

# THE POLITICAL / ADMINISTRATIVE INTERFACE: TIME FOR RECONSIDERATION?

Prof. C. Thornhill  
University of Pretoria

## ABSTRACT

The roles of political office bearers and appointed officials have been studied and described since Woodrow Wilson's famous article was published in 1887. The relationship between a minister and the managerial cadre of a department is probably one of the most complex issues related to the public sector operations. The paper describes the effects of the political structures in a democratic country with special reference to South Africa. Thereafter attention is devoted to the influence of politics in governing a country with a diverse society having to eradicate legacies of the past. The administrative/ managerial functions are briefly alluded to. This is necessary to identify the respective roles of the politicians and the appointed officials and to clarify the interface. It is argued that the interface is not present in only the public sector, but also in the corporate sector. Therefore, the *Code of corporate practices and conduct* proposed in the King Report should also be followed in the public sector. This recent developments also indicate that the clear distinction that used to be made between the public and the private sectors should be revisited. The result could be that the interface between the political office bearer

in charge of a public institution and the senior managers of a department has to be reconsidered.

## INTRODUCTION

The debate on the political / administrative interface has been on many agendas since officials were appointed to give effect to so-called political policies. In this paper the historical development of the interface will not be alluded to in detail. The justification for such a relationship will be referred to in an effort to indicate what the current situation in South Africa is. Attention is also devoted to what the interface implies

and how it affects the relationship between politicians and managers on the three spheres of government. Attention is also devoted to the local sphere as the new system of municipal government and administration has a significant effect on the relationship between the municipal manager and the executive mayor (where the particular type applies).

## POLITICAL STRUCTURES

In a system of representative democracy, members of society are elected by an electorate to make decisions on behalf of that particular society or a particular segment of society. The representative body that is created as a result of such an election normally consists of a large number of members. This composition makes it cumbersome and even impractical to *formulate* decisions or to develop complex policies requiring technical knowledge and factual information to ensure that policies are implementable. Therefore, a committee is usually appointed to assist the larger assembly in formulating guidelines (policies) for operation; to supervise the appointed officials; and to provide the representative body with information about the results achieved.

On the national sphere of government, Cabinet acts as a committee to assist Parliament in deciding on particular issues demanding the intervention of the state and to give guidance to the executive institutions i.e. to perform the governing function. In fact the origin of the term *govern* is the Greek word *gubernare*, which means: to steer as in steering a boat. Thus, a government's primary responsibility is to provide guidance to the executive institutions concerning the policy directions they should aim their activities at.

A similar arrangement has been introduced for the South African provincial sphere of government in which case the premier and the executive council perform the governing function. On the municipal sphere various possibilities exist e.g. the executive mayor and mayoral committee. The other types of executive, e.g. the collective executive system, the executive committee system are not discussed, although they represent different types of executive in the South African system of municipal government. It is imperative to note at this stage that on the municipal sphere the council is both the legislative and executive authority (*cf. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, section 152[1]e; and section 11 [1] of the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, 2000 [Act 32 of 2000]*).

On the local sphere of government a committee(s), such as the executive mayor and mayoral committee therefore, has a different relationship with the council than the case is with Cabinet on the national sphere and the premier and executive council on the provincial sphere in regard to their respective legislatures. This issue is not discussed, but is an important characteristic of the system of local government in South Africa that should be acknowledged.

## POLITICS/POLITICIANS

It is important to refer to politics as one of the most significant phenomena in the public sector. In this regard it does not imply only *party* politics, i.e. the politics of a political party, but politics referring to the process of decision-making; to who receives what, when, where and how; a conflict resolution process which determines the apportionment

of resources; the process by which power is applied in order to determine whether and how government is to be exercised in any given area; or the apportionment of values (Fox & Meyer, 1995: 98).

With this simplified definition of a very complex process in mind, it is obvious that politics has many faces or facets. It could be argued that the weighting of the available facts and related information is done within a particular value framework. This framework could be that of a political party, an interest group (TAC, ratepayers association, agricultural union, religious group) or even a corporate body (e.g. Eskom, Telkom, SABC). Therefore, it could be argued that politics concerns the attachment of values to the available facts; to determining the relative importance of requests by society or a particular segment of society for a particular service; on the quantity of the services to be provided; and on the quality of the services to be delivered. Thus, the political body governing (*cf.* section 151[3] of the Constitution, 1996) in a particular country, region or municipality has the responsibility to oversee the executive actions of the appointed officials acting on its behalf.

