

SYNTHESIS

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Editor's Note:

The synthesis was originally delivered in Maltese. This is an edited English translation, intended to provide non-Maltese speakers with a full understanding of the contributions at the forum.

My role as rapporteur

The purpose of this synthesis is not merely that of reporting what has been said at the forum, but rather that of helping the audience to 'read' the experience, by focusing on key insights and posing questions for further study.

The context of this event

The forum finds its context in nation-wide concern about the performance of the public service. The Public Service Reform Commission has produced a report entitled 'A New Public Service for Malta', which forms the subject of this forum. The task before the policy-makers and administrators is now to translate this concern and the Commission's proposals into concrete initiatives and decisions.

The forum is a step in this direction. It is not intended to propose fresh solutions, nor to take decisions about the Commission's

proposals: it is intended to develop and promote understanding of the Commission's proposals, and of their implications, with a view to catalyzing decision and action by all the players involved, especially by those leaders from many walks of life who are present here and who are somehow associated with the Service.

The forum brought together many voices and many interests to discuss a matter of common concern to the leaders present here. The outcomes of these two evenings can be described under three headings: feelings, matters of universal concern, matters on which there is agreement. What did not emerge during the forum is also significant, and will be identified at the conclusion of this synthesis.

Feelings

At times, the atmosphere in this hall has been highly charged, with a range of emotions gravitating around two poles, and betraying a tendency among all players to think in terms of absolutes.

At one end of the spectrum are strongly voiced concerns. There seems to be a fear of thinking outside the established patterns; a reluctance to confront new realities, challenges and ideas; and a preoccupation with continuity, stability, safeguards against injustice and abuse of administrative discretion. These emerged most strikingly during the first day's discussion on the institutional fabric.

At the other end of the spectrum is a sense of excitement about the opportunities presented by the report of the Public Service Reform Commission for the public service itself, for Government and for the customers of the Service. While the fears and concerns are very real and need to be addressed, the general tone of the discussions, especially the first day's discussion, may tempt decision-makers and civil servants to ignore the real challenge before the civil service, which is to manage change; it may tempt them to look for alternative solutions without really assessing the implications, costs and benefits of the Commission's proposals.

In sustaining a dialogue about the Commission's recommendations, all those concerned with the future of the public service need to be aware of these risks.

Matters of universal concern

Five matters have emerged as concerns shared by all the players, irrespective of whether they are broadly favourable or contrary to the Commission's proposals.

The first of these is **role delineation**: this is an issue which can no longer be evaded. The Maltese system of government needs a few basic groundrules to regulate the working relationship between ministers and civil servants. The trust which is necessary for effective government will be created and sustained by respect for these roles. The question before the policy-makers is who will define the roles: it seems to me that all the institutional players

must be involved in the process. How quickly can progress in the development of these conventions be expected?

The second concern is that **justice be done to the civil service**: it should not [continue to] be made a scapegoat for national failures; its customers, critics and would-be reformers cannot be allowed to think in terms of stereotypes, or to burden it with responsibilities that do not belong to it.

The third concern is that **the pace and extent of change in the public service is conditioned by the pace and extent of change in other sectors** of Maltese society. The changes that will really matter and last will be those that affect values, attitudes and expectations, rather than persons, operating systems and structures. One question that arises in this connection is whether this truism will continue to be used as an excuse for inaction by policy-makers. It is certainly a tempting way of escaping responsibility for participating in the change process.

Finding and promoting leadership of the process of change is the fourth concern: who should initiate drive, guide and evaluate this urgent, complex and lengthy process? By common consent, the political authorities and the public service itself both have significant roles to play, but these should be clarified. They should not exclude the contributions of other sectors, nor diminish the individual's responsibility. The Reform Commission proposed external appointments as one way of strengthening the leadership of the civil service.

This leads to the fifth and final concern. **External appointments** have roused much anxiety about their possible risks and implications. Clearly, these need to be evaluated further, in order that a measure of consensus may emerge about the final shape of the formula for external appointments.

Matters on which there is agreement

The forum identified some important matters about which all or most of the players are agreed: they constitute a basis for developing policy and initiatives.

There is, first of all, a **clear consensus on the need for and the urgency of change in the public service**, as well as an understanding that change will not come immediately. Beyond that, there is agreement on the need for a new and inspiring vision of the public service, for new structures, for more clearly defined roles within the system, for dynamic, visible leadership within the service.

There is also agreement that there is **much that is of value in the report of the Public Service Reform Commission**. Given this, should we, indeed, could we, look for fresh solutions?

There is general agreement on the **value of the Service's human resources** for administrative reform: effective human resource management is the principal issue confronting the public service; it is the principal theme of the PSRC report, and the principal

strategy for effecting lasting change, by inspiring, developing, deploying and mobilising public officers.

Matters that did not emerge

The matters that did not emerge in the forum are also significant.

The position of the major players remains unclear: they have been silent or guarded in their comments. As a result, there is no firm judgement about whether the Commission's recommendations are coherent or workable or acceptable; the discussion has emphasised one single proposal – external appointments – and neglects the remainder; at times, criticism amounts to little more than quibbling over trivial items such as the name given to the report.

In contrast to the chorus of criticism of the public service, and of the Commission's proposal concerning external appointments, the **opportunities presented by the report** – to the public service, to Government, to the general public – have hardly been mentioned.

In sum, it appears that all the players share the same concerns about the public service, but that no player is ready to take a position or an initiative: in a sense, they 'look over one another's shoulders', fearing to seize the initiative.

The present state of play

What prospects for the public service at this point in time?

The **credit side** shows something approaching a national consensus on issues and on the need for change; there is a coherent set of proposals setting out goals and strategies; financial and human resources are allocated or deployed for this purpose; and some significant initiatives are in hand.

What is needed now is the political and administrative will to move forward. The Commission has provided not so much a 'solution', as a vision and a strategy, and it presented policy makers and the public service with a challenge. Do these leaders have the will to make all of these their own?

The final word belongs to the Commission:

The public service stands at a cross-roads: it is burdened by past and present difficulties, and facing both the excitement and the risks of a multitude of challenges. Its leadership must make some choices about the future: whether to retreat along the road already tramped thus far, or to forge ahead towards the professionalism and effectiveness set forth in the eleven goals we have proposed.

Whatever course the Service takes is a matter of real interest to every citizen of this country. We wish to see this interest translated into genuine support for the initiatives conceived in this report. We earnestly hope that the changes which have been initiated will be pursued. We

believe in the ability of the parties concerned to take up the challenges identified here. We are confident that they will bring determination and goodwill to the task of creating 'a new public service for Malta'.