



Why the past matters

Histories of the public service in South Africa

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## Why the Past Matters: Histories of the Public Service in South Africa

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This paper argues that the state of the public sector in South Africa is heavily influenced by particular histories of state administration related to the legacy of apartheid and the nature of the political transition to democracy. Whilst this theme is explored in a number of scholarly texts, there is a paucity of work in the discipline of public administration which takes into account this legacy, particularly the significance for the viability of a range of public sector reform initiatives, and for the models of public sector management underpinning these reforms.

### **From Descriptive to Analytical Research on the State**

In 1991 a number of scholars from the discipline of public administration, anti-apartheid activists recently returned from exile, and those sympathetic to the democratic struggle in South Africa met at a conference venue in Magaliesberg, just outside Johannesburg. The focus of the Mount Grace Conference was the character of the post-apartheid public service, the nature of appropriate public sector training for the new administration, and the state of the public administration discipline that was to serve it.

In reflecting on the state of the discipline, participants argued that the ‘current theory, teaching and practice of Public Administration’ was in crisis. Specifically, teaching and practice was, ‘too descriptive: lacking sufficient analytical, explanatory and predictive techniques; ... reductionist: restricting and reifying Public Administration to one view of the administrative processes only ...’ (Cameroon and Milne, 2009, p.386). Delegates resolved that, ‘More rigorous scientific analysis, explanation and prediction of governmental and administrative phenomena supplementing their mere description is necessary. An open and critical debate on explanatory models for this purpose should be encouraged ...’ (Cameroon and Milne, 2009, p.386).

Mount Grace II was held eight years later, and aimed, amongst other things, to evaluate the extent to which the resolutions adopted in the first conference had been effected in the service of contributing to ‘the process of democratic policy making and public and development management’ (Cameron and Milne, 2009, p. 388). This included the development of a more analytical and critical body of scholarship of the state.

Based on an overview of journal articles from 1994 to 2006 in two prominent academic journals in the field of public administration in South Africa, (*Journal of Public Administration* and *Administratio Publica*), Cameron and Milne conclude that there was ‘very little theory development in the discipline’. Further, ‘most research was descriptive and normative and there was very little testing of validity or causality’ (Cameron and Milne, 2009, p.391).

Cameron and Milne suggest that the poverty of research on the public sector (at least in the discipline of public administration) is linked to the ‘move towards Public Management in the discipline’ which lead to ‘a narrow focus on skills and techniques at the expense of research’ (Cameron and Milne, 2009, p293). The reasons for the paucity of analytical work on public sector institutions are complex, and deserve to be addressed in a dedicated paper. Two factors are worth noting. In the first place, public administration/public management generally, but especially in South Africa, is positioned as a vocational pursuit that has tended to downplay research and scholarship. This has been compounded by the entanglement of public sector research and consulting in many of the universities that has often blunted the critical edge of such work.

Yet, supporting the development of an analytical and historical lens is key to both research and training a cadre of skilled strategists and management in the public sector.

There has, thus, been an overconcentration in the public administration literature on a description of the administrative and management techniques required to support the development of an appropriate public service in South Africa. Whilst a discussion of these techniques and approaches is of value, too little analysis has been applied to understanding the lack of traction of seemingly sensible public sector reform initiatives.

A key deficit in this literature is the lack of attention paid to the histories of public sector institutions and organisations; more specifically, attention to the histories of their emergence, and to changes over time in structure, leadership, personnel populating these institutions, informal norms and practice and so on. Such research is difficult, and often requires long-term fieldwork, and where and if possible, historical and ethnographic research. In South Africa, especially, the traditional social science disciplines have been slow to bring their attention to the study of government, governance and the public sector in particular.

### **The Postcolonial Literature**

For more than twenty years the field of African studies has been reinvigorated by host of scholarly works interested in the character of African politics. Of particular interest has been the failure of democracy in the period after independence; to understand the institutional ‘crisis’ of the state as well as the relative decline of African economies from the 1960s.

By the beginning of the millennium a consensus was beginning to emerge that the ‘the nature of the contemporary African state is in large part due to the legacy of the colonial era’ (Haynes, 2002). Crawford-Young cast this relationship in zoological terms: ‘In metamorphosis the caterpillar becomes butterfly without losing its inner essences’ (Crawford Young, 2004, p.2) In a similar vein, the colonial state becomes a postcolonial one while retaining its original DNA.

