

The leaks that could sink government's proposed tighter ship

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A suite of new measures to improve the co-ordination of policy and service delivery will, it is hoped, strengthen policy outcomes and accountability. The success of new planning and monitoring bodies in the Presidency, for one, is predicated on sound institutional arrangements between the three spheres of government and a competent, accountable public administration. But two questions are still unanswered. Who will co-ordinate the many initiatives aimed at better co-ordinated service delivery? And what's the plan for building a competent and accountable public administration?

In his recent address to Parliament, Minister in the Presidency Trevor Manuel said the government would shortly release a green paper on the role of the new National Planning Commission, which he heads. This signals a clear intention to debate important public policy issues in the public domain, but also the possibility that further institutional reforms may be on the cards. A national plan must stick to have any effect, but making national policies stick in a system in which provinces and municipalities can make their own expenditure decisions has bedevilled co-ordination for 15 years .

SA is, after all, a unitary state — and it seems reasonable that we now debate what the nuts and bolts of co-operative governance are . Hopefully, the green paper will provoke a debate (to borrow the words of a leading finance expert) about which aspects of the system of governance “need to be tight” and which “can be loose”.

There are myriad long-term institutional reforms under way or in the pipeline. The single public service has taken seven years to become a draft bill and it will take as long to complete. The legislation will superimpose a system of administrative decentralisation over a system of political decentralisation. The constitutional reforms that will open the way for regional electricity distributors will have a profound effect on the revenue structure of larger cities. The new housing agency will pose complex problems for the co-ordination of provincial and municipal development plans, and could provoke disputes. In a recent submission on the budget, the **Financial and Fiscal Commission made bold proposals on the financing of education and health and called for clarity on expenditure assignments between spheres of government to improve accountability.** In last year's local government budget review, the Treasury also raised concerns about growing grant dependence in municipalities. Individually, these may all be necessary and worthwhile measures, but do the pieces fit together into a coherent long-term public sector reform strategy?

A lot is said about improving the competence, performance and accountability of the public administration, but what is being proposed? The single public service may deal with frameworks and conditions of services that will have an effect over the long term, but it will not address the government's need for a formidable corps of public managers to drive the plans and programmes of the developmental state. Much more attention

needs to be given to what can be done within the current legislative framework to improve performance and accountability. For example, why should the director-general of a department that receives two successive qualified audits survive in office? Shouldn't the new monitoring ministry play a close role in supervising the turnaround in that department? Shouldn't directors-general be required to individually defend their annual spending plans to the cabinet? Shouldn't Parliament receive regular reports on managers who do not sign performance agreements or comply with disclosure laws, and call them to answer publicly?

The last major white paper on the public service was in the 1990s. A lot has happened since then, and much more is expected of public servants today. Perhaps it is time for a new white paper on public service reform.

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