Diversity is a characteristic of most countries. African countries are no exception to this phenomenon. In the Commission for Africa's Report (2005:119): *Our Common Interest* (Commission for Africa) it is *inter alia* stated that "Every country has a mix of social and economic realities that differ from other countries and differ, often massively even within one state according to divisions of ethnicity, religion, gender, generation, geography and so on. Such diversity can be seen in everything from attitudes to standards of living, provision of infrastructure, access to health and education, economic opportunity, models of governance and political history" If it is considered that South Africa actually represents a microcosm of the composition of African states, the complexity of governing a diverse population becomes obvious. Representatives in each of the legislative bodies on each of the three spheres of government have to be able to judge, the often divergent, values and requests of interest groups or political parties representing segments of society. The complexity of this duty becomes clear if one considers the composition of the South African population. e.g.

- different religious groups
- different language and cultural groups
- different economically active/inactive groups
- different residentially situated groups with divergent developmental needs
- different business and industrial concerns
- different labour unions
- different political parties with own agendas
- different age groups with each its own needs and expectations.

It should be mentioned that within any large institution, such as a government (or a municipality), a variety of invisible networks exist (Commission for Africa, 2005:119) These social networks influence the perception of a community or society at large regarding the acceptability of a political body's composition and decisions (consider the unrest of August 2005 at Frankfort, Free State) and the quality of the administration and management taking place under its guidance.

Parliament consists of representatives of the South African society. The Gauteng Province is part of the Republic of South Africa and its legislature consists of representatives of the inhabitants of that province. The so-called weighting of possible policy options within the political framework of the ruling party or alliance require complex “political equations” with a large number of unknown quantities and even value considerations to be taken into account.

Government has to identify the most important priorities to be dealt with at a particular stage, bearing in mind the Constitution, 1996, concerning its powers and functions entrusted to the three spheres of government. This identification of functions as part of the political process has to acknowledge the constitutional requirements contained e.g. in the *Bill of Rights* such as the right of access to adequate housing and access to health care services. As already alluded to, a large cumbersome representative assembly such as Parliament cannot effectively perform the functions required to formulate policies. Not even Cabinet or the premier and executive council could formulate a policy to be contained in e.g. an act. It requires the assistance of appointed full time capacitated employees. This is *one* point where the political/administrative interface is clearly visible.

Politics is largely “practised” by politicians, such as ministers, members of the executive council or a mayoral committee or executive committee on the municipal sphere. However, it should also be considered that even in determining the relative importance of a proposed policy, the possible administrative implications have to be considered. This is one of the occasions where the politicians have to liaise with the appointed officials and rely on their expertise. It is important to mention that Government can only keep its promises made in election campaigns and in policy statements if they can rely on the support of the appointed officials. The latter have to translate political decisions into actions and must thus ensure that policies become reality.

Ministers (and members of the executive council on the provincial sphere) are the politicians who are usually responsible for the *governing* function. Thus a minister will be

- responsible for overall political supervision of the department or other organ of state under his/ her jurisdiction;
- accountable to the legislature for the way in which the department/organ of state gave effect to the policies as approved by Parliament (either directly or indirectly)
- responsible for other duties related to the particular position e.g. the appointment of members of a board; approval of regulations related to legislation within the minister’s competence; and approval of particular appointments.

Note should also be taken of the different governing styles of ministers. Some ministers could e.g. be viewed as *interventionists*, implying that the minister may tend to be more involved in the detail of the actions of a department. Some ministers prefer to act as *policy initiators* and thus focus only on the development of new policies. Some ministers view themselves as *ambassadors* and limit their roles to promoting the image of a department or policy. Lastly some ministers could be viewed as *minimalist* ministers, implying that they keep a low profile and avoid having to take controversial decisions that may compromise him/her. Naturally these governing styles would have a direct effect on the relationship

between the political head and the administrative structures. Thus the personality of the minister will affect the political administrative interface.

