

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN A CITY-STATE: THE SINGAPORE CASE

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INTRODUCTION

Public Administration (PA) can be viewed as a discipline or as an activity.⁽¹⁾ As an activity, PA can be defined as those activities undertaken by public organizations in a country to ensure the attainment of national development goals.⁽²⁾ In this paper, we will focus on PA as an activity rather than as a discipline. More specifically, we will identify the various features of PA in Singapore by describing how the public bureaucracy implements its development programmes.

Although Singapore is a young nation, its civil service has a much longer tradition as its nucleus was formed in 1819 when Stamford Raffles appointed six officials to look after the administration of the island.⁽³⁾ The Singapore Civil Service (SCS) today consists of 15 ministries and employs a total of 68,677 persons on January 1, 1983.⁽⁴⁾ The other arm of the public bureaucracy is made up of the 83 statutory boards which have about 56,000 employees.⁽⁵⁾ This means that the public bureaucracy provides employment for nearly 125,000 persons or 10.8 per cent of the employed labour force.⁽⁶⁾ The size of the public bureaucracy is quite large for such a small country as Singapore since the public official/population ratio is 50 public employees per 1,000 population.⁽⁷⁾

Needless to say, the public bureaucracy plays a significant role in Singapore's national development especially after June 1959 when the People's Action Party (PAP) government assumed office. The purpose of this paper is to describe the dynamics of public administration in Singapore by dealing with how the public bureaucracy operates and its impact on national development. The major thesis of this paper is that the pattern of PA IN Singapore is quite unique because she is an typical new state and furthermore the role of the public bureaucracy as an agent

of social change in Singapore is more visible and significant than in other new states.

PA SINGAPORE STYLE

In his book, *Public Administration: A Comparative Perspective*, Ferrel Heady has identified the following five general patterns of administration in the new states:

1. The "basic pattern of public administration is imitative rather than indigenous."
2. The "bureaucracies are deficient in skilled manpower necessary for developmental programs."
3. The bureaucracies place emphasis on non-production-directed orientations.
4. A high degree of formalism.
5. The bureaucracies have "a generous measure of operational autonomy."⁽⁸⁾

Heady's checklist is useful because it identifies the conditions or constraints influencing the process of PA in the developing countries. The following discussion will show that these constraints do not affect PA in Singapore and this non-applicability accounts for its uniqueness.

The first feature of PA in Singapore is that, unlike other new states, the pattern of administration is not imitative but a combination of both the influence of the original British Civil Service model and the local adaptations to this model. As Singapore is a former British colony, she has political and administrative institutions patterned after the British prototype. This is not surprising since 137 years (or 83 per cent) of Singapore's 165 years of history (1819–1984) were under the British, 25 years (or 15 per cent) were under the PAP government (1959–1984) and only three years (or 2 per cent) were under the Japanese Occupation (1942–1945).⁽⁹⁾ In 1947, the Trusted Commission, which was appointed to consider the salaries and conditions of service of the public services in the Malayan Union and Singapore, recommended (1) that a Public Service Commission (PSC) be established as the adapted version of the United Kingdom's Civil Service Commission; and (2) that the SCS, following the example of the British Civil Service, be reorganized and divided into four divisions according to the duties and salaries of its members.⁽¹⁰⁾ The PSC still exists today and is one of the two central personnel agencies for the SCS, which has not abandoned the fourfold division of work suggested 37 years ago.

Although the British imprint on the SCS is quite obvious, the influence of the local environment on the public bureaucracy has been more important especially after 1959. The PAP government not only revamped

the SCS and resocialised its members, but also created many statutory boards to accelerate the implementation of socio-economic development programmes. For example, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was created in February 1960 to deal with the housing shortage and the Economic Development Board (EDB) was formed to solve the unemployment problem in August 1961.⁽¹¹⁾ The reliance on statutory boards for promoting national development will be discussed below as another feature of PA in Singapore. Reference has been made to statutory boards at this stage to illustrate the point that the creation of statutory boards to solve socio-economic problems is a local response which deviated from the British colonial government's approach to such problems. During the colonial period, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) was unable to solve the housing crisis because of its own inadequacies and lack of financial and legislative support from the colonial government. Accordingly, the PAP government learnt from the SIT's experience and avoided making the same mistakes. It established the HDB as the *de jure* public housing authority in Singapore. The HDB was also given the necessary resources and legal powers by the PAP government to implement the public housing programme.⁽¹²⁾

