

# Minister-Permanent Secretary Relationships: Lessons from Zimbabwe's Government of national Unity

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Accepted: January 09, 2014

doi:10.5296/ jpag.v4i1.5061 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/ jpag.v4i1.5061>

## Abstract

Public administration is carried out through the public service. Public administration is an instrument of the State which is expected to implement the policy decisions made from the political and legislative processes. The rationale of this article is to assess the working relationships between ministers and permanent secretaries in the Government of National Unity in Zimbabwe. The success of the Minister depends to a large degree on the ability and goodwill of a permanent secretary who often has a very different personal or professional background and whom the minister did not appoint. Here lies the vitality of the permanent secretary institution. If a Minister decides to ignore the advice of the permanent secretary, he/she may risk of making serious errors. The permanent secretary is the key link between the democratic process and the public service. This article observed that the mere fact that the permanent secretary carries out the political, economic and social interests and functions of the state from which he/she derives his/her authority and power; and to which he/she is accountable, no permanent secretary is apolitical and neutral to the ideological predisposition of the elected Ministers. The interaction between the two is a political process. Contemporary administrator requires complex team-work and the synthesis of diverse contributions and view-points.

**Keywords:** Permanent secretary, minister, public administration, political neutrality

## **1. Introduction**

The management of public sector does not exist in an institutional and political vacuum. The public, the political leadership of government and its public servants are closely tied to each other by institutional arrangements and political interaction. Naturally, business of government is entrenched in politics. It follows, therefore, “that effectiveness as a public administrator is predicated on both an understanding of politics and of the political process and an ability to manage public programmes in a political context” (Frederickson, 1989:12). Literature on public administration habitually treats the issue technically and separated from politics. Politicians in power often take for granted that what they want will be carried out without demur and administratively in a kind of master-servant relationship. This myth of reasoning was for a long time associated with the name Woodrow Wilson, that policy and politics can be purely instrumental. It is not.

In Zimbabwe, the way choices are made, the way policies are devised and administered, the way programmes are managed are all vitally political as it will be shown in next sections. The political parts of government are established by numerous legal and constitutional arrangements and in these, some form of accountability will be required. This article is of the view that the system of accountability is what ties the administrative part of government with the political part and ultimately to the public itself. This article therefore seeks to examine the relationship between the permanent secretary and Minister from the time Zimbabwe attained its independence in 1980 to the present. Furthermore, the article traces closely the relationships of the two public officials during ‘transitional’ periods, that is, era of Government of National Unity such as soon after independence and the Global Political Agreement (GPA) (2009-September 2013) framework.

## **2. Methodological Design**

The nature of the relationships between the Minister and permanent secretary in Zimbabwe is such that there are several views and ideas about them, to the extent that there is no shortage of literature on this subject. Some of the works so far published on the subject have been undertaken by scholars of various disciplines and by journalists of a diversity of persuasions. This study, therefore, takes into account this multiplicity and diversity of views, interpretations and opinions in synthesising the literature selected for this review.

Both print and electronic media have done a remarkable job of reporting some of the performances and challenges the GNU is going through. The study undertook documentary search and made use of the data collected. Both state controlled and independent media publications were searched for appropriate data for this study. Such documents were studied and analysed as part of the data for this study. Content analysis was utilised in order to give the collected data scholarly interpretation. The underlying political science concepts and principles were highlighted in the process.

The study also identified and interviewed selected key informants from such groups as the academia, House of Assembly and Ministers. Deliberate sampling of these possible respondents was utilised to focus on primarily on those that had significant roles in different

sectors of the economy.

### 3. Rationale of the Offices of the Permanent Secretary and Minister

In the Westminster model of public administration, the permanent secretary is the administrative head of a department or Ministry. He/she is permanent in the sense that they are career civil servants who have tenure beyond the life of any particular government. This arrangement is important “to balance administrative continuity, without which governing is unpredictable and difficult, against political sensitivity, which is the basis of democracy (Larson and Coe, 1999:3). The French system is also similar to the Westminster version. However, the United States of America (USA) has a different system. In USA, “a change in elected government leads to sweeping changes in personnel at many levels of public administration” (ibid).

