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CHALLENGES FACING SENIOR PUBLIC SERVANTS IN A PLURAL SOCIETY

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The primary aim of this article is to examine some of the challenges that are likely to face senior administrators in the public service as countries in the Commonwealth Caribbean introduce what Hood (1991) commonly referred to as New Public Management. New Public Management (NPM) as Christensen (2001) pointed out has three interwoven change elements: substantial horizontal and vertical specialization, substituting an integrated sector model for a fragmented functional model and the extensive use of contracts. All three elements will have implications for the nature of public service delivery and the tasks that public officers will be expected to perform. However, these tasks will be even more daunting in plural societies. This article examines the ‘new’ roles expected of administrators as governments commit themselves to adopting NPM and the special difficulties that are likely to arise in plural societies divided by racial and cultural cleavages. Apart from the emphasis on competition and contracting out, it is evident that one critical challenge facing senior public servants in a plural society is how they deal with the group and communal pull. This article will examine the challenges facing senior officers in the twin-island Republic Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies.
CHALLENGES FACING SENIOR PUBLIC SERVANTS IN PLURAL SOCIETIES

It is generally the case that in plural societies, the public services and government are usually dominated by one powerful group. This was so under colonial rule and in countries such as Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana these conditions exist even today. Under such arrangements it was to be expected that the formulation of policy and the delivery of goods and services were biased towards rewarding the dominant group. In the post-independence period and the introduction of New Public Management measures during the 1980s it was clear that the old system of public administration in these countries could not continue. New Public Management, a set of ideas and practices largely imported from the private sector signaled a shift in paradigm where merit-based considerations would be replaced by performance criteria. There was also a focus on output rather than input, and competition became a major feature of reform. This new model of Public Management, therefore, presented a number of challenges for senior administrators who were required to manage the 'new' re-engineered organizations. However, a more formidable challenge would be presented to senior administrators in plural societies since group interests would now have to be replaced by broader societal goals and citizen demand. For these administrators, apart from the challenges in adopting a new managerial mode of service delivery, a change in attitudes and behaviour will be required as well. This article will therefore look at the challenges that will face senior administrators in the islands of Trinidad and Tobago, as it tries to come to grips with the problems and challenges of New Public Management and its aftermath.

New Public Management (NPM) has to date been one of the most discussed topics in the field of public administration reform (Levine, 1988; Grey and Jenkins, 1995; Rhodes, 1991; Walker, 1996; Mascarenhas, 1993). While writers have focused on a number of countries, the debates on New Public Management have essentially identified two broad themes; advancing explanations for the universal adoption of New Public Management or an examination of the domestic environments in which New Public Management was introduced. In a few cases some writers have focused on a changing leadership role. However, this literature has been selective and the
major emphasis has been on the role of the cabinet ministers or top elites (Christensen, 2001; Laegreid, 2000; Theakston and Fry, 1989; Marsh, Richards and Smith, 2000; Chapman, 1994; Hogwood, 1995). There has also been little attempt to date to investigate the challenges that will face senior public officers in the developed countries and even less so in the developing countries more particularly plural societies such as Fiji, Suriname, Guyana and Trinidad.

Trinidad and Tobago has justly been described as a plural society since these islands comprise two major ethnic groups, namely Africans and East Indians, each equally balanced and with a long history of rivalry in politics. The concept of a 'plural' society, it should be recalled was first formulated by Furnivall (1948, p.446) who defined these societies as follows:

Comprising two or more elements of social order which live side by side, yet without one political unit.... In a plural society, there is no common will except possibly in matters of supreme importance. In such societies, people hold on to their distinctive cultures, language and beliefs and there is little intermixing across racial lines. The different ethnic sections are held together by a political structure superimposed by a colonial power. Distinct from the western societies, the plural societies are not based upon common values and they lack consensual basis.

