

P E P

RESTRUCTURING THE CIVIL SERVICE

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29 September 1992

INTRODUCTION

1. The civil service in South Africa has been systematically created and expanded to pursue a clearly defined political ideology. It now is undergoing a severe case of goal displacement because the new constitutional goals it has to be made serviceable to, are almost a direct contradiction of what it was expected to administer and implement in the past. This must inevitably affect the efficiency of the developmental role of the State, either as a facilitator or initiator of programmes. For example, if education is seen as a developmental priority, it is not only necessary that political opponents have clarity as to what kind of educational system should be put in place, but civil service departments would have to be restructured and help to implement the new system. If not tackled early on, this restructuring can delay the process a great deal and generate frustration and conflict.
2. In addition to necessary restructuring, transitions that lead to a change of government or regime very often also lead to an expansion of the civil service as a result of extending patronage and/or rewarding supporters. This seldom increases efficiency or productivity and stimulates inflation. This problem is compounded in South Africa by the fact that in the past the political control of the civil service has been a powerful avenue of economic mobility for a minority of the population at the expense of the majority and has strengthened the view that the State is the most important instrument of economic development and growth.
3. It is unlikely that South Africa is going to experience a sudden regime change and therefore a rapid replacement of most of the civil service with new incumbents. In any case, there is no civil service in waiting with well developed skills and administrative experience. More than likely most of the current incumbents will continue, and as colonial transitions have shown, the old ones very easily seduce newcomers into the old civil service culture. This dilemma poses a very serious threat to new development programmes. It is very important that thinking and attitudes within the civil service be attuned to new development needs. Above all, ways have to be found to increase transparency and public participation in both government and the private sector.

4. From one point of view, the civil service is a decisionmaking process with input-conversion-output and feedback. This decisionmaking process fundamentally structures the life chances and opportunities of people in society. If our society is going to move from domination to democracy, this transition will also have to be reflected in the change of the decisionmaking process that is the civil service. If there is no fundamental change in this decisionmaking, then the most likely feedback we can expect will be continuing mass action and protest. For the civil service to change so as to meet this new challenge, it would have to :

- become far more accessible to a much broader range of interest groups so that new information can become available;
- have to mediate between different needs of different interest groups in society, and
- allow much broader participation in feedback.

This is not going to be easy in the South African context and what may be needed in order to develop new patterns of behaviour and regulations would be extensive research into criteria for resource allocation by the civil service and which groups in society are the prime beneficiaries.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR RESTRUCTURING

1. A civil service code of conduct to combat nepotism and corruption and promote impartiality. Such a code to have judicial backing and be overseen by a multi-party Civil Service commission.
2. Combat excessive secrecy through open book and disclosure procedures. South Africa has extraordinary secrecy laws. A first step towards democratising government, and one that could take place even before elections, would be to narrow secrecy requirements to a bare minimum. New rules must compel the civil service to give up most of the information they now see as their own. This is particularly true of the State Budget which typifies the cult of secrecy. There is hardly any public input into the budget process. This reinforces the view that the civil service as an agent of redistribution is a law unto itself.
3. Make official language simple, understandable and accessible. In South Africa the language of bureaucracy obscures rather than informs, bewilders rather than enlightens.
4. Public input into civil service decision-making can be strengthened by regulations that establish channels for public input on proposed laws and programmes before their presentation to the Cabinet and Legislature.

5. In South Africa it may be necessary to have community representation in agencies deciding on housing, public work schemes and other development programmes. This may be particularly important to combat suspicions that linger about the old days and to increase public understanding about the difficulties of public administration.
6. Formulating new development programmes in the areas of education, rural poverty, housing etc. is by implication beginning to restructure the civil service. Restructuring does not only mean rationalisation and avoiding overlap and duplication, but also involving the administration in formulating and planning such programmes. Mechanisms have to be created which can involve all the relevant stakeholders from the beginning in the process of development. The best laid plans for development will come to naught through antagonism or ignorance of a few officials at a critical juncture in the implementation process.