There are variations in names or titles from one country to another. These include top public officials, top bureaucrats, chief executive of government departments and top civil servant. In Zimbabwe, they are referred to as ‘permanent secretaries’ and differ from South Africa where they are called Director-Generals while in Britain they are known as permanent secretaries. A thread binding all these different semantic is that they are ‘Accounting Officers’ of departments. In Zimbabwe, the Public Finance Management Act [Chapter 22: 19] never mentions and uses the term permanent secretary rather it uses the term ‘Accounting Officer’ throughout the Act. The word Secretary is used to refer to “the Secretary responsible for finance and Paymaster-General” (ibid). In the context of this article, all these terms refer to administrative heads in government departments or ministries and are used interchangeably.

Ministers are both individually responsible for the affairs of one department or ministry, and collectively responsible for the conduct of the government as a whole. The principle of individual ministerial responsibility refers “to the responsibility of the Minister, as the political head of a department, to answer to the legislature and through the legislature, to the public, both for his or her personal acts and for the acts of departmental subordinates (Larson and Coe, 1999:5). The principle of collective responsibility refers “to the concept that ministers are responsible as a group - as members of the Cabinet-for the policies and management of the government as a whole” (Kernaghan and Siegel, 1995). Both individual and collective ministerial responsibilities are achieved through permanent secretaries. This really calls for good relations between the two. The permanent secretaries perform the following roles:

- *As policy advisor to the Minister: the permanent secretary provides objective advice on policy issues, on the government’s options in dealing with them and on the implications of each option. The advice requires a complete understanding of complex technical, managerial, legal and financing issues. It is important to note that policy development is inherently an interactive process. The minister should specify policy objectives and the permanent secretary devise practical options for achieving them*
- *As head of a department: the permanent secretary must direct and manage, on behalf of the Minister and within the law a department of government. The permanent*

*secretary has to ensure that the department responds to ministerial priorities and that the administration of the department is carried out in a way that reflects the Minister's direction and interests. A loyal public servant, the permanent secretary has the duty to respect the authority of the democratically elected political level and to carry out its policies to the fullest extent. The permanent secretary must ensure that the key tasks of planning, organising, execution, control and evaluation are carried out. However, there are numerous constraint permanent secretaries may face when discharging their duties. These include: limits on their latitude to hire, fire, promote and compensate employees; constraints on procurement; and inhabitations imposed by the highly public nature of their decisions*

- *As member of public service top management team: the permanent secretary shares a collective responsibility for the management of the public service as a whole (Larson and Coe, 1999:6-7).*

The New Zealand's State Services Commissioner spelled out the collective responsibility role of permanent secretaries in a letter to all chief executives (i.e. permanent secretaries):

*You have a key role in ensuring that the collective interest of government is not lost sight of, and indeed is enhanced by your department's actions. While departments properly and necessarily specialise in certain areas, it is important that they always consider the relationship of their own policy advice and programmes to their wider context of the Government's strategy. I would therefore expect you to work with central agencies and other chief executives, both in the public service and in the wider state sector, to ensure that the work of your department complements other state agencies...*

In Zimbabwe, permanent secretaries partake in the collective management of the public service through serving on special task forces investigating policy questions or matter of government organisation, heading corporate projects or joint committees.

### **3.1 Roles of the Minister**

According to Self (1972:149) politics is a "non-rational matrix", an area of change and indeterminacy. Ministers perform the following roles:

- Climate-setting and specific policies-these reflect general attitudes, opinions and ideologies of the governing political party. A general election is the supreme occasion for changing the political climate and the programmes and political images indicate the direction of intended change (Self 1972:153);
- Brokerage and planning- all political systems perform functions of interest articulation and aggregation. Aggregation includes methods of effecting arbitration or compromise between interests where those conflict (ibid: 155); and
- Bringing individual claims and grievances to the attention of the relevant public agency (ibid: 158).

