The Essence of Professionalism:
The Meaning and Significance of Public Service Professionalism in the Context of Global Governance

“La corruption de chaque gouvernement commence presque toujours par celle de ses principes”

Baron Charles de Montesquieu (1748) L’Esprit des Lois, I. VII, cl. 2

Demetrios Argyriades
Consultant, UNDP

October 2011

I

Profound dissatisfaction with State and public service;
with the performance of government and the economic system, in several parts of the world; This feeling of *malaise* has been compounded by the effects of the crisis, which have been unevenly felt within and between regions, as well as social classes and occupational groups; There is a growing sense that a certain *ethics deficit, civic responsibility* and lack of *professional rigour* may have been at the source of the economic woes afflicting many countries; The incidence of graft, embezzlement of funds and other forms of *corruption*, across the board, certainly strengthens this feeling.
To make this feeling worse is “a culture of impunity” shielding all but junior ranks in public organizations (G. Bowley 2011:B1; I. Pichardo Pagaza and D. Argyriades 2009:32, fn7); Other than the complicity among the senior ranks, is a stark capacity deficit which makes the enforcement of sanctions, the prosecution of crime and the elimination of graft extremely problematic; A prevalent sense of the inadequacy of both structures and personnel in the upper reaches of government feeds into the rapid erosion of public trust; Decline of social capital, in many parts of the world, translates into alienation, political indifference and apathy or cynicism, even when it does not lead to political and social upheavals, as in the Middle East, today.
Decline of social capital and public trust represents a serious danger to democratic governance, as well as social stability and economic progress; In part, it also accounts for the visible erosion of public service widely; It would be wrong, however, to conclude that stiffer penalties and swifter justice alone would suffice to meet the challenge and to reverse these trends; If anything, lip service and “anti-corruption strategies”, which serve decorative purposes, have proved counter-productive reinforcing the belief that “deceit is the name of the game”; Other more positive ways and more constructive remedies are needed.
IV

In all too many countries, the core of the problem today and cause of capacity deficit, as well as ethics deficit is what may be described as de-professionalisation, which often goes in tandem with de-institutionalisation and politicisation of the public service; Redressing this situation calls for concerted measures for capacity reinforcement and institution-building in the public service, in general; Capacity-reinforcement is absolutely essential to restoring the prestige, authority and effectiveness of the public service profession; This, in turn, is predicated on respecting the sense of identity of the public service profession and, to this end, according it a measure of autonomy in the exercise of its functions and its internal management; Human Resources Management & Development must be professionalised and be accorded priority
If we are serious about it, we need to reposition the debate on ethics and professionalism:
Redefine the terms and the relationship between the two;
Go back to basics; and
Set our priorities right

Professionalism is *knowledge-based*. It means *mastery* and *commitment*:
*Mastery* of a field; a definable body of knowledge and mastery of techniques, of methods and of processes that are proper to the advancement of that particular branch of knowledge and the use of information or data that it yields;
*Commitment* to this field: to rigour, propriety and thoroughness in the use and application of scientific methods, or otherwise established and widely accepted processes in the pursuit of knowledge and in the communication or dissemination of results;
It is *commitment to serve* to the best of one’s capacities and not in any which way but in accordance with standards and processes established for each discipline, be it pedagogy, medicine or public administration. A service is “professional” when the *end-user*’s good primes other considerations. In public service, it is the
public good or *long-term general interest* that should take precedence over private, particularistic, trade union or other concerns.

It’s an established discipline *that* which underpins a profession. The skills, techniques and values applied to the practice of a profession and service of end-users are also knowledge-based. They are largely predicated on mastery of a field. They very largely depend on institutional frameworks either established by law or developed over time through custom and tradition.
VI

The Public Service profession is a “quilt of many fabrics”;

What makes it a single profession?

“… government professionals have certain attributes in common. They work in a common institutional and legal framework, which offers its own constraints and opportunities. They share a commitment to use their skills for the public good, in public service as against private gain, for a fixed remuneration. They are subject to public accountability for their actions.”

