

RESEARCH NOTE

Independence of Public Service in Australia: A Few Pertinent Issues

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Introduction

Australian Public Service (APS) is an age-old institution characterized by the virtues of efficiency, merit, accountability, ethical balance, neutrality and independence. Australian Public Service plays a significant role in the formulation process and implementation of various policies of the government in an effective and appropriate way for the maximum welfare of the people. Most of the Australian public services are career services which imply that appointment is made at the base grade by selection on competitive basis and gradual progression upward through merit and professional skill. A dominant feature of APS is recruitment on the basis of merit with a stress on public servants, ability of the fact that they not only possess virtues of probity, integrity, efficiency but also provide a greater degree of accountability and impartiality.

Traditionally, historically and culturally, Australia has been able to maintain to a greater extent the virtue of independence and the principle of neutrality for a long time but over the years this aspect of APS has increasingly become under scrutiny stimulating much debate, controversy and deliberation. The public services, scope and leverage to act independently and without unnecessary encroachment is crucial because vicious, malignant and motivated interference works as a deterrent to implement public policies in a manner that ensures justice, equity and fairplay.

By independence of APS we mean impartial, unbiased attitude to any particular group of people in society or to any political

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party in particular. But the concept of independence or neutrality in the public service is often vexed, vague, dubious and to some extent "confusing". The extent of impartiality in maintaining the independent character of public service embodies a two way process; it depends on the role, attitude and expectation of the political party in power towards public servants and at the same time the strength merit expertise and ethical sense in the public servants also play a prominent part. This does not mean that independent character in Australian public service is lacking because of unfair and unwarranted intrusion of politics in the sphere of public servants' usual functions. In fact in most places public servants work uninterfered and without unjust imposition or compulsion but it is too risky to make such a broad generalisation.

APS is neutral or independent of any outside influence but a large number of opinions are there against this proposition. On many occasions, there have been arguments for and against independence in public service. Independence in the sense of an impartial public service does not mean that public servants possess no views of their own but it does signify that they can be sufficiently 'detached' to advise in accordance with what they understand to be the government of the day's objective. Independence of public service may be summarized as public servants' neutrality, public service anonymity and career service concept. The principle of public service neutrality does not mean that public servants have no political views. It implies that despite his political complexion, a public servant owes allegiance to the government of the day and advise impartially on policy issues and help in implementing those within the existing law. Public service neutrality also signifies professional

behaviour by public servants and preventing themselves from acts of disobedience i.e, "leaking" or "unauthorized" disclosure of Information to the media.

Independence of APS also implies equal treatment of all citizens by public servants in accordance with law. Efforts are taken to dispel any sign of political interference and influence in respect of recruitment and promotion of public servants. This virtue of neutrality is maintained in Australia for developing a career service based on efficiency and morale because it is thought as imperative as to why public servants could not serve any government faithfully and with equal dedication if they are allowed to complete their usual term of office without any unwarranted interference. Public servants are not to make policy; they are responsible for policy implementation and carrying out advice based on an impartial view of situation.

The expertise of an independent public service in policy matters and advice is effective because in the light of their accumulated experience and observation, public servants are able to prognosticate to a certain degree, the efficacy of a policy and advise the minister accordingly. Independence and integrity of public service is based on the dictum that good quality service is not what a minister prefers to hear. It means that there are pretty good advice that the public servants may offer solely based on the merit of the policy or advice and not bothering on the likings or dislikings of the minister concerned.

