



Response

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A Decaying Public Service

Last Thursday was a bad day for South Africa's public sector. First, two of the country's most senior legal officials were struck off the roll of advocates, the High Court having found them unfit for office. Then, a very senior revenue official was suspended, after various unexplained payments, running into more than a million rands, were made to his bank account. Finally, late in the afternoon, the long-overdue financial statements of South African Airways for 2014/15 were tabled in Parliament, revealing an annual loss of well over R4 billion.

Or perhaps it was a good day, in the sense that some of the rot was exposed, and some action taken. Anyone with a vague grasp of the qualities that are required of Deputy National Directors of Public Prosecutions will have known for years that Ms Nomgcobo Jiba and Mr Lawrence Mrwebi lack those qualities. Their superiors – successive Directors of Public Prosecutions, Ministers of Justice, and ultimately, the President – have kept them in office despite their unfitness. Fortunately, the High Court was able to take a more rational and judicial view of their failures to carry out their duties, and applied the necessary sanction.

Allegations that Mr Jonas Makwakwa, the head of business and individual taxes for SARS, had been receiving suspicious payments were first made in May, but nothing was done about it for four months. It is unclear why it took so long for him to be suspended, but at least – albeit only after the matter was disclosed in the media – some action was taken.

SAA's financial statements have been so long delayed that the Hong Kong aviation authorities threatened recently to revoke the airline's landing rights, and Shell reduced its payment terms from 21 to 14 days. In both cases, the fear was that SAA was in such dire straits financially that it might not be able to meet its obligations. This, a week before one of its main domestic competitors, Comair, which enjoys no state subsidy or treasury guarantee, reported its 50th consecutive profitable year. SAA's board, under the direction of Ms Dudu Myeni, an intimate of President Zuma, ignored the reporting requirements applicable to publicly-owned entities until external actors such as Hong Kong and Shell began to apply pressure.

These are only three examples of how South Africa's public sector is being diverted from its proper purposes. The witch-hunt against finance minister Pravin Gordhan is another. So is the way the SABC is run by Mr Hlaudi Motsoeneng. So is the fact that the country's main criminal investigative unit, the Hawks, is directed by someone declared by the courts to be a liar. So is the fact that Eskom, Denel and

Transnet, all state-owned enterprises, are involved in questionable dealings with companies associated with the Gupta or Zuma families, or both.

Commenting on all this, former finance minister Trevor Manuel said that “our key state institutions are now staffed by people who are not fit to hold the office” and that “we have forfeited the responsibility of leadership to those who are involved and are driven by veiled instincts rather than the values of service.”

What are these “veiled instincts”? By definition, the public sector’s proper purpose is to serve the public interest or, in Catholic Social Teaching terms, the common good. Such service should be the “instinct” of everyone in the public service, and indeed it is for many thousands of senior and junior public servants who go about their business honestly and diligently. Unfortunately, a significant number of highly-placed state employees have shown that they are not honest, and that their diligence lies only in their pursuit of ulterior purposes. Their “veiled instinct” is to do whatever is necessary to further the agendas of those who see the public service – and the public purse – as an easy route to wealth, status and power.

Many people think that there exists a malign web that interlinks corruption, patronage, manipulation of court cases, appointments of cronies, and the diversion of state resources into private pockets; and that at the centre of the web sit President Zuma and his circle of supporters. For those who believe this, what is needed is for the country to move quickly to a “post-Zuma” position; then, the web itself, and all the harm that it is doing to the nation, will dissolve, and the public service can be redirected back to its proper purposes.

Such thinking is naïve. There is a great danger that, as the list of dishonest, partisan, and meretricious senior public servants grows, the whole body of the public service will become infected. As fast as the courts, the media, civil society and the opposition parties expose the Jibas and the Myenis, they will simply be replaced by more of the same, ready to serve the powerful elites, rather than the public. One the ethos of true public service is lost it will be extraordinarily difficult to resurrect it.

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