



J.N. Boshoff Memorial Lecture Delivered by the SALGA President, Cllr Parks Tau, at the University of the Free State

'What is the significance of public service in nation-building within a democracy?'

17 October 2018

Master of ceremonies,
Acting Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, Prof Hendri Kroukamp,
Vice-Rector for Institutional Change, Prof Puleng LenkaBula,
Acting Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, Prof Philippe Burger,
Head of the Department of Public Administration and Management, Dr Lyndon du Plessis
Staff and students,
Distinguished guests, and
Ladies and gentlemen:

Introduction

Allow me to preface my lecture by expressing sincere gratitude to the University of the Free State (UFS), the Faculty of Economic Sciences, and in particular, to the Department of Public Administration, for extending this gracious invitation to deliver the 2018 JN Boshoff Memorial Lecture.

Although I have to say, my assigned lecture title presents somewhat of a daunting task, that is, being asked to speak about the very loaded topic of the public service, nation-building and democracy. Nevertheless, it is a title I readily agreed to speak to given the magnitude of challenges our country is presented with. Still, I do believe that these are challenges we can certainly surmount and overcome.

The backdrop to discussing the notion of a 'public service,' the practice of 'nation-building,' and institutionalising 'democracy' is our very own blueprint, the National Development Plan (NDP). The NDP, in essence, aims to "eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030", by among other means, "building capabilities, enhancing the capacity of the state, and promoting leadership and partnerships throughout society".

Ladies and gentlemen,

If I may be so bold to say, since the delivery of the 2018 State of the Nation Address (SoNA), South Africa has turned a corner towards a positive trajectory. This is said in recognition of the example – in word and deed – set by the State President, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa in his encouragement that all sectors in society need to integrate or synchronise their work towards a commonly shared vision.

As he said at this year's SoNA: "Our country has entered a period of change. While change can produce uncertainty, even anxiety, it also offers great opportunities for renewal and revitalisation, and for progress".

And so, in the existential task of seeking to eliminate poverty and reducing inequality, not only is leadership critical, but even more so, is the crucial role of a capable and developmental state in providing policy direction, regulatory certainty, and institutional mandate to meet the set targets and stated deliverables.

Public service in relation to efficiency

In this regard, the first issue I wish to emphasise is the link between a developmental local government and an efficient and effective public service.

If you recall, at the genesis of our democratic journey, the White Paper on Local Government identified four (4) interrelated characteristics of developmental local government, namely:

- Maximising social development and economic growth,
- Integrating and coordinating,
- Democratising development, empowering and redistributing, and
- Leading and learning.

These four characteristics or founding principles, are a covenant, within the context of local government; the state has entered into with society to provide essential services which only the state can, and should, provide. They include fundamental public services the state is obliged to discharge like providing, within the local government context, basic services such as the provision of water, sanitation, etc., and within its broader national context, providing safety to its communities in areas such as the defence and policing.

The essence of this covenant, is that the state has a duty to provide services, but extends beyond only providing services. It also includes the responsibility to provide such in a manner that promotes equitable access to public services within a prescribed set of standards. We therefore have to move beyond merely stating the principle of *Batho Pele*. It requires of us to appreciate the role of the state in promoting equity and development in all communities.

This is a reason why the *Batho Pele* charter is an important reminder about public service standards, turn-around times, openness and transparency, and consultation about the quality and levels of services citizens and communities are entitled to receive. In turn, the covenant also talks about the responsibilities of citizen and communities to safeguard public property and make certain public officials are held in check plus accountable. This covenant therefore goes both ways. It is about a relationship of mutual interest and benefit, and one that promotes both community and nationhood.

Colleagues and friends,

There is room to argue that, when our national economy enjoyed its highest rating from Moody's in the 2008/09 financial year, we were well on course to reach the objectives of meeting our set targets. As we set out to return the country to those levels of investor confidence and promote growth and development, the state must assume it's rightful role as leader and organiser of different stakeholders.

Through effective policies, legislation and investments, the state should direct the country in a manner where such growth and development is accessed by all communities, and

borrowing as I usually do, from Amartya Sen, see 'Development as Freedom', and therefore development as a means to achieve nation building.

There can be no gainsaying the fact that there are serious challenges with, and in, our public service. There can be no denial that the nation-building programme, espoused by our country's founding fathers, former President Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, it is a programme that is fraying at the seams due in large part, by limitations in the state in assuming its role as the primary organiser and leader in pursuit of our development objectives.

I say this in deference to the motto of the University of the Free State, which counsels, *In Veritate Sapientiae Lux*, meaning that, 'In Truth is the Light of Wisdom'.

