

CONFLICT BETWEEN BUREAUCRACY AND INNOVATION IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

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IN NIGERIA, those charged with the responsibility of managing the affairs of the country had at several times enunciated policies, programmes and projects ostensibly in reaction to environmental pressures. The latest of such policies/programmes is the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). However, the Nigerian Government, just like any other government, implements its policies and programmes through the instrumentality of the Public Service. This government's organ has variously undergone several changes, arguably, to make it more responsive to the demands of a development-oriented society. The latest of such changes is the "Civil Service Reforms" which is legally backed by Decree 43 (on the Re-organisation of the civil service) of 1988. Our search-light is, thus, being beamed on the Public Service which is Federal Government's Central Bureaucracy. Positive changes within a society or elsewhere normally come in the form of innovation. The vital question of interest to us is: How responsive is the Federal Government's Central Bureaucracy—the Public Service—to innovation? To answer this question, we attempt in this study to survey the literature on innovation and bureaucracy and the relationships between them. Variables derivable from such a survey are used to analyse the Nigerian situation; where lapses are identified, possible treatments are prescribed.

The term 'Public Service' is defined in the Nigerian Constitution of 1979 as "the service of the Federation in any capacity in respect of the Government of the Federation, and includes services as...."¹. It proceeds to list a number of offices: Clerk or other staff of the National Assembly, member or staff of the Courts of Judicature of the Federation and States, member or staff of any commission or authority established for the Federation or State; staff of any company or enterprise in which the government or its agencies hold a controlling share or interest; member of the Armed Forces and the Police; staff of a Local Government Council, of a statutory corporation, of educational institutions established or principally financed by Government, etc. Bureaucracy, on the other hand, exists everywhere, in the civil and public services as well as in the large organised private sector. It is derived from the French work 'bureau' meaning a

¹ Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1979*, Part IV, Section 277(1), Lagos, Federal Government's Printer, 1979, pp.90-91.

writing table or desk, the bureaucrat is the clerk or official that sits behind the desk or the writing table. The term was indeed coined in the 19th century by the French encyclopaedists.² Max Weber similarly described bureaucracy as the most efficient administrative organisation for the conduct of the affairs of government.³ His conceptualisation and typification of bureaucracy today provide, to a large extent, the framework for discussing and understanding the basis and functions of organisations, such as the Public Service. The Public Service could, therefore, be rightly referred to as the Federal Government's bureaucracy. Innovation for this study can simply be referred to as changes in whatever form capable of improving the administrative machinery of Government organs. This agrees with the definitions provided by Steiner; Myeas and Marquis; Knight; Barnett; Hagen; and Zaltman *et al.*⁴

However, Zaltman *et al* go further to outline the characteristics of innovation among which is the interpersonal relationships. According to the authors, the impact of innovations on the interpersonal relationships, within organisations and between organisations, is effective as it is on technology. Its effect on the interpersonal relationship between superior and subordinate officers within an organisation is the focus of this study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

"Imagine human organisations without structure, without stability, and without order. Chaos prevails. To overcome what otherwise would be utter confusion--to give his organisation (and, thus, also in large measure to himself) structure, stability, and order--man has created bureaucracy." The foregoing inspiring statements were provided by Hicks and Gullet.⁵ Yet it is to Max Weber that we must credit the conceptualisation of bureaucracy. In his enthusiastic analysis of this inevitable concept, Weber, describes it as the only concept that guarantees efficiency and effectiveness to organisations, especially government organisations. According to him, this results because experts, as found within the bureaucracy, "are the best qualified to make technically correct decisions and because disciplined performance governed by abstract roles and coordinated by the authority, hierarchy fosters a rational

² P.N.C. Okigbo, "In the Public Service", Paper presented at the *Anambra State Public Service Lecture Series*, No.5, Enugu, March 25, 1986, p. 6.

³ M. Blau and R. Scott, *Formal Organisations: A Comparative Approach*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963, p. 33.

