Building a culture of professionalism and competence in the public sector

*Keynote address by the Minister for Public Service and Administration*

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*At*

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June this year saw two events unfolding that although they may seem to be unrelated to most were actually connected in terms of the issue of trust in public service and government. This trust pertains not only in terms of citizens to government, but also collegial trust within and across the ranks of public servants as well as trust between public servants and the Executive.

Trust is associated with the predictability of action of a category of others (in our instance public servants), and a basic belief that this category of others, i.e. public servants, through their action or inaction, will contribute to my/ our wellbeing and refrain from inflicting harm upon me/ us. Therefore, behaviour and values that instil and build trust should be inherent to our discussion regarding public service professionalism as well as competence expected from our public servants.

The two events I refer to and the associated proceedings and processes provide the backdrop against we can raise very
pertinent questions associated with the theme for this Academy. Whereas previously we might have referred to some of these issues almost in a philosophical and abstract manner, these events clearly drove home the fact that it is not. These issues are very real, and have very real consequences that can be either positive or negative. As will be shown it definitely impacts on development and what we can do to alleviate the plight of our citizens, particularly those who are most reliant on the state for their well-being. They undeniably impact on the culture and quality of the public service work environment.

Let me turn to these events I am referring to:

The one event took place here on our own soil and I hardly need to remind this audience of it. Over a period of almost a month we experienced a national public service strike. A strike which on the one hand was about public service employees exercising their constitutionally protected right to strike – a right that we have always respected and are keen to continue respecting within the framework of our democracy. On the other hand though, it was a strike which had ample examples of how the exercise of the rights by some, especially if the boundaries of those rights are pushed and exceeded does impact negatively on the rights of others. After all, different rights and responsibilities cohabits the same democratic space and they are bounded by one another.

Without going into a detailed analysis of the strike, we have to acknowledge the fact that in the process of the national strike, with or without the approval of union leadership, intimidation of
fellow workers and the public did happen. In addition, public services, in some instances even essential public services, were denied to members of the public. In some instances this resulted in the loss of life of critically sick people, and in other instances, medication impacting on long term health were not available, which over time might have an effect on preserving health. Education was withheld from our children. Overall confidence in the stability of our economy and overall system was damaged. But more so, fear was instilled in fellow workers and sometimes the public.

Given the size of the public service and the effect a national strike had on the economy, for weeks it filled the newspaper pages. It catapulted discussions around the public service, ordinarily not regarded as a hot topic. At the start there was significant public sympathy with public servants, and particularly those in the public service professions in sectors such as health, education and criminal justice. However, as intimidation and violence mounted, and access to public services were denied to the population at large the sympathy moved away and the publics’ negative perceptions of public servants resurfaced and became re-enforced. Questions started being raised regarding in whose interest the strike was, since it became clear this industrial action was not conducted in the public interest.

A look at some of the newspaper headlines during the period tells the story:
17 May (at the time unions decided on strike action): government is criticized for “unrealistic” offer, and newspaper articles clearly favouring a position of significantly higher pay for public servants, linking pay to performance

6 June (early days of strike): a number of headlines points to the tensions emerging, e.g.

“When a just cause leads to injustice” (Pretoria News Editorial”)

“Principal backs strike but slams brutal teachers” (Star)

“Violence lashes nobility of strike” (Sowetan Editorial)

13 June: Sowetan still sympathetic “Union strikes are a last resort by desperate workers” and Pretoria News refers to the Courts’ decision on sympathy strikes as a “victory for workers”

20 June: Even a fairly radical journalist such as Christine Qunta starting to pull back from the violent tone of the strike, writing in the Star “How quickly they turned violent” and in Pretoria News “Strike should be disruptive, not deadly”

By 21 June the Sowetan demands in an editorial “Teach, don’t cheat the future” and by 25 June it punts its service under the headline “We help the victims of Public Sector strike”.

By 26 June the headlines screams “Cosatu plays politics with wage offers” and non-striking Home Affairs officials’ story is carried under the headline “We fear for our lives”.

By 29 June the strike is over and the question is asked “‘now that it’s ended, was it really worth it?’ and reference is made to the fact that nobody actually won much. One of the papers choose to carry a story under the headline “The job Sister Mpumi loves has turned into a well of bitterness”.

This process of creeping disenchantment of the public with the public servants as a general category of workers, and the breach of trust within the ranks of public servants are in a way the most damaging and will have the longest impact. This is bailed out by the inputs made at the second event I referred to in my introduction.

