

Managing Sri Lanka's Administrative Reform Agenda

Sri Lanka appears to have reached a point in its history when administrative reform has become a major focus of the polity, the society and the economy. Frequent references to administrative reform are continuously being articulated – at least to go by the frequency with which it figures in the media. These references come from a range of sources.

Different points in the political executive stress the urgency of administrative reform. The legislature does not lag behind. Frequent in these pronouncements are the varied references to what should constitute the content of the reforms. The discourse, if nothing else, provides a fascinating array of suggestions. It would be of interest to future researchers to study the links as between the varied suggestions and the individual or group interests of the articulators!

Equally active in the discourse is the donor community. As is to be expected, the activity of the donor community is led by the multi-lateral aid agencies. The need for administrative reform is stressed not only in different fora but also in interactions with policy levels. However, the road map that should be followed to achieve the articulated need tends, mainly, to be indirectly articulated.

The corporate world – through its several organizations – continues to signal the need for administrative reform and to draw attention to the co-relation that exists between effective governance and the pace of economic growth. Given the pre-occupation of the organizations of the corporate world with the objective of making the administrative structures and processes 'business-friendly', suggestions abound as to the directions that the administrative reform process should take and even what its content should be. Memoranda are prepared and submitted to the political executive as well as publicised. Conferences, seminars and the like are convened at frequent intervals to discuss various issues related to administrative reform. Given the close relationships that exist between the corporate world and the media, these events and their proceedings receive considerable publicity. This serves to keep the issue of administrative reform alive before the public.

Increasingly, the community of civil society organizations finds the different aspects of ad-

ministrative reform a major issue on its agenda. As could be expected, this results in the conference scene being crowded with discussions on these different aspects. The resultant outputs as well as the public information fallout from these events has contributed to enhancing public awareness of the issues related to administrative reform.

Equally active, but in a different stance, are the trade unions in the public sector. They see the prospect of reforms as sounding a death knell to the relatively comfortable existence that they have had, a threat to uninterrupted employment, as well as a loss of privileges. It is to be expected that they would mobilise themselves against the possibility of the formulation and implementation of a reform agenda. At the same time, their public activities – comprising demonstrations, meetings, publicity materials and even industrial action –

Dr. Shelton Wanasinghe *

contribute to the debate and keep the issues of administrative reform in the public gaze.

However, the citizenry appear to remain passive concerning administrative reform. It is clear from empirical evidence that the citizens in their daily interface with governance perceive that the administrative entities that they have to deal with are ineffective. At the same time, they see 'the administration' as something alien and distant – over which they lack any influence for change. They tend, thus, to regard the administrative structures and processes as something that they have to suffer with resignation.

The Reform Priorities

The directions and contents of the reform agenda have been issues that have received frequent attention for a considerable period of time in the multi-faceted discourse that has been referred to. The attention has been most pronounced in the past decade and a half – since the work of the Presidential Committee on Administrative Reforms in 1986 to 1988. However, given its nature as well as of its participants with their various interests it is not a surprise that the discourse has not yielded an agreed agenda of reforms.

Given the constraints of space, it is not the intention of this discussion to provide a detailed agenda of reforms. As the agenda evolves it would need to be spelt out in great detail and specificity in terms of its constituent elements and supporting activities. What is critical, however, is to gain an

understanding of the priority issues that such an agenda will need to address.

These priority issues would need to be derived from an examination of the nature and degree of decline of the effectiveness of Sri Lanka's administration since the early decades of the post-Independence period. What is critical would be to escape the trap of treating the symptoms of the disease and to engage in a systematic probe of the factors that have led to the current level of effectiveness. The available evidence points to several critical issues that require to be addressed if the decline of administrative effectiveness is to be arrested and reversed. What is significant in regard to these issues is that addressing any of them would call for the making of decisions that would require overcoming entrenched political and/or trade union interests.

This discussion recognises that this, in the Sri Lankan context, is an extremely difficult process that has to be pursued with determination and single-minded purpose – with a readiness to face the consequences and counter them regardless of the political price that would have to be paid. The empirical evidence concerning the previous episodes of attempts at administrative reform bring this out clearly – in that the failure of these attempts were a direct consequence of the absence of the required political will.

