

To fix our climate we must fix the public service

In the run-up to COP26, this issue of *New Agenda* leads with a feature on climate change; we all know global warming will have a dire impact on our planet in the not very far off future, and already we are concerned that its effects will make it more difficult for South Africa to deal with poverty.

Global warming multiplies existing problems, whatever these may be. It has direct effects – more intense droughts, wildfires, floods, habitat loss, weakened ecosystems. And it has indirect effects as countries battle internally to implement commitments to cut emissions of harmful greenhouse gases.

Business, unions and civil society organisations along with citizens will bear the main burdens of implementation and suffer the effects where mitigation efforts are ineffective. However, the government role is central – resolving disagreements, giving direction, correcting unjust imbalances, responding to disasters.

For this we need a public service that does more than spend salaries. The theme for this edition of *New Agenda* is carried by four articles that look at how to build a more capable and effective public service. There is a strong link between our articles on the public service and our cover feature on climate and ecosystem challenges. To tackle the latter we will require changes in the former.

An institution like the public service is based on people and on principles. For it to be effective we need capable people, who – on the one hand – take political direction and assist government to realise their political promises and – on the other hand – implement policy strictly within the framework of law, the Constitution and court judgments.

These themes are illustrated in the conversation between Alan Hirsch and Rob Adam, which discusses lessons from state-sponsored high-tech infrastructure projects. From their experience as high-level senior public servants the authors know that to succeed such projects need complementarity and trust between ministers and high-ranking civil servants in the departments.

Mzukiso Qobo and Busani Ngcaweni discuss the professionalisation of the public service. Professionalism means officials who are ethical, capable and properly qualified. They are not appointed through nepotism or cronyism. They recognise and respect the distinction between politics and administration. The authors argue for a model where top civil servants are appointed on the basis of ‘a meritocratic selection process rather than the prevailing cadre deployment system that makes them beholden to politicians or political factions’.

Firoz Khan and Willan Adonis argue for a public administration curriculum for our universities that is grounded in responding to the needs of the poor, hungry and homeless. They are highly critical of neoliberalism and the colonial foundations of public policy schools, which reinforce ‘exclusion, erasure and denialism’.

Ian Palmer and Brendon van Niekerk present an assessment of the long-term failure of government to manage wastewater (sewerage). The article highlights the need for technical capacity in municipalities and for politicians to take heed of technical advice

All the contributions suggest that rebuilding our state institutions must be

the first step if government is to succeed with its plan to develop infrastructure – and implement the proposals South Africa will be taking to COP26.

Finally, it is necessary to mention the violence in Gauteng and KZN that followed the imprisonment of former President Zuma. It was fuelled from many sources, including the impacts of the tough Covid-19 lockdowns and the internecine battles within the ruling party. South Africa is still trying to make sense of what happened. *New Agenda* encourages this debate and calls for readers to submit their views for discussion. We offer three quotes as a start to what will probably be an ongoing issue for future editions:

‘The riots were nothing less than a violent attempt by a pro-corruption faction within the ruling African National Congress (ANC) to overthrow the democratic order.’

The Economist, 24 July

‘The hot air we have been subjected to – about insurrection, counterrevolution and plotting – is a symptom of our disorientation ... But we do not have evidence of “an insurrection”, still less of any “ultimate objective”, such as the attempted overthrow of democracy or removal of the president. Imitation and opportunism drove the widespread looting ...’

Anthony Butler, *Business Day*, 2 August

‘Don’t let us forget that the causes of human actions are usually immeasurably more complex and varied than our subsequent explanations of them.’ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*