When Ministers are discharging these duties, conflicts with top administrative heads are

inevitable, for instance, the political discrimination versus administrative impartiality. There is always some degree of conflict between the politicians' interest in helping his/her supporters and the administrators' concerns with impartial rules and procedures. The literature consulted has shown that in all modern democracies, the politician's capacity to secure special favours has dwindled as public services have been purged of patronage and nepotism and as the spheres of administrative uniformity and of professional discretion have been steadily expanded. The crudest form of political discrimination consist of the procurement of jobs, business concessions, welfare payments or other special services for supporters in exchange for their votes or for bribes.

Another dimension of conflict is the political control versus administrative delegation (Self 1972). Politicians are the ultimate controllers of administrative systems and one of their chief problems is to maintain and demonstrate the reality of their control, for example, holding the reins of office that the decisions of administrators can always be over-ruled or amended or establishing an atmosphere in which administrators will continually be aware of political guidelines and constraints (Self 1972:161).

The political concern or obsession, with issues of control conflicts with the administrator's interest in effective delegation of discretionary authority. Such delegation is wanted to increase the consistency and promptness of decision making. Administrators frequently confirm or tress that they welcome effective guidance on policy matters, what they dislike are the rigid and cautious procedures which reflect at roots the wish of politicians to keep control without knowing how or whether they propose to exercise their power.

The Minister, however, can control the discretion of administrative experts over the preparation of plans and programmes in several ways:

- To require the submission of several alternative plans between which politicians can choose;
- To develop a plan tentatively by successive stages with opportunity for political review at several points; and
- To test the plan produced by the internal experts against the views of external advisers (Self 1972:162).

All these methods have the advantage of broadening the range of policy analysis and establishing political guidelines for administrative investigations or for evasions or postponements of political decisions, with the result that administrative efforts are nullified or delayed.

### **3.2 Accountability System**

Accountability is "the obligation to answer to a person or group for the exercise of responsibilities conferred on him or her by that person or group" (Osbaldeston, 1999:5). According to Larson and Coe there are six essential and somewhat overlapping accountabilities:

- *The Prime Minister or President, who in most Commonwealth countries appoints permanent secretaries and confers specific powers on them;*
- *The minister of the department, for whom the permanent secretary provides advice and manages the department;*
- *The head of the civil service, who on behalf of the government, confers collective responsibilities on permanent secretaries;*
- *A management or Treasury board usually consisting of a small number of key minister supported by a powerful secretariat, which provides funds to carry out activities under agreed conditions*
- *A public service commission, responsible for the independence of the public service, which delegates certain staffing, financial and personnel management functions to the permanent secretaries under specified conditions; and*
- *Parliament, through one or more parliamentary committees, including the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) which is a body that holds permanent secretary accountable for the expenditure of public accounts (Larson and Coe, 1999: 15-16).*

### **3.3 Fiscal Control within Department**

The literature consulted has revealed that in many jurisdictions the permanent secretary is called the accounting officer (AO). The AO is the central figure in public administration in particular the financial administration wing. The AO signs the Appropriation Account and thereby makes himself/herself responsible for its correctness. The AO is the person whom Parliament and the Treasury regard as primarily responsible for the balance in the custody of the department and he must satisfy himself/herself before making or allowing payments of the correctness and propriety of a transaction.

It is the accounting officer who appears before the public accounts committee (PAC) to answer any criticisms of the expenditure of the department by the Comptroller and Auditor-General (C & AG). The practice whereby the permanent secretary is also the AO is regarded as axiomatic. It is the quintessence and spirit of the financial arrangements. The essence of this arrangement is to ensure that responsibility for advising on policy and responsibility for advising on the financial consequences of that policy go hand in, and are not divorced. Finance is integral with policy something which cannot be dissociated from policy. Finance is not to be relegated as something upsetting and inconvenient which one avoids until his/her policy has been settled. Finance must be regarded as an indispensable element in the contemplation of all policy questions from the outset and the permanent secretary, as the administrative head of the department, has a duty to make sure as a prerequisite of efficiency and the economical administration that financial considerations are taken into account at all stages by his/her department, both in framing and reaching decisions of policy and also in their execution.

In Zimbabwe, the stewardship of the governmental financial control is vested in the Office of the Permanent Secretary. As Accounting Officers of their ministries, permanent secretaries have responsibility for the overall administration of funds under in their ministries, however being accountable for all financial activities to the Treasury (Ministry of Finance), the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) and Parliament of Zimbabwe through the Public Accounts Committee (PAC).

### **3.4 Synthesis of the Responsibilities**

The division of responsibilities between the Minister and the Secretary of a Ministry is often misunderstood leading to a lot of trepidation and stepping on each other's toes. To bring it to the corporate world, the difference between the role of a Minister and that of the Secretary is akin to that of a Chairman and the Chief Executive Officer.

Just like the Chairman of a corporate entity, the minister's role is to give general policy direction to the Ministry and to provide general oversight to the ministry. His authority derives from membership in the cabinet with which he/she shares the policy and oversight responsibility. He/she chairs cabinet committees related to his portfolio. The minister is also the ministry's spokesperson and accountable to the legislature. He/she answers parliamentary questions related to his/her portfolio.

On the other hand, the secretary runs the Ministry on a day to day basis. Like the CEO of a company the secretary has direct responsibility for ensuring the effective and efficient delivery of the ministry's programmes and policies. The secretary is the ministry's accounting officer, which means that he/she has custodian over the ministry's financial resources. The secretary is also the chief staffing officer, meaning that he/she has responsibility for ensuring that the ministry's establishment is well maintained and that its human capital is properly managed, motivated and driven to perform. The secretary and not the Minister signs the ministry's performance contract. Thus, at the managerial level, the buck stops with the secretary. If the ministry performs poorly, it is the secretary who is directly responsible and also answers for any misuse or abuse of the ministry's resources. This is why the secretary is often regarded as the Head of the Ministry.

There are many instances when strong ministers try to usurp the secretary's administrative role and to interfere with managerial or administrative issues. The term political interference refers to such practice and has been often blamed for the poor performance of ministries and other statutory agencies falling under a ministry's jurisdiction. Involvement into the administrative affairs of parastatals or state enterprises brings ministerial interference two levels down, that is, past the secretary and past the board of directors of the state enterprise or parastatals. Often, such ministers will pay little heed to the ministry's policy and strategic issues, which are the big picture issues that they are supposed to be responsible for.

When a minister interferes in managerial issues, the whole process is opened up to political influence and the possibility of graft. Once this happens, laid down procedures may be toppled and a spoils approach may take hold. In Zimbabwe and other African countries, managers of parastatals and state enterprises have always complained of the erosion of

managerial discretion as a result of too much ministerial interference. This is particularly so in relation to procurement where ministerial interference often results in the toppling of statutory procedures. Corruption, nepotism and other forms of favouritism take hold when the minister gets involved in day to day managerial decisions.

All in all, the relationship between a minister and a permanent secretary is supposed to be symbiotic. One takes off where the other leaves. The Minister is supposed to provide policy direction and oversight while the secretary takes care of day to day management of the ministry. Much trepidation can be avoided if each respects roles.

#### **4. Global Experiences**

##### **4.1 South Africa**

The problems between the Ministers and Director-General are resolved through the Office of the Head of the Civil Service or Cabinet Secretary. The Schedule II of the Public Service Act 1994 provides the guidelines for Ministers, Members of the Executive Councils, and Director-General and heads of national departments. In South Africa, the permanent secretary is called the Directors-General.