⁴ G. Steiner, *The Creative Organisation*, Chicago, University of Chicago Graduate School, 1965; K. Knight, "A Descriptive Model of the Intra-Firm Innovation process", *Journal of Business*, Vol.40 (October, 1967), pp. 478-96; H.G. Barnett, *Innovation: The Basis of Culture Change*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1953; E.E. Hagen, *On the Theory of Social Change*, Homewood, Dorsey Press, 1962; and G. Zaltman, R. Duncan, and J. Holbek, *Innovations and Organisations*, New York, John Wiley 1973, pp. 7-10 & 42-44.

⁵ G.A. Hicks and R.C. Gullet, *Organisations: Theory and Behaviour*, Tokyo, McGraw-Hill Kogakusha, 1976, p. 127.

and consistent pursuit of organisational goals."⁶

Weber went further to provide in his "rational-legal model" the following distinctive characteristics of a bureaucracy:

1. The regular activities required for the purposes of the bureaucratically governed structure are distributed in a fixed way as official duties. This implies a clear-cut division of labour among positions which makes possible a high degree of specialisation. Specialisation in turn promotes expertness among the staff directly and by enabling the organisation to hire employees on the basis of technical qualifications.
2. The positions or offices are organised into a hierarchical authority and responsibility structure. In the usual case, this hierarchy takes on the shape of a pyramid wherein each official is responsible for his subordinates' decision and actions as well as his own to the superior above him in the pyramid and wherein each official has authority over the officials under him. The scope of authority of superiors over subordinates is clearly circumscribed.
3. A formally established system of rules and regulations governs official decisions—decisions and actions. In principle, the operations of such administrative organisations involve application of these general regulations to particular cases. The regulations insure the uniformity of operations and, together with the authority structure, make possible the coordination of the various activities.
4. Officials are expected to assume impersonal orientation in their contacts with clients and with other officials.
5. Employment by the organisation constitutes career for officials. Typically an official is a full-time employee and looks forward to a life-long career in the agency. Employment is based on the technical qualifications of the candidate rather than on political, family or other connections.⁷

The foregoing characteristics present an excellent picture of the traits of an efficient organisation. This appears to have been vindicated by the successful application of these characteristics in organisations in the Western World, particularly the French Government's bureaucracy. Max Weber himself has been severally described as innovative and his ideals as very innovative. Hence, application of his ideals and principles by some government agencies had introduced positive changes in such agencies as earlier mentioned. However, arguments are rife regarding the shortcomings of Weber's bureaucratic principles. Some of those who highlighted these shortcomings are Fred Riggs, and Victor Thompson (1961 and 1975). In fact, Fred Riggs went further to provide an alternative model—the "SALA

⁶ M. Blau and R. Scott, *op. cit.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-3.

model" which, according to him, encompasses the ecological and cultural peculiarities of the developing countries. His model according to him, emphasises the value of development administration in underdeveloped countries where the need is for adaptive administration which can incorporate constant change.⁸

Despite the shortcomings of the Weberian Model of Bureaucracy, most modern bureaucracies are based on some variation of this Weberian model which again justifies its inevitability. The question that we seek to answer, however, is: Does a superior officer, in a bureaucratic set-up accept, adopt and implement innovative ideas which emanate from his subordinates? The extant literature on the subject seems not to have provided a positive answer to this question. For Hicks and Gullet X-rayed the ills of bureaucracy as they affect formal organisations as possible causes of inability of superior officers to embrace innovative ideas from their subordinates. According to the authors, "Formal organisations may have built into their designs the seeds for many non-productive, dysfunctional, energy-consuming activities at all levels which tend to result in organisational rigidity, organisational ineffectiveness, and inter-group conflict, as well as less effective decision-making process".⁹

