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THE SCOPE OF PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT 1/

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In the years since their independence most of the African countries have felt the need to re-examine their systems of government and administration; to discover which features and institutions are still relevant to the needs of the present day, and which need to be abolished or extensively adapted because in their present form they are less than ideally suited to doing the work of national development. The object of this paper is to ask why we need a system of personnel administration for locally employed staff, how badly we want it, and what objectives we hope to achieve thereby. I do not think you can answer these questions, however, without looking into the nature of local government itself, as we have it here in Africa in 1967. The one feature common to African countries in general is that they are in a period of rapid social change: the old philosophies, inherited from one's ancestors or imported from outside, are all subject to question, and nothing can be accepted without testing.

So the argument from tradition is no longer sufficient by itself. The fact that a system works well in the industrialized countries, or that it did what was wanted in the colonial period in Africa, is no guarantee that it will do what we want it to do here and now. The countries represented here have all opted for local government, in one form or another, as part of their form of government. The central authority has voluntarily divided its power to govern, and allocated a share to local units scattered over the country. What part are the local units, and the staff who serve them, intended to play in the national movement? I would suggest to you that there are three great African objectives, to each of which the personnel of the local authorities have their contribution to make:

- A growing and self-sustained national economy;
- A rising material standard of living; and
- A social system which corresponds with these aims and yet embodies African values.

These are dynamic objectives, full of the atmosphere of change, and they seem a long way removed from day-to-day preoccupations like repairing the roads, keeping the ambulance running, straightening up the accounts and bringing in the local rate. But if local government fails to play a

dynamic role, it will risk being left without any separate role of its own, losing the degree of autonomy it possesses and becoming a subordinate level of the central administration. We all believe that it has a better and more effective future than that in Africa.

The local government employee, then, whatever the level of his appointment, is in the business of development - economic, social and even in a sense political development. Moving down from the great national objectives I have already mentioned, we can say that he and his local authority can work for development, broadly in three ways -

- (1) By providing and maintaining the infrastructure needed for major national developments: the roads which will stand up to heavy traffic, the water supplies, drainage and health services without which the labour force could not remain fit and efficient;
- (2) By organizing and providing minor development works and social services at the local level, enlisting the people's own enthusiasm and helping them to create for themselves the betterment of their own life and productivity;
- (3) By offering a practical political training to very large numbers of people, not only to those who become councillors but to every elector who takes an intelligent interest in the democratic running of his own local affairs.

There have always been peculiarities in the situation of local government staff, compared to that of the central government officials. The units to which they belong are so much smaller, and very often have a short history compared to the central civil service. As a result there tends to be more uncertainty over the rules which should apply, whether in major questions such as the status and relationships of senior officers, or even in details like leave entitlements and allowances of various kinds. Then again there is the nearness of the employer, and the frequency and ease of contact with him; an average local authority is far too small an organization for any of its employees to escape interference by retreating behind their official image. At the same time, the work the authority does and the services it supplies are of considerable interest to a large part of the population, who are able to express themselves forcibly

and repeatedly if they feel there is something to complain about. It is all rather like a popular local shop, selling things which people need for their daily life; let an assistant put one foot wrong, and it is sure to turn out that his customer is on friendly terms with the management, and feels entitled to go and make a complaint. I have still not mentioned the councillors, that rather large and unorganized "board of directors", who are not always sure whether they are playing the part of directors or customers. They can do much, if they will, to protect the staff from unjustified criticism, but may also be found on occasion leading the attack against them.

Whatever the strains and tensions involved, at least this traditional situation of the local official has been a stable and broadly understood one up to the present. But now we have to consider the new factors working upon him, the tasks related to development and social change. Wherever the local authority is involved with the national development plan, if only in providing certain types of "infrastructure", a new and heavy burden falls upon the senior officers, particularly the Secretary or Executive Officer. They will normally be involved in consultation procedures when proposals for the Plan are put up from the local level; and when the Plan comes out, it is vital that they should be thinking of the implications which it contains, directly or indirectly, for the work of their own councils. A new industry or settlement scheme is coming to the area: where are the workers coming from, and how will they be housed and transported? What additional schools will be needed for their children? Will the roads stand up to the extra use, and should they be up-graded so that more can be spend on them? Should there be an extended water supply or additional dispensary services? In a modern local government system, any of these requirements may mean a request for extra government grants, which can often not be obtained without a year's delay or more. The critical point is nearly always the point at which someone- the professional local officer or his counterpart in central government - begins thinking about these long-term implications, the overlooking of which can put the brakes on a scheme and may drag it to a standstill.

