

Deterioration of public administration in Papua New Guinea – views of eminent public servants



by Terence Wood

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In 2004, Lynn Pieper interviewed 11 eminent former or long-standing PNG public servants. Her topic: the deterioration of public administration in PNG. In 2010, I came across her report when working on the review of Australian aid to PNG. Lynn's report had been commissioned as an internal exercise for AusAID. I suggested to AusAID that they make it public. And now they have, [here](#): a welcome sign of a move towards greater transparency.

Although the report was written in 2004, it remains relevant today. I encourage you to read it for yourself, and to read Terence Wood's reflections on it below. Also check out [this](#) post by Tony Hughes on a similar "What can we learn" project for the Pacific.

Stephen Howes

Of all the aspects of development work, public service performance is one of the least loved. It's not the focus of international campaigns, there haven't been any TED talks about it, and NGOs are yet to offer schemes for sponsoring beleaguered civil servants. And yet the performance of government bureaucracies matters. Functioning civil services are important for development.

This is true regardless of whether you favour an active government like me, or whether you desire only the night watchman state of libertarian fantasies. Even laissez-faire still needs the government to do a lot: property rights need to be demarcated and protected; contracts need to be enforced; negative externalities managed; monopolies broken-up; and information asymmetries addressed. All this is required just for the functioning of a free market economy, let alone one where

the state operates social services.

To achieve these things you need an effective civil service. Without it, both government and market failures become major issues. Unfortunately, in Papua New Guinea, as well as other developing countries, government departments are often deeply, stubbornly dysfunctional.

And this is why Lynn Pieper's [just released paper](#) on public administration in Papua New Guinea is important. Not just for the subject matter but also because it draws on a fascinating data source: the recollections of a small group of long-serving, respected, senior (or formerly senior) civil servants. These are informants who possess a wealth of inside knowledge born of lifetimes of experience, and Pieper does an excellent job of curating the information they share.

The central tale threaded through the paper is one of decline: the shift from a civil service that worked relatively well in the early years after independence to one that is dysfunctional today. In those early years, according to Pieper's interviewees, civil servants were "energised, prepared, and completely focused on doing what was right for the country." And, critically, the public service was "independent and professional" and staffed by bureaucrats whose tenure was "unaffected by politics". Overall, "[t]here were proper checks and balances in the system, and they were adhered to."

This contrasts with today where within the public service "independence and professionalism have been eroded." And where the core functions of the bureaucracy have been "usurped and devalued". Something that has, "derailed national and sectoral policies, led to gross inefficiencies, and left a demoralised and insecure public service."

Pieper's interviewees identify a range of influences contributing to this decline, three of which strike me as particularly interesting.

The first is the decentralisation of government structures mandated in PNG's 1995 Organic Law. This change was well-intended but overtaxed civil service capacity by creating complex, multi-tiered government. The lesson to be learnt here, particularly for countries such as neighbouring Solomon Islands that are considering further decentralisation of their own, is that changes need to be weighed against the complexity they create and the capacity of the civil service to cope. In low capacity environments reforms that look great on paper can be disastrous in practice.

The second interesting contributing factor is the changing nature of externally supported technical assistance (TA) to government departments. Initially, "[e]xpatriate personnel were in contracted, line positions, subject to normal lines of

command, discipline, and public service ethics.” Something that shifted to “off-line, advisory support during the 1980s.” To Pieper’s interviewees this was “a well-intentioned part of the localisation process”. However, it has “created a feeling of condescension between ‘advisers’ and their ‘counterparts’; reduced sustainability prospects...destroyed the collegiate sense that previously existed...and eroded any sense of pride in achievements – counterparts do not have any sense of ownership of results, and advisers today ‘are not long term stayers.’” This observation is interesting not because this shift was central to the decline in public administration in PNG (an important factor perhaps; however, far from the most important) but rather because it speaks to an under-appreciated aspect of aid-funded TA: human relationships and perceptions. Whether TA plays a constructive or destructive role in the medium to long-term functioning of government departments is more than just a matter of contractors’ formal expertise, but also depends on the nature of the relationships and incentives that form around their roles.

The third factor that the paper identifies, and which I think interesting, is politics. Or, more specifically, the swallowing of the bureaucratic sphere by the political sphere in PNG: “Public resources increasingly became controlled by politics rather than public policy, and politicians began involving themselves in administration, project management, and senior [civil service] appointments.” Of all the forces behind declining public service performance in PNG, politics strikes me as the most important by a considerable margin. Ultimately, it is politicians who decide the rules governing the public service. And politicians shape the incentives that bureaucrats labour under. If politicians reward bureaucrats for performing well and providing high quality impartial advice, or at the very least don’t punish them, then good advice is likely to flow. And if politicians allow staffing in bureaucracies to be governed by meritocratic processes staff quality will likely improve. On the other hand, if they dole out positions on the basis of patronage quality will get worse. And this is what has happened in PNG.

Unfortunately, solving public administration problems that are born of politics is not easy. And if I had one criticism of the paper it would be that, while it makes many interesting practical suggestions for positive change, the complexity of the problems that bedevil PNG politics, and the impact of these problems on the public service, aren’t considered fully enough in the section of the paper on possible improvements.

Reform of PNG’s political system is suggested as a solution but the only reform offered is to do with no confidence motions, something that might add to government instability but would seem to have little to do with politicians running government departments to their own benefit. Meanwhile, other suggestions attribute unconvincing levels of agency to politicians and avoid the fact that

politicians themselves are part of a system. The paper states, for example, that “[t]he solution lies in strong leadership”. And that, “decision-makers need to reach consensus on what they want to achieve. In essence, the decision to be made is whether they want what is best for the country in the long term or what is best for individuals in the short term.”

This sounds good, but the recent elections in Papua New Guinea were blighted by fraud, vote-buying and voter intimidation in many parts of the country. Meanwhile, the costs of campaigning have afforded moneyed interests significant influence. And clientelism, a system which sees MPs rewarded or punished by voters on the basis of delivery of goods to supporters rather than their performance in governing the country, is a central feature of PNG politics. Maybe I am too pessimistic but I think it is unlikely that strong, honest leadership is likely to emerge in sufficient quantities from this sort of electoral politics, or that MPs will be inclined or incentivised to think about what is good for their country when their re-election depends on delivering to key local supporters. Changing PNG politics and changing the way politics in PNG impacts on the public administration will not be easy.

To be fair, expecting ideas for addressing these sorts of issues is more than can reasonably be asked of any one piece of research. And, on its own terms, the paper does an excellent job: it details the decline of, and problems within, the PNG civil service; and captures the insights of a fascinating group of long serving civil servants. And for these reasons alone I recommend it to anyone interested in issues of governance in developing countries.

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