What can be done, therefore, to repurpose our public service and reboot nation-building so that we practically implement the principles espoused in the Preamble to the Constitution. The Constitution urges us to seek to "improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person" so that South Africa can "take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations".

As you know, there can be no doubt that nation-building and service delivery are inherently linked and interdependent for the very survival and strengthening of our nascent democracy.

The Nation-building diagnostic report, drafted in 2011 by the National Planning Commission (NPC) says, nation-building is critical if we are to inculcate accountability and responsible behaviour in all of society. This is more so in the current period where the trust index is low between citizens and the state, between industry and government, and in the state-civil society nexus.

The prevalence of a trust deficit in the body politic is a reason we have such high incidents of social, political, and economic divisions highlighted in the urban-rural dichotomy, rich and poor classes, privileged and underprivileged institutions of basic and higher learning.

In the absence of public trust, our society is unable to reach consensus on critical areas of public interest and reaching comprehensive implementation on the NDP objectives. As a result, the major fault-lines defining South Africa – of poverty and inequality – are exacerbated as evidenced by incidents of racialised discrimination and lawlessness which indicate that the moral centre is not holding.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The survival of our fledgling democracy hinges on resourcing, capacitating, and consolidating the public service.

As a representative of the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), we are committed to working steadfastly for the structural support of the public service. Our core mandate talks to assisting the 257 municipalities in terms of governance, financial management, infrastructure delivery and managing municipal political skirmishes.

As we maintain at SALGA, the sphere of local government requires strategic support – from national government, the private sector and institutions such as this University. This is important for the simple reason that, at local government level, that is where the rubber meets the road, both figuratively and literally, and where basic service delivery takes place. There can be no denial about the significance of positioning local government at the heart of people-centred growth, transformation and development.

Public service as a means to transformation

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have spoken above about public service in relation to efficiency and effectiveness. This presentation now addresses directly the matter of public service as a means to transformation.

The post-1994 political dispensation selected a developmental state model since it was regarded as best suited to address the inherited apartheid legacy and reverse what former President Thabo Mbeki called a country divided into two nations; a division that is also defined by race, by class and spatial markers.

Public service is and should be conceived as an instrument of transformation to ensure we address the stubborn challenges of poverty, unemployment, violence, gender-based violence, land hunger. The ultimate objective is to foster an alternative society encapsulated in the NDP Vision and beyond.

In this undertaking, public-private partnerships are critical. The fact is that transformation and efficient public service can only be enhanced if there are institutional partnerships between, for example, the UFS's Department of Public Administration, the National School of Government and SALGA based on sharing our expertise and experiences through peer-to-peer learning platforms.

It is through such public-private partnerships, that public service can be optimally maximised to meet the growing challenges of the fourth industrial revolution whereby state organs and bureaucrats are compelled to manage complexity, uncertainty and Nassim Taleb's 'black swan' events and other rare happenings.

There can be no denial that the state is crucial in ensuring that we prioritise development and transformation, policy and legislation, performance and monitoring as exemplified in the macro-interventions championed by President Ramaphosa - with the jobs and investment summits, and also the stimulus and recovery packages.

In this regard, the state remains an essential instrument to drive democratic participation that fosters value and maximal public participation beyond periodic electoral cycles. Seen in this light, the state is an enabling mechanism to spur and inspire multi-stakeholder engagements as witnessed with NEDLAC leading the recent jobs summit.

Furthermore, the state is entrusted to engender community partnership with CPOs, ward committees so that we guarantee that democracy is exercised and experienced at the lowest level in society. Within current legislation, it is possible for municipal councils to empower communities by delegating some of their authority and functions to ward committees.

In this manner, we can thus ensure that ownership of public institutions is safeguarded and that accountability by public servants is secured. I wish to believe one of the major reasons responsible for service delivery protests and acts of wanton public property destruction, stems from the public not feeling a sense of ownership or participation in decision-making taking place in their own local municipalities.

I am of the opinion that we need to seriously consider empowering ward committees with delegated functions since it is assumed that these ward committees represent the community voice and community needs.

By allowing communities to be self-governing, active citizenry becomes a part of the overall governance system. It should not be the case that, as currently transpires, that ward committees are sites of internecine political conflicts, within and between local elites. In this regard, we would be empowering communities as both agents, and partners in development and in the project of nation-building.

In other words, to comprehensively solve the triple challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality, this requires a capable and developmental state whereby our public servants are:

- encouraged to be open to continuous life-long learning and improvement of their professional standards to meet complexity of the 21st century;
- are shielded from sectional political and economic interests which eventually compromise efficient public service as the VBS example highlights; and
- service delivery is viewed not as the sole competence of the state but demands an active citizenry “to strengthen development, democracy and accountability”.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The key operative word here is “inclusivity” in decision-making, policy implementation and monitoring of programmes of action. The fact is that, the ideals of nation-building and social cohesion are compromised when governance in public schools becomes a preserve of a few informed parents; when certain neighbourhoods are turned into a *laager* of exclusion through boom gates; when some well-resourced municipalities refuse merger or cooperation with less resourced municipalities on the basis of technicalities related to, among others, municipal demarcation lines.