When we turn to the minor development operation or social service which can be organized at the level of the local authority itself, once again the senior officer is deeply involved, and much of the coherence of

a scheme will depend upon his "development-mindedness" and drive. But this type of operation also requires the personal commitment of semi-professional officers, foremen and supervisors, and a great range of junior staff whose problems have been too little studied and whose importance is perhaps under-estimated: the agricultural and veterinary assistants, cooperative and community development workers, and village executive officers or headmen. To quote Robert Chambers, formerly of the East African Staff College ^{1/}: "If anyone persuades people to change and develop, they do; if anyone supplies advice and services, it is usually they; if anyone applies coercion for failure to cooperate, it is they who are at the sharp end, torn between dual loyalties - to the people they serve and the Government (we may add: or the local authority) that pays them". The terms of service drawn up for these junior officials, the provision made for their families, the decision whether they should live close to their work, or be given transport of their own and expected to travel about - all these can have a profound effect on whether they function as active members of a development team, or drift along performing a limited task and just doing their best to keep out of trouble. I have taken the political training of councillors and electors as the third way in which a local authority and its staff can contribute to development. This might also be regarded as one of the traditional tasks of local government, yet it has acquired a special significance and delicacy in the years since African countries have attained independence. Properly used, the local government system can offer a way of escape from tribalism and the limited scope of traditional institutions, and provide for many people their first working contact with the developing society of the future. But this result is heavily dependent upon the part played by senior officers of the local authority, more especially the chief executive. His task is twofold: first, to operate the system in such a way that the councillor has the greatest possible share in decision-making, and so maintains his feeling of concern in the local authority's work; and secondly, to work for the integration of local interests with the national interest, ironing

^{1/} In an unpublished paper dated 20th August, 1966.

out and moderating the differences which are constantly cropping up. The chief executive of a local authority is now a political figure, whether he likes it or not, and as Donald Stone has put it ^{1/}: "To achieve support, capable politicians dramatize goals and aspirations, the steps to fulfil them, and the national and individual advantages of doing so". This means that the executive officer must himself have a sound understanding of the government's own ideology, of where the nation wants to go in the social and economic sense, and how it proposes to get there. At the same time he has to be constantly aware of the limitations of decentralized power within which his authority has to work: central government must always retain the ultimate decision over major issues of policy, and must also be able to wield sufficient controls to ensure that local government is viable, efficient and free from corruption.

All this demands a very much broader type of mind than was needed for the secretary-treasurer's duties in earlier days; the conservative type of official can, of course, survive with his limited approach and keep his office going, but he will not be responding to the real needs of a changing and developing country. It is not only the chief executive who is required to play a constructive role and provide leadership in the tasks for which local government is best suited. Every member of the staff has the same responsibility in some degree to be an "animator", to promote development and make an effective call for voluntary effort from the ordinary citizen. How can personnel administration be shaped to produce this new type of official? In my submission, you cannot begin to plan until you have some body capable of forming a single policy and of looking ahead on at least a national scale - whether that body should be a central government department, an autonomous commission or an association bringing together the employing local authorities or the personnel themselves. The changes required must be consciously adopted, and almost certainly they must be adopted for the country as a whole. They involve manpower planning - so far a very inexact science, but it is better to have some estimate of your needs in qualified staff, however tentative, than no

^{1/} Public Administration and Democracy, ed. Martin (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1965)

estimate at all. They involve training requirements, which are always a matter for long-term planning, and more particularly so when change is in the air - a decision to provide courses for the first time to a new category of staff may mean extensions to the buildings of existing training centres, or even the creation of a new centre, quite apart from the need to recruit additional teaching staff.

