



**THE PRESIDENT
REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO**

PUBLIC SERVICE & THE CONSTITUTION

The foundation of society in Trinidad and Tobago is expressed in the Preamble of the Constitution where the People have affirmed belief in the core principles of democracy including the dignity of the human person and the equal and inalienable rights of human beings. The Constitution further affirms a belief in a democratic society in which all persons, to the extent of their capacity, play some part in the institutions of national life.

The Constitution importantly recognises a commitment to social justice and a belief that the operation of the economic system should result in the national resources of the community being so distributed so as to sub-serve the common good, that there should be adequate means of livelihood for all, that labour should not be exploited or forced by economic necessity to operate in inhumane conditions and that there should be opportunity for advancement on the basis of merit, ability and integrity, with seniority not being the main component.

These principles generally speaking, reflect the aspirations of the Caribbean people, in the context of our history and consequential social context.

The important question therefore arises; how do we achieve these laudable objectives?

How does the State, established by the respective Constitutions in the Caribbean deliver to the people, the circumstances that allow for delivery of the content expressed above. Delivery of the objectives of the Constitution cannot be achieved in a vacuum or by inert machinery. It can only be delivered by people working with people, for people. The issue therefore becomes: How is it achievable? How do we create the circumstances that allow individuals to aspire, to dream, to hope, to work towards achieving an individual objective that results in the sum total of nationhood?

I respectfully suggest that much of that task falls to the public servant. When placed in that perspective, one immediately understands the fundamental importance of public service and at the same time the great sense of fulfilment that public service brings with it.

How can we forget the quintessential call to arms to service to country by President John F. Kennedy and his seminal statement:

“Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country”.

That request awoke a generation from its slumber.

President Bill Clinton, some three decades later declared:

“Service is the spark to rekindle the spirit of democracy in an age of uncertainty”.

We live today in an age of individualism, what I previously referred to as an obsession in Caribbean culture of “me, myself and I”, which at first appears to be in conflict with the idea of public service.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in the book “Democracy in America”, stated that the problem with individualism is that it *“saps the virtues of public life and in the long run is absorbed in downright selfishness.”* Unbridled individualism eats away at the connection between citizens and Government. There is a constant demand for rights and entitlement, a desire to consume rather than create.

And what is public service? Put simply, Public Service is a service rendered in the public interest. It is action that promotes the public good or meets the public’s needs. When placed in the context of this definition, public service can be heroic because it does not depend on assets. It is a mind-set. It is a commitment. It is a culture.....

In other words, it has a mission statement.

One doesn’t have to serve a Government to serve his/her country. A citizen may be compelled to serve his country by nothing more than his conscience. However, this level of commitment can only arise as a result of the understanding of the relationship between the individual and the society, an understanding that brings home to the person that the individual in a democratic state can only achieve, can only survive, when the society is striving to achieve its objective of our Constitutions, as a common purpose, and dollars and sense must not be integral to that common purpose.

The service motive can be just as powerful as the desire for profit or power if it is encouraged by a recognition of the needs of a society. Those needs are sometimes greater in young, post-colonial societies.

The Public Service of any nation is a fixture dating back to the earliest civilisations. However, for as long as there have been public services, there has been an almost love-hate relationship between the service providers and the people that they serve. Whilst Max Weber (*Vay-ber*) extolled the benefits of the bureaucratic organisation which exemplifies most public services, he also lamented the loss of personalization which accompanies what should be the efficient provision of services to the public. The Public Service has the responsibility to operationalize the strategies which governments may generate but only within the limits of what is considered legal within the constitutional frameworks of a nation. In this regard the service acts as a custodian for the public good. The permanence of public servants ensures that they remain the best source of institutional memory allowing them to keep a country functioning even in the absence of political oversight or vision.

But for all its benefits, the Public Service can sometimes prove unwieldy and too unfriendly for the public to properly navigate. This is what Weber saw and highlighted in his treatment of bureaucracy. All too often the Public Service may appear to hold the members of the public to ransom, withholding the provision of essential services until conditions are to the liking of the public servants. Very often as well, services are sometimes not provided in a wholesome manner almost as if the duty of the public servant is a favour to society. Instances such as these abound but, as is often the case, they are the result of the actions of a few members of the Public Service, which have often been highlighted and sensationalized by a press luxuriating in bad and not good, and this results in a broad brush approach of painting the entire service in a bad light.

It is for this reason that I wish to highlight the good that can be and has been done by the conscientious public servant. As a public servant all my working life, I have seen first-hand the sacrifices made by managers, supervisors, and, lest it said be said that good resides only in the upper echelons of management, clerks and orderlies. There are some public servants who may have spent significant portions of their remuneration to travel to work from East and South Trinidad to Port of Spain, yet still they face the traffic and come to do their duty. I can attest to this, working some eighteen years at the highest level in the Office of the DPP and starting every day at for AM. Some will work after hours until late into the night to ensure that they get all their tasks up to date. Still others will take money from their own pockets to pay the cost of supplies which are not forthcoming. And to make matters worse, when they retire their pension package is a mere pittance and once more, I can attest to this. I am, and have always been on the ground, and I hear the cries of anguish from public Servants. I dare say, to trigger motivation, any discussion on pension must have, as its additional mandate, short term or long term, increased pensions for those employed in the Public Sector and the oilfields But the public never sees this.

What the public sees is the individual, for example, a temporary three month clerk, the unschooled security officer and messenger who may be untrained and thus unsuited to interface with them, greeting them on their arrival to seek assistance in a manner which leaves much to be desired because it is sometimes unhelpful, uncaring and disrespectful. First impressions count and the impression that the citizen will leave with, notwithstanding the comprehensive and competent assistance which may be provided or would have been provided after the fact, is one of distress at the initial treatment meted out. This is not the image that the Public Service needs or wants, but it is the image which is held in the view of the public at large. In this regard, the Public Service may be regarded as its own worst enemy. My imperative: recognize the problem and create the solution.

All is not lost however. We very often ignore the positive effects of training and this is to the detriment of the quality of services we provide. Members of staff who interact with the public have to be trained to do so. It is the first line of defence. It is only when they are provided with the tools can they be expected to be held accountable. Many times people just don't know the right thing to do. In Trinidad and Tobago, perception has become reality. Training can remove the doubt. Public servants also have to internalize the fact that without a public to serve, there would be no need for a Public Service. Both are thus inextricably linked and the public servant must acknowledge and embrace the responsibility, as onerous as it may be at times, of providing quality services to all customers. Employees must also be aware that the bureaucracy of the Public Service can be like a never ending network of dark tunnels which the uninitiated are forced to navigate on their own without guidance. An unhelpful public servant places additional and unnecessary stress on members of the public leading to an unwholesome experience.

It has been my experience that members of the Public Service are often times the best trained and capable personnel who are placed in the wrong billets. Knowledge, skills and abilities have to be continuously audited and matched to job descriptions to ensure that the best qualified are placed where they can do the best job. There are many clerical officers with Degrees, and we need to invoke a system possibly of ex-gratia payments for their increased competencies brought on by certificated training. This is not a marked departure from normal management doctrine, and it needs to be cranked up. If anything, it is being made commonplace because it suits some to frustrate the effort of others. The Public Service has to manage its manpower better.

The age of the super-technocrat has come and gone. Bureaucracy is a system, not an individual. Many times the resident public service guru has turned from a beneficent employee to a tyrannical overseer whose power resides in knowledge and experience hoarded over the years. The fallacy of one's indispensability has to be dispelled. Efforts have to be made to ensure that knowledge is collected and disseminated so that public

servants are able to provide the type of quality services which citizens not only demand, but also deserve.

This is not a hard sell. It is an imperative. Too often the citizenry of this nation are forced to settle for mediocre results because of the actions of a small percentage of public servants. Efforts have to be made to streamline bureaucratic structures by leveraging technology in order to limit the need for face to face interaction. Many services sought by the public can and should be available online. There is no need for every public officer to come to work physically every day. This obsession with work hours must recede. The quantum philosophy must give way to the quality philosophy in public service. This saves employees of public and private enterprise time and money. This translates into greater productivity for them and the entire economy. This is the future of service and it is the only way that we can increase our productivity as a nation. Olivia A. Smith senior economist writing in the Barbados Business Authority magazine on Monday 29th September 2014, Barbados, a place where you have genuine in-depth intellectual discussions, in her brilliant analysis, encapsulated the meaning and the measure of public service productivity, and the philosophical construct and underpinnings of such service. I wish to quote in extenso: "Productivity does indeed apply the public sector. There are four dimensions of public sector performance- stabilization and growth of the economy, distribution of welfare, allocation of public services, and quality of public administration (and I must emphasize). It also refers to the efficient use of Government's resources: people, time, money and information technology, to produce a good or service efficiently and effectively and contribute to socio-economic development of the country. Government has the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the resources spent generate the highest return on investment possible or the highest level of accelerated development possible on a consistent basis. Therefore, efficiency and standards of delivery which meet the clients' expectations are what we have to be concerned with. The point being made here is that productivity in the public sector is not just a measure of activity but rather of efficiency, standards, outcomes and development."

As the largest employer of citizens, the Public Service is an institution which is irreplaceable. It is part of our society run by us for us. It should not be a safety net for the unemployable, inefficient and the incompetent. There are social programmes in place for that, and where not, there probably could be. It should remain an important building block in the tapestry of our society and should be able to be held up as an example of best practice, leading the way for other members of the service industry. But this can only happen if we want it to happen. The citizens want good service so it is up to the public servant to step up to take the challenge. After all, the only thing that separates a public servant from another citizen is the desk or counter between them.