The nature of these and similar societies have, however, overtime produced two different types of elites, the administrators (who control political and or administrative power) and the entrepreneurs (who are excluded from effective political participation). While from a normative perspective, the nature of plural societies necessitate that ethnic elites work towards establishing a genuine multiracial society with acceptable mechanisms for defusing and controlling ethnic conflicts it has been found, generally, that ethnic security concerns and the desire to maintain political domination dictate that ethnic leaders, especially the intellectual or elite class, act in accordance with communal pulls. In addition, elites tend to prioritize and pursue interests which are meant to enhance the security and welfare of their own group. In other words, the collective good of the society is often sacrificed for private or ethnic interests. Thus, one can argue, that irrespective of the administrative structure or systems that are in place in public bureaucracies in these societies, to a large extent the group that occupies the top positions in the public service, determines the output and kind of public
service delivery. This situation obtained largely because the political parties are ethnic based and therefore when they formed a government problems about the limits and nature of public service reform are bound to arise.

It was found in Trinidad and Tobago, that during the period 1956 - 1986 that the African segment monopolized not only the political arena but to a large extent exercised control as administrators in the public services, the police services, and the armed forces. It was not surprising, therefore, that when East Indians complained of discrimination in not only the employment policies that were in place in the public sector, including promotion to high public offices, but were largely critical of the government for what they believed to be inequity in the distribution of state resources, in particular the distribution of housing, the award of scholarships, the establishment of community centres and funding to non-governmental organizations.

To a large extent these claims were substantiated when in 1992, a study conducted by The Centre of Ethnic Studies, which was established at the University of The West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad, found that there was gross under-representation of the Indian group at the top level of the public services. Data gathered and presented in this report revealed that in 1992, while East Indians occupied 35.6% of the top positions in the public service, compared with 64.4% for Africans. The Report also noted, though, that so far as professional positions were concerned, East Indians reached and surpassed the equity ratio in areas of medicine and finance. Here the criteria are clearly technical. However, the retention of power legitimately by one ethnic group is understandable in the case of plural societies and is what has often been described as a parentela relationship (Peters, 1995). What obtains is that one ethnic group loyal to the political party in power largely benefits from patronage and becomes the dominant group in the bureaucracy. Also the age-old principle of seniority ensured that the African descended group would inherit the power from the departing colonials.

Yet at the outset, the bureaucracy in Trinidad and Tobago was largely established
along
’ neutral lines.’ Like most of the former British colonies, these islands had inherited a civil service that was based on some basic principles. One of the chief features of this bureaucracy was the centralized hierarchical structure that was adopted. This essentially “Weberian” structure had a number of distinct advantages, especially for plural societies. For example, control mechanisms such as Public Service Commissions ensured that there was a distinct separation between the political and the administrative spheres. One expected advantage of such a principle or model would have been that equality and neutrality in the allocation of rewards and services would have prevailed.

Another important feature of the public services in these countries was the concept of a permanent career civil service. It was based on the premise that a complex organization of people could serve different political masters and render loyal and effective service to each, given the measures that were in place to protect their independence. It also implied, as Ryan (1972) suggested in his book, Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago, that while departments and ministries accumulated a stock of technical and managerial knowledge, their professional integrity demanded that in matters of policy they would support competently and loyally, the will of the government of the day in all its diverse aspects. The maintenance of a permanent career civil service also implied that public officers would make it their business to try to understand the philosophy, policies and attitudes of the current government and would point out pitfalls which the minister might have overlooked. It was also believed that in the career civil service, civil servants, because of their long experience, would guide the minister and having advised him would accept his opinion and wholeheartedly implement sound measures to carry out policies.