##### **4.1.1 The role of Director-General**

Directors-General have a duty inter alia:

- To formulate and implement policies within their departments in line the government's overall policy goals and to make sure that these are speedily and cost-effectively implemented;
- To account to Parliament and be held to account for the financial management of the departments for which they are responsible;
- To provide Parliament with accurate and truthful information;
- As Accounting Officer, to account to Parliament and be held to account for the proper use of public resources in the conduct of the Department's business;
- To uphold the political impartiality of the public service;
- Not to act in any way which would conflict with the Code of Conduct for the Public Service
- Not to use public resources for purposes not voted for by Parliament or for party political purposes

Director-Generals are responsible to their ministers for ensuring that the minister's policies are developed and implemented efficiently and cost-effectively. Only ministers can make policy decisions because only ministers can be held to account to Parliament and to electorate for those decisions. If a director-general or any other public servant, having provided his or her best advice, remains so deeply opposed to the course of action the minister has decided to take that they cannot implement the decision willingly and to the best of their ability, they



must offer their resignation.

In South Africa, Ministers may appoint special advisers to provide them directly with political and expert advice on policy matters which it would be inappropriate to seek from the director-general and other public servants. However, special advisers are not a substitute for the professional advice of director-general and their departments.

Ministers are ultimately accountable to Parliament for the overall direction of their departments and they are charged, under Public Service legislation, for ensuring that the department is managed in accordance with the Public Service Regulations. Director-General, as Accounting Officer is personally responsible to Parliament for the propriety and regularity of the public finances of their Departments, for keeping proper accounts; for avoiding waste and extravagance; and for the effective and efficient use of resources.

If the Minister is contemplating a course of action which would breach the requirements of propriety, regularity and value for money, the director-general has a duty to set out in writing his or her objection to the proposal and the reasons for it, and a duty to inform the Auditor General, the President, or the Public Service Commission should the advice be over-ruled. This procedure ensures that the director-general, as accounting officer is not personally responsible for improper or irregular actions flowing from the minister's decision.

South Africa has generally adopted a combination of British, French and American systems both during and post apartheid. Kalema (2009: 551) states that although top public officials adhered to liberal principles, they were highly politicised. The post of Director General was held by National Political Party members only (Venter and Landsberg, 2011:85). In terms of policy, post apartheid South African government envisaged a public service that is "faithful to the Constitution, non-partisan and loyal to the government of the day" (Constitution of South Africa). The appointment of Director-Generals is a privilege of the President. This once caused disagreements between former President Thabo Mbeki and the then Minister of Home (Buthelezi, 2009:551). The latter did not agree to the Director-general appointed to his department. In South Africa, Director-Generals are political appointees who are expected to discharge neutral roles.

#### **4.2 The British Experience**

When Lord Grey took office as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in 1830, Sir John Barrow was requested to continue serving as secretary in his Admiralty department. This was the genesis of the principle that senior civil servants must stay in office on change of government and serve in a non-partisan manner. It was during Barrow's occupancy of the post that it was renamed "Permanent Secretary".

Permanent secretaries are the accounting officers for departments, meaning that they are answerable to Parliament for ensuring that the department spends money granted by Parliament appropriately. Permanent secretaries are frequently called for questioning by the Public Accounts Committee and select Committees of the House of Commons. The permanent secretary usually chairs a department's management board which consists of executive members and non-executive directors. The most senior civil servant who acts as de

facto head of the service is the Cabinet secretary.

According to Self (1972: 164) the permanent secretaries are both protected and restricted by a rigid code of conventions. All acts of the departments are done in the name of its minister who takes full responsibility before parliament and public for everything that is done or not done. The administrators do not appear before Parliament to answer questions of accusation, but brief their minister as to how he/she should answer. However, they do appear before the Parliamentary Select Committees, but the scope of these committees' inquiries is restricted and their proceedings do not attract much political attention.

The study of reports of the Parliamentary Select Committee in the United Kingdom on the relationship between the minister and permanent secretary have shown that:

- Permanent secretary should record in writing their dissent when their ministers are spending funds for purposes other than those for which they were voted for by Parliament;
- Officials must be willing to tell Ministers things the latter do not wish to hear;
- They must confront ministers with problem not just bring them solutions
- The official relationship with the Ministers is emphatically not one of passive obedience; and
- Ministers are expected to give more attention to the advice of the secretary.

