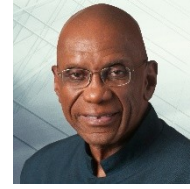




Economic Letter April 2021



We Have Not Yet Turned the Corner on Public Sector Performance

Why is it that, despite the many talented, knowledgeable, committed and forward-thinking Barbadians they employ, our public services stumble from crisis to crisis? Old systems fail, and attempts to modernise them actually make things worse. We are unable to devise and implement permanent solutions to inadequacies of water supply, waste management and road maintenance. The QEH, once the envy of the Eastern Caribbean, is hopelessly outdated; our legal systems, once reputed to be the best in the Caribbean, are now among the region's most inefficient. The many initiatives in recent years to modernise technologies used by the public sector have too often resulted in worse performance. There can be no denying that public sector performance has been getting worse and worse, and that we have not yet reversed this trend.

The management of any modern economy is a difficult and complex matter, requiring many specialised skills from several disciplines, covering the whole gamut of economic activity. In the models of government that are taught in schools and universities, the public service is staffed by persons who possess the required training and experience in all aspects of the design, implementation and assessment of public sector performance. The service is headed by skilled managers of no known political allegiance, whose job it is to implement efficiently the policies that are decided upon by the Parliament.

The Prime Minister and the members of Parliament cannot be expected to know how to manage something as complex as a modern government. Their job is to propose policies that will contribute most to improving the livelihoods and wellbeing of the people they represent. Democracy works best when the members of Parliament and the public service appreciate the fundamental difference in the responsibilities to the public of parliamentarians and public servants: the Parliament presents proposals that they believe to be in the best interests of the society; the public service has the responsibility for the implementation of those policies, and accounting to the Parliament for their performance.

The challenges in putting this model into action are immediately apparent: the policies desired by the Parliament will inevitably exceed the resources available to Government. What policies are to be pursued, and what is to be left out?

It was our first Prime Minister, Mr Errol Barrow, who brought this problem to popular attention when he described the public service as "an army of occupation", bent on frustrating the popular will. He took the first steps to reform the public sector, setting in motion a process which over the decades has caused the Parliament to invade the space of the professional public sector managers. Subsequent actions, including hiving off the water authority, the QEH, the BRA and others, has accelerated the process. Today's public sector managers play no role in the design of public policies, as far as one can tell.

The reform that is needed in public management must redress this situation. Public policies must be designed by competent, experienced professionals, if they are to be fit for purpose. The members of Parliament are drawn from the whole range of knowledge and skills in society; they are chosen, not for their skills, but because their constituents trust them to best represent their interests. Their job is to offer policy proposals; whether those proposals will achieve the desired objectives, and how and in what form policies are to be implemented, are the responsibility of the public service.

There is no perfect way to manage the interface between the people's representatives and the skilled and experienced management of the public service. In an ideal system they are given equal weight: the policies proposed by the Parliament are researched and analysed by the public sector, using all available data and relevant information; a report is prepared for adoption by the Parliament, showing how the policy might best be implemented, including any necessary modifications and qualifications. If the proposal is not feasible, the report would suggest alternative policies to achieve the objectives set out by the Parliament.

The British left us a workable version of that balance at Independence. It could be argued, as Mr Barrow believed, that the balance was tilted too much in favour of the public sector managers, and this slowed the implementation of socially desirable policies. What is obvious is that the design and implementation of policies have been taken over by politicians, and that the public sector managers, where the skill and experience reside, have no role in the process.

This problem must be recognised and addressed. Only then will Barbados turn the corner on public sector performance.

*Previous Economic Letters may be found at **DeLisleWorrell.com**.*