This event took place during the last week of June in Vienna. It was the 7th Global Forum on Reinventing Government. This year the focus of the discussion was on “Building trust in Government”, a theme the organisers considered as of critical importance after it became clear that in general trust in Government is dwindling across the world, notwithstanding clear evidence that there are close associations between higher levels of trust in the institutions of government and development.

In preparation of the Global Forum the Africa region met and one of the conclusions of that meeting contained in the final report was that government performance is more than likely the single most important factor that influences trust in governance arrangements in a country. Public servants as a collective is therefore logically at the centre of the future fait of African countries and their people and they carry an immense
responsibility. If they perform and deliver public services to the people trust will grow in government institutions, however, by not performing and not delivering public services they create a slippery slope through which citizens divest their belief in the institutions of government, paving the way for loss in social capital and stability to chaos and anarchy.

Central in the equation to government performance is obviously the issue of competence and professionalism of our public servants. More critically, how does these relate back to our discussion on trust and the undermining of trust and the consequences thereof?

As the twenty-first century begins there is broad agreement that public-sector managers must be specialists by training and application, and professionals by temperament and commitment.

According to the authors Green, Keller, and Wamsley in their article "Reconstituting a Profession for American Public Administration" public service professionals will demonstrate "sound moral insight and judgment in their decisions, and exhibit integrity and commitment in institutional missions" (p. 522). Such government officials are involved in a calling to profess and serve public values. The authors argue that their university education should focus on development as institutional leaders, while technical competencies in terms of professional management should still be retained (p.523).
De Hoog and Whitaker, two American researchers who studied city and county managers in the state of Florida, have identified expertise as the essential characteristic of professionalism in virtually all undertakings, but they also found that managers must supplement their use of expertise with three specific public service values. These would automatically distinguish public sector managers from their private sector counterparts. First, they suggest there must be an acceptance of democratic values, and therefore the legitimacy of elected officials, with a corollary decrease in individual autonomy as a value. Secondly, there must be an ethic of responsibility to the public at large. And finally, a respect for the expertise of other professionals is required.

In my view, these are not only requirements for public managers, but for all layers of public servants. With the wisdom of hindsight and the history clearly made in June we need to reflect critically as to how the image of professionalism for public servants have been undermined given the above requirements.

Over centuries and in different cultural context the notion of service and particularly service in the interest of the public good has evolved and there is much agreement across cultural divides around the key tenets of such a service culture, including willing subordination, loyalty, trustworthiness and an optimistic belief in the achievement of the vision as represented by the higher authority.
I believe that these basic tenets also hold for public service professionals in South Africa today. There is nothing to suggest that we should be an exception. In my analysis I believe as public servants we have done damage to our own ratings in terms of trustworthiness, loyalty and willing subordination to an interest higher than our own narrow and sectional interests during the strike.

In my budget vote speech this year I referred to the work of Sir Anthony Giddens in the Progressive Manifesto where he cautions against the tendency of public service workers to become vested interest groups and where they use an appeal to public goods and values to advance and protect their own sectional interests. I think the June strike is a case in point, demonstrating the validity of this cautionary note. We need to critically reflect on what of public servant actions are clearly in the interest of South African society broadly, and which have become narrow self and class interests. We need to check how actions are demonstrative of a belief that the vision as captured in the Constitution and elaborated by this Government is embraced and advanced through such action, or whether it is subtly undermined. We need to constantly engage with how the democratic space we have created since 1994 can be used and abused and what the consequences of such potential abuse might be.
The June events highlight the importance for us to raise the level of discussion around the ethics we as a relatively young, but democratic public administration want to embrace. In a classical sense we need to establish a public service ethical community. Such an ethical community is not necessarily one in which we all will agree on issues such as the boundaries of our freedoms, or the extent of our obligation to the common good. What ii is, is a space to constructively discuss these things. In a way if we want to be ethical we are obliged to engage each other about what should be expected of all. We are therefore obliged to reflect on the effect of recent events – even in this forum – working out how we are going to restore trust within our own ranks and between us and the public we are intent to serve professionally and competently. How are we going to restore respect between us as professionals where we threatened or were threatened with life or limb during the strike action? How do we restore the image of professionalism and the value base of placing people first in our ranks where two months ago we stooped as low as kicking over the wheelchairs of the physically disabled and infirm or prevented learners from writing their exams and tests in an atmosphere conducive to academic work?

I trust that this Academy will provide the necessary space to engage with some of these very necessary discussions.

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