Furthermore, the managing style of the head of a department would also have an effect on the extent to which the minister could play a political role. A strong head of department and a minimalist minister would result in the administrative/ managerial functions being emphasized. A strong interventionist minister and a weak head of department would result in the political issues being emphasized. To these complicating factors should also be added that the current political ideologies of government could also require stronger political involvement than in cases where stability exists and new policy directions are not important. Similarly some departments enter new uncharted waters and regular and intensive political interventions are required. In such cases the political inputs would be significant.

## ADMINISTRATION / MANAGEMENT

**A**dministration and management could be defined as the enabling functions required to give effect to political decisions/policies. Administration primarily concerns the establishment of an enabling framework for the performance of duties. It could be divided into

- systems and processes for policy making
- development of organisational structures
- a system for the appointment and utilisation of human resources
- a system for the acquisition and utilisation of financial resources
- a system to ensure that work methods promote efficient and effective service delivery
- a system to ensure effective control and that public accountability can be maintained.

Management, put in simplified form may be viewed as the way in which the system is operated. It *inter alia* concerns the decisions taken, regarding the different components of the system as well as the way in which managerial staff operate to ensure that the resources are utilised effectively and efficiently by the line functionaries. Without going into the history of the debate on the neutrality of public administration and public management, suffice it to state that the relationship between administration and politics is not one of a servant – master relationship (Cameron 2003:55). The relationship is much more multi-faceted and complex. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the respective roles of the politicians and of the personnel corps more closely.

It is important to note that all African countries did not inherit sound administrative systems at the time of gaining independence from the colonial powers. Some African countries even emerged with weakened governance structures (Commission for Africa 2005:102) contributing to the challenges they had to face in the post-independence phase. Even in the case of South Africa with a different history as far as democratic independence is concerned, the newly elected democratic government inherited a deeply fragmented administrative system in 1994. Therefore, it was required of government to develop new systems to accommodate the more or less 14 systems (ten Bantustans, three own affairs, one general

affairs) and the former four provincial administrations into one non-racial administrative structure for the new national and provincial spheres of government. Furthermore, more or less 1100 racially divided municipalities, covering only some of the urban areas had to be transformed into 284 non-racial municipalities covering the total area of South Africa. Indeed, a formidable challenge to the innovative abilities of the advisors, senior management echelon and the responsible political leaders on all three spheres of government.

The brief historical background provided above should clearly identify the significance of the administrative and the managerial challenges the newly formed administrative system had to face. It should also be obvious that the transformation required a close liaison between the political structures and the administrative structures and officials to achieve the goal of an effective and efficient public sector that was required to not only transform, but to improve service delivery to the formerly disadvantaged sections of the South African society. Simultaneously, it was required to ensure that existing administrative and managerial requirements are met.

## PERSONNEL CORPS

**H**uman resources are utilized in the public sector to give effect to policies determined by the political executive. However, it should be considered that the political office bearers rely heavily on the advice of the appointed officials. The senior officials who advise the political executive body, therefore, have to be fully aware of the political choices that have been made by the governing authority. In some cases provision is made to appoint specific officials to ensure that political values are considered by managers when advice is provided. Section 12A of the *Public Service Act, 1994*, (Proclamation 103 of 1994) makes provision for an executing authority (President, minister, premier as the case may be) to appoint one or more persons under a special contract to

- advise the executing authority on the exercise of the executing authority's powers and duties;
- advise the executing authority on the development of policy that will promote the department's objectives;
- perform such other tasks as may be appropriate in respect of the exercise or performance of the executing authority's powers and duties.

The provisions of the *Public Service Act, 1994*, thus acknowledges the need for particular advisers to be appointed in the Public Service to ensure that political views are noted when the relevant executing authority is advised. This does not imply that the other officials should be politically neutral. Managers should always be cognizant of the policy directions of the governing body, but need not be appointed on the basis of their political affiliation.

As indicated earlier, politicians make political choices. However, these choices have to be considered within the framework of its administrative, managerial and technical feasibility. This is the domain of particularly senior managerial employees of the executive

institution. Public officials are appointed as a result of their expertise in the various functions executive institutions have to perform. This is particularly the case with specialists in areas such as engineering, economic matters, financial affairs, labour relations and legal matters and a plethora of other functions the public institutions deal with.

