

Governance Perspectives: South Africa

Interview with Minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi

South Africa's Minister for Public Service and Administration, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, was in Singapore last year to attend the Commonwealth Association of Public Administration and Management Conference. In an interview with *Ethos*, she spoke about how South Africa's history and traditions are shaping the country's principles of governance. South Africa has a development-oriented approach to public administration. Faced with pervasive inequality, wide ranging poverty and under-development, it has resisted the notion of a weak, hollowed-out state. Therefore, unlike many countries which embraced the philosophy of less government and smaller public services in the 1990s, South Africa seeks to have a strong and capable state and public sector in order to meet the country's specific needs.

What are the principles of governance of the South African public service?

The basic principles and values influencing our public service are enshrined in our constitution. Public administration must be governed by these democratic values and principles. They include:

- A high standard of professional ethics.
- Efficient, economic and effective use of resources.
- Public administration must be development-oriented. This is important for us because it lays the basis for the developmental state that is re-distributive in character, but based on fundamental principles of human rights and social justice.

- The Public Service must act impartially, fairly, equitably and without bias.
- People's needs must be responded to.
- The public must be encouraged to participate in policy-making.
- The Public Service must be transparent and measures must be taken to ensure the implementation thereof.
- Good human resource management and career development practices.
- Public administration must be broadly representative of the people of South Africa. This is also important because we come from a past where our public service was fragmented according to race and ethnicity. We've now built a single unified public service which does not represent one particular group, but the majority of South Africa.

How do you ensure these principles percolate to all levels?

We've very consciously and deliberately taken it forward. Post-1994, after we had our first democratic elections, we built a unified public service. We inherited 14 different public services that at the time were divided on ethnic and racial, as well as geographical grounds. We have amalgamated all of these into a single public administration, while making provision for a degree of decentralisation.

We have three spheres of government: national, provincial and local. The public service, as we use the term, straddles national and provincial government. As far as the first two spheres go, we enforce legislation and codes to ensure the

enforcement of the principles and values that were enshrined in the interim Constitution of 1993, and subsequently the Constitution of 1996. Local authorities fall strictly speaking outside the public service but in general they emulate the norm-setting that takes place at national level. They are obviously required to function within the parameters of the Constitution.

In order to give effect to the building of a single public administration after the initial amalgamation took place, we have engaged in far-reaching change management processes. These processes are clearly not five- or even ten-year projects. They are an ongoing change process. To build, revitalize and bring a new culture and ethos to the public service is a process that will take considerable time. You can adopt models and tools quickly, but to actually change a whole mindset is going to take much longer.

To that end, we have a program called the *Batho Pele* (People First) Change Management Program. We've introduced various mechanisms and measures to take this forward. We have already achieved some pockets of excellence that demonstrates our progress. Due to the sheer complexity of the public service, we have not fully achieved what we want to, but I trust through hardwork we will reach the desired outcome.

And also the world is changing, and so are expectations...

Yes, the world is changing, and the expectations and global realities are changing. The first 10 years of our democracy coincided with some changes internationally around the perception of the role of the state. At that point the philosophical and ideological thrust globally was one that saw the need for less government and smaller public services. This philosophical approach suggested that vehicles other than the state are preferable in delivering services to people, since they can do so more efficiently.

As a country we've never embraced that approach. A society that has the extent of disparities and inequalities that we have cannot entirely outsource the functions of the state to

other partners. In many instances, particularly in very poor and transient communities, civil society organizations are very weak or non-existent and the market is not interested in meeting the needs of the very poor since there is no profit to be made. The poor are often not able to pay for the actual cost of services. We believe that our people are not just customers—they are our citizens and on that basis they are entitled to basic public services that will maintain their human dignity and will grant them an opportunity to escape the clutches of abject poverty.

Our Constitution enshrines particular rights to our people: fundamental human rights as well as second- and third-generation rights, which also include socio-economic rights. The state needs to play an active role to ensure that these rights are protected and incrementally realised within its own constraints. The state must fulfil its distributive and redistributive functions and look at how best resources can reach those who do not have access to them.

So in our situation, we said we would not take an approach of "less government" and "hollowing out" the state. We need a capable and strong government to play the unique role that only government can play in a society such as ours.

When we talk about the developmental state, we don't talk about it in the East Asian context, but in our own context. We say that the developmental state is foremost built on the foundations of democracy. The developmental state needs to comply with certain basic human and socio-economic rights and subscribe to the principle of social justice. It is not first and foremost influenced by economic considerations. Above all, it must redress inequities in society. It needs to consciously utilize its power in order to influence certain directions in society.

For example, our economy is essentially one where whites own the means of production and are in charge of capital. If we want to be a truly non-racial society, we need to ensure the de-racialisation of the economy. For that to happen, the state needs to be able to intervene to ensure that the intent of our Constitution and our policy goals are realised. The historical

iniquitous patterns of power relations in our society are too strong and pervasive to expect that an organic process of change will be sufficient and rapid enough to satisfy the majority of our people.

In the public service, we clearly say that we will have affirmative action programmes. We bring people from previously disadvantaged groups, such as blacks, women and the disabled in as lateral entrants into senior positions of government. We provide mentoring programmes and give special attention to human resource development for such entrants in order to ensure that they can effectively assume the responsibility that goes with the positions of seniority they are appointed to. The employment equity targets we set and regularly revisit will allow us to change the racial and gender composition of the public service. We do this unapologetically because if we don't, some other political instability may arise, and cohesion of society as a whole is not built.

