Speech by Trevor Manuel, Minister in The Presidency: National Planning Commission on Implications of the National Development Plan for the Public Service, Conference of the Senior Management Service, CSIR Conference Centre

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Chairperson, Hon Lindiwe Sisulu;
Hon Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe;
Honourable Cabinet Colleagues;
Right Honourable Francis Maude;
Distinguished delegates;
Ladies and gentlemen.

Let me express my sincerest gratitude to the Ministry and Department of Public Service both for convening this conference and for the invitation to share some thoughts with you here.

It is perhaps more important to focus on the commitment to and measurement of change than merely to listen to speeches from the podium, and I do hope that these interests and commitments will be secured here. Many of the challenges and the truths are universal and our purpose should not be to merely repeat them ad nauseum but to identify and contextualise the challenges and to focus on overcoming them.

I would want to start in an unusual place, to share with you an address I delivered to a similar SMS conference on 20 September 2004, not in order to quote myself, but merely to emphasise the universality of the arguments and to ask what we have done to drive the improvements in the quality of public services. Interestingly, that conference was convened five-and-a-half years before the National Planning Commission was first convened. I choose this starting point as a reminder that the challenges remain, and that we have been less than assiduous in applying ourselves to obtain different outcomes. What we said then was

In most developing countries, the senior civil service becomes a self-serving elite, interested only in their own welfare, their own empowerment and their own bank balances. Because of the huge income inequality in many developing countries, senior civil servants become part of the elite. They are well educated, have access to economic opportunities, receive remuneration many times greater than the average income in the country and become an obstacle to change in society. Let me state unequivocally that public service is a calling and a responsibility. It is a choice exercised. We choose to serve and accept that we will be comfortable or we enter the private sector in pursuit of wealth – we cannot do both!

In a developmental state the civil servant is professional, skilled, adequately rewarded but humble. Humility towards the poor is the greatest attribute of a civil servant.

The National Development Plan (NDP) has elevated the task of building a capable and developmental state to a higher priority. There is broad consensus across the political spectrum of the need for a professional and competent civil service.
The Plan presents some clear principles for developing this professional civil service. These principles are rooted in the Constitution and draws on our understanding of the struggle for a democratic society. They are also informed by our understanding of the role of the state as a key agent of transformation, acting with and on behalf of the poor and the most marginalised. The proposals are synthesised into a chapter with the title “Building a Capable and Developmental State”. However, since the NDP is focused largely on outcomes, as opposed to drafting new policy, proposals for transforming the public service are found throughout the 16 chapters.

They include the need for accountability, for professionalism, for service to the citizenry, for being neutral in relation to party-political contestation, for public servants to be dynamic change agents seeking to change society while adhering to the law at all times, for public servants to be prudent with the use of public funds and to be responsible stewards of the public’s trust.

The diagnostic report produced by the National Planning Commission (NPC) in June 2011 concluded that in the main, South Africa has not suffered from a lack of policies or from having incorrect policies but rather from a lack of the ability to effectively implement these policies. The diagnostic report outlines at least three main problems:

a. High policy turnover – That is the urge to change policies frequently without proper analysis of what is working, and what is not, why it does not work, what institutional capacity exists and which aspects can be improved? Every time that a new Minister, MEC or Mayor is appointed, he or she feels the need to announce new policies or policy initiatives. This suggests that policies appear not even to emanate from a party, but from the circle of influence over a public representative. The effect is that there is too little focus on implementation. Critically, there is little use of evidence in making policy, little use of data, or best practice or of the lessons from piloting.

b. High turnover of staff, especially senior and technical staff – The average department has about four Directors-General in ten years. This figure is even higher at provincial level. No private company, academic institution, or even a village football club can thrive with that sort of turnover. Because of the high turnover, senior managers therefore pursue short-term agendas rather than focusing on building institutions and capacity. When people perform poorly, it is sometimes necessary to dismiss or shift people. But more often, it is necessary to keep people in their positions so that they can learn from their mistakes, gain some experience and make steady progress in performance. Many of the best performing departments have had much more stable leadership.

c. A critical shortage of technical skills and no effective staff development strategy – while the competence of many senior managers is not questioned (they may lack experience though), there is a dearth of skilled professionals in the middle of the public service. This range of categories include engineers, IT professionals, forensic specialists, senior prosecutors, subject advisors in education, supply chain management specialists, financial managers and legal experts. No bureaucracy can function without these skills in the engine of the civil service, closer to the frontline of the public service.
The political and administrative systems have to incentivise both politicians and civil servants to be more circumspect when changing policies, encourage stability in senior management teams and take a long term focus to skills development.

The proposals in the National Development Plan are based on an understanding of the special role of the state in our social transformation. Apartheid systematically skewed economic and other advantages towards a narrow section of the population. Our challenge is to simultaneously build a non-racial society while taking firm steps to address the inequities of the past. Without a strong and effective government, we will not be able to reverse the effects of apartheid on the opportunities available to all South Africans but in particular, to the historically disadvantaged. Markets on their own will not reverse the centuries of subjugation and oppression.

The role of the state is to intervene decisively to change the opportunities available. It does that by providing high quality services to the poor, especially services such as education and health. The state has a role to correct failures in housing markets that exclude the poor from formal housing. The state has a role to play to regulate private business to prevent exploitation, environmental damage and uncompetitive rent-seeking. The state has a role to play to transform our cities and our rural spaces to enable citizens to lead fulfilling lives. The state has a role to play to serve the poor in the face of vast vested interests arranged against them. It is this deep understanding of the role of the state in our society that must inspire civil servants to be champions of the poor and to fight off the impact of past inequities.

The NDP’s proposals on addressing challenges in the public service start with strengthening the accountability chains. In most areas it is not clear who is accountable for what. This is in part due to a complicated intergovernmental system but is more often the cause of a risk-averse public service that thrives on passing the buck. The NDP cites an example from the water sector where there was an outbreak of cholera in a town more famous for a treason trial in the 1980s. In this case, the mayor blamed the municipal manager, who blamed the head of the water utility, who blamed the engineer. The engineer responded by saying that his maintenance budget had been cut for the past three years. The municipal manager lamented the rise in salaries and the non-collection of revenue for the cuts to the maintenance budget. The mayor blamed SALGA for negotiating unsustainable salary increases at a central level and the blame game went round in circles. And still the problem of cholera continued.

Yes, constructing firm accountability chains is difficult to do because most services are delivered by many different people in many different entities, in a complex system that frequently covers more than one sphere of government. The NDP provides an example in basic education of what an accountability chain may look like, how to construct one, what systems and controls are needed and what to do when things go wrong.

The view of the Planning Commission on the role of our intergovernmental system in helping or hindering service delivery should be noted. The Commission is of the view that there needs to be more clarity for responsibility in relation to the built environment infrastructure and services – namely housing, transport planning, water and sanitation. In particular, housing and transport planning should be the
responsibility of municipal government. The commission has also proposed examples of how specific problems can be resolved using the cooperative governance section of the Constitution. In general, however, where there are clear accountability chains, competent civil servants and clear and tested policies, service delivery is better irrespective of the intergovernmental set-up.

In Michael Barber’s book “Instruction to Deliver”, he talks about the need for a ‘ruthless and rigorous focus on implementation’. This is sorely lacking in South Africa. I hope my colleagues in Basic Education will forgive me for using an example of what I mean by the lack of focus on implementation with an example from that sector.

A few years ago the Department of Education approached the National Treasury to request funds in order to provide laptop computers for teachers. The Department came armed with a 12-page proposal that simply stated why it would be a good thing for each teacher to have a laptop. The Treasury agreed with the motivation but asked for an implementation plan. The Department went back and returned a few months later with a 50-page document. This new 50-page document was merely a more complete case for why it would be a good thing for each teacher to have a laptop. Again, the Treasury asked for an implementation plan. Departmental officials were at sea about what an implementation plan looks like.

The Treasury wanted a plan that set out what decisions were required by whom, who would be accountable at each stage, what model of delivery would be used, what checks and balances would be in place, how financial resources would flow, who would check to see if the resources were meeting the intended purpose, what systems would be used to track the laptops, what happened if they were stolen, or sold... and so the determinants of a detailed implementation plan were set out.

Sadly, even after the resources were allocated, no proper implementation plan was put in place and delivery has been sporadic at best, derelict at worst.

Through laxity like this, we fail our people, repeatedly. Nineteen years into democracy, our government has run out of excuses. We cannot continue to blame apartheid for our failings as a state. We cannot plead ignorance or inexperience. For almost two decades, the public has been patient in the face of mediocre services. The time for change, for a ruthless focus on implementation has come.

The National Development Plan makes proposals in a range of areas from the intergovernmental system (touched on earlier) to supply chain management, from capacity building to managing the political administrative interface. These are practical proposals that can be acted upon immediately. Many of them do not require legal changes or policy prescriptions. They simply require a commitment to common sense and to getting things right.

The lack of rigour and the absence of disincentives, or to use a term that we have more frequently in the recent past, “consequences”, bedevils the best laid policies. There is the fundamental problem that we cannot begin to transform South Africa to the kind of country with the type of opportunities foreseen by the drafters of our still-young Constitution. We need to guard against the risk of an “opt-out society” defined by the reality of people having to opt out of public services because the quality is so poor. In such circumstances, increasing numbers of people, starting with
elites like ourselves rely less and less on the public services that we are, in fact, paid to provide. The remainder, those without the means to opt out, are left with only despair. Without the elites demanding better quality services, the situation deteriorates and the prospect of a better life for the poor who use those public services becomes a distant memory. As we grapple with this challenge, we would do well to remind ourselves of the words of Amilcar Cabral when he said, "Always bear in mind that the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone’s head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children."

It is true that the political-administrative interface may be a confusing one for senior civil servants. Many of you are members of the ruling party and many have risen through the activist ranks of the political party I also represent. In many cases, in many provinces and municipalities, there is a worrying blurring of lines of accountability with staff appointments being made in Provincial Executive Committees (of the party) as opposed to through the proper legal channels. I’d like to set the record straight here on this matter. Political appointments, per se, are not the problem.

The problem is the blurred accountability that it brings. No matter how you were appointed, no matter who appointed you, you are not accountable to the ruling party. You are civil servants who are meant to serve all citizens irrespective of political persuasion. You are accountable to your political head and you remain accountable to the respective legislature. I repeat, you are not accountable to the ruling party, certainly not directly and certainly not as civil servants. There are proper channels within the ruling party to deal with areas of concern and areas of weak performance.

This new approach may come as a surprise to you. It may also come as a surprise to your political principals. However, without a professional civil service rewarded for their competence and commitment to the Constitution, we do not stand any chance of transforming South Africa.

A second area where the lines have become blurred is in relation to supply chain management. Yes, we have laws and policies that seek to advance the interests of new, emerging firms and entrepreneurs. This is not an excuse to award tenders to friends or politically connected persons, simply because they are black and were oppressed. The law requires you to put value for money ahead of any other requirement when making procurement decisions. There is a legal framework within which BEE can be taken into account. The public loses trust in government when it reads reports that we spend billions on contracts to politically-connected people who deliver poor quality services. Let us be hard on ourselves, whatever else this practice may masquerade as, it is not empowerment, it is theft. There should be no blurred lines. As civil servants and as public representatives, we must act in accordance with the law, regardless of what may appear to be expedient, or shaped by pressures exerted on us.

Let us commit to strengthen that which is correct, that which is focused on measurable improvements in the quality of life and services to citizens. More importantly, let us carry ourselves with pride, in the knowledge that we are servants of our people.
Thank you.

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