When Singapore separated from Malaysia and attained independence in August 1965, she was concerned with her survival.⁽¹³⁾ In mapping out the nation's strategy for survival, the PAP leaders have relied on policy diffusion i.e., the "emulation and borrowing of policy ideas and solutions from other nations."⁽¹⁴⁾ This is not surprising because, according to Howard M. Leichter:

Rarely do policy makers embark upon entirely new courses of action; rather, they borrow heavily from an apparently finite, existing repertoire of policy solutions. There is a tendency for policy makers, when faced with a particular problem, to look for an analogous situation in another system and to emulate the solutions used by others.⁽¹⁵⁾

The PAP government has not been hesitant in learning from the experiences of such countries as Israel, Switzerland, West Germany, and more recently, Japan. The key point to note in these learning attempts is the adoption of ideas which have worked elsewhere (with suitable modification to take cognizance of the local environment if necessary) as well as the rejection of unsuccessful schemes or experiments in other countries. In short, the Singaporean pattern of public administration is not purely imitative, but is a mixture of both local and foreign influences.

The second feature of PA in Singapore is that until recently the public bureaucracy has not been deficient in skilled manpower required for developmental programmes. The problem here is not one of quantity as the size of the public bureaucracy is quite large for a small country like Singapore. Rather, the problem involves the upgrading of the quality of

the public bureaucrats.

The problem of scarcity of trained personnel in Singapore is not serious when compared to the situation in other developing countries for two reasons. First, the localization of the public bureaucracy was a gradual one and there was thus sufficient time for the local officers to undergo the necessary training and to replace the expatriate officers on completion of their training. Those new states which have experienced rapid localization of their civil services suffer from a serious manpower problem as the expatriates were removed before the native officers could be adequately trained to replace them.

The second reason is that the training of the civil servants has been handled until recently mainly by the PSC, which forecasts the manpower needs of the country and selects candidates for the SCS as well as for training abroad through the awarding of scholarships. However, the bulk of this training took the form of on-the-job training on an ad hoc basis in the various government departments. To rectify this inadequacy and to produce well trained and efficient civil servants equipped with a knowledge of modern management, the Staff Training Institute (STI) was formed in March 1971 to

provide the trainees with an understanding of the environment affecting the Civil Service, equip them with the basic skills to perform their jobs more efficiently, and introduce them to modern management concepts and a range of modern management techniques.⁽¹⁶⁾

Since then the STI has been renamed twice: its name was changed to the Civil Service Staff Development Institute in 1976, and to the Civil Service Institute (CSI) in 1979.⁽¹⁷⁾ On January 3, 1983, the Public Service Division (PSD) was created within the Ministry of Finance, and the CSI came under its purview.⁽¹⁸⁾

However, Singapore's success in family planning from 1966 onwards has drastically reduced the annual rate of population growth. The need for family planning is understandable given the small size of the island. But, successful family planning has, on the other hand, further reduced the already small base of the population. According to Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the quality of Singaporeans is the most important reason for Singapore's rapid development after 1959. The combination of Singapore-born and non-Singapore-born talent in the population has been responsible for Singapore's success story. Unfortunately, in recent years the proportion of non-Singapore-born in the population has declined. To meet this problem and to ensure that "the standards of leadership in the Cabinet and efficiency in the public service" will be maintained in the future, Prime Minister Lee recommended the recruitment of talented persons from other countries to supplement Singapore-born talent. He justified the need for this "search for talent" policy in the following

way:

It is not that Singapore lacks talent, but that we have been able to achieve so much more because we had doubled our talent pool by a brains inflow.

The message of the declining numbers and percentages of non-Singapore-born . . . is clear: go out to recruit and to retain talent to supplement our own finite pool. Otherwise we shall not be able to maintain the pace at which we have progressed.⁽¹⁹⁾

Consequently, two committees were formed to help in the recruitment of foreign talent to Singapore. In October 1980, the Professionals' Information and Placement Service (PIPS) was created within the PSC to perform two functions: (1) keep records of overseas graduates' job applications and provide such data to interested employers; and (2) provide a resource pool for high-level manpower by maintaining records of PSC scholars and good honours graduates from local and overseas universities.⁽²⁰⁾ The second committee is the Committee for Attracting Talent to Singapore (CATS), which is concerned with recruiting foreign talent for the private sector in Singapore.⁽²¹⁾ In sum, the public bureaucracy has overcome the lack of skilled personnel by recruiting foreign talent to supplement the Singapore-born talent in the population.

