



FW de Klerk
FOUNDATION

ARE THE APPOINTMENT MERRY-GO-ROUND AND TOO MANY VACANCIES IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE TO ANYONE'S BENEFIT?

By Dr Theuns Eloff: Executive Director, FW de Klerk Foundation

The South African Institute of Race Relations (IRR) recently published a report that clearly shows that there has been an unprecedentedly high interchange of Cabinet Ministers and Directors-General since 2009 under President Zuma. Accordingly, the average length of a Cabinet Minister's term was 8.5 months, and that of a Director-General (DG) 22 months. Sixty percent of working relationships between Ministers and DGs lasted only 12 months and 40% of them included an acting DG.

A concrete example of this (albeit at a lower level than DG) has also emerged recently. After the then head of Crime Intelligence, Mulangi Mphego, was forced to resign in 2009 for allegations that he interfered with witnesses in the Selebi case, he was succeeded by the now-notorious Richard Mdluli. After the latter's departure, King Bhoyi Ngcobo was appointed acting head. After him, Pat Mokushane was appointed, but he was recently fired because he had no security clearance (only in South Africa!). Now the fifth head in eight years has been appointed for this important post - again Ngcobo (who was part of President Zuma's Protection Unit).

It also came to light in Parliament in August that the national Department of Energy currently has 85 vacancies. It is difficult to determine what percentage of all posts is made up of vacancies, but the fact that it includes four of the top nine posts (including that of the DG) must be worrying.

The ongoing oversight and management problems of state-owned entities such as Eskom, SAA and SABC, as well as the scandals at national and provincial government departments (SASSA and Esidimeni are the most frightening examples), is indisputable proof that there is an endemic lack of leadership, management skills and competence in the majority of state entities. And more and more, service delivery at local level is also impacted negatively by these factors.

The pattern that emerges is that of a swift turn-around of senior staff (which destroys continuity and makes good governance and efficacy almost impossible), a high percentage of vacancies in senior posts, and a general lack of skills to do the job.

The IRR gives three reasons for the merry-go-round phenomenon. The first is President Zuma's politics and his personal agenda to ensure that nobody in his Cabinet is strong enough to oppose him (and that he seemingly hires and fires until he finds someone willing to dance to his tune). The second is (understandable) external circumstances such as death, resignations and the expiry of terms. But the third is simply poor judgment and an inability to appoint people who can work together and implement a policy agenda. These three reasons create a "perfect storm" of organised chaos and a state administration that is totally dysfunctional. The picture created by the merry-go-round figures is one of "large-scale instability, constant conflict, and ongoing turmoil".



FW de Klerk
FOUNDATION

In addition, there is the negative impact of cadre deployment on “lower” levels of government, where appointments are motivated by politics or corruption, and competence does not count. Even the Public Service Commission said in a discussion paper in 2014 that cadre deployment and the associated corrupt practices have extremely negative consequences for effective service delivery.

There are no recent reliable figures available, but it is estimated that due to the unwillingness to appoint minority groups in state entities, there are tens of thousands of vacancies on the three levels of public service. These jobs often require a high level of expertise and experience - such as engineers. Posts are then left vacant in, for example, municipalities with water and sewerage problems. The transformation ideology of racial quotas according to the formula 80% black, 9% white, 9% brown and 2% Indian, therefore, also plays a destructive role.

Another factor not often considered is the impact of internal tension in the ANC on government effectiveness. Pro-Zuma and anti-Zuma elements that work in the public service simply cannot work together. Unfortunately - generally speaking - South Africa is far removed from a corps of objective and professional civil servants, especially at this time. This means that as a result of internal party political tensions, the operation of a department or local authority is totally incapacitated. This partly explains the high number of suspensions and disciplinary charges frequently imposed on civil servants.

Clearly, the erosion of the public service's capacity begins with the President-appointed Ministers and their DGs. At lower levels this is further exacerbated by cadre deployment, corruption, the application of transformation ideology and associated vacancies, as well as the tension within the ANC - all of which restrict effective functioning of the state. With the run-up to the ANC election conference in December 2017, the end of this is unfortunately not yet in sight.

It is therefore urgent and necessary that there be a new style of leadership at the highest level, other than the current Zuma leadership. Whether Mrs Dlamini-Zuma will do that, is highly doubtful. To get an answer to this plea, one will have to wait until December 2017, and possibly later. The best one can hope for in the interim, is that those politicians and public servants that can and want to manage, and are willing to lift their heads above the parapet, will rise up and show leadership. Only then can the “oneself first” culture of entitlement affecting the majority of the current public service again be transformed into a culture of “the people first”.