The colonial state during its phase of construction in most cases created entirely novel institutions of domination and rule. Although we commonly describe the independent polities as ‘new states’, in reality they were successors to the colonial regime, inheriting its structures, its quotidian routines and practices, and its more hidden normative theatre of governance (Crawford Young, 2004, p.15).

In the South African case, the extent to which the ‘original DNA’ of the apartheid administration has been retained has varied by region and institution. Profound changes in conceptions of who constitutes the country’s citizenry, changes in the leadership of staff managing public institutions and so on, have

produced a range of new institutional norms and practices (both formal and informal).

The value of postcolonial literature for the study of the public sector in South Africa is that it helps us to situate elements of contemporary political phenomena (corruption, neopatrimonialism, institutional failure for example) in the *longue durée* of the colonial state. Perhaps key to the relevance of postcolonial literature is the extent to which bureaucratic functioning prior to democracy was embedded in social relations at odds with the ideal of a Weberian state. This varied across institutions, and played out differently in the administration of the four provinces and the Bantustans.

Focusing, in particular, on the system of provincial government in South Africa since the end of apartheid, Louis Picard has argued that ‘there has been a continuity of policy with regard to structures and processes of government’ with the apartheid period (Picard, 2005, p.368).

We will suggest that the uneven character of public sector performance, especially at provincial and local government level, for example, is partly a function of the uneven and differential relations of new provincial governments to former Homeland administrations and administrators. This is likely true of local governments too. The viability and the institutional fortunes of post-apartheid, local and provincial governments owes a lot to the history of their emergence, in particular, to process of integration of former black and white, local authorities.

### **Administration of the Former Homelands**

By the end of apartheid, the territory of South Africa was governed and administered by an astonishingly complex puzzle of governments, agencies, departments and legislatures. Over and above the Dr Seuss-like arrangements of the Tri-Cameral parliament—three houses of parliament, a President’s Council and the myriad of white and black, local authorities—the homelands (Lebowa, QwaQwa, Bophuthatswana, KwaZulu, KaNgwane, Transkei and Ciskei, Gazankulu, Venda and KwaNdebele), collectively, consisted of 14 legislatures and 151 departments (Picard, 2005, p.293).

Homeland administrations grew quickly between 1965 and 1970. By 1971, 3581 black Africans served in the Transkei civil service, and additional 2000 chiefs in administrative roles. By 1980, the Bophuthatswana public service had reached 55,000 employees. In 1990 there were 197,455 public servants in the self-governing territories and another 438,599 personnel in the nominally independent states. By 1992, the civil service in the Homeland areas had swollen to 638,599 people, or 16% of their economically active populations, and an even higher proportion of their middle classes (p.301). The bloated system was due in part to the extent of duplication in setting up administration for each of the homelands.

In contrast, there were only 60,352 officials directly employed in apartheid South Africa's official, four provinces (the Transvaal, the Orange Free State, Natal and the Cape) in 1993, and only 349,832 officials in the entire apartheid-era bureaucracy, including at central, provincial and local government levels.

Collectively, Homeland officials were the least qualified and experienced. White, senior managers often consisted of those officials that had been transferred from the South African civil service because they were below grade. Below-grade, white, civil servants were joined by black officials, usually drawn from the ranks of the chefferie, who were prized for their obedience and loyalty rather than their education and competence (p.297). For the rest, Homeland administrations consisted of tens of thousands of black, poorly trained subalterns, either performing menial or basic administrative tasks (p.295).

Before 1980, there were no trained, black personnel working as senior managers in the Bantustans (p.297). Bantu education and the limited opportunity for black South Africans to obtain tertiary education supplied few skilled managers to the Homeland administrations. Further, the nurturing of a skilled, black, bureaucratic class was a perceived threat to the apartheid state, and to the privilege of the white civil service. In the 1980s, apartheid reformers attempted to deal with the major human resources deficit in the homelands, and counter the perception that increased black employment was a threat to the survival of the state. Their efforts were unsuccessful. Yet the facade of the homelands as independent states had to be maintained. This required the active collaboration of a group of black, local, political elite (p.297).

As the apartheid state progressively ceded power to the homelands, so the Bantu Authority System provided more opportunities for the accumulation of wealth to the traditional elites as well as to senior bureaucrats and South African companies. Significantly, chiefs received official salaries and occupied strategic positions that often fused judicial and administrative functions—in what Mahmood Mamdani famously described as a ‘clenched fist’ of indirect rule (Mamdani, 1996). Access to land and control over licenses and the granting of concessions, in particular, created huge opportunities for corruption.