The third feature of PA in Singapore is that the public bureaucracy, unlike its counterparts in other developing countries, emphasizes production-directed orientations rather than non-production-directed orientations. There are three reasons for this stress on efficiency in the Singaporean public bureaucracy. First, the political leaders have constantly reminded the population in general and civil servants in particular of the necessity to be efficient and highly trained in order to survive and prosper, especially in view of the fact that Singapore has no natural resources and therefore has to rely entirely on her human resources — her people.

A second reason for this focus on efficiency is that selection and promotion in the SCS, which are the functions of the PSC, are based on achievement criteria and civil servants are recruited or promoted on the basis of merit, relevant qualifications and experience rather than such ascriptive criteria as ethnic or kinship ties. Indeed, the PSC is the gatekeeper to the SCS because it controls the quality of personnel entering the SCS by "keeping the rascals out" and attracting the best qualified candidates to apply for civil service jobs.⁽²²⁾ Outstanding higher civil servants have been rewarded for their efficiency either in the form of public service awards or they are up-graded into higher positions, or both. Such incentives and the constant revision of salaries are two measures taken by the SCS to stem the out-flow of competent civil servants to the more lucrative jobs in the private sector. Conversely, if a civil servant does not emphasize production-directed orientations or if he is not efficient, he will not be promoted; and if his level of efficiency is very low, he might

be transferred, demoted or even fired.

The final reason for emphasizing efficiency in the SCS is that discipline in the latter is very strict. All civil servants must follow the standard operating procedures stipulated in the Instruction Manuals. Any civil servant found guilty or alleged to be guilty of misbehaviour is investigated by the PSC and/or the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB), depending on the nature of the offence. The PSC deals with absenteeism, insubordination and other offences related to the job, whereas the CPIB's function is to eradicate bureaucratic corruption. Discipline is not a serious problem at all in the SCS as there were 169 disciplinary cases in 1982, which constituted only 0.2 per cent of the 68,677 civil servants.⁽²³⁾

Similarly, bureaucratic corruption in Singapore is incidental and not institutionalized because the need to be corrupt among civil servants has been reduced by the relatively high salaries and favourable working conditions. In addition, the opportunities for bureaucratic corruption have been severely limited by the comprehensive powers of the Prevention of Corruption Act (POCA) and the CPIB's constant vigilance.⁽²⁴⁾ The SCS's emphasis on production-directed orientations has increased its level of organizational effectiveness, contributed to a low incidence of bureaucratic corruption, and earned for itself a good reputation and prestige.

The fourth feature of PA in Singapore is that the level of formalism in the public bureaucracy is low or negligible as a result of its focus on efficiency and its ability to implement development programmes. The concept of formalism was coined by Fred W. Riggs to refer to

... the extent to which a discrepancy exists between the prescriptive and the descriptive, between the formal and effective power, between the impression given by constitution, laws and regulations, organization charts and statistics, and actual practices and facts of government and society.⁽²⁵⁾

Furthermore, Singapore's many assets such as her small size, well-developed infrastructure, strategic location and development-oriented political leadership, have also contributed to a low level of formalism in the public bureaucracy.

The fifth feature of PA in Singapore is that the public bureaucracy is controlled by the PAP government, which has been in power since June 1959. The boycott of parliament by the Barisan Socialis in October 1966 led to the PAP's monopoly of all the 58 parliamentary seats in the 1968 general election. Since then, the PAP has retained its status as the only party in parliament until the October 1981 Anson By-election, which was won by the Workers' Party candidate. The PAP's predominance in the political arena after 1959 and the concomitant political stability and continuity during the past 25 years means that the public bureaucracy

does not have the "generous measure of operational autonomy" exhibited by public bureaucracies in other new states. In part, this reflects the British Civil Service tradition of the control of the public bureaucracy by the legislature, as well as the predominance of the PAP on the Singapore political scene.

In his article, "Bureaucracy and Political Development: A Paradoxical View," Fred W. Riggs has argued that the growth of public bureaucracy, if left unchecked, would stifle and hinder the development of such democratic political institutions as political parties, legislatures and courts. In other words, the ideal pattern of growth was a balanced one for both bureaucratic and democratic political institutions. That is, the bureaucracy should not grow at the expense of the political institutions. In the new states, Riggs notes that the public bureaucracies are very powerful and have been growing at a much faster rate than the indigenous political institutions, thus stunting the growth of the latter and prejudicing the growth of democratic institutions.⁽²⁶⁾ In the Singapore context, a local scholar has recently pointed out the growing power of the public bureaucracy since politics now occurs within the latter and not in the general political arena. At present, the political leaders are still in control over the public bureaucracy and all is well. However, problems might arise if and when the political leaders are no longer able to control the public bureaucrats.⁽²⁷⁾