It was evident, however, that while institutions were introduced to ensure ‘neutrality’ and to define clear levels of responsibility in the public sector, to a large extent these objectives were not achieved in Trinidad and Tobago. Mills (1970), a Jamaican writer, has rightly suggested that the failure of the British model in the Caribbean was largely due to ecological considerations. For him, the
apathy of the civil society born out of a history of non-participation in public affairs and decision-making was the distinguishing characteristic of slave and indentured societies. What Mills (1970) was suggesting, then, was that while the model of administration left by the departing colonials was meant to ensure a neutral, impartial and efficient public service, it was clear from the reports of the various commissions which were set up over-time, that these objectives were not achieved. Rather public services, state-owned enterprises and other state-owned agencies initially served the interest of the political elites in power and their followers. It followed, then, that since the African descended group was in power for over thirty years and given the veto power of the Prime Minister over senior appointments, it was to be expected that that group would come to dominate the public service in later years.

Indeed, it was evident, particularly in the case of Trinidad and Tobago, that decision-making was largely exercised by the Cabinet rather than at the level of the individual ministries or agencies. What was found was that decision-making was highly centralized and the issue of over-centralization was raised in a number of reports that were commissioned by the state. The O’Neil Lewis Report of 1964 for instance stated:

*The process of decision-making has slowed down significantly since Independence. Practically every decision, no matter how simple, now seems to involve the personal approval of the highest level of officers and not infrequently, of the highest executive authority itself (para. 59). .. There is a high degree of centralization of authority particularly since 1966....... Cabinet following the tradition of the previous Executive Council continues to deal, not primarily with broad policy formulation, but also with a large number of details.....*

In addition, O’Neil Lewis, a former Head of the public service, suggested that some senior civil servants seemed to have adopted the view that the substitution of ‘ministers’ for expatriate decision-makers was all that was needed to render the former 'colonial' civil service appropriate to the requirements of the new state. He observed that in many cases the best possible advice was not always available to ministers. He pointed out that managers did not have the knowledge or the capacity to carry out their functions and in other instances were ‘careless.’ To a large extent, although some measure of training was introduced during the period
1956 - 1986, there was little or no improvement in service delivery in the public services and the public services continued to be plagued by delays, red tape and cost over-runs. It was also found that there was a lack of accountability and the regulations and instructions governing public sector accounting were out-dated.

By the 1980s, however, the decline in the prices of primary commodities which constituted the principal export of many countries of the Commonwealth Caribbean, as well as the expansion of economic activities, led to budgetary and external balance of payment deficits. Consequently, most countries of the Caribbean had no alternative but to seek funding from International Lending Agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The major conditionality of these agencies was the introduction of structural adjustment policies aimed at developing sustainable growth. However, La Guerre (1994) noted that such policies were not confined only to economic transformation of the country but involved corresponding changes in the political and administrative systems as well.

During the period 1991 - 1995, therefore, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago embarked on comprehensive reform of the public sector under the umbrella of New Public Management programmes. In 1992 a Task Force was established with a specific objective to make recommendations for the de-centralization of Human Resource Management functions. Some reforms that were proposed and partly implemented in Trinidad and Tobago during the period 1992 - 2003 included:

- Privatization of state-owned enterprises
- Contracting out of state services
- Decentralization of central personnel agencies
- The establishment of Human Resource Management Agencies.
- The proposal of a new Job Classification Scheme
- The introduction of computerized systems for payroll and personnel
- The introduction of new technology including advertising government services via web sites.
- A new financial system
- The introduction of a Performance Appraisal System
- Training directed at senior and middle level managers

All these reforms constituted the standard prescription of New Public Management philosophies.
As Figure 1 below illustrates, then, the reforms that were introduced in the public sector of Trinidad and Tobago reflected the central tenets of New Public Management. For ease of reference, these tenets could be summarized under five broad categories: structural re-organization, an emphasis on output, the introduction of human resource systems and practices and the introduction of new technology. There could be no doubt, then, that these new reforms would present a number of challenges for senior administrators.