In a historical analysis of corruption in South Africa since the Transvaal Republic, John Hyslop, drawing upon Roger Southall’s *South Africa’s Transkei: The Political Economy of an Independent Bantustan* (1982), notes that, ‘Homeland government became a by-word for corruption and incompetence. Official extortion in relation to everything from the issuing of trading permits upwards was rife. Homeland leaders presided over massive patronage networks’ (Hyslop, 2005, p.783).

Nepotism flourished. In KwaZulu-Natal, for example, those with royal lineage had privileged access to the civil service (Picard, 2005, p.297). In short, the very organisation of the Homeland system, as well as the reason for its emergence, discouraged the establishment of predictable, impartial and rule-driven bureaucracies.

The resultant, ineffectual state of the bureaucracy (lacking in technical and managerial capacity, often corrupt, and lacking in adherence to formal procedures), further entrenched a culture of patronage. Individuals and communities turned to accessing state resources by drawing of personal networks within the bureaucracy and traditional leadership (Gibbs, 2011). In this context political brokers emerged (some of them traditional leaders), with later consequences for the manner in which local government politics played out in post-apartheid South Africa.

### **Transition to Democracy**

At the time of South Africa’s transition to democracy, there were nearly 650,000 homeland officials, often with rudimentary qualifications, formed and apprenticed in dysfunctional administrations that operated less according to

standing orders and impersonal processes and more through patronage and personal rule.

What was to be done with these officials in the democratic period?

Staff was needed to administer the rural areas of the country. While the ANC had a number of highly educated and trained leaders, few had experience in running a modern state, and certainly insufficient numbers to populate the administration. Further, argues Hyslop, the ANC now required the political support of the black, middle-class administrators of the former homelands (Hyslop, 2005). The homeland elite had strong bargaining power in the negotiations of the early nineties (Picard, 2005, p.301), becoming a strange ally to the white, apartheid civil service in seeking job security in the new administration.

The dilemma facing the ANC was compounded by the situation in public service outside the homelands. In 1992, a survey of senior public servants in South Africa proper showed that 80% of them were Afrikaans-speaking and 77% supported the National Party (Picard, 2005, p. 302). There were only two, black persons in senior management (at the lowest grade) in the Department of Finance. Even the Department of Development Planning, which was in charge, in part, for the provision of public goods to black South Africans, had only six, black senior managers. All of them I were Indian (Picard, 2005, p.302).

How could such a staff complement be trusted to execute the new, democratic government's mandate?

Homeland officials were, thus, largely retained when they were merged back into the new provincial governments of the democratic period. Black, homeland officials were progressively promoted as the ANC administration privileged Affirmative Action and demographic change in the transformation of the apartheid-era public service.

'After 1994,' Picard writes, 'affirmative action needs were quickly met through the integration of homeland administrators into the new provincial system. Testing and the establishment of qualification criteria defined by the government, which many advocates of civil service reform saw as necessary in

order to address the past limitations of the homeland system, were simply not implemented' (Picard, 2005, p.307).

### **Contemporary Significance**

There were several, damaging consequences of this arrangement. In the first place, apartheid-era corruption continued. In discussing corruption in contemporary South Africa, Hyslop writes, 'Most central government departments have shown a fair degree of functionality in the new era, and corruption has been relatively contained' (Hyslop, 2005, p.785). However, he notes that the nine, new, provincial administrations were extensively afflicted: 'Here there was a clear correlation between the level of systematic corruption [in the new provincial administrations] and the degree of administrative continuity with the old homeland administrations' (p.785).

Second, the service delivery improvements that were supposed to follow from rationalisation and integration did not occur. This has had further consequences for the nature of state-society relationships. In post-apartheid South Africa a far wider set of groups in the former homelands now come into contact with the state (Gibbs, 2011). Yet, the state continued, in the 1990s, to be ineffectual in providing services to a broad base of rural citizens in areas such as the Transkei. Tim Gibbs argues that, coupled with the political culture of patronage entrenched under the homeland system, local ANC politicians at municipal level have stepped in to play a role in political and economic brokering for poor, local communities. With expanded, development projects in the rural areas implemented in 2000s facilitated by a healthier fiscus, further space opened up for local officials to play this role. Whilst this has provided a number of impoverished communities with access to resources and infrastructure projects undertaken by provincial government, it has perpetuated neo-patrimonial styles of politics in these areas (Gibbs, 2011).

