



Government in Transition: A New Paradigm in Public Administration

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Article:

This is a synopsis of the report on the inaugural conference of CAPAM, the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management. Held in Charlotte, Prince Edward Island, Canada, in August, 1994, Government in Transition was the first gathering of public administrators from the 51 nations that comprise the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth has a population of 1.5 billion and is experiencing unprecedented political and social transitions: from single to multi-party systems, from national to regional sovereignty, from closed to open economies, from decreasing to exploding populations, and from apartheid to democracy. Despite the diversity of Commonwealth countries, there is a pattern in their responses to changes. CAPAM believes that these patterns and transitions represent a new paradigm in public administration and hold the promise of greater freedom of political expression and improved material well-being.

This report draws from the formal and informal discussions at the conference and from the papers presented by the speakers. CAPAM plans to release the complete proceedings in 1995. According to CAPAM there are five components to the new paradigm in public administration:

° High-quality services to citizens

- Increased autonomy from central agency controls
- Performance targets
- Human and technological resources
- Receptiveness to competition and understanding of public purpose.

The report gives myriad examples of all five components -- although not much about how they were implemented or what problems they may be facing. For example:

- Singapore is establishing one-stop shopping centers for public services and Tanzania has established a new promotion center to make it easier to license businesses.
- Trinidad and Tobago, New Zealand, and Zimbabwe have reduced central agency controls over departmental or agency human resource management practices. Namibia is permitting year-to-year budget transfers; Malta has established three-year forward estimates.
- Canada is undertaking a performance review of all government programs in order to make major expenditures cuts. Malaysian senior officials are signing performance agreements with their ministers. Australian public managers are required to return an efficiency dividend to the treasury.
- Singapore has brought public sector salaries in line with the private sector. Hong Kong offers international scholarships to promising students who must work for the government as recompense. The UK and Ghana are retraining their public servants. Australia has initiated a recruitment program for women, the disabled, aboriginals and those of non-English backgrounds.
- Malta, Malaysia and Mauritius have launched major new office automation programs.
- Jamaica has created a new secretaries board, laid down guidelines for cabinet submissions, and given each cabinet office the responsibility of reviewing policies and performance in certain key areas.
- The UK is inviting the private sector to finance infrastructure development. Jamaica, Tanzania, Namibia and Ghana have dismantled price controls, import licensing regimes and exchange controls, and are lowering tariffs as well. Singapore is conceptualizing and implementing an explicit industrial strategy.

While all of these initiatives are exciting, the report gives very little information about how the programs were planned, implemented, or are being measured. Perhaps those issues will be addressed at future meetings.

There are, however, some lessons learned about the organizational dynamics that are necessary to governmental reform. Among them:

- Some kind of shock may be needed to force change.
- High level support is necessary to implement reform.
- Reform programs need clear visions, objectives and priorities.
- The organization needs its most capable people in charge, all of its employees -- and its clients -- involved.
- Technology is not a panacea; it is a tool.
- New systems should be tested before they are implemented.

The report goes on to discuss the societal context of public management. Are successful reform initiatives replicable across a variety of societies? Using the OECD countries, the Asian tigers (Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong) and the developing countries, the conference participants examined those issues.

In the OECD countries, economists and politicians were the driving force for public management reform. Their policies -- particularly the use of market mechanisms and the increasing role of the private sector -- remain controversial in the public management community. The three countries that have most fervently embraced these new paradigms are now rediscovering the virtue of old values. Australia is now implementing a "new professionalism" in its civil service. New Zealand has reiterated the collective interest of government relative to departmental autonomy and the UK has reasserted the importance of the civil service's role as policy advisor.

The Asian tigers have very different experiences. Their public managers are already held in high regard and their economies have not made them subject to the demands faced by others. They can afford to pay their people high salaries and to invest in the latest technology. Thus, they are not putting as much emphasis on the tenets of neo-classical economics as are the OECD reformers.

It is the developing countries that are most desperately seeking solutions: to developing professional civil services; to reaching sustainable economic and industrial development; even to establishing working democracies. Moreover, since their external aid comes from specific countries and from international organizations such as the World Bank, they have competing constraints to address. Thus

conference representatives from the developing countries did not feel that market approaches alone would positively affect their government reform efforts.

Participants at the CAPAM conference felt that it was a success in that it brought together a group of sophisticated thinkers to address major questions of public management. But there were many questions about whether the new paradigm really works, either in the countries where it was first developed or in countries to which it has been exported. Thus, the first order of business for all who are committed to the improvement of public management should be to explore the experiences gained in implementing the new paradigm to see what works, what doesn't work, and why.

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