Britain is governed by the creative tension between temporary ministers and permanent officials. The two serve different and complementary purposes in the political system and consequently are locked in a relationship of mutual dependence. In Britain the permanent secretary does not report to the minister. The permanent secretary, as accounting officer not the secretary of State is answerable to the House of Commons for the honest and efficient use of the department's resources and permanent secretaries must appear at intervals before the Public Accounts Committee to account for their stewardship-a nail-biting, nerve-wracking, upsetting and nasty experience.

Self (1972:164) observes that the British governmental system turns upon a curious kind of symbiotic partnership between two disparate groups. The partnership is naturally closet between the Minister himself and the permanent secretary of his department who is his senior official. A good administrator must show a peculiar mixture of independence and compliance. It is his duty "to speak out and the shut up" (ibid). This means that the permanent secretary must provide confidential policy advisor to Minister and discharge duties with outspokenness and integrity. The task of the permanent secretary is not much to be a political eunuch as a political chameleon. In Britain, the permanent secretary has to enter sympathetically into political aims whatever government is in power. The heart of his job "to have a common mind with his minister"(Hughes 1998). Thus the style of the ministerial-administrator partnership is pragmatic and flexible stressing responsiveness to collective leadership and to general political ideas or fashions while giving much less weight to specialised knowledge or experience (Self 1972).

### 4.3 The French System

The French system of top governmental management is marked by a more assertive and self-confident career bureaucracy. Here the political-administrative dividing line has been pushed upwards in favour with the career bureaucracy. The process started well before the Fifth Republic. Self (1972) notes that political posts themselves have been progressively bureaucratised before the advent of the Fifth Republic. A French Minister governs his department with the aid of a cabinet, that is, political friends and supporters. This provided in theory an instrument of political control and supervision which has never existed in Britain and was more akin to the American system (Ridley and Blondel, 1969).

Post the Fifth Republic, the bureaucratisation of once political post has not basically changed the character of cabinet ministers. Careers of officials, the members of a cabinet need political qualities of suppleness and versatility which are less necessary within the bureaux of a Ministry (Self 1972:167). The point is that in France some career officials have the opportunities to fill posts which are distinctly political in character. In France, political and administrative roles are more mixed and blurred than in Britain. This is what Self (1972:1269) calls 'marginal politicisation', that is, the ability of politicians to extract specific favours and concessions from the administration is definitely more marked. In France, civil servants are entitled to stand for Parliament and if elected, they keep their civil service rights in storage. Permanent secretaries are not trained to respond flexibly to political leadership, which is the British case; they will become somewhat directionless or ritualistic if the leadership is inadequate. However, up to this day, the capacity of political leadership to impose their will upon career officials is still the subject of much inconclusive debate.

## 5. Zimbabwe Case

### 5.1 Period before Inclusive Government

In Zimbabwe, the Minister is appointed by the President. For one to qualify and be eligible for the post of the Minister has to be a Member of Parliament. The Minister is elected by the public or civil society through his/her party. According to the Global Political Agreement (GPA), permanent secretaries are appointed by the President of the Republic. This makes them political appointees. The permanent secretary who is an administrative cadre who manages the financial and human resources of the Ministry is appointed by the president on the advice of the Public Service Commission (PSC). The Permanent Secretary is responsible to his/her Minister for the whole range of work of the Department and for its organisation. He/she is responsible for the advice given to the Minister on all matters, whether of policy or administration. He/she is responsible for seeing that financial questions have been taken into account in all stages in formulating policy: he/she must be satisfied that all projects submitted for approval are financially sound and that they are economically administered. The PSC is responsible for recommending the appointment of the permanent, setting up terms and conditions of employment and performance management. This process is designed to ensure that the appointment is not entirely political but professional or administratively while at the same time providing a policy advisory service to the Minister, the advice of which have political dimensions. The permanent secretary represents the state machinery as public