**Figure 1: Central Features of NPM and the implications for senior managers**

<table>
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<th>Features of NPM</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Structural Changes</strong></td>
<td>2. <strong>Emphasis on output</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Privatization</td>
<td>• Limited role for national government in domestic affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Contracting Out</td>
<td>• Culture must change to one of negotiation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Decentralization</td>
<td>• Accountability</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Creation of Agencies</td>
<td>• Regulatory control</td>
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<td>• Establishment of HR Units</td>
<td>• Mechanisms to ensure transparency</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Human resource management</strong></td>
<td><strong>Expectation of new and better services by the public</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Introduction of new technology</strong></td>
<td><strong>Introduce mechanisms for motivating staff</strong></td>
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It was evident, however, that the New Public Management reforms that were introduced in Trinidad and Tobago were similar to those that were introduced in other countries more particularly the United Kingdom, The United States, New Zealand and Australia. Therefore administrators in both the developed and developing countries were faced with fairly standard challenges. In the past decade, for example, senior administrators were faced with ‘redefined’ challenges requiring new competencies and skills because of dramatic economic, demographic, ideological and political changes in the environment. For example, the devolution of programs and the wave of privatization that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s had a dramatic effect on service delivery and the respective responsibilities of national, state, local government and of the private sector was in the midst of a ‘sorting-out’ process. Ciglar (1989) suggested that with this new shift in paradigm, the challenge that faced senior administrators was the need for strong leadership, imagination and resourcefulness at all levels of government. To her, these attributes were necessary to deal with the crosscurrents of centralization, decentralization, deregulation and devolution.

Yet as Walsh and Leigland (1989) clearly pointed out, more than the development of leadership skills were required given this new market-based paradigm. Rather as they noted, the purchase of goods and services from private enterprises was a task that governments were not traditionally organized to perform. Administrators, given this new thrust would therefore be required to design and manage public procurement strategies and at the same time develop the capacity to function effectively in the market place. Yet tensions between flexible business practices and prescribed administrative procedures were a constant source of policy contradiction.
In practice, as these authors observed, and was clearly the case of Trinidad and Tobago as well, private companies put less emphasis on formal competitive bidding, on documented procedures and on containing conflicts of interest. Managers in these organizations would have built in incentives backed up by corporate audit systems. They would have in place already existing procedures for hiring and the dimensions of accountability were related to results. In public service organizations, on the other hand, the public administrator was often a permanent career public servant who was required to follow prescribed processes. Thus, these administrators often had to answer for results - in legislative hearings, in audit reports, in departmental reviews or in the press. Therefore in comparison with business enterprises, government agencies were bound to administrative due process, which encompassed established parameters, administrative regulations and prior reviews by staff agencies.

The paradox, then, was because the public procurement systems needed balance between procedural accountability and flexibility to act successfully in the market place, public administrators involved in procurement must be able to analyze market sources for various goods and services, attract competitive suppliers, and evaluate products. In addition, they were required to have the skills to negotiate at arm’s length, develop performance-oriented specification, manage and monitor contracts and resolve differences with dispatch. A major limitation, however, was the public procurement system had also to meet procedural requirements that often included complex social and political goals. In Trinidad and Tobago, administrators were clearly not up to the task.

Other writers have suggested that the fiscal environment was forcing administrators to become more self-reliant. They suggested that because of the reduction of allocations in the public sector, pressures would develop for more cooperation with the private sector. Indeed, because the role of the state was reduced in what some writers referred to as third party government, government by proxy or privatization (Salamon, 1986; Seidman and Gilmour, 1986; Kettl, 1986), what was emerging was that intermediaries were now responsible for actually producing goods and services. What was evident, then, was the
administrators’ environment was a fluctuating one which crossed over from the public to the private to the nonprofit sector. The lines of demarcation were becoming blurred. The major challenge to these administrators was to learn how to provide services without actually producing them. Yet, learning to provide such services required other inputs and controls as well: mechanisms to ensure accountability, curb corruption and to ensure transparency were critical since power was no longer centralized but was shared with other parties.