With the above caveats, the ensuing discussion will attempt to identify the key issues that would require to be addressed. It is recognised that the issues would be many and that the list will grow over time. Hence, this discussion would limit itself to the issues that are most urgent and relevant as at the end of the year 2002 – whilst acknowledging that it is by no means exhaustive.

The first and primary issue to be addressed is the arriving at of a clear definition of the role of the government in Sri Lanka. Much has been written on this issue but without an appropriate and adequate response from those engaged in administrative reform. It is obvious that unless there is clarity as to the role of the government at the beginning of the twenty first century, there cannot be an appropriate process of restructuring of government institutions or of the determination of the numbers and specific categories of personnel that need to be employed. That the roles of the government that were relevant at the time of Independence do not hold relevance

* Senior Visiting Fellow - Institute of Policy Studies

in 2002 is obvious. But the vested interests that have grown up around the archaic definition of the roles of government have been strong enough to discourage decision makers – both political and administrative – from attempting any review. It has to be stressed in this connection that the redefinition of the roles of government should apply not only for the government as a whole but also across the three levels of the polity – the Centre, the Local Community and the Province.

The second main issue to be addressed is that of the setting of the size of the political executive at the Centre in conformity with the definition of the roles of the government. Whilst there is a certain measure of constraint as regards the political executive at the level of the Province consequent to the specific legal provisions contained in the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, no such restraint arises in the case of the Centre. The traditions that have grown up over the decades with the growth of the size of the Parliament at the Centre and the imperatives of coalition formation, have contributed to a continuous burgeoning of the size of the political executive – leading to rising expenditures, expansion of sequential cadres of personnel and confusion and overlapping in regard to policy making.

A related third issue that requires to be addressed is that of the reform of the structures and the processes in the central legislature. The main objective that needs to be achieved through a process of restructuring and of adopting new processes is to reverse the current ineffectiveness of the central legislature in its role of decision-making in public policy management and of being the watchdog of the implementation of public policy.

The setting up of effective independent regulatory institutions is a fourth issue that the reform agenda will need to address. This issue has assumed importance in the context of the past and current failure of the Sri Lankan State to be relevant and efficient in its regulatory role with the country having moved to a market-led economy.

The modalities and processes for the progressive withdrawal of the State from direct engagement in economic activity constitute a fifth issue to be addressed. Whilst such withdrawal remains an ultimate objective of the restructuring of the State, the processes for achieving this objective remain complex and the concerns that have to be addressed in their implementation are such that an unplanned rushing into divestment will both be counter-productive as well as be a potential for societal unrest.

The addressing of the issue of the role of the government must, necessarily, lead to the examination of the relevance of all current ad-

ministrative entities in the context of the changed role. This, the sixth issue to be addressed, would, naturally, be the one that would evoke the highest level of resistance from vested interests – both political and bureaucratic – that are entrenched in the continued life of current administrative entities. Hence the level of determination that would be forthcoming from the highest levels of governance would be critical in addressing this issue.

The redefinition of the roles of governance also has its implications for the quality of human resources that would, in the future, be required in State employment. Hence, the introduction of personnel induction, management and capacity building approaches to achieve the objective of having cadres that are relevant, skilled and productive would be a seventh issue that would need to be addressed.

There is a critical issue of administrative reform that can and must be initiated immediately. This is the conduct of a fast-track review of the relevance of all the current public institutions, agencies etc to the discharge of governance responsibilities of the present. This has to be a ruthless exercise. The best and shortest approach would be for the Task Force on Administrative Reforms – or a group



An agitation of the health sector workers in progress. Vital enterprises of State sectors often resort to trade union action putting public into inconvenience.

within it – to conduct face-to-face inquiries whereto the heads of all public sector organizations are summoned and requested to justify the continuance of their organizations. They should be required to provide proof of any adverse consequences to the economy and to the society that would result in the event of their organizations being abolished.

Linked to the above issues would be many other issues and sub-issues that would call for attention as the reform agenda is in process. This requires that the nodal point that would manage the formulation and implementation of the reform agenda would have to be continuously alert to the new demands that are likely to be posed as the agenda proceeds. This need makes the institutional arrangements for the management of the reform agenda critical to its success. This issue would be dealt with in the ensuing discussion.

