

Pressure on public service is increasing

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This year's general election in SA set aside critical debate on the functioning of the public service. This was unfortunate, given the substance and complexity accompanying discussion of its transformation. Political and public opinion often sustain deep examination of public administration, preferring to exchange views on the basis of policy soundbites and a degree of preconceived bureaucratic bias.

This puts the public service in an unfair situation of sorts as it will ultimately bear the brunt of increasing pressure from the electorate to respond to and fulfil expectations raised through electioneering and public perception. This process is, however, embedded in how the election game and public debate tend to function.

How better can we interpret public service performance? In the recently launched book *State of the Nation SA 2004-2005*, I emphasised that given prevailing socioeconomic cleavages defining post-apartheid SA what is required is a public service that actively contributes to the public's material and psychological development according to needs that are wider in scope and depth.

Although service delivery dominates public service discourse the present cadre of public servants is expected to do more than deliver services efficiently and effectively. They are expected to continuously examine and respond to circumstances that constrain utilisation and access to services, which goes beyond redressing material imbalances to a kind of psychological rehabilitation of the relationship between public service and public, retarded by years of alienation under apartheid and resurrected from time to time since 1994.

Perhaps we need to rethink the sufficiency of reconstituting the public service as a "network of delivery-oriented public service providers", where challenges seem to overemphasise bureaucratic efficiencies such as implementation, co-ordination and integration of services (Parliamentary monitoring group reference to public service commission submission to Parliament, 2003).

Former Eastern Cape premier Makhenkesi Stofile said recently the public service should not try to blindly mimic features of the private sector such as its drive for productive efficiencies. Rather, it should be more sophisticated in how it defines this, preferably by first reclaiming its own distinct features such as a nonprofit ethos, commitment to protect the vulnerable and the environment, where harnessing centrifugal societal forces for desired social change will be complex, difficult, but perhaps because of this more meaningful.

This is a sobering perspective when injected into current public service issues. The recent public servant strike was conveyed as driven by quantifiably acceptable compromises between state as employer and public service unions as employee, and did not appear to go beyond the level of service inconvenience for the public.

Conspicuously underrepresented in this debate was a serious consideration of how bargaining positions emerged out of — and could potentially affect — the services being provided, in terms of how it could best respond to an ethos driven by desired social and economic objectives.

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