

South African Deputy Presidential speech

Address by Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe at the 5th Annual SPMA International Conference on Public Administration and Management, University of Pretoria, Pretoria

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Programme Director and Convener of this Conference, Professor Jerry Kuye;
Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Pretoria, Professor Cheryl de la Rey;
The Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, Professor Elsabe Loots;
Academics and Administrators from various Universities;
Under-graduate and Post-graduate Students;
International Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

I thank you most sincerely for this opportunity to share my humble thoughts on the all-important question of 'effective governance', especially as it applies to the South African post-apartheid landscape.

In turn I also look forward to learning from the diverse and wide ranging contributions by reputable scholars from different parts of the world whose perspectives will enrich the outcomes and the lessons we draw from this learned encounter. In this regard I also wish to commend the University of Pretoria School of Public Management and Administration for having the foresight to organise this event. From this kind of initiative it is clear that the University of Pretoria is becoming one of the social partners equally seized with the concern to help catapult our public institutions to a higher level of efficiency.

For us in South Africa such catalytic interventions by social partners are a prerequisite for meeting the goals of reconstruction and development, which are, in effect, the warp and woof of progress. Since it is a debt we owe to both our history and posterity, and on which we cannot default, reconstruction and development of our country is indeed a moral obligation. This moral obligation makes the need to build an efficacious civil service all the more critical.

Our history of uneven spatial development and racial inequalities in all facets of life renders ineluctable the need to make good on our vision of bringing about a truly united, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist, just and prosperous society.

Programme Director;

The theme of this conference reads:

Pushing the model of governance in the public sector to higher levels of performance, effectiveness and accountability – global challenges and prospects.

Pushing the model of governance in the public sector to higher levels of performance, effectiveness and accountability has uncannily pertinent resonance to South Africa. Consequently, within the parameters of this engaging theme I propose to reflect on the post-apartheid South African civil service by looking at three areas:

The inherited challenges of socio-economic inequalities and how this historical experience has shaped our understanding of and approach to civil service and governance.

Government's commitment to breaking out of the old mould of thinking on governance which flows from numerous reports by relevant public institutions that identified the causal conditions of constraints in the public service and the best ways of dealing with them as we go forward.

Lastly, reflect on how higher education institutions, such as the University of Pretoria, can help us to produce the calibre of public servants that our country needs.

I thought this manner of proceeding quite apposite to the extent that it ably maps out both the history and the current nature of the key challenges encountered in public service as well as delineating what we as government are actually doing.

Ladies and Gentlemen;

Before attempting to throw myself at the task at hand, I must remind all of us that societies are the outcomes of their own history and that South Africa is no exception to this truism. Our current efforts at reconstruction and development stem from this historical experience, and are aimed at tackling the triple challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality.

Accordingly, we have chosen to build a developmental state shaped by the history and socio-economic dynamics of the South African society. We chose to pursue the path of a state that intervenes decisively in the economy with the aim of promoting growth and development.

This approach to confronting the structural nature of our socio-economic challenges demands an administration that is philosophically and politically capable, willing and ready for this exacting role. In this connection the preamble of the Constitution says that the democratic state is under the obligation to:

"...heal the division of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights; lay the foundation for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law; improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person..."

To give effect to these Constitutional provisions, government has identified 1goal, 5 key priorities and 12 outcomes, one of which calls for:

"An efficient and development orientated public service and an empowered, fair and inclusive citizenship".

It is important to understand this point of departure since, within the context of our history; it pre-inclined government to opt for a model of an administration that is politically conscious of its role in history. In this regard, government considers the state machinery an instrument to realise the principles enshrined in our Constitution; principles which, in sum,



boil down to delivering social justice to the people of our country. The need to deliver social justice entailed adopting corrective policies to address the long, cold shadow cast by our past on the present even as we upscale efforts to consolidate reconciliation and social cohesion.

At the centre of the process of employing state machinery to meet the goals of reconstruction and development was the imperative to transform the civil service, which, until then, had been steeped in apartheid ethos and therefore antithetical to the democratic vision. At the point when a democratic state was ushered in this was the reality of transformation that it had to confront.