Then we come to the well-known general objectives of any personnel system. I have been emphasizing the new approach which I think is now necessary, but not with any intention to suggest that the traditional objectives have become obsolete. The system must still offer the prospect of a full career, with reasonable opportunities of promotion, because this is what the best qualified men want, and because you are competing directly with the attractions of a central government career service. The local government official must be made to feel no less secure than a government employee in the same position: that is, he must not be left in constant fear of losing his post because the council has decided to economise next year, or because Councillor X's young brother has just come home and is in need of a job himself. For as many of the staff as possible, there should be a scheme of retirement benefits, and with it the expectation that they will serve long enough to enjoy them. Salaries and terms of service have to be made comparable to those prevailing in central government, because in a developing country central government is the great competing employer; sometimes a local industry or commercial employment will also enter into competition, but this is a variation which can only be treated on the merits of the particular case. Finally, careful thought has to be given to setting up negotiating machinery and committees for consultation between employers and employees, not only within the local authorities themselves, but including the central controlling or coordinating body - in any unified or integrated system, the latter will be considerably more important than the local units, since terms of service have to be settled on a national scale. The danger of a triangular argument between employees, the employing local authority and the central body, which can cause immense frustration and waste of time, must be anticipated, and clear channels of negotiation laid down. Now I do not want to list in any more detail the matters to be covered by personnel

systems in general, because this is a subject which will concern other lecturers, and you will be going deeply into it in group discussions. What I should like to do is to offer you some thoughts on how we might produce the type of local official needed to make local government an active influence for development.

One attitude we must get away from is the assumption that the staff of a local authority consists of the senior officers, who count, and a great mass of subordinate employees who do not. The seniors have more pay and greater prestige, and rightly so, but the junior supervisors and extension staff, to whom I have referred, are in far greater contact with the public, and because of their numbers they exercise an immense influence for better or for worse. If they feel neglected and uninterested in the council's business, that is the image that will get over to the public; if on the other hand they can see the point of what they are doing, if they take a pride in it because it is contributing to development, then some of this interest and enthusiasm will be communicated to the people in general. In considering how this spirit of change and development can be brought most effectively into the local government system, I am therefore going to start with the staff below the top level.

The first point to be made concerns the distribution of responsibility within the local authority's administrative system. Local government depends for its existence on the idea of decentralization, and it is a contradiction in terms if, within each authority, there exists a rigid hierarchy in which all decisions have to be made by the chief officers personally. The junior staff must be given responsibility and the chance to use their initiative, as much of it as they can take. And this of course is the limitation, because the quality of the staff, their education and training, are not yet all that could be desired, and there are dangers that mistakes will be made and resources wasted. But because these dangers are obvious, it does not follow that they are the only ones: I want to suggest to you that it is necessary for the health of the personnel body that we should decentralize to the maximum degree possible. In time, the shortcomings will be made up by the rising standard of general education in the country, and by better recruitment and training procedures in the local government system itself.

One desirable effect of decentralizing authority is to give junior officials the sense that their own jobs matter to the community. Another factor which works in the same direction is the increasing specialization of posts. As time goes on we should be moving away from the idea that common-sense and a few rules-of-thumb are sufficient, and towards the creation of training courses which will turn an increasing number of posts into better paid professional or semi-professional ones. Wherever the local government service has been unified or integrated, it seems to me essential that the central authority responsible for its recruitment and control should be associated to some extent with training. I do not mean that it should attempt to direct the organization of courses in detail, but once it is accepted that positive intervention is needed from the central body to plan the future of the personnel system, it follows that the central body must be able to influence training policy as well. Just as important is the contact with local realities which it will itself acquire from being confronted with training needs and problems - it is all too easy, in a central office in the capital, to be submerged in the paper work of a staff system and to be aware of the human beings themselves only as a mass of statistics.

Coming now to the senior staff, the first and essential step is to rescue them from the sense of insecurity in their posts, which arises from giving the power of life and death over them to a capricious council or individual councillor. We are probably all agreed on this. But when that battle has been won, should we not beware of setting up a too perfect bureaucracy in place of the former system? Max Weber's ideal characteristics of integrity and security are good in themselves, but they need to be diluted with other elements in any institution which hopes to work for development and social change. The incentive to achievement depends rather on bringing some degree of insecurity into an official's outlook, if not with regard to his present post, at least to his future career. This means an increased emphasis on promotion by merit rather than seniority, and a determination to prevent an inefficient officer from drifting peacefully upwards all his life from one automatic promotion to another. With all the necessary safeguards to prevent injustice and ensure humane treatment, we must still so arrange matters that merit is actively rewarded