In the early years of the transition from apartheid to the democratic dispensation, the focus was on political settlement and stability. Understandably perhaps, less attention was paid to the way in which new institutions of government would be developed and structured, and how these changes might deal with the legacy of the homeland system.

A 1992 planning document written by Job Mokgoro pointed to the problems that the new Government of National Unity would inherit from the homelands. Mokgoro noted that, ‘little could be done with the homeland civil services, because no preparation had been made for training and retraining homeland bureaucrats’ (Mokgoro, unpublished paper in Picard, 2005, p.299).

Since coming to power in 1994, however, the ANC government has been a forceful agent on the post-apartheid scene. This is, especially, true in respect to the reform of the South African public service. In line with broader international trends in public administration (in Britain, the US and New Zealand, for example), a number of public sector reform initiatives in South Africa were shaped by the philosophy associated with New Public Management (NPM). Proponents of NPM sought to change what they saw as bureaucratic, law-driven administrations into an innovative and adaptive public service that could respond to increasingly globalised and complex societies.

In South Africa, large areas of the apartheid state could be characterised as, ‘bureaucratic, law-driven, hierarchical, multi-layered, departmentally fragmented, inward-oriented, racial Oligarchy’ (Fitzgerald, 2005, p.512)—characteristics the adoption of NPM sought to change. Whilst this characterised the national departments of the Pretoria administration, to what extent was the administration of the former homelands—now largely incorporated into the provincial administrations of the Eastern Cape, North West, Limpopo and KZN—‘bureaucratic, law driven and hierarchical’? We have seen how the bureaucracy functioned more through informal procedure and networks than a rule-driven hierarchy.

NPM ‘techniques’ were neither applied wholesale or uncritically by the ANC government, especially, in relation to its political roots in ‘neoliberal’ critiques of social democracy. In South Africa, however, its adoption took too little cognizance of recent history, especially the nature of former homeland administrations. How could public sector reforms (such as an increasing focus on the skill and discretion of public sector management) be meaningfully embedded in these provinces?

Picard notes that, ‘Focus in the provinces should have been on organisational development and capacity building, particularly amongst former homeland

leaders' (Picard, 2005, p.308). Yet, even the apparently neutral intervention of 'capacity building' and skills development may be highly political, as Karl von Holdt shows in a discussion of health provision in South African public hospitals. (Von Holdt, 2010, p.12).

A serious consequence of the wholesale incorporation of the former homeland administration into post-apartheid administration was that that Affirmative Action was seen to coincide with the deterioration of public service. Like the wide-spread recognition of the HIV/Aids epidemic at the beginning of the democratic period, establishing a shocking coincidence between freedom and death (Posel, 2005 and Steinberg, 2008), so the deterioration of the quality of public service apparently coincided with the inclusion of blacks as public service managers and officials.

It is little wonder, therefore, that in the current situation, questions of skill and training in the public service have become so politicised, resulting, as Karl Von Holdt shows in respect of the nursing profession, to an 'ambivalence to skill' (Von Holdt, 2010).

This politicisation is likely a major obstacle to the implementation of minimum, compulsory qualifications for public servants in South Africa and an associated national school of training to provide them. Yet, racist charges of black incompetence and the defensive reactions they meet in government lead us away from one of the key issues.

What would have been an appropriate model of governance for the provinces, in relation to their recent histories? The failure to think beyond descriptions of the public service or beyond normative arguments or beyond training pedagogies has often lead policy-makers away from providing answers suited to South Africa's particular history.

### **Conclusion**

Inquiry into the performance of institutions cannot simply be reduced to questions of leadership or to techniques of organisation. We have suggested that insufficient attention has been paid, both in policy design, and in writing on the state and public administration, to the history of the South African public

sector, and in particular to the specific histories of the institutions it comprises. What ruptures and continuities, for example, have been created in the contemporary South African public sector (organisational culture, norms and values, for example) with the administration of the pre-apartheid state? How are we accounting for the differentiated experiences of provincial and local government?

This paper has considered the state of the public sector in South Africa in light of the particular and largely exceptional history of the transition from apartheid. It has suggested that constraints, especially in provincial and local government are further related to the unwitting effects of compromises made during the original constitutional settlement.

It has argued for a form a scholarship and analysis of government that pays attention to the recent history of the country and its institutions. The failure to do so means the borrowing of models and solutions (best practice!), for example, largely drawn from other people's histories and circumstances.

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