(N. Caiden, United Nations 1999:80)

The U.N. defined Professionalism in the following challenging terms:

“Professionalism in government or in any
other field rests on two foundations: one is a competence base, a special body of knowledge or a definable skill acquired through study and practice … The concept of professionalism, however, also suggests a shared values system, a code of ethical conduct that manifest themselves in the application of knowledge, in the use of particular skills and the exercise of control over practice.” (United Nations 1999: p.97)
In defining the *ethical content* of the Public Service specifically, we need to emphasise:

The use of information, knowledge and skills *correctly* and to lawful and ethical purposes *only*;

The need to refrain from inflicting unnecessary pain or harm to individuals or groups;

The primacy and centrality of the general interest and long-term common good over personal, party political or particularistic interests;

Working in the public sphere, under the rule of law and due process (*état de droit*);

Being accountable to the taxpayer for the use of public funds;

Demonstrating a genuine sense of civic duty, respect for democratic propriety and responsibility to the community;

Serving as a role model to the Community at large.

This sense of civic duty and obedience to the law should in no way interfere from a public servants’ duty to adhere to the core values of his/her professional group (e.g. law, education or medicine);

During the Second World War and recently, in
connection with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the world has been exposed to starkly egregious practices performed, condoned, defended or facilitated by medical practitioners and lawyers in government service;
The terms “moral inversion” and “administrative evil” have been coined to describe this phenomenon: the readiness of people, including public servants and professionals in government, to participate in actions which are inherently unethical but are portrayed as necessary, justified as “cost-effective” and, therefore, seen as “good”;
The excuse of “pseudo-professionals” is: “compliance to orders” or defending the “national interest”. This can be a serious dilemma. It raises the following issues which certainly lie at the core of public service professionalism.
These need to be addressed, both nationally and globally:
The duty of obedience: what are the limits?
One can think of many laws (e.g. the Nuremberg laws, Apartheid), which should have been resisted, certainly not be obeyed;
The concept of General Interest must be redefined and cast in broader, regional or even global terms;
*Raison d’Etat* must give way to *Raison d’Humanité* (Y. Dror 2001 *The Capacity to Govern*).
Both Virtue and Professionalism lies at the antipodes of opportunism;
Not everything that works and serves the “here and now” is *ipso facto* good;
Both ethics and professionalism aim at the long-term good, as well as the general interest.
In the final analysis, ethical conduct rests on personal critical judgment; it makes demands on and engages one’s individual responsibility. Invoking higher orders is really no excuse; Accordingly, the issue, as well as pressing challenge to the public service profession, lies in: internalising the values and the “mission” of the particular discipline, which we have made our own (e.g. medicine, law, education, economics or public administration); and raising the critical judgement of public service professionals, rather than speed of compliance, we should strengthen their disposition to take responsibility for their actions, not blindly follow orders; What knowledge, what skills, what values, attitudes and behaviours ought to be reinforced, in order to bolster professionalism, and how What training and career paths are better apt to foster this objective?

Developing critical judgement ought to take centre stage. But how do we do it? To develop critical judgment do we need a type of
balance and proportion that over-specialisation may not provide, indeed may even blunt;
How many wrong decisions which brought about the crises, with which we are currently faced, were really the outcomes of one-dimensional thinking; “one size fits all” approaches?
What type of general knowledge do we need in order to escape the traps of narrow-mindedness and one-dimensional thinking?
How can we learn to listen and to communicate?
One final thought: Beware of hubris; and
Two related statements:

“One thing I know: how little I do know” (Plato: The Apology of Socrates; and

“Les valeurs pour les Grecs étaient pré-existantes à toute action dont elles marquaient précisément les limites… Mais les Grecs n’ont jamais dit que la limite ne pouvait être franchie. Ils ont dit
qu’elle existait et que celui-là était frappé sans
tmerci qui osait la dépasser. Rien dans l’histoire
d’aujourd’hui ne peut les contredire.”

(A. Camus 1954: 112-113)
References:

