

THE FUTURE OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE: A POLITICAL ECONOMY APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This article uses triangulation to understand the development of an effective and efficient public service in South Africa. The creation of democracy in South Africa is not a sufficient condition for development as demonstrated by the challenges the country faces, twenty years after the political settlement. The public service of this country must be grounded in an understanding of the applied political economy of development and fully embrace that this country is a democratic developmental state. The article explores the evolution in thinking from development economics to structural economics and eventually to the importance of applied political economy and how it can inform the advancement of service delivery as expected from public servants. The pre-conditions for the success of the South African public service are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The challenge to create a relevant and leading public service in South Africa dates back to the founding of a democratic state on 27 April 1994. Prior to this forward-looking change, racial division drove South Africa's public service and service delivery was premised on this understanding. Twenty years later, South Africa as a democratic state is confronted with the reality to deliver services within the context of a nation that has self-defined itself as a democratic developmental state. Such an understanding recognises the development challenges faced by the country. The public sector is, at most times expected to loyally execute policies and effectively as well as efficiently delivers services to the population. The questions are: does the political economy that prevails allow this to happen? Are the education, training and development of public servants aligned with the solutions required to address the structural challenges in society? The other challenge is the relevance and the quality of the research produced on the public service and its impact on a democratic developmental state.

The challenges that arise are how training, education and research can be utilised to unleash a human capital that can advance the public service. There is no doubt that appropriate education and training are important to advance a public service. In modern times, the collapse of Greece, Spain and to a certain extent the Italian economies is attributed to poor governance and their civil services - yes, aided and protected by corrupt political leaders who did not have a vision for the future of these nations. Equally to blame are political scientists and economist who did not seem to have been able to, through their research, predict the political economic crises that currently face these nations.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this article is to expose the significance of political economy in public service efficiency and the understanding of what it means to be a democratic developmental state. South Africa is compelled to establish a competitive system of governing that contributes positively to the existence of a formidable cadre of public servants, public sector workers in State-Owned-Enterprises (SOEs), individuals who are well developed to participate on behalf of South Africa in multilateral organisations and well equipped persons ready to work in the private sector but at the same time sensitive to the needs of a democratic developmental state. This challenge requires proper financial investment by both the public and private sectors; it mandates a trans-disciplinary and sophisticated approach to teaching, learning and research in public service human capital development. Experiential learning as well as research emerges as important. Furthermore, the use of the most outstanding knowledgeable South Africans is essential. This entails the proper incorporation of institutional memory of those individuals who have successfully performed in the public service. All of the above must be grounded in an understanding of the political economy within which government operates.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE

The bi-laterals and multi-party negotiations represented the commitment to have a functional and effective public service. However, the future would determine how this public service would evolve as the structural features of the apartheid system were being uncovered. The features were political and economic. Like many other nations, South Africa would continue to struggle with the challenge to establish a model that can meet the needs of the nation's developmental imperatives with the public service being in the frontline (Vil-Nkomo, 2012:21). In 1994, it was some forgone conclusion that the transitional public service would sooner than later be orderly deconstructed and reconstructed to meet the development needs of a democratic society. Universities were expected to make significant contributions

to both endeavours and yet the evidence proves the contrary. It is easy to retain the status quo whilst at the same time blaming the victim.

The birth of the current public service was to a great extent a result of the multi-negotiations. There is no doubt that the negotiations established firm conditions conducive to democratic leadership in South Africa. The challenges of the current public service cannot be blamed on Nelson Mandela and his chief negotiators nor the compromises made because the latter were at that time the only solution, dictated by numerous national and global conditions. This is the argument that I advanced in the article published in publication for thought leaders called *The Thinker*. (Vil-Nkomo, 2012:39). While compromises have come with certain challenges, they also set the stage and foundation for public service construction, innovation and development in the short-term, medium-term and the long term.

Prior to the inclusion of individuals from the progressive movement to participate in the deconstruction of the apartheid civil service, the African National Congress used the bi-laterals and multi-party negotiations strategically in the interest of national reconciliation. Serious studies were also undertaken on the developing world, developed world, African countries and the Asian Tigers to see how a good public service could be developed for South Africa. What was assumed was that there would be a new paradigm shift from public administration preparation to the concept of public management. According to Professor Sandford Borins at the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management Inaugural Conference, public management offered a turning point for service delivery that the consumers of public service would highly value (Borins, 1995: 6). South Africa, the newly emerging democracy and once again member of the Commonwealth was entrenched in these “promising” discussions and was being listened to as a nation that had successfully handled its first steps to democratising.

At least, the multi-party negotiations opened up several opportunities. These invariably would be confronted with resistance to the radical changes required to achieve the goals of a developmental state, and hence some of the transformation accomplishments were incremental. The use of the two words, namely, transformation and incremental, is not contradictory as the former is not an event. The public service of today is more representative, it is more open to public scrutiny, it is expected to deliver excellent services to all South Africans, and the public service is continuously being challenged to understand the needs of a democratic developmental state and more. With all of these challenges, a public service associated with public administration/management was to connote service to the people of South Africa (Ibid).

TURNING POINT FOR SOUTH AFRICA'S PUBLIC SERVICE EDUCATION

Whilst much has been said about the so-called “New Public Management” as

was advocated in 1994 by various Schools in South African Universities, the jury is still out nearly twenty years later as to what was achieved with this so-called paradigm shift. The struggle to project a globally competitive university of public administration and policy education is still illusive for South Africa. It is a moot point for this article paper to dwell on this issue. The Mount Grace I and II as well as Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management papers are available for public review, for anyone seeking to gain insights into the debate on public administration education in the immediate post-democracy era.

It will also be counter-productive for this research to re-visit the well-articulated paradigm shifts as were properly documented by Nicholas Henry in his seminal works (1995). All we know as evidence is that other nations like Singapore and South Korea developed outstanding Schools after learning from their own political economy experiences and were compelled to teach governance in accordance to what they knew and understood and in synch with their nation's development trajectories. In the latter country, Wonhyuk Lim observed that there were dramatic political economy shifts that influenced the direction that this country had to pursue. The early 1960s saw two dramatic events in Korea's political economy: "the student revolution of April 1960 and the military coup of May 1961. These two events highlighted the government failures of the past and ignited a passionate national debate on development and modernisation" (Lim, 2011: 187).

The dawn of democracy in South Africa on April 1994 seemed to have institutionalised in the public administration thinking community that the running of the fledgling democratic South African state apparatus needed more robust educational, training and research approaches. These approaches would create an environment for a democratic developmental state to flourish. The weakness, in all of this was the lack of a comprehensive research agenda for a newly democratising emerging market country with its own unique political economy and public administration approach operating within the context of a self-declared democratic developmental state. The word "democratic" explains the nature of the South African view on how the nation aspires to be governed. Credit in this thought is given to Barry Gilder, who views the case of a developmental state as grounded in South Africa's democratic principles as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. In his view, the developmental states that existed in Asia were not self-defined but were named by multilateral organisations and neither were they democratic in character. Gilder has introduced into the discourse of a developmental state and public administration the importance of democracy. The research expands Gilder's thinking to the field of public administration. This area of scholarship in South Africa tends to follow trends rather than set them. The danger of mimicking is the re-invention of the same mistakes. Lant Pritchett and Frauker de Weijer highlight the shortcomings of mimicking (also known as isomorphic mimicry) as follows:

This notion of "accelerated modernisation through transplantation of best

practice” (AMTTBP) has powerful attractions. Unfortunately, by now it is obviously false as a universally applicable strategy. There have been too many nation-states which have adopted the forms of Weberian civil service bureaucracies and yet have not seen the corresponding increase in state capability to continue to believe that “form follows function” is a workable general theory of change. AMTTBP is not obviously a universally false theory of change as there have been successes in development that appear to have followed this strategy, but clearly it is not universally true, in that it does not have a universal (across all countries and conditions) range of applicability (2010: 4).

From the above, it becomes abundantly clear that South Africa must define its political economy of development and eliminate the comfort of service delivery premised on what existed prior to 1994 and what were transitional public service measures in the Interim Constitution. The lack of this political economy of change, in public administration, in South Africa is also apparent in the inability to predict the global economic crisis that has had serious ramifications for the public service. Equally important is Joel Netshitenzhe’s analysis on the understanding of a developmental state. He succinctly states, “the first is the positioning of the notion of a developmental state as a universal concept, applicable to the evolution of economies and polities over centuries. This ignores the fact that the category of a developmental state in social sciences is a recent phenomenon” (Netshitenzhe, 2011:11). He later in his article concludes that “ the argument that all states are developmental simply because they do intervene in economy to pursue given objectives proceeds from the false notion that the defining measure of developmentalism is the extent of state intervention in the economy” (Ibid). Nonetheless, to advance public service delivery efficiency in South Africa requires that the study of public administration make a contribution to the discourse on a democratic developmental state because public services must be understood in the context of applied political economy and development. Teaching, training and research in public administration must institutionalise this kind of learning and analysis.

Prof Ali Mazrui, a world renowned political scientist postulated in the 1980s in an unpublished presentation at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania that a changed South African could emerge as a vanguard of the 21st century because of the level of development the country had attained within the African continent. His analysis did not disregard the years of subjugation under the apartheid period but was more focused on the institutions that had been established. It can be deduced from the presentation that South Africa would have a competitive take-off advantage in the new millennium. This country’s institutions of higher learning had better resources that could produce a critical mass of human capital as compared to all the countries in the African continent. The bi-laterals and multi-Party negotiations assumed the

existence of this competitive advantage.

Nonetheless, the above remains a challenge twenty years after the deconstruction of the apartheid era. At the advent of democracy South Africa as a democracy and global player stood on the threshold of providing an excellent education to South Africans, by meeting the human capital investment that was and continues to be demanded by students from the African continent and other parts of the world. This is a competitive advantage South Africa could have established for itself much more significantly in the field of public administration. Critical to achieving this niche is excellent teaching and the generation of cutting edge research pertaining to competitive public service development, which would have led to the schools of government/administration/public management being held in high regard.

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL ECONOMY

As the world undergoes a major repositioning in political economy terms, South Africa seems to be ahead in its political evolution but is behind in the economic revolution. Furthermore, the country must explore areas of research in economics and the public service as a competitive advantage. The country is an excellent laboratory to undertaking research that can improve the human condition in those two areas. Yet, Prof Ben Fine from the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies, at the launch of an industrial policy course in Johannesburg made this timely observation that “South Africa does not have the skills to create independent, critical economic thinking: The country is not in a position to train and provide for alternative ways of thinking in terms of making alternative policies for the South African context”. Political achievement without economic development do not lead to better understanding of the political economy, and this undermines the idea of establishing a democratic developmental state and also does not lead to effective governance.

The lessons learned from Singapore and South Korea point to the need for South Africa an opportunity to advance good governance that is grounded in an understanding of its political economy. However, the Singapore and South Korean models, in and of themselves, must not be viewed as a panacea for our unique public service, political economy and development issues. The reason is simple, as South Korea under General Park came into existence via a military coup in 1961 and the nature of their political institutions determined their economic trajectory (Acemuglu and Robinson: 2012: 93).

The interrogation of political economy and relating it to the public service is of paramount importance for the future of how political institutions are constructed in South Africa. If making public servants to see the value of political economy as defined by Paul Turpin can make the notion of political economy applied, service delivery would drastically be improved. According to Turpin: “Political economy

encompasses the full range of the social and political situation in which economic interaction takes place, especially with respect to institutions, accepted practices, law, political debate over desirable and undesirable policies and presumptions about human nature and social relations, including social justice" (Turpin, 2011: 10-11). Public service transformation must take into consideration what Turpin has defined as political economy. This can be achieved through proper applied public service research and teaching grounded in applied political economy. In the context of this analysis, applied political economy is understood to be the advancing of a political system that advocates an economic system that builds the livelihood of citizens and informs public servants easily as they endeavour to successfully deliver services. In this case, public servants are not mere technocrats but have a broader understanding of service delivery that is development oriented and holistic in policy implementation.

The presumption is that the public service of a democratic developmental state is better positioned to systematically make political economy more applied than in highly developed nations whose systems tend to be more confined by the institutions that are established as well as entrenched and have too many vested interests. In any case, these nations have reached a certain level of development and are now pursuing their own trajectory of service delivery and development. We can learn from some of their experiences; however others would not be applicable to what faces South Africans being an emerging political economy. The structural features of South Africa will bedevil its public service and political economy unless forward thinking analysts engage with these two.

THE UNDERPINNINGS OF A POLITICAL ECONOMY FOR THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Political economy as defined above should be the philosophical foundation for public servant thinking, analysis and implementation of policies in order to address the triple challenges of poverty, inequality and underdevelopment. In this case, South Africa's public service can become egalitarian and relevant for the present and the future. The following should then underpin this public service:

- Unity of purpose with a developmental imperative,
- A creative public service that uses diagnoses and analysis to respond to service delivery,
- One that understands and internalises the common ethos, values and culture that has its true foundation of Ubuntu and reconciliation. These two are the hallmarks of South Africa's emerging democratic dispensation,
- The desire and commitment to continuously protect the image and the credibility of the public service as a progressive institution and
- A public service viewed as a knowledge hub (KH) for effective and efficient policy thinking, policy invention and policy implementation that

pursue societal development.

There is compelling evidence that excellent public services perform well in properly institutionalised policy environments. As Richard Rich has summarised it, a conducive policy environment “can be important to an issue beginning years before it becomes a subject of debate among policy makers, and that importance can continue right through to the period when a new policy is implemented” (Rich, 2010: 153). All of the above are achievable when the public service and the service corps within it understand its intended existence as well as acknowledge that policies are about the human condition that must be deliberately improved through relevant appropriate legislations and other legal frameworks. This confirms Rich’s analysis that suggests that policies do not suddenly appear when politicians come to office. Thus, *ex-ante* policy evaluation must mean that society is aware of what can constitute effective development policy for service delivery.

MOVING FROM DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS TO STRUCTURAL ECONOMICS AND BEYOND

The article has referred to the one time centrality of development economics that focused largely on developing countries. The history is in abundance in this field of study and analysis. Analysts agree that development economics did not pull developing countries out of their quagmire. This is articulated by Justin Lin, Ann Krueger, Joseph Stiglitz and others. Correctly so, development economics had good intentions but the results tended to not necessarily be the desirable outcomes. Anne Krueger summarizes the intentions as follows: Ever since development economics became a field, there has been a search for “the” key to development. Physical capital accumulation, human capital, industrial development, institutional equality, social capital and a variety of other factors have been the focus at one time or another. As each became the focal point, there was a parallel explicit or implied role of government (Krueger: 2012: 48). Though the role of government was mentioned, it is a known fact that the public service was always passive and hence in this article the emphasis is more on the existence of a progressive and thinking public service that is part of the team that leads development in a country such as South Africa.

To have an active public service is dependent on the existence of applied political economy. This thinking views the public service as being at the heart of the construction of a political economy that is driven by service delivery. Such an approach goes beyond the works of Justin Yifu Lin who advocates what is referred to as structural economics. It postulates that the economic structure of an economy is endogenous to its factor endowment structure and that sustained economic development is driven by changes in factor endowments and continues technological innovation” (Lin: 2012; 2012). Though much of this might be true, to what extent does the public service engage in all of this? The South African economy

has demonstrated in the last 20 years of democracy some of these attributes and yet has not shown sustainable competitive advantages. At the end, public services shoulder the burden of state failures. Thus, it is an imperative for public servants to understand the deep rootedness of the South African development challenge.

Having explored structural economics, it is necessary to elaborate further on the role of the state in a political economy. Vito Tanzi has written extensively on *Government versus Markets: The Changing Economic Role of the State*. As observed by Tanzi, governments in this current economic crisis have been compelled to once more implement Keynesian economics and these interventions are today known as fiscal stimulus packages with implications on financial markets, health, education, infrastructure, research, energy and assistance to collapsing banks (Tanzi, 2011: 45-46). In the centre of these are public servants who are responsible for the proper utilisation of taxpayer's monies even though they are not directly responsible for the policies formulated. The triple challenges referred to in the case of South Africa have in a way mandated that South Africa take on a political economy approach in addressing these issues. This approach protects the state from degenerating into one that is perceived as being controlled by oligarchs who create a fertile environment for the tenderisation of government contracts intended to promote development for the nation.

CONCLUSION

After almost twenty years of deconstructing and constructing a service delivery oriented public service the result must demonstrate positive outcomes beyond seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. The pronouncement on *Batho Pele* (Public first or a people oriented public service) and professionalism must be, at least, the clear indicators that there are tangible development outcomes emanating from the democratisation of the system of governance in South Africa. The intended achievements can be summarised as follows:

- The nation has embedded that it is a democratic developmental state wherein the public participates in the nation's advancement,
- Applied political economy is the basis for efficient and effective service delivery. Education, training and research oriented according to this approach contributes significantly to the development of service-oriented public servants,
- Meritocracy, professionalism and consistency within the public service are strong pillars for a competitive public service corps,
- The public service through visibility in its performance must contribute to nation formation as it was envisaged 20 years,

The analysis has used triangulation as the path to establish a futuristic effective and efficient public service, responsible. The jargon of paradigm shift has not been evoked because it was commonly used in 1994. Rather, our higher learning

and research must focus on the needs of the unique South African democratic developmental state with the intention of facilitating the growth and development of the public service. The institutions of higher learning must be strategic, and in particular the schools of government must anticipate the present and future in service delivery. The next ten years will be about successful public services that have contributed to national stability and nation development. Finally when the public service is weak, governing is compromised and this leads to lack of confidence in the political economy.

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