Rigidity, as highlighted by Hicks and Gullet, appears to be one of the most dysfunctional elements of bureaucracy. Here, it is seen as non-adaptive and, thus, is in conflict with the basic adaptability laws of nature. It leads to strict adherence to regulations which in the author's words, produces 'timidity', 'conservatism' and 'technicism'. In an earlier work, Downs explained that superior officers resort to being rigid in a bureaucratic set-up for fear of losing power, prestige and their income. This is because they occupy positions in which decision-making is inevitable and that decision-making is inherently a risky process because decisions can prove to be wrong, unpopular or both. Superior officers in such bureaucratic organisations, therefore, tend to be avoiders, who try to escape responsibility for making decisions. However, since it is inevitable that they make decisions, they resort to rigidly applying the rules of procedure promulgated by higher authorities.¹⁰ Many superior officers generally eschew even the slightest deviation from written procedures unless they obtain approval from higher authority. Thus, rigid and strict adherence to rules and regulations become a shield that protects officers from being blamed for mistakes by the authority. This attitude of rigidity and its attendant problems, which include delays in obtaining official rulings for unusual situations, leads to stereotyped conditions which Downs refers to as "bureaucratic mentality" and 'red-tape'.

The rigidity in roles occasioned by strict adherence to rules and

⁸ F.W. Riggs, *Administration in Developing Countries: The Theory of Prismatic Society*, Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1964.

⁹ G.H. Hicks and R.C. Gullet, *op.cit.*, pp.144-52.

¹⁰ A. Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy*, Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1967, p. 100.

regulations often times creates a situation where officers perform their jobs without any emotional attachment, particularly where subordinates come up with official problems. This is another ill of bureaucratic organisation highlighted by Hicks and Gullet and referred to by Thompson as 'impersonality' in the performance of official responsibilities. In fact, Thompson in his earlier work—*Modern Organisation*—referred to the ill of the bureaucratic organisation as "Bureaupathology", a disease of bureaucracy which he further suggested are those dysfunctions, which are produced by "bureaupathic behaviour".¹¹ However, the central theme of his later work—*Without Sympathy or Enthusiasm*—is the impersonality of modern complex bureaucratic organisation and the search for objectivity at the administrative level in the process of decision-making.¹²

Summing up the above mentioned arguments, Hicks and Gullet posit that bureaucracy has many unintended consequences or dysfunctions: They further describe bureaucracy as a "machine model" that is non-adaptive and impersonal. Its rigidity, they opine, leads to its failure to account adequately for many important human characteristics. They contend that it offers numerous opportunities for members to displace objectives and to work for personal or sub-unit goals which may not contribute adequately to the overall objectives of the organisation. In their views, innovative ideas are seen by bureaucratic officials as disturbances to an otherwise ordered situation. Such ideas are, therefore, never seen as a necessary life-giving elements to an evolving, adaptive organisation.¹³

From the foregoing, it could be inferred that:

1. Bureaucracy is inevitable for an ordered and progressive organisation;
2. Innovation is a factor that enhances growth in and assures survival of an organisation;
3. Some elements of bureaucracy--such as rigidity, impersonality, and hierarchical/ordered arrangements--impede application of innovative ideas; and
4. Superior officers capitalise on these provisions of the elements of bureaucracy to stifle innovative ideas which emanate from their subordinates.

The following factors or assumptions would form the basis of analysis of the Nigerian situation.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

The dysfunctional characteristics of bureaucracy manifest in the Nigerian

¹¹ V.A. Thompson, *Modern Organisation*, New York, Knopf, 1961, pp. 152-77.

¹² V.A. Thompson, *Without Sympathy or Enthusiasm: The Problem of Administrative Comparison*, Alabama, The University of Alabama Press, 1979, pp. 3-23.

¹³ G.H. Hicks and R.C. Gullet, *op.cit.*

situation. An evidence of this manifestation was provided by the Public Service Review Commission, which observed that the Nigerian Public Services are characterised by a spirit of animosity and jealousy rather than of cooperation and team work. This spirit of animosity, it further observed, exists between peers, as well as between superiors and subordinates. In fact, the animosity and jealousy become very high when a subordinate is perceived by his superior officer as being very innovative and may supersede him. In order to forestall the implementation of innovative ideas that emanate from subordinates, the superior officers resort to adherence to rules and regulations which they often argue are at variance with the innovation being contemplated. In obvious reference to this state of affairs, the commission in paragraph 140 of its main report, noted as follows:

Our examination of the Ministry reveals that the majority of its staff take a narrow view of their responsibilities. There is a tendency to concentrate on rules, regulations and procedures. These rules are not sufficiently positive, nor are they devised to meet the new tasks and the development needs of government. They reflect more concern over rights and perquisites than obligations; more concern over security and job protection than creativeness and productivity. Personnel officers act as watchdogs of the rules and their application.¹⁴

In a similar vein, Balogun identified resistance to innovative ideas as one of the factors that differentiate the Nigerian public sector from its private sector counterpart. According to the author, the tendency to resist innovative ideas is higher in public management, it should have been 'killed' with the transformation which public sector management in Nigeria had undergone overime. Other characteristics of the public sector identified by Balogun, inextricably linked with "resistance to innovative ideas" are, survival, maintenance of *status quo*, risk avoidance, mistake avoidance, self-protecting, fear of trouble, fear of the unknown, retroactive (fire-fighting).¹⁵

Another evidence of stifling innovative ideas, particularly where such ideas emanate from subordinates, in the Nigerian Public Service is provided by the Study Team on the Structure, Staffing, and Operations of the Nigerian Federal Civil Service, headed by Dotun Phillips. In its report, the Study Team observed that the decision-making process and implementation mechanics of the Civil Service have been highly criticised by both government and public as bureaucratic, slow, rigid, secretive and not development-oriented. A major cause of the aforementioned problems, according to the report, is the inability of senior officers to take decisions unless a clearance is obtained from the top-most senior officer in whom all

¹⁴ Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Main Report of the Public Service Review Commission*, Lagos, Federal Ministry of Information, September, 1974, p. 37.

¹⁵ M.J. Balogun, *Public Administration in Nigeria: A Developmental Approach*, London, The Mcmillan Press, 1983, pp. 8-9.

authority is vested. The Study Team feels that the tendency is for trivial issues to go through a long chain of officers before a decision is taken. This situation, it continued, leads not only to time-wasting, but also kills the initiative and discretion of intermediate officers leading to frustration and lack of confidence in the ability of officers to take decisions.¹⁶

In such circumstance, therefore, innovative ideas emanating from subordinates are not accepted by a superior officer, who feels that he is incompetent to implement such ideas and similarly feels reluctant to pass such suggestions to the point where a decision could be taken because of the long chain of officers it will pass through. Even when such suggestions are so passed, they never see the light of the day because they are 'killed' somewhere along the line. The point being made here is that "hierarchy of office", a principle provided by Weber's Bureaucracy, constitutes a "stumbling block" in the implementation of innovative ideas emanating from subordinates. There are situations, where an innovative "Head of Department" for instance, may never have received a complete memo prepared by a bright and innovative subordinate because of its getting distorted at the draft stage by other senior officers through whom the memo must pass before getting to the Head of Department. In other words, a less intelligent and less innovative superior officer is assumed to be more knowledgeable than his subordinate (that is seniority is synonymous with knowledge and acquired skills for performing a given job). This assumption contributes to the bane of the Nigerian Public Service. In support of this argument, Okigbo observes that bureaucracy today retains the pejorative flavour and is flung at the public service to denote slow, clumsy, inefficient and cumbersome machine that grinds down every decision, obstructs actions and perverts policy.¹⁷

The point of emphasis from the foregoing is that New Ideas Management principles are not applied in the public service probably because they infringe upon rules and regulations or, where introduced, they get killed somewhere along the line of long chains they had to pass through before being accepted. This has, thus, led to the inability of superior officers to appreciate innovative contributions from their subordinates. This, however, has certain implications:

1. the enthusiasm of the subordinates will be dampened;
2. the subordinates are likely to withdraw, thus leading to loss of productivity in the service; and
3. the subordinates can be frustrated out of the service.

Resistance to innovative management practices, when and where initiated

¹⁶ Federal Republic of Nigeria, *The Nigerian Federal Civil Service in the Mid-1980s and Beyond: Report of the Study Team on the Structure, Staffing and Operations of the Nigerian Federal Civil Service*, Logos, August, 1985, p.192.