It's in that context that we say that we did not and do not believe in less state. We believe in a capable state and a strong state. Even if we decentralize certain activities and functions of government to a more local level, and even if we want to put in place executive agencies and public entities and utilize these for service delivery, we can't effect our policies without a strong centre to determine the overall direction, undertake the necessary coordination functions and to regularly monitor and evaluate our performance against governments' stated priorities. De-centralization without a strong centre, whatever the textbook says, doesn't work.

I don't think a strong state necessarily translates into a large state. It is not about numbers but capability. This is a challenge that we are preoccupied with in South Africa right now. We are trying to determine exactly what the needs of the state are in terms of our human resource requirements—across the public service, specifically, but also the public sector, more broadly speaking. The biggest challenge facing the public sector is to make sure we have the competency and capability to respond both to the immediate and more so to the future realities—globally, regionally and nationally.

Earlier you mentioned the East Asian model. Many of our definitions and what we learn about governance comes from Western sources. Do you think there is something unique in Asian or African culture which affects how government should relate to the citizen?

We tend to draw a number of models from developed countries because we believe they could be relevant in a particular context. But in the process, we may have overlooked the reality that there may also be models in the South that we can use. We must take into account that we should never take an approach of "one size fits all". If you look at the whole New Public Management approach, the failure of its application is because people have assumed that they can take a particular model and transplant it somewhere else. You can't do that. You need to take into account the national and cultural realities. We are becoming more and more aware of that reality.

Even as we reflect and look at developing further models for developing countries, we should look at taking the best within each of our situations. We need to take on board different aspects from different situations. For example, India has remarkable examples of how they use ICT to make services accessible to local communities. They have done that in an environment where there is high inequality: there are places with high levels of infrastructure, and other places where the infrastructure is absent. India has used ICT to overcome those divides. I think there are lessons for us.

Singapore is a city-state. We cannot make a direct comparison with South Africa. Singapore is vastly different and is like one of our metropolitan areas. I think we must look at examples on a case-by-case basis, bearing in mind that there is no one situation or country that's exactly like another. I believe the South can develop solutions, and may do so in a strong way.

We must, however, bear in mind that deep-seated beliefs and values influence culture, and that these do have an impact on what the natural inclinations of behaviour, individually and organizationally, would be. The African culture is deeply humanistic.

How do you strengthen the centre in order to give overall direction and constitute a balance against decentralizing forces?

We believe that the lives of people derive meaning in terms of their relations with other people. Given this philosophical orientation the idea of placing people centrally in our public service delivery orientation ought to come very naturally. Engaging with people in a dignified manner, and so on, is also akin to our culture. We cannot, however, ignore the fact that in our case the history of Apartheid, and in the case of the African continent, the colonial experience, have negatively impacted and undermined the fundamental African culture and that we can no longer assume the existence of it in all cases. We have to consciously build on strengthening this and bringing it to the fore once again.

What do you think the next phase of public service reform will be?

I think the big challenge for public sector reform is how to ensure the responsiveness of the state within networked government, in order to deal with poverty and under-development in society. The reality is that globally, but specifically in Africa, we are not on the trajectory of meeting the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations. The challenges of poverty and inequality are not restricted just to the developing nations. They are very much in the developed world as well, although less exposed, and the proportion of wealth and poverty might be different. And of course, then we are faced with the inequality between the so-called developed and developing worlds.

We need to review the impact of fashionable responses like decentralization and managerialism.

The fundamental questions are: "How do you strengthen the centre in order to give overall direction and constitute a balance against decentralizing forces? How do you ensure coordination, integration, collaboration and networking across spheres of government, between agencies and departments? How do you ensure that duly elected political representatives take the fundamental decisions and are in control of the political agenda?"

Incorrect application of decentralization has led to fragmentation of the service delivery landscape. Managerialism is contesting the predominance of political power. I'm not suggesting that we go back and simply adopt old concepts of public administration to the detriment of a modern administration. But there are some challenges we need to deal with in a more nuanced, but deliberate way.

We also need to ask, "What is the capability of the state that we require at this point in time and how best to develop and retain it?" You cannot talk about reform without understanding what capabilities are needed. We need to revisit these questions all the time as the capability needs are always changing in response to the global challenges and realities. We also need to ask, "How do we improve the lives of our citizens?" because the citizens, very correctly, demand better government and, "How do we strengthen democratic accountability to our citizens, and administrative accountability?"

Obviously developments in information and communications technology will continue to inform some of our public administration reforms.

There is a limit to how far values can be enforced through a contract. As the state engages more non-state players, how do you think the rules should be written for these new relationships?

The state is among the largest procurers of goods and services. There is nothing that stops us from demanding through our contractual arrangements what we believe the citizens should get. The state is going to be accountable if the private sector partners fall short. Therefore we need to pro-actively structure and manage any contracts with non-state players, and sharpen our ability to do just that.

What's important is that we do a risk analysis so that we know what can go wrong, and we build in an escape clause so that we are able to go for another and better partner if others don't meet our needs. It doesn't mean that if we enter into a partnership for service delivery, the state becomes a captive audience of any particular private sector or NGO partner. We need to ensure that the contractual arrangement at all times keeps the citizen at the centre, and captures the values that bind the state.

This interview was conducted by Dawn Yip and Tan Soo San. ■