As Barry Gilder reminds us:

"We inherited a culture of patronage and corruption and disdain for the public, of authoritarianism and bureaucracy. We inherited an ideology diametrically opposed to the broadly progressive one we strove to introduce into government and society."²

Broadly this emphasised the need to develop programmes meant to change the doctrines, the composition and the management style of the public administration institutions in keeping with the type of society envisaged in our Constitution. At the same time, in his book, *Beyond the Miracle*³, veteran journalist, political analyst and author, Allister Sparks, observes that:

"...apartheid's legacy of poor education for the majority of the population and the way the job reservation laws favouring whites truncated the skills base of our working class."

Further on, he argues that:

"...the education system is the harder to remedy, for there is no way education can be speeded up. In the best of circumstances it takes 21 years and nine months to produce a new skilled worker. And before you can do that you must first produce a corps of skilled and dedicated teachers."

It follows then that the process of transforming the old order with the view to rebuilding the institutions to effect sustainable material changes in the lives of our people turned out to be a stubborn challenge that was compounded by the inexperience of the new democratic state. Once again Gilder hit the nail on the head in this regard, arguing that:

"Many of us drawn into the public sector had little or no experience of governing, of managing large organisations and budgets, of the complex and incomprehensible processes and procedures we were suddenly expected to follow, of myriad law and regulations we had to comply with, of the requirement upon us. And we were charged, by history and our own beliefs, with providing health, education, employment, welfare services – and Freedom – to the four fifths of the population previously neglected by apartheid."⁴

In certain instances this legacy manifests itself in unsatisfactory levels of service delivery. Another key issue that has increasingly proven knotty for the democratic public service is the political-administrative interface.

All over the world, this nexus between political authority and the administrative arm is a priority area clearly defined in accordance with the prevailing political system, since any muddled conception underlying this interface would compromise the core vision of government.

As conventionally understood, law and policy are the forte of public administration, which sees to their implementation in line with the political mandate. In other words, the civil service is the administration while the executive is known as the government.

Like many other key areas of governance, this connection between the political authority and public administration had no historical frame of reference or long-established tradition in our new democracy. This has in some cases led to strained relations between ministers and Directors-General, resulting in the high turnover of senior administrative personnel, who take with them invaluable skills needed in public service. This loss of rare skills and pivotal institutional memory further constrains the ability of the public service to deliver.

Ladies and Gentlemen;

In view of the structurally negative historical conditions outlined earlier, government has been jolted into thinking up new ways of doing things.

At the heart of this transformation project is what renowned philosopher and theorist on the modern state, G.W.F. Hegel⁵ refers to as an effective state that is able to intervene strategically, on behalf of its citizens. I am interested here in Hegel's argument, firstly, that the public (or civil) service is absolutely essential to the state machinery; and secondly, his assertion that a modern public service can only gain the legitimacy of its existence from its competence, professionalism and its bureaucratic efficiency. At least at the spirit level, these Hegelian precepts are invoked in the numerous reports by the Public Service Commission as well as the National Planning Commission's diagnostic report, among others, which have not only helped us identify constraints in public service but suggested corrective measures.

On a broader level identified challenges include:

- A lack of leadership and weak managerial capacity;
- Poor organisational design and low staff morale;
- Tension occasioned by weak political and administrative interface leading to further erosion of accountability and authority;
- Skills deficit, lack of capacity and poor performance; and
- Short-shrift changes in leadership, policy and priorities that give rise to instability in leadership.

Joseph Stiglitz⁶ contends that "misaligned incentives can induce government officials to take actions that are not, in any sense, in the public interest". Stiglitz ascribes the weakness of the public service to four broad failures in Pareto improvements – the inability of government to make commitments, coalition formation and bargaining, destructive competition and uncertainty about the consequences of change. As a solution he recommends that:

"... making government processes more open, transparent, and democratic, with more participation and more efforts at consensus formation is likely to result not only in a process that is fairer, but one with outcomes that are more likely to be in accord with general interest."



As such it appears to me that an effectual public service has to develop a deeper understanding of the Constitutional imperatives and the character of the developmental state in which it serves.

Secondly, we have to repeat the message that resource wastage cannot be tolerated. Therefore it will be important that institutions such as Parliament, Provincial Legislatures and Councils that provide oversight, always interrogate whether:

- Public resources are allocated and used in accordance with policy priorities;
- There is efficient spending and value for money;
- Resources are genuinely constraining service or the problems are a result of institutional and organisational constraints; and
- Public servants act as responsible guardians for public resources.