¹⁷ P.N.C. Okigbo, *op.cit.*

by subordinates, tends to stimulate two types of adjustment behaviours in the latter group. The usual adjustment strategy is for the innovative subordinate to reverse to the *status quo ante* either on a permanent basis or temporarily until he has status and authority enough to install his ideas. Until then, benefit of his innovative ideas are lost to his organisation. A more unusual strategy, which Fleishman *et al*¹⁸, Sykes¹⁹ and Bobbitt *et al*²⁰ had, however, observed, is recourse to the exit option whereby the stalled staffer withdraws his membership of and services to the organisation.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Bureaucracy as is practised everywhere, including the private sector, ensures an ordered system of operation. It is in no way synonymous with ineffectiveness, inefficiency, lack of creativity or lack of innovation, etc. Within the purview of the public service bureaucracy, the service could be results-oriented and innovative. It is with this belief that we propose the following solutions:

1. The revitalisation of elements of a results-oriented management as proposed by the Udoji Commission. The public servants should as a result be made to move from a state of an 'input' manager to a results-oriented manager. The public servants should adopt such elements of result-oriented management as economy, effectiveness, and efficiency in their operations.
2. As we proposed elsewhere, the country's public bureaucracy should be made less rigid by a de-emphasis on strict adherence to rules and regulation, thus, creating opportunities for public servants to be creative, innovative and proactive.²¹ This could be achieved by the application of tested management principles and techniques, such as Management By Objective (MBO), Programme Performance Budgeting System (PPBS), and Project Management (PM).
3. "Dotun Phillips" Study Team proposed a short-circuiting of the long process of decision taking by limiting policy formulation to the Management and Directorate levels (*i.e.*, Grade Levels 13 to 17). This, according to the Study Team, would break what amount to "bureaucratic bottlenecks" in decision taking in the service.²² This suggestion is endorsed here.

¹⁸ E.A. Fleishman *et al*, *Leadership and Supervision in Industry*, Columbus, Bureau of Educational Research, the Ohio State University, 1955.

¹⁹ R.J. Sykes, "The Effects of a Supervisory Training Course in Changing Supervisors' Perceptions and Expectations of the Role of Management", *Human Relations*, Vol.15, 1962, pp. 227-43.

²⁰ R.H. Bobbitt Jr., *et al*, *Organisational Behaviour: Understanding and Prediction*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1978, p. 302.

²¹ C.P. Maduabum, "The Challenge of Economic Recession in Nigeria to Her Public Sector Managers", *Nigerian Management Review*, Vol. 3, No.1, March, 1988, p. 17.

²² Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Report of Study Team on the Structure, Staffing and Operations of Nigerian Federal Civil Service*, *op.cit.*

4. The stiffling of innovative ideas by immediate superior officers could be resolved by the provision of what is sometimes captioned a "fly-over situation". This is a privilege provided to the innovative subordinate to informally discuss his innovative ideas with the Head of Department whenever such innovative ideas are dismissed by his immediate superior as not practicable. Caution should, however, be taken to check abuses of such a privilege.
5. By professionalising the Civil Service, Decree 43 on the Civil Service Reforms had made the responsibility for action in the service less cumbersome as each Ministry/Extra-Ministerial Department is more autonomous than is hitherto the case. This situation is more amenable to the introduction and implementation of innovative ideas. It should, therefore, be so applied rather than resorting to the pre-Reforms state.
6. In some private sector organisations, each officer has the opportunity of trying out new ideas with a proviso though that he is rewarded where the ideas contribute positively or punished where they contribute negatively to the organisational objective. A similar situation could be applied in the public sector.

CONCLUSION

Bureaucracy, as we have argued in this article, aims at enhancing effective and efficient achievement of organisational goals. Though it has its own shortcomings, it has, however, been found to be very successful in Western countries. It, therefore, does not connote negative attitudes to work and operations. A situation where public servants hide under the canopy of some of its principles—such as rules and regulations, and hierarchy of office to stifle creativity and innovation—should be decried if the service must improve.