The Institutional Arrangements

Given the above context, the issues concerning

the institutional arrangements for the management of the reform agenda assume critical importance. On reflection it is clear that the previous exercises failed due to the ignoring of this issue and taking the institutional arrangements for granted. There are, thus, lessons to be learnt from the past exercises and their failures so that a future exercise could have a better expectation of success. It is on the basis of reflection on the past failures that the following discussion would deal with some of the institutional issues.

Before launching on any administrative reform exercise, it is critical to decide on the issue of the responsibility for formulating and implementing the agenda and, thereafter, to assign such responsibility in a manner in which there would be no confusion. Confusion, invariably, arises in the polity, the bureaucracy as well as in the minds of the citizenry. Multiple points of responsibility in the formulation and implementation of an administrative reform agenda will lead not only to confusion, but also to turf-based conflicts, to sabotage of elements in the agenda and to ultimate failure.

Once the locus of responsibility is clearly decided upon and assigned, it is important that adequate time be spent in formulating the agenda in detail as well as the arrangements for its implementation and the time frame for the process. It would be counter-productive to rush the process – an ever-present temptation to gain political capital by seeking to impress on the citizenry that a 'move is on'.

A basic requirement would be to adopt a holistic approach to the formulation of the reform agenda. It is essential to

keep in mind that the different issues that are addressed in the reform exercise are closely inter-related. Hence, the different elements of the reform agenda would have a direct bearing on one another. It is, thus, important that all elements in the agenda should be developed and formulated in the closest interaction with the fullest consultation. The resultant reform agenda should not be the product of an approach of assembling together discrete pieces formulated by individuals or small groups working in isolation without adequate interaction. The Task Force, if there be one, should carry joint ownership of the total agenda.

In setting the process of administrative reform in motion, it is important to take account of the realities of the current Sri Lankan political and administrative culture – wherein nothing moves unless the process is, and is seen to be, presided over and monitored by the lead point in the polity. In the present Sri Lankan context this

Contd. on Page 15

would be the Prime Minister and his/her Secretariat. Therefore, the locus of direction of the Task Force should be the Prime Minister's Secretariat – with the head of the Task force reporting to the Secretary to the Prime Minister and through him/her to the Prime Minister.

The above caution implies that there should be no parallel institutional arrangements for administrative reform anywhere else in the political system. Whatever institutional arrangements as, for example, for the implementation of the agenda that may be required at sectoral levels should be subordinate to the central Task Force. The development of the reform options should be through processes that are transparent and inter-active and not in secret behind closed doors. Equally important is the adoption of a practice of publishing White Papers throughout the process. These are essential for seeking inputs from the citizenry; for obtaining reactions to tentative proposals in mid-stream, as well as for keeping the citizenry informed of the conclu-

sions and recommendations that are arrived at as regards reform measures.

It would be appropriate to place the final reform agenda before a Select Committee of the Parliament on Governance and Administrative Reform before they are placed before the Parliament for its final approval. It would be equally appropriate for the same Select Committee of the Parliament to act as the watchdog of the implementation of the reform agenda - through a system of periodic reviews.

In carrying out the future administrative reform exercise, it is important to recognise that there has been considerable study of the issues of administrative reforms in Sri Lanka. This is particularly so since 1986. These studies have been conducted under the aegis of the Government, of the corporate private sector, of multi-lateral as well as bi-lateral aid providers, of several civil society groups, and of research Institutions. It would, thus, be a waste of time and resources to start the future reform process by undertaking another set of studies. The more practical and rational approach would

be to list the conclusions of the previous studies, examine their relevance to the situation as at the onset of the twenty-first century and, then, to undertake fresh studies only to fill any gaps.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion has sought to focus both on the priority issues that need to be addressed by a future administrative reform agenda as well as the institutional arrangements that should underpin such an exercise. If previous experience is anything to go by, it is also essential that administrative reform should not be regarded as a discrete single episode. It is essential that it be regarded as a continuing process that responds to the changes in the challenges faced by governance as the Sri Lankan economy, its society and the polity evolve.

It is the hope of this discussion that this would be the reality of the administrative reform that is to ensue.