countries, there is much less demand from individual consumers on the government to improve the quality of services. If the quality of public services has to be improved, there is a need to recognise consumers and create structures which facilitate consumer pressure for improved public services.

MINIMISING CORRUPTION

Corruption is not the sole preserve of developing countries. Even in countries where there have been strong democratic structures, there are many instances of corruption and some indications that opportunities for corrupt practices may be increasing as the new value systems, emphasising individual freedoms over community values, gain. In strengthening the public service ethos, the decision makers and politicians must establish a consensus around new values which balance the need for personal achievement and personal fulfilment with collective responsibilities. Corruption cannot be minimised unless political actions receive same scrutiny as administrative actions.

SUPPORTING NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The continuing pace of development in information technology and communication systems and applications provided the opportunity to develop new organisational models that provide a motivating working environment for public servants, and which are less addicted to stability than previous structures.

The increasing pace of technological development is coinciding with the end of uniformity in the public service. Centrally determined standards and systems, service-wide pay and grading arrangements, and procedural consistency, are giving way to local structures and systems shaped around the needs of the activity, the needs of the consumer, and the capacity of the public service. This increasingly diverse public service will be less and less amenable to hierarchical management or to control by ever more detailed contractual relationships.

The increasing possibility of a network-based public service could change the profile of the public servant. The challenge will be to continue the improvements in discipline and loyalty that some reform programmes are demonstrating, while moving further towards self-motivating, self-policing public servants, who see the public service as an opportunity for creativity rather than risk-avoiding career.