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OPENING ADDRESS BY BG (RES) GEORGE YONG-BOON YEO,
MINISTER OF STATE (FINANCE) AND (FOREIGN AFFAIRS),
AT MSD'S SEMINAR "BUSINESS MANAGEMENT PRACTICES FOR A BETTER
PUBLIC SERVICE" AT THE ENVIRONMENT BUILDING THEATRETTE
ON FRIDAY, 2 DECEMBER 1988 AT 9.15 AM

THE CIVIL SERVICE AS AN INSTITUTION

To many people, a flexible civil service is a contradiction of ideas. The word bureacracy in the dictionary has two meanings: the first, a clinical one, describing a body of nonelective government officials; the second, a pejorative one, characterising an administration marked by rigidity and narrow adherence to rules. At Harvard's Commencement Ceremony, business school graduates wave dollar bills while public administration graduates scatter rolls of red tape.

The self-mocking humour of these public administration graduates has a basis in reality. The Civil Service makes rules and polices them. Civil servants can never operate with the flexibility and licence enjoyed by those in the private sector.

In many societies, it is the civil service which provides institutional stability. Anyone who flies into India will be impressed or frustrated - depending on your frame of mind - by the care with which Indian Immigration officers check your travel documents. Every form is carefully inspected, gone over with green or red ink, then stamped and double-stamped. Rush the officer at your peril because he takes his job very seriously.

These are minor expressions of a vast, proud administration - the Indian Civil Service. We may complain about the bureaucratism but without the two great institutions left behind by the British Raj, the Indian Civil Service and the Indian Army, the sub-continent would have come apart a long time ago. Interestingly, till today, you cannot become an officer in the Indian Administrative Service or the Indian Army without first learning to ride a horse. The Congress Party was a great institution too when it fought the Raj but is now fragmented because of the divisive politics of India. In many countries where the civil service is weak, it is usually the Army which moves in as the most organised force, with predictably disastrous consequences.

The continuity of Chinese civilization would also not have been possible without the mandarinates. The First Emperor, Qin Shihuang, succeeded in conquering an empire over two thousand years ago but the Qin Dynasty could not hold it together. It fell to the first Han emperor, Han Liubang, to create a civil service founded on the Classics and the Imperial Examination System. Successive dynasties were able to reconstitute the empire because that civil service supplied able administrators for the governance of a large number of people over a vast geographical area.

This continuity in Chinese civilization was an amazing feat in human history. A comparable achievement in Europe would have been as if the Roman Empire re-gathered itself again and again from the Atlantic to the Urals. Rome succeeded in developing a professional civil service only in the third century AD - the members of the Equestrian Order drawn from the commercial class - by which time it was too late. The principal beneficiary of professional civil service development in the Roman Empire was, in the end, not the Empire itself but the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, the continuity of the Church matches that of Chinese civilization, one sustained by a civil service of priests, the other by a civil service of mandarins.

Conditions For A Successful Civil Service

The role of the Civil Service in Singapore is, fundamentally, no different. It is to provide stability and continuity. The test is how long we succeed in keeping Singapore free, independent and prosperous.

Three conditions must be met. First, the Civil Service must bring in the best and the brightest. The Civil Service is de facto the corporate staff of Singapore Inc, and you should not be running the country if you are second-rate. I am not saying that all of the best and the brightest must be inducted. Neither am I suggesting that all who join must submit to perpetual vows. The point is those who eventually make it into the higher civil service must be from among the most able in Singapore. Only then can there be a claim to national leadership.

That leadership is not only intellectual, it must also be moral. That is the second condition for a successful civil service. The moral basis of the civil service of the Roman Church is the Christian Bible. The moral basis of the Chinese mandarin state was and may well again be Confucianism. In Singapore, the moral basis of the Civil Service is gradually taking shape. Some aspects are clear like intolerance of corruption and commitment to national independence, but others are not. Our national values, when they are settled, must eventually be reflected in the way the Civil Service carries itself. Moral leadership must not only be exercised, it must be publicly and visibly exercised. We cannot succumb to the free-wheeling ways of the private sector. The free market idealised by Adam Smith works only when competition takes place within a moral framework that engenders regard for law and respect for human life and dignity. That moral framework the Civil Service helps to provide. The Civil Service has to be above the fray of the marketplace.

The third condition for a successful civil service is a collective self-consciousness of its role in society and of its corporate mission. This is a group helicopter quality. As a group, civil servants must always be concerned with the national welfare and proud to be charged with that responsibility. A certain idealism keeps up group morale and group confidence. Pride and idealism must of course not degenerate into arrogance. You command respect; you don't demand it.

All three conditions - intellectual leadership, moral leadership and esprit de corps - are essential.

The Need For Flexibility

I discuss the nature of the Civil Service and its role in society in order to establish the context for our seminar today. The seminar topic is "Business Management Practices For A Better Public Service". The objective is greater flexibility.

We need greater flexibility because technology has made this a volatile world in the economic and commercial sense. To prosper, even to survive, Singapore and Singaporeans must constantly adapt and adjust to changes in the external environment, an external environment over which we have no control. Leisurely response is simply not on. For most products, you measure your competitive advantage in short years. For some products in the computer field and in fashion, you measure your advantage in months. Others are always catching up and you have to move on. The effect of the revolution in information technology is relentless. Labour may not be completely mobile. But capital and information are. The result is a high premium placed on speed of response and the ability to combine the efforts of large numbers of human beings in common, concerted effort.

A lethargic civil service will hold back everyone and everything. Yet flexibility sometimes go against the grain of the Civil Service because of the traditional emphasis on stability and continuity. The problem is one of balance. Today's seminar will help us achieve a balance that is more in keeping with the times. What need not be a part of the public sector should not be. That is the reason for divestment and privatisation. What parts can be run like private corporations should be. That is the reason for re-structuring the hospitals and introducing management accounting and transfer pricing. Personnel management in the public sector must be responsive to changing conditions and market forces.

Conclusion

A flexible Civil Service need not be a self-contradiction. That is the challenge before us. If the Service is slow to change, it will be depleted of talent, public policies will bear little resemblance to reality and all will be lost. If the Service is too much like the private sector, it will lose its essential institutional character and Singapore with it also. We all want the best of both worlds. We can have the best of both worlds if we continue to succeed in recruiting able men and women of character into the ranks of a professional and self-confident Civil Service. Like the priests of the Roman Church and the mandarins of Imperial China we have a mission before us and it is worthy of us all.

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