As such, accountability in the public service is as important as the transformation of the Human Resource Management principles that underpin work in the public service. It requires a mind-set change and an understanding by citizens that they have a right to government services. At the same time public servants must understand that they have the duty to provide these services without the expectation of a bribe.

Ladies and Gentlemen;

The National Development Plan submits that in order to address the challenges we face — the challenges of poverty, unemployment, under-education and inequality — we need a developmental state that is:

“...well run and efficiently coordinated state institutions with skilled public servants who are committed to the public good and capable of delivering consistently high quality services, while prioritising the nation’s developmental objectives.”

To achieve this objective will certainly require painstaking and meticulous planning as well as policy formulations that will help us overcome the deficiencies in the service. In this regard, the Public Service Commission has largely supported the proposal to develop our political and administrative interface arrangements through a hybrid approach. This takes into account the need for political principals to have confidence in the heads of departments by, for example, devolving the appointment of certain levels of senior management to heads of departments.

One aspect of this approach entails the Public Service Commission conducting the assessment of competent candidates, given its expertise in this area as well as its Constitutional mandate. It will also assist with the third aspect that relates to the positioning of the public-service as a viable career choice. This will require greater focus on Human Resource Management, career-pathing and development, a long-term perspective on training and developing a formal graduate programme.

The final aspect is the professionalisation of the service through the development of technical and specialist professional skills and setting minimum standards and prerequisite for all posts. The Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs is already in the process of piloting some of these changes in municipalities through Regulations that set

out the minimum qualification for Municipal Managers and the second layer of municipal executives.

Programme Director;

Given government's efforts to overhaul its public service machinery to herald a more effective culture in how this organ of government does things, what role can the institutions of higher learning play in order to produce graduates better equipped for this mighty challenge? I am raising this issue knowing that, as sites of knowledge production, universities are better able to understand the history and makeup of societies. As a consequence this role enables universities to develop curricula responsive to the totality of societal experience.

I must hasten to add that universities and leadership institutions must be at the forefront of backing governments' efforts to improve public service, especially amongst young graduates.

This requires greater investment in the research and teaching of theories of change and development, the necessary technical training as well as instilling selfless spirit of public service.

Higher learning institutions are an important player in ensuring that the knowledge imparted will not be solely for individual gain, but will be used as a tool for advancing the betterment of society, which can be done while earning a living in the public service. Like the late ZK Matthews, we see education as "the instrument through which the community achieves its survival in the environment in which it lives its life."⁸

An effective educational system would thus give the learner a thorough understanding of society and the wider world in which he or she would live. It would "put man in touch with the whole field of human experience", and equip him with the competencies and skills to contribute to social development. The immediate implication of this is that universities should consciously respond to social conditions in their approach in order to drive social development in an all-rounded fashion. Nowhere is this observation truer than in our own country, where, as we have argued earlier, the present is still in the grip of the past. At the same time, I wish to suggest that universities not confine training to the post-graduate leadership programme but must start at the foundation of under-graduate study.

I suggest that institutions of higher learning take a serious look at this issue, affecting some of the necessary changes to the curricula and develop ways of allocating credit for community service.

In conclusion, I wish to remind us that the prosperity of societies depends on efficient, dedicated and well-trained civil service. More specifically, in South Africa's case successful social transformation that yields social justice can only come about if our civil service is defined by the culture of human rights and excellence, as our constitution requires.

While it is the primary duty of the state to turn the civil service into a responsive, purring machinery that serves the people, it takes more than government, the single if important actor, to achieve this objective. To this end, I trust that this conference will make a difference in this long and difficult journey towards creating a society where human comfort is an inviolable human right.

Thank you once again for inviting me into this conference and all the best in your proceedings.



NOTES

- 1 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.
- 2 Gilder, Barry, *Songs and Secrets (South Africa from Liberation to Governance)*, 2012.
- 3 Sparks, Allister, *Beyond the Miracle*, 2003.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*.
- 6 *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 12(2), Spring 1998.
- 7 The National Development Plan, 2012.
- 8 ZK Matthews, Christian Education in a Changing Africa. *The International Review of Missions*, Vol. LII (205), 1963.