It does not make either political or economic sense, for poor municipalities to be bundled together where there are no resources to be shared or where there is no expertise to be transferred. Inclusion and equity should be the basis of policy making and planning.

Such actions militate against chapter two of the Constitution that places a core responsibility on the state to promote the attainment of socio-economic rights in a progressive manner.

This is a reason, as SALGA, we welcome initiatives like those announced by the South African Institution of Civil Engineers to work with us to address the critical shortage of engineering skills in our municipalities.

As you may know, our country has a severe shortage of engineers, a case in which for every 3,000 people, there is 1 engineer. In Brazil, for every 227 people, there is 1 assigned engineer and in Malaysia the average is 1 engineer for every 543 citizens.

The consolidation of our democracy and the attainment of tangible nation-building is possible and, arguably, well within reach if as, the NDP stipulates:

- “staff at all levels have the authority, experience, competence and support they need to do their jobs;
- relations between national, provincial and local government are improved through a more proactive approach to managing the intergovernmental system;
- clear governance structures and stable leadership enable state-owned enterprises to achieve their developmental potential”.

Master of ceremonies,

Public service in relation to probity and accountability

The much-punted New Dawn is no chimera. In my considered view, the New Dawn provides a platform to realise social cohesion and achieve nation-building – wherein all of us work in concert to guarantee that citizens receive socio-economic rights as enshrined in the Constitution.

The March 2017 Constitutional Court (ConCourt) judgment, entitled the *Black Sash vs Minister of Social Development and Others CCT48/17*, was a blemish on the post-1994 democratic project. Hopefully, we have transitioned to a place where ‘lawfare’ is no longer the new normal as was the case in the past 10 years.

And hopefully, the commissions of enquiries instituted into ‘state capture’ and the so-called tax revolt at SARS, signals a positive foundation to rebuild a culture of probity and accountability.

Moving forward though, it is my belief that the public service needs to institutionalise two important interventions to prevent malfeasance, corruption and maladministration.

The first intervention is to design, and entrench, an internal system within public institutions to manage possible conflict of interest. Such a system can be something as basic as a regularised declaration order and recusal modality for public servants, at all levels, to state upfront their public and private interests. And in cases where there arises a conflict of interest, a recusal framework should be instituted to prevent interested parties to partake or influence any decision-making process.

The second intervention I would propose would be a roll-out, nationally, of an accountability mechanism currently in place in the Gauteng provincial government. They have installed an Integrity Commission to adjudicate and advise on arising conflict of interest matters. Such an institutionalised commissioner, is similar to what you find in the private sector with their ethics committees designed to instill integrity into the organisational functions. Institutionalisation also means that managing potential conflict of interests, declaration of pecuniary interests, and adjudicating contraventions, happens as part of the normal business of governance

Ladies and Gentlemen

Viewed collectively, such interventions mentioned above can contribute to the overall objective of building our nation and the state assuming its role as the pivot around which such is achieved. It can lay the necessary foundations of effective partnerships and be made a reality through the concept and practice of social compacts, as witnessed with the recent jobs summit bringing together the private and public sectors into problem-solving mechanisms. As you would agree, we all become stronger when we share and learn from one another. Convergence is therefore encouraged in this complex and rapidly world.

After all, it was through social compacts that we were able to manageably negotiate the transition from apartheid to democracy, formulate the Bill of Rights and reach consensus on the functions and scope of Chapter 9 institutions.

Social covenants are critical if we are to ensure that good governance and service delivery are not swear words, but are a reality for most communities and citizens in our Republic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the NDP objective of ending poverty and inequality demands that all sectors support the state machinery towards the realisation of redistribute social justice or delivery of common goods which many in our society still lack.

By an efficient service delivery in the 21st century, one is referring to a post-Weberian model which is not exclusively hierarchical. Instead of talking about normative public administration, rather, we need to talk about public governance which is embedded in citizens' interests, is about shared values, building coalitions, and shared leadership.

Public governance is underscored, in order to enable government to close the yawning social distance which produce so-called service delivery protests that render our country to be dubbed, incorrectly so, as the 'protest capital of the world'.

Finally, thank you once again to the University of the Free State and the Department of Public Administration for the invitation to talk about the mutually inclusive relationship between the public service, nation-building and democracy.

I thank you.