manager. Collectively, the elected and appointed are leaders and manners of the Ministry, concurrently representing the public and the civil service. The two have different backgrounds; levels of expertise and technical competence and may belong to different political and ideological temperament. The permanent secretary of a Ministry is its Chief Civil Servant. He/she is responsible to the Minister not only for the organisation and efficiency of the Ministry, but also for the advice given to the Minister. In Zimbabwe, the permanent secretary is invariably the Accounting Officer of the Ministry. The day-to-day work is done by the Finance Branch, whose chief officer is called the Accountant-General. The permanent secretary as the Accounting Officer has a personal responsibility for finance both to the Minister and to the Treasury and has to answer for the ministerial accounts and estimates to the Parliament through the Public Accounts Committee. The permanent secretary as the head of the administrative hierarchy has to wrestle with high and difficult matters of policy which continually arise in the course of administration. He/she is not and should not be a politician, but he/she should know enough about politics and politicians to be on his guard against blunders, indiscretions and injudiciousness, although it is the minister rather than the permanent secretary who is paid for his political expertise and understanding of the public.

The permanent secretary normatively, ideally and in principle is apolitical and neutral with a triangular relationship between the Minister, the Public Service Commission (PSC) and the Cabinet Secretary who is the Head of the Civil Service (Agere). The Minister is the principal policy maker and administers the policy the very same policy. Responding to the questionnaires, 83, 7 % of the permanent secretaries provided a range of tasks they perform as follows:

- Consult with and advise the Minister and staff
- Oversee the formulation of policy advice
- Write speeches for the minister
- Deliver speeches for the department or the minister
- Write memoranda to the cabinet
- Prepare the minister for question Time
- Ensure that ministerial initiatives are consistent with government priorities
- Represent the ministry to parliament, i.e Public Accounts Committee
- Participate in inter-ministerial committees
- Chair ministerial committees
- Deal with the media
- Exercise control over departmental units
- Oversee strategic and business planning for the ministry
- Recruit, train and promote key staff

- Motivate, educate and discipline staff.

In reality, the permanent secretary, participates in policy decision making processes which have a political base and preconceived notion (Agere, 1998:52). The performance of duties inevitably has inherent conflicts and contradictions with simultaneous elements of cooperation and collaboration. This affects the operations and performance of the Ministry. The political nature of permanent secretaries explains why a majority of them end up occupying political positions in government. Examples inter alia, current Minister of Justice, Patrick Chinamasa, who was once a permanent secretary in the same ministry; former Minister of Labour and Manpower Development, July Moyo who was once a permanent secretary in the same and the late Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education, Stanely Mudenge, was once the permanent secretary and eventually became the minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A close examination of the current Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) cabinet's ministers shows that a majority of them once occupied top administrative positions in government. One public administration scholar made a good observation when he said "public officials were only human beings who had ambitions and aspirations like all people and they actually viewed their jobs as platforms to achieve these aspirations (O'Toole, 2006:196).

The post-independence Zimbabwe was based on a policy of reconciliation of all classes, races and gender and the interests of other social groups in society. The policy alleviated the fear that the majority whites had when the blacks assumed political power. The Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, announcing the reconciliation policy immediately after the 1980 elections said:

*We will ensure that there is a place for everyone....a sense of security for both winners and losers....jobs of civil servants are guaranteed....let us forgive and forget (Mandaza, 1986:42).*

This policy underscores the conflicts and constraints experienced by the public service through the policy formulation and implementation.

The behaviour and attitudes of Ministers and permanent secretaries after independence, was based on mistrust and suspicion. Some ministers alleged that the permanent secretaries used to support the policies of the previous racist regime and resisted democracy with concomitant political and administrative which would result with the emergency of the new government. One respondent informed this study that "the distrust essentially emanated from race and ideology"<sup>1</sup>. The Principal Director in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister argued that "in some cases where the minister and permanent secretary were both blacks, ideological differences were predestined and suspicions came from the two positions"<sup>2</sup>.

Because this conflict was characterised by race and ideology, black ministers attempted to eliminate permanent secretaries from their positions even if they were not appointing authority. The confrontation was quite edgy, overwrought and apprehensive among the old permanent secretaries who were defending not only their jobs but pensions as well. This group saw any change as a menace, consequential in insecurity and instability. Agere (1997:86) cites the example of the Ministry of Transport where resistance was demonstrated

after the appointment of black minister. This prompted the minister to go ahead and appoint a black permanent secretary in the ministry. The rationale was categorically to avoid sabotage of government policies and programmes. This process has its own challenges, namely: firstly, in most cases the appointees did not have requisite skills; they did not have the experience to quickly fit into the vision of the new government (Mukonza, 2011). The study notes that public administration was the scarcest resource, in particular lack of leadership in the public service during the first early years of independence.

One key informant, government official, argued that the majority of Ministers had corrupt tendencies through abusing state property and influencing policy decisions to their advantage.<sup>3</sup> However, such practices used to be resisted by permanent secretaries. As a result of these inherent conflicts and contradictions between ministers and permanent secretaries, the then Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, at a 1984 colloquium of permanent secretaries warned:

*I am fully aware that in some cases you may be working under a Minister irrevocably given to procedural irregularity. You must resist such propensity for error. Nor must you act as a ministerial agent for preferential treatment based on regional, tribal or nepotistic considerations. Be not tainted with the sins of your minister, but do allow his virtues also to become your own. I hope, I am not giving you licence to turn my ministers into Yes Minister<sup>4</sup>*

The preceding statement from Head of State and Government unequivocally divulges the innate conflictual relationships between elected politicians and appointed technocrats. Public administration students must glean here that critical factors such as cooperation, alliance in the management of all resources of the Ministry are important if effective goal feat is to be a reality.

## **5.2 Government of National Unity (2009-2013) Era**

The relationship between the Minister and permanent secretary must also be conceptualised and examined within the Inclusive Government framework. The coalition government was formed in September 2009. It has not been easy terrain under this set up, with inter-party political tussles and infighting as well as continuing economic and social changes (Zhou and Zvoushe, 2012:219). The Ministers from the two formations of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) did not have experience in government business and faced many challenges working with experienced and seasoned permanent secretaries appointed from the previous government. The initial unilateral appointment of permanent secretaries by the President without prior consultation with Principals from other political parties as prescribed by the Global Political Agreement did not inspire a spirit of trust and cooperation necessary for good working relations between ministers and top public servants. One key informant informed this study that permanent secretaries in MDC led ministries were supposed to be appointed by the party in question in order to enhance working relations between ministers and permanent secretaries.<sup>5</sup> This would have culminated in improved execution of government policies and programmes. However, the study notes that assuring that permanent secretaries are apolitical and neutral administrative cadres would eliminate the struggle and unnecessary noise about their appointment. The mistrust and power struggles between some permanent secretaries and

ministers proved costly for the Government of National Unity which is faced by the challenges of transforming the economy, achieving political stability, spearheading constitutional reform and improving service delivery.

A classic example of a struggle between an MDC minister and his permanent secretary was exposed by the court case between a company bidding to supply electricity pre-paid meters, Solhart Zimbabwe and the Minister for Energy and Power Development. The Minister in his opposing affidavit wrote:

*I, as the Minister for Energy and Power Development set policy and directions and not the permanent secretary. He can only write concurring parastatals on my say-so, not on his initiative. He has no part except what I ask him to do..... (Newsday 20 March, 2011).*

The minister is wrong and missing the point in saying the permanent secretary cannot initiate anything. It's not like that. The permanent secretary by virtue of being an accounting officer and establishment officer is an initiator. The avowal by the minister shows the degree of consternation, vexation and disenchantment about his working relationship with the permanent secretary. The