It may be conveniently argued 'neutrality' in public service is a myth in that public servants cannot be totally independent in the discharge of their functions because in some areas of

responsibility neutrality is neither possible nor desirable. This dictum is truer in American context but public servants cannot always maintain their independent character in Australian context as well. Imposing neutrality upon public servants in Australia deprived them of the liberties of expression enjoyed by other citizens of the society. Public servants are by and large intelligent and imaginative. They have a tendency towards critical evaluation of a phenomenon that stimulates them to form a personal expression. It may be further contended that the public servants who have the same political belief as the minister and his party will be much more articulate, enthusiastic and adept in implementing their policies. To remain independent and apathetic to the abuse, waste and fraud perpetrated by a minister is to compromise with one's conscience and ethical values. The virtue of neutrality that propels a public servant not to be a party to the misdeed of a minister sometimes invites danger. For example, in Queensland the then Permanent Head of land Department Vivian Creighton informed the Premier about some irregularities committed by his minister Thomas Fooley but the Premier preferred not to take any action. He then informed the Australian Workers Union (AWU). The minister was found guilty of the charges brought against him by Creighton. At a later stage, Creighton was suspended and lost his job for misconduct in that "he had clandestinely communicated official information to outside". Some of Creighton's remarks are noteworthy in our discussion of the neutrality issue, "In everything, I have done, I have been motivated by the public good and by a desire to protect the good name of my department...I have sought to prevent improper practices..... has a higher duty to the people than to the minister....."

The above example raises a series of questions about the independence in APS-----is it safe to be neutral and pro-people? What should public servants do? Should he be vocal or eschew his conscience? Is neutrality in the truest sense possible or desirable? Some public servants may have some political preferences that influence their policy advice to the minister. Political leaders and ministers should select their own advisors and policy executants both from within the career service employees and from outside or 'contract' employees. Ministers should get their 'party political works' done by others, not their departmental staff. On the whole, the career service tradition is still prominent in Australia.

Unlike Bangladesh, Australia is a Commonwealth, a federation (with a bicameral legislature) consisting of six States and two Territories that enjoy sufficient autonomy in a virtually Parliamentary system of government. The British Queen is still Head of the State and a Governor-General appointed by her works on her behalf. The Prime Minister is head of the government. Most people are not in favour of constitutional monarchy and prefer a Republic. There are a number of similarities and dissimilarities between the two countries. Australia is a big country (almost equal in size and area of the USA) with a comparatively small population while Bangladesh has a big population compared to its size. Like the USA, Australia is a land of immense prospects and possibilities fostering the spirit of multi-culturalism in an atmosphere of ethnic diversities and anti-apartheid. In Bangladesh and the USA, casting of vote in the nationwide election is optional while in Australia, it is compulsory.

An Australian Ministry at the Centre consists of three tiers: the Permanent Secretary, the Deputy Secretary and the Assistant Secretary. Below the Assistant Secretary which is quite a senior position, there are a good number of officers of different grades who help him in the disposal of day-to-day business. Most public servants are appointed purely on contract basis and further renewal of service is done strictly on merit, skill and performance. Despite this cautious and stringent measure, there is an increasing trend to prefer 'contracting out' some of the utility services to the private enterprises to get value for money. Inefficiency and procrastination have no place in APS.

Unfortunately enough, in Bangladesh we are yet to develop a unanimous, uniform and stable structure of competitive examination through which we can sieve and select really deserving candidates to prepare and groom them up as efficient civil servants. Indiscriminate application of quota system relegates the more meritorious people to the jobs that need people of average calibre. Square peg in a round hole corrodes value judgement that eventually might strain the independent character in some people.

Civil servants in general are expected to work honestly and sincerely with the government to implement its welfare policies and materialize the commitment to the people.

Conclusion

A convenient strain of dualism prevails in Australian socio-economic and political system in that for future economic survival, Australia has to look more to the countries in the south-east Asian belt than its political allies in the west including the UK and the USA. The existing geo-political realities and peculiar position of the country as a continent have given rise to this truism. Those days are not very far ahead when the dedicated, dexterous and independent Australian Public Service will work as a catalyst in harnessing Australia's leading role in the Pacific region. In an atmosphere of extreme socio-economic and political volatility and vulnerability in the international scene, neutrality of public service has become a critical issue in both developed and developing countries alike.

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