Technological and economic changes also required a re-tooling by senior administrators. Indeed, administrators in both the private and the public sectors had to deal with changes in science and technology as an ongoing phenomenon. The task of the senior administrator involved the analysis of the social impacts of the new science and technologies so as to anticipate potential problems, minimize risk and maximize benefits. On the other hand, though, it was recognized that the increasing use of computers and information processing in most areas of government administration also created concern among administrators with respect to sabotage, theft of services, property crimes, financial crimes, individual privacy, security of data and the accuracy of data banks (Mandell, 1984).

In the case of plural societies such as Trinidad and Tobago, on the other hand, these challenges were exacerbated by the relationship between government and administration. As was pointed out earlier, the African descended segment had been in power for almost thirty years and the public service therefore as a result became oriented toward the interest of the dominant group. Given the model of government, namely the Westminster model and the fact that the political parties were ethnic-based meant that the Indian group became the out-group.

The introduction of New Public Management practices and procedures therefore meant a contraction of the state and the potential award of a number of contracts to persons in the private sector. To a large extent the quasi-markets that emerged during the 1990s were very different from the neo-classical markets that formerly obtained. While there had always been some type of contracting out in the delivery of public services, from the period 1991 there was a radical departure from the
traditional concept of a contract. A number of new processes were now required including the establishment of internal arbitration and perhaps more importantly the determination of pricing regime with providers directed to calculate prices on a ‘full cost’ basis with no planned cross subsidization. Yet, the regulatory control that was required under contracting arrangements were not introduced in Trinidad and Tobago and in a number of cases, more recently what was commonly referred to as The Community Environment and Enhancement Programme (CPEP) where more than forty four million Trinidad and Tobago dollars was awarded to private contractors, it was alleged that contractors were all affiliated with the ruling party. (The Trinidad Guardian,, February 23, 2003.) Contracting, therefore, was an issue with very serious political implications and patronage generally had to be considered in the distribution of power between the two differing groups.

Senior administrators, accordingly, were caught between the demands of their political masters on one hand and the established regulations of the public services on the other. As public service reports over the years have indicated in the case of Trinidad and Tobago, in a number of cases senior administrators generally gave in to political demands since they were afraid of political reprisals. Whether this would now change under the ‘new’ method of administration is still left to be seen. Over the years, too, and based on the experience of colonial rule, in the case of Trinidad and Tobago and indeed in many ex-colonial territories as well, a public service culture has developed in which security of tenure, low productivity, a culture of shifting files and a sense of ethnic proprietorship has developed. This ‘proprietorship’ seemed to be accurately summed in the views of an Afro-Trinidadian public servant when interviewed by researchers from the Centre for Ethnic Studies. He noted:

We have built a lifestyle, a culture that is rooted in the administrative establishment. Indo-Trinidadians have built their lifestyle on entrepreneurship. In addition, they have been able to keep intact an Indo-Trinidadian culture, grounded in family, community and Indian religions. They are now the dominant population element in the rural agricultural areas and hold a major influence in the industrial south. They dominate in many professions and control a large percentage of the retail trade in Trinidad and Tobago. Moving into our sphere will bring about an imbalance in economic distribution. It will create a disequilibrium and lead to an increase in rivalry, hatred and fear between the two major ethnic
A major challenge for senior administrators, then, would be to change this culture - to make it more proactive, concerned with results and driven by performance criteria.

In terms of human resource management programs, despite the emphasis on merit and performance criteria, and the need to have persons perceived to be loyal in critical positions meant that in practice, seniority continued to play a major role. The Service Commissions themselves were accused of complicity in these practices and recent court cases have tended to vindicate charges of racial discrimination.

As far as one can envisage, then, the challenges for senior administrators in the public services will in the future have to do with transparency in appointments and promotions, productivity and equality in implementation quite apart from other considerations such as the relevant competence and skills, e-governance and a change of corporate culture. Ethnic rivalries and suspicions had in the past led to a mentality which allowed persons of low productivity to be protected. New systems of evaluations will have to be created and given the suspicions, historical rivalries and memories, transparency and accountability will be some of the most formidable challenges facing senior administrators in a plural society such as Trinidad and Tobago.
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