

THE COMMONWEALTH ASSOCIATION FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT (CAPAM) BIENNIAL CONFERENCE

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I am indeed honoured to be asked to address this distinguished Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management (CAPAM) Biennial Conference. I wish to take this opportunity to thank the Rt. Hon. Dr. Fenech Adami, the Prime Minister of Malta, the host of this conference, and the Honourable Minister Gordon Draper, President of CAPAM for inviting me here today to address this Conference.

2. I have no doubt that the Conference this time will focus on pertinent issues on the New Public Administration as identified by the CAPAM's inaugural conference in 1994. The theme 'The New Public Administration : Global Challenges - Local Solutions' is timely and appropriate given that leaders of the Commonwealth at the last Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Auckland had agreed to assist member countries in strengthening their public services. Malaysia hopes to share the experiences of Commonwealth countries in the area of public administrative reforms.

3. The global challenges which will confront us as we enter the next millennium are many, and whether we succeed in managing them will depend on a number of factors among which will be our own ability to adapt to rapidly changing perceptions and situations.

4. For this, we need to know our own strength or weakness and the direction we are headed for. Nothing serves to concentrate our efforts more than the identification of targets or goals. Once the goal or goals are identified, it remains only to chart the route and to negotiate your way along it. The whole would then constitute the national agenda, which when promoted and accepted by the nation as a whole, will yield positive results.

5. It is with this perception that Malaysia identified its goal - an ambitious one no doubt, but then unambitious goals motivate no one. Our goal is to become a fully developed country by 2020, fully developed not only economically, but also politically, socially and spiritually. To achieve this, we must ensure high rates of growth; seven percent to be precise for a period of 30 years from 1990. At the same time we intend to consciously maintain our social system, our strong moral and ethical values and our religious faiths.

6. An important cog in the engine of growth is the public service, the executive machinery of Government. Some in the advanced countries believe that Governments are superfluous,

being merely a collection of corrupt officials and politicians who act as impediments to the freedom of the people to do what they think is good for them. And so in the last few decades they have been busy paring the authority of the Government. This they do by breaking up the administrative machinery into conflicting centres of authority. Thus the authority of the President for example is negated by the authority of the legislative bodies and the authority of the legislatures diminished by the courts' powers of judicial review. Even when the people elect the President and the members of the legislative, they refuse to trust the leaders of Government that they themselves have chosen.

7. Now new centres of power have emerged. These are the Non-Government Organisations. Just about anybody can set himself up as an NGO and he will have a powerful influence over Governmental affairs even if he represents nobody but himself. There can be literally hundreds of NGO who must be listened to. The time of the administrators must be taken up dealing with NGO, their protests and often their violent opposition.

8. On top of all these is the press, now referred to as the media, the people in between, the interpreters. No one will dispute the need for a free press. But the freedom is gauged by the strength of the media's opposition to the Government in power. The media is not considered to be free unless it is unequivocally against the Government. The effect is to force the media to undermine the Government, its authority and its programmes. Even if the Government does good or succeeds in carrying out a programme, the media highlights only the negative aspects of these in order to prove that it is free. That this in itself reflects its own lack of freedom does not seem to be appreciated by the press. That it is also not free from the control of the owners or the editors or the journalists and their pet prejudices is deliberately ignored.

9. With all these forces ranged against the Government, it is almost impossible for the Government to function effectively and to lead the nation. Perhaps an emasculated Government such as this is good for the developed countries of the West. The people are well able to take care of themselves, or so they believe. But a Government without authority, and the means to apply, if not enforced that authority in a developing country would be disastrous. The country will not only be unable to develop but it will not even be stable. Anarchy will prevail and the people will suffer. If you look at a number of developing countries where the Governments are weak, you will realise why these countries just cannot make any progress. Of course they are lauded for being democratic. But anarchic democracies are no better than any other anarchy. The people lose their freedom.

10. Malaysia believes in democracy but not in anarchy. Democracy is not intended to result in a Government unable to govern. The Government must rule the country. It must lead and it must be effective. It must have objectives other than merely the maintenance of law and order. A developing country must develop and it is the duty and responsibility of the Government to develop it. While the Government should not be authoritarian, should not trample on the rights of the citizens, neither should the citizens disregard and negate the rights and the authority of the Government to govern. If the Government fails, then it should be brought down democratically i.e. through the same door that it came in, through the ballot box. Overthrowing it in any other way must be regarded as undemocratic and eschewed. Those who overthrow the Government by other means must accept being overthrown by the same means when they become the Government. And the process can be endless. Again anarchy will prevail.

11. To implement the policies and programmes of the elected Government, an effective administrative machinery is essential. Such a machinery must be structured carefully to enable it to carry out the decisions of the elected Government. Separation of the legislative from the executive (administration) is good but the fact remains that the executives must carry out the decisions of the legislative wing. It is fine when the administration is merely required to maintain law and order and the utilities. But a modern Government cannot just confine itself to this chore only.

12. To develop a country and to manage its finances, the administration must know and understand the decisions and the directives of the elected governing body, the Cabinet. Effective communication between the Cabinet and the top officers of the administration must exist. Far too often the interpretation of Government decisions by the administration is wrong. A one sentence condensation of Cabinet decision is not adequate. Not having heard the debate preceding the decision, the administrators may well disagree with the decision or interpret it wrongly. The end result must be an ineffective and an unsuccessful administration and Government.

13. In Malaysia, Post Cabinet Ministerial Meetings, presided over by the Minister concerned, allows Cabinet decisions to be fully explained to the administrators. The latter can ask for clarification or even disagree at this stage. The Minister will have to explain why. In the process, there emerges a greater understanding of the decisions made. Implementation will be more precise and positive, in accord with Cabinet's decision.

14. But wrong interpretations can also take place at lower levels. Effective communication is also necessary all down the line of command. Each and every individual in the administration must know exactly the workflow chart, his own position and responsibility according to the chart and the part of the work that must be carried out.

15. A modern Government has less authority but is expected to do much more than just govern, i.e. maintaining law and order and attending to the public utilities. It is a paradox. But a modern Government must accept the need to be more involved in the general well-being of the people. It must develop the country and manage its economic and social affairs. These days military strength is not as important as economic strength. Government must lend its weight and authority to ensure that the economy grows.

16. Socialists and Communists believed that the best way to make the economy grow and benefit the people is for the Government to take over all the means of production. It was assumed that if all the profits from business accrue to the Government as the sole owner of the business, then Government should become much richer. Private ownership of the means of production would result in only a percentage of the profit accruing to the Government in the form of taxes.

17. But after some 70 years of Communism and Socialism, it was discovered that the Government received practically no profit from Government-owned enterprises. Not only was Government management not profit motivated but workers refused to work hard because there were no incentives. On the other hand, workers still went on strike in Government-owned companies to demand more pay despite the lack of profit. Besides with only workers to buy the products, the domestic market was poor. And so, the Communist and the Socialist systems of Government ownership of the means of production are now in disrepute. Where once nationalisation was the catchword, today one hears everywhere the new catchword - privatisation.

18. But privatisation is neither easy nor always beneficial. It requires a totally new mindset, particularly among civil servants. Privatisation really means abolition of much of the authority of civil servants. Whole departments have to be given up to new owners whose ways of doing things and whose attitudes towards the performance of employees are radically different. Suddenly civil service chiefs find themselves turned into mere inspectors rather than being the directors and implementors of Government policy. Quite often they have actually to service those people who have taken away their jobs from them.

19. But if privatisation is to succeed, cooperation from the civil servants is essential. They must be prepared to reexamine their roles and their way of doing things. They have to put the interest of the private sector above those of the bureaucracy. They have to remove bureaucratic impediments to the success of the privatised entities. In short, they must ensure that the privatised entities succeed where they the bureaucrats may have failed before.

20. This is not something that anyone does gladly. And civil servants are often reluctant to cooperate in making their former arch rival successful. And yet that is what it takes to make privatisation work. From being the authority, the Civil Service must now become the non-executive partners and public servants in the true sense of the word.

21. Why should the civil servants cooperate with the private sector, particularly with the agencies which were once run by them but are now in private hands? The simple answer is that it pays to do so, to help the private sector succeed and make profits. Government collect taxes from the people in order to finance the administration; to pay the salaries of civil servants. Obviously, if the private sector makes no money, taxes cannot be collected. On the other hand, when the private sector is doing well, tax collection in every form, in particular corporate tax, will be big. Big revenues collected by the Government influence the remuneration of the civil service. And so by helping the private sector to prosper, the civil servants are actually helping themselves.

22. Politics was once the most important consideration of Governments when conducting foreign relations. Countries align with other countries or confront them based on ideology and the need for national security. Civil servants were therefore required to be skilful in politics, understanding the various ideologies and negotiating diplomatic alliances.

23. Today the stress is on economic relations, on trade and investments. Again the civil service has to adjust, to acquire expertise in economics and trade and trade practices, even master an entirely new jargon. Failure to do so would make the civil service ineffective or even irrelevant. The past attitude towards business has to change also. The civil service must be business-friendly, facilitating trade between nations through negotiating favourable terms and conditions for trade.

24. Not so long ago the only machine seen in an office was the typewriter. Today machines have invaded the office, Government and private. It is said that office workers above forty are afraid to handle computers, faxes, copiers and paperless

transactions. But office automation and computers are now essential parts of the administration process and civil servants must adjust their work to accommodate these machines.

25. Quality too has become a much sought-after target. If goods produced must meet certain quality standards, surely services, Government services included, must achieve a certain degree of quality. ISO 9000 should not be for the factories of the private sector alone. Government administration must also vie for the coveted award. A good Government administration cannot be of a lower quality than its clients - largely the private sector. It must complement the private sector fully if it is going to serve the country and contribute towards its growth and the well-being of the people.

26. From the foregoing, it is clear that present day administrators need to change and adjust not once, but again and again. New structures need to be set up even as administration is downsized. The reorientation can be disruptive and unsettling at times. But failure to take cognizance of these needs and failure to devise the right structures and methods will surely result in ineffective Governments and the failure of the nation. So the civil service has a crucial role to play and it is necessary that they appreciate them and take immediate steps to make themselves as relevant as ever.