The management echelon, requires specialists in management and administration. These are specialist areas and require the same degree expertise as is required in each functional area. Unfortunately, in many African countries there is a dearth of such experts available (*vide* Report on Africa 2005:130). Managers need not (perhaps even: should not) be engineers or accountants or lawyers. They have access to these specialists. Managers should manage and administer the affairs of an executive institution. The senior management officials are involved in the political arena within which the political office bearer operates. Cameron (2003:69(3)) states it succinctly as follows: "The criteria for posts that require political suitability can be defined as any post

- which involves the development of government policy at a strategic level ensuring alignment with party political objectives and programmes;
- which requires the incumbent to be trusted with sensitive and/or confidential party political information; and
- which requires the incumbent to direct, at a political level, government communication."

Thus, the managerial level is the actual area within which the politics/administrative interface plays itself out as these functions bring the two participating role-players into direct contact with one another creating the political/administrative interface. However, it should be emphasized that there are various factors that could influence the way in which a minister and the head of department interact with one another as already alluded to. Some functions are assigned to the appointed chief executive officer in which the minister is not supposed to interfere in any way e.g. particular statutory obligations related to the accounting officer; appointment of personnel (with the exception of section 12A of the *Public Service Act, 1994* appointments); particular functions entrusted to a department as well as delegated functions assigned to a department (e.g. responsibilities assigned to the Treasury in sections 5[1] and 6 [1] of the *Local Government: Municipal Finance Management Act, 2003 [Act 56 of 2003]*).

## THE INTERFACE

**T**he political/administrative interface is where the tyre hits the road. This is the grey area within which politics has to be distinguished from administration and management. In the case of a motor vehicle the bonding between the tyre and the road determines to what extent the driver is in control of the vehicle. If the bonding is insufficient due to tyre failure or road inconsistency the vehicle tends to move in any direction but forward. This situation applies to the executing authority and the management cadre as well. If there is lack of trust or lack of clarity regarding the respective responsibilities, the executive institution cannot provide the services required. It should also be stated that to be able to separate the political and administrative functions

to some extent one has to assume that sufficient educated and talented people are available to fill both offices (Cameron 2003:58) If this condition cannot be met, an executive institution cannot promote the policy objectives of the particular executing authority and will not be able to integrate political values into the administrative and managerial systems.

The interface on the municipal sphere is much more complex than on the other two spheres of government. This is mainly due to the fact that the issues involved in municipalities concern the direct and daily lives of communities in clearly demarcated areas. Lack of service delivery is directly observable and often results in direct calls to the municipal councillor. The councillor in turn tends to liaise directly with the manager concerned, or worse still, with the particular official involved. This practice tends to cloud the distinction between the two functions. It also contributes to communication failures within the managerial system and detrimentally affects lines of authority within the system. It is a requirement in section 53(5) (a) of the *Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, 2000* Act 32 of 2000) that a municipality must determine the roles and areas of responsibility of political office-bearers and of the municipal manager concerning lines of accountability and the interaction between the two.

The other two spheres of government, in some cases, suffer the same fate as some ministers tend to involve themselves with the daily running of the executive institution. This also contributes to creating a fuzzy dividing line between the political and the administrative/managerial duties. It may even result in the ethical guidelines for sound public administration being compromised. In its report entitled: *State of the Public Service Report* (Public Service Commission 2005:3) the Chairperson stated *inter alia* that "While the basic ethics infrastructure has been established, its implementation requires attention for it to become fully entrenched and integrated within the organizational culture and ingrained into the ethos of every public servant". The need for clarity on the interface is, therefore, an urgent requirement to be attended to in an attempt to ensure that ethical guidelines are honoured although a need exists for the recognition of an intimate interface in developing a more representative and more efficient and effective public sector.

The politics/administrative interface is probably one of the most complex relationships to manage in any public institution. As already alluded to, this interface is particularly complex on the municipal sphere of government. However, the different acts governing municipal matters are quite clear regarding the respective functions and duties of the political role player (e.g. the mayor) on the one hand and the head of administration (the municipal manager) on the other hand.

A similar situation exists as far as the other two spheres of government are concerned in the sense that the political office bearer has to acknowledge the fact that he/she acts as the representative of society. As such he/she has to identify and interpret the value preferences of a particular segment of society or an interest group and evaluate its importance in relation to all the other demands for action by the relevant legislature. The chief executive officer, with the assistance of all the other managerial staff, has to interpret these demands in terms of the administrative and managerial implications e.g. the human



resource and financial implications. The executive is then advised of the effects of draft policies or resolutions on the resources and other components of the administrative and managerial systems.

Ultimately the final decision-making power vests in legislature representing society. The director-general or other chief executive officer and other managerial staff are charged with the responsibility to ensure that the legislature is fully briefed on all administrative, managerial and executive activities. The director-general will ultimately be held accountable by the legislature if the policies or other policy decisions are not effected. Therefore, if an executing authority neglects its overseeing or monitoring function the electorate will take the responsible political office bearer to task. Indirectly the actions of officials are also scrutinised by members of society and may even be criticised in newspapers and the other news media. These actions or inactions, however, will ultimately have to be dealt with by the legislature or one of the portfolio committees (in the case of Parliament). Lack of clarity regarding this division of responsibilities result, in some cases, in communities demonstrating physically their opposition to inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

Considering the interface, it is necessary to consider whether it has remained the same since public servants were appointed to give effect to policies as adopted by the elected legislative body. In this regard it could be argued that the interface remains. The need to distinguish between the functions of administration and politics remain. However, it is necessary to reconsider the traditional notion of the "neutral" public servant. In developing countries, it is unlikely that managerial officials could be politically neutral. They need to reconcile their views with those of the executing authority regarding the functional area in which they have to perform their administrative and managerial responsibilities. The implication is that the interface is becoming more complex not less complex. It is important for the respective role players to continue in their endeavours to distinguish between political and administrative issues and promote the primary duties each is responsible for.

The paper has largely focused on the public sector and it may appear as though the political/administrative interface only applies to this sector. However, it should be pointed out that in the corporate sector the interface is also present, although not necessarily a party political/ administrative interface. In this regard specific reference should be made to the *King Report* (2002). This report 's recommendations are wide ranging and apply to:

- Public sector enterprises and agencies that fall under the Public Finance Management Act and the Local Finance Management Bill (Now Act 56 of 2003) including any department of State or administration in the national, provincial or local sphere of government or any other functionary or institution:
  - exercising a power or performing a function in terms of the Constitution or a provincial constitution; or
  - exercising a public power or performing a public function in terms of any legislation, but not including a court or a judicial official, unless otherwise prescribed by legislation.

The abovementioned quote is the same as Section 239 of the Constitution, 1996. Thus the King Report acknowledges the similarity between the public and the private sector as far as the proposed *Code of corporate practices and conduct* is

concerned. It could, therefore, also be argued that the *Business Judgment Rule* ( King 2002: 73) is also applicable to the public sector e.g. to the municipal council on the municipal sphere as far as this sphere of government is concerned. The rule is defined as follows:

- Essentially, the rule protects directors against being held accountable for business decisions, however unwise they subsequently turn out to have been, if they were made on an informed basis, in good faith, and without conflict of interest, and the decision was rational at the time in all its circumstances.

It should thus be clear, that if the opposite situation prevails a board (council) could be held accountable. This illustrates that the administrative/political interface could to some extent be clarified as far as the accountability for decisions is concerned. The political body cannot in all cases be absolved for wrongful decisions, which may result in unauthorized or wasteful expenditure.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The brief discussion was mainly aimed at reviewing a complex topic. Its focus was mainly on clarifying concepts and the legal requirements. More comprehensive research is required to establish the practical application of the new system of government and administration practiced in developing countries. The political/administrative interface which has created tension since the appointment of “permanent” officials, has not been thrashed out. It will probably remain a contentious issue for the foreseeable future.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cameron, R. 2003. Politics-administration interface: the case of the City of Cape Town. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*. 69(3).
- Cloete, J.J.N. & Thornhill, C. 2005. *South African municipal government and administration: a new dispensation*. Pretoria: Dotsquare Publishing.
- Commission for Africa. 2005. *Our Common Interest: Report of the Commission for Africa*. The Commission.
- Fox, W., Meyer, I.H. 1995. *Public Administration Dictionary*. Eppondustr: Juta & Co.
- Institute of Directors. 2002. *King Report on Corporate Governance for South Africa- 2002*. Institute of Directors.
- Public Service Commission. 2005. *State of the Public Service Report 2005*. The Commission.
- South Africa (Republic). 1994. *Public Service Act, 1994* (Proclamation 103 of 1994). Pretoria: Government Printers.
- South Africa (Republic). 1996. *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*. Pretoria: Government Printers.