The sixth feature is that PA in Singapore is also characterized by the creation of eufunctional administrative practices and institutions required for the implementation of socio-economic development programmes. Focus is given to both institutional and attitudinal aspects of administrative reform, as can be seen in the administrative reform of the SIT, the HDB's predecessor, or the administrative reform of the Singapore Harbour Board which resulted in the formation of the Port of Singapore Authority. Whenever a serious problem arises, or if an existing public organization is ineffective and a failure, administrative reform will be undertaken in the form of the dissolution of the defective organization and the creation of one or more organizations to replace the former. The personnel in the new organizations are also socialized towards the attainment of organizational goals. There is a "hiving off" process as new organizations are created to take over the heavy workload of the existing organization and thereby help to promote organizational effectiveness by reducing their own workload.

There is a division of labour between the two components of the public bureaucracy. Before 1959, the SCS did most of the work as there were only a few statutory boards in existence. Thus, the creation and subsequent proliferation of statutory boards by the PAP government served two purposes: it reduced to a great extent the SCS's workload, and entrusted to the statutory boards the task of expediting the imple-

mentation of socio-economic programmes as they would not be hindered by the procedural delays and regulations faced by the SCS.

The seventh feature of PA in Singapore is that the public bureaucracy (especially the statutory boards) has become a very important agent of social change in Singapore after 1959 as a result of the PAP government's strategy of relying on the statutory boards for the implementation of socio-economic development programmes. Indeed, the public bureaucracy has contributed to national development by bringing about desired social change in Singapore. By introducing low-cost public housing, family planning and traffic management, the public bureaucracy has, within two decades, transformed the way of life of Singaporeans in three areas: where and how they live, when and how they limit their families, and when and how they go to work.⁽²⁸⁾

What are the reasons for the successful implementation of the public housing, family planning and traffic management programmes? The most important reason is the quality of the political leadership in Singapore. The PAP leaders are able to plan ahead and to anticipate problems and are willing to enforce necessary but unpleasant measures. The commitment of the PAP government to the successful completion of these programmes is the first step to success because it ensures that the organizations involved receive the necessary manpower, legislative backing, financial resources and equipment to implement their programmes. Second, all the three agencies are highly effective public organizations and are staffed with qualified and competent personnel. Third, since corruption is not a serious problem in Singapore, the implementation of the above programmes has not been hindered by this problem. Fourth, the PAP government relies on national campaigns to persuade the people to support its policies on the one hand, and disincentives have been introduced to ensure compliance with such policies on the other hand. In other words, the population is quite disciplined and has cooperated with and supported the PAP government's policies on public housing, family planning and the Area Licensing Scheme. Finally, the smallness of Singapore is an asset because the organizations concerned are not plagued by logistical and communication problems in the implementation of their programmes.⁽²⁹⁾

The final feature of PA in Singapore is that, given the smallness of the city-state, there is no local government or rural development administration, and PA takes on an urban character. Thus, unlike other countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and South Korea, Singapore does not make provision for rural development administration programmes because such programmes are not necessary. Apart from being spared from the pressures created by a huge hinterland as manifested in the migration to the capital cities, the small size of Singapore encourages centralization rather than decentralization.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding pages, eight features of PA in Singapore were identified. It only remains for us to explain why these features do not conform to those described by Heady. The reason for Singapore's uniqueness insofar as the pattern of PA is concerned is her many assets which set her apart as an atypical new state. Singapore's various assets include the following:

1. Its strategic location between the main sea and air routes in the Far East as well as its fine harbour and port facilities have made it the third largest port in the world;
2. Its increasingly diversified economy which is no longer based on entrepot trade only, but also on industrialization and tourism;
3. Its small size which presents such advantages as reduction in problems of communications, enhanced political control by the leadership, and improved administrative coordination;
4. Its well-developed infrastructure has enabled Singapore to become a regional centre for banking, financial and oil-refining facilities, as well as a training centre in various fields for Colombo Plan scholars;
5. Its negligible "rural" sector; and
6. Its stable, pragmatic and efficient political leadership, whose task has undoubtedly been made easier because of the other assets, but nevertheless, whose achievements in nation building and socio-economic development ever since it assumed power in June 1959 should be recognized.

We have seen that the public bureaucracy in Singapore is a very powerful force for social change as it has succeeded in making public housing, family planning and the Area Licensing Scheme a way of life for most Singaporeans. The public bureaucracy's success in contributing toward national development can be attributed not only to Singapore's assets (small size, no rural hinterland) but also to the PAP leaders' commitment to development, their intolerant attitude towards corruption, and the high standards of discipline within the SCS and statutory boards.

NOTES

- (1) This classic distinction was first introduced in Dwight Waldo, *The Study of Public Administration* (New York: Random House, 1955), P. 3.
- (2) Jon S. T. Quah, "Public Administration: An Introduction to the Discipline for Students in the ASEAN Countries," (Singapore: Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore, Occasional Paper No. 41, 1981), p. 1.
- (3) J. Kathirithamby-Wells, "Early Singapore and the Inception of a British Administrative Tradition in the Straits Settlements (1819-1832)," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 42, Part 2 (December 1969), pp. 48-49. For details of the administration of Singapore during this period see Ong Tiong Whatt, "Farquhar's Administration of Singapore, 1819-1823," (B. A. academic exercise, University of Malaya in Singapore, 1959).
- (4) *Singapore Facts and Pictures 1983* (Singapore: Information Division, Ministry of Culture, 1983), p. 32.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 32 and *Singapore Government Directory* (Singapore: Information Division, Ministry of Culture, October 1983).
- (6) *Singapore Facts and Pictures 1983*, pp. 32 and 102.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- (8) Ferrel Heady, *Public Administration: A Comparative Perspective* 2nd ed. (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1979), pp. 271-274.
- (9) For a detailed account of Singapore's history, see C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819-1975* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977).
- (10) See Jon S. T. Quah, "Origin of Public Service Commission in Singapore," *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (October-December 1972), p. 564; and Jon S. T. Quah, "The Origins of the Public Bureaucracies in the ASEAN Countries," *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (April-June 1978), p. 417.
- (11) Jon S. T. Quah, "Public Bureaucracy, Social Change and National Development," in Peter S. J. Chen (ed.), *Singapore: Development Policies and Trends* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 201.
- (12) For a detailed analysis of the SIT's failure and the HDB's success in public housing see Jon S. T. Quah, "Administrative Reform and Development Administration in Singapore: A Comparative Study of the Singapore Improvement Trust and the Housing and Development Board," (Ph. D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1975), pp. 211-300, 507-553.
- (13) Chan Heng Chee, *Singapore: The Politics of Survival, 1965-1967* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971).
- (14) Howard M. Leichter, *A Comparative Approach to Policy Analysis: Health Care Policy in Four Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 42.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- (16) Quah, "Administrative Reform and Development Administration in Singapore," p. 575.
- (17) Jon S. T. Quah, "The Study of Public Administration in the ASEAN Countries," *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (1980), p. 358.
- (18) *Straits Times*, January 1, 1983, p. 36. See also Finance Circular Minute No. 40/82 (MF (B) B12-0518) dated 31 December 1982.

- (19) Lee Kuan Yew, "The Search for Talent," in S. Jayakumar (ed.), *Our Heritage and Beyond* (Singapore: National Trades Union Congress, 1982), p. 18.
- (20) Republic of Singapore, Public Service Commission Annual Report 1980 (Singapore: PSC, 1981), p. 20.
- (21) Lee, "The Search for Talent," p. 22.
- (22) Jon S. T. Quah, "The Public Bureaucracy and National Development in Singapore," in Krishna K. Tummala (ed.), *Administrative Systems Abroad* (Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, 1982), p. 51.
- (23) Republic of Singapore, Public Service Commission Annual Report 1982 (Singapore: PSC, 1983), p. 20.
- (24) For a more detailed discussion, see Jon S. T. Quah, "Administrative and Legal Measures for Combatting Bureaucratic Corruption in Singapore," (Singapore: Department of Political Science, University of Singapore, Occasional Paper No. 34, 1978), pp. 9–20.
- (25) Fred W. Riggs, *The Ecology of Public Administration* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 91–92.
- (26) Fred W. Riggs, "Bureaucrats and Political Development: A Paradoxical View," in Joseph La Palombara (ed.), *Bureaucracy and Political Development* 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 120–167.
- (27) Chan Heng Chee, "Politics in an Administrative State: Where has the Politics Gone?" in Seah Chee Meow (ed.), *Trends in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975), pp. 51–68.
- (28) For more details, see Quah, "Public Bureaucracy, Social Change and National Development," pp. 212–216.
- (29) Quah, "The Public Bureaucracy and National Development in Singapore," pp. 62–63.