

# Whither Public Administration in South Africa?

*The Quest for Repositioning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

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OPINION

The thrust of this article is to critique the apparent lack of identity and orientation of the Discipline of Public Administration prevalent in most South African universities and Universities of Technology and also to trigger a debate on the future of the Discipline in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, the identity of the Discipline constitutes the unit of analysis for the purpose of this article. The practice of Public Administration is as old as the inception of governments dating back to the Greek's direct democratic state that existed during the fifth century. The Discipline of Public Administration was formally introduced in North American universities in the late 1800s and beyond. Suffice it to say that Public Administration in the South African context was a taught subject during the 1930s (Picard 2005:80) by University of Pretoria and later other universities followed especially historically black universities situated in the erstwhile homelands except for the University of Good Hope later renamed University of South Africa which introduced the first course of study in "Native Law and Administration" in 1918 (Picard 2005:80).

The philosophical underpinnings of the Discipline then were basically to equip students with administrative and financial knowledge and skills tailored for serving their respective governments, namely, the former Transkei, Bophuthatswana and Venda and Ciskei states, central government, and the homelands of Lebowa, Gazankulu, Qwaqwa and Ka-Ngwane and to a greater extent espoused the values and ideology of the British and apartheid regimes. This view is also advanced by Chipkin and Meny-Gibert (2012:102). Furthermore,

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the Discipline evolved from Native Administration to Development Administration and subsequently Public Administration prior to 1990, and this evolution clearly attests to identity crisis that has engulfed the field of Public Administration over the past century. Public Administration has, therefore, remained a contested Discipline in South Africa owing to varying and competing political interests, ideology, class and race over the previous and current epochs.

The prominence of Public Administration gained impetus during the Convention for Democratic South Africa (CODESA) negotiations and resulted in the insertion of Chapter 10 devoted to Public Administration values and principles. The significance of this Chapter was to construct a new and inclusive Public Administration shaped by good governance principles and values in order to be responsive to the needs of the whole society, bearing in mind that the new democratically elected government inherited a public service that was in a bad state of affairs in 1994. One would have, therefore, envisaged that universities would be seized with reconfiguration of their academic departments and schools in line with the vision of the framers of the Constitution. Ironically, there are a few universities that currently offer Public Administration as a distinct Discipline while most universities have deliberately refashioned their departments and schools with different identities and thus this situation has created an amorphous Discipline and in part this trend was largely influenced by the adoption of New Public Management doctrine – invented and embraced in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the UK amongst others, during the early days of the democratic transition in the country. A case in point is the naming of departments and schools as Public Governance; Public Leadership; Governance; Government; and Public Management.

In addition, there are two associations established to carry out a mandate of advancing scholarship and practice of public administration and management namely, the South African Association of Public Administration and Management (SAAPAM) and Association of Southern African Schools and Departments of Public Administration and Management (ASSADPAM) and these structures should serve as the appropriate platforms for deliberations and resolution of this vexing question.

The questions that beg answers are:

- Is it in the public interest to have differentiation that currently exists given the limited size of universities and universities of technology and government institutions as the most crucial market for graduates?

- Is it self-serving?
- Is it a mere question of exercising autonomy granted to these departments/schools?
- Does the Constitution serve as a frame of reference for shaping Disciplinary identity? What about the UN Standards of Excellence of Public Administration as a point of departure?

These are some of the serious questions that should top the agenda of the key stakeholders involved in the business of public administration education and training including but not limited to universities, Department of Public Service and Administration, National School of Government, and academic associations with a view to help construct a single Disciplinary identity.

Public Administration is but one Discipline that appears to lack a clear epistemological orientation and identity relative to its sister disciplines such as Economics, Law, Sociology, Political Science, Business Management and Human Resource Management/Industrial Psychology. Van der Walddt (2015:1) asserts that the absence of a unified theory is largely to blame for the identity, existential and academic crisis which the Discipline undoubtedly experiences and thus he calls for a unified and coherent study of Public Administration. It is important to note that, Public Administration is an eclectic Discipline. This implies that Public Administration, over the years has developed as a Discipline by borrowing concepts and constructs from other fields of study (Madumo 2014:130). Therefore, interdisciplinary academic programmes in Public Administration include programmes in which Public Administration is studied from the integrated viewpoints of different disciplines, generally those of Political Science, Law, Economics and Sociology (Verheijen and Connaughton 2003:835).

Comparatively speaking, what is the differentiator between the Harvard Business School and Wits Business School in the eyes of the target market except for the rankings? Surely, they both offer MBA programmes for different contexts and most glaringly are named business schools as opposed to entrepreneurial or new venture creation schools since this represents the cliché in the mainstream economy. In relating this comparison to the thrust of this article, would it be a herculean task to reconfigure departments and schools as distinctly Public Administration, for instance, UFS Department of Public Administration or

UNISA Department of Public Administration, Fort Hare School of Public Administration, CPUT Department of Public Administration?

Public Administration as a Discipline rooted in the legal, political, economic and social contexts characterising South Africa today cannot afford to be perceived as disparate, disjointed and unstructured given the enormity of the challenges facing the contemporary South African developmental state manifested through inequality, unemployment, poverty and gross government inefficiencies. This may scupper efforts to help build a capable, effective, efficient and responsive machinery of the state. Arguably, the teaching of Public Administration in institutions of higher learning is essential for any government. This is due to the fact that it has to prepare its graduates to comprehend and optimally perform in the often dynamic government environment. Therefore, the government of South Africa has to rely on universities and universities of technology to produce cutting edge and innovative Public Administration graduates who should be equipped with the skills to solve complex challenges.

However, this will be difficult to achieve if there is limited coordination in so far as the offering of the Public Administration curricular is concerned shaped by unified theory. This implies that the curricular in all institutions should originate from the same point of departure. In the United States, and some parts of the Global West, it is universally accepted that the seminal work of Woodrow Wilson, ignited the origin of the Discipline in 1887. The growing contending perspectives on the etymology of the study of Public Administration and the adaptation of Wilsonian theory in South Africa is progressive and should drive all of us to a middle ground and consensus on the need for a unified theory attuned to the South African past history, context and dynamism.

Flowing from the multi-dimensionality of Public Administration, an important question arises as to "what should a future public servant demonstrate?" This article argues that a future public servant should principally demonstrate a thorough understanding of the Constitution, its interpretation and attendant obligations imposed for the spheres of government; should be a development activist and thus demonstrating sufficient understanding of the interconnection between Public Administration, Politics, Economics, Law and social engineering of the South African society in respect to decision making, project planning and public service delivery provisioning; be well placed to proffer expert opinion to political office-bearers; and finally, demonstrate humility and a sense of urgency in resolving perennial governance challenges.

The future of the Discipline of Public Administration is inextricably intertwined with the vision encapsulated in the Constitution coupled with the National Development Plan 2030 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030. This implies that there ought to be alignment in the offerings of Public Administration with the strategic objectives and direction of the country since Public Administration is basically a study embedded on the analysis of government in action or the business of government. Public Administration will remain a sought after career for many graduates who aim to make a difference in the lives of ordinary people in various settings and add value to the implementation of the Constitution and National Development Plan.

Scholars and senior government managers alike should jettison the prevailing otherness and silo mentality. This means that, they should collaborate to ensure that through the cutting edge research produced in the corridors of higher learning and excellent coordinated teaching, developmental challenges are identified and adequately addressed. For instance, scholars have contributed vastly to the literature in Public Administration, which proposes new frameworks and perspectives towards solving some long-standing challenges facing South Africa, but most government actors prefer to rather solicit the services of the independent consultants such as KPMG and Deloitte whose research work is often incongruence with the realities facing all the spheres of government, as their core business is significantly different from that of the government, in terms of its orientation. Thus, the future of the Discipline of Public Administration will correctly be shaped by three important questions: Where do we come from? Where are we now? Who do we want to become? Finally, Amilcar Cabral once opined that "ideas and perspectives are moved forward through debates and not through a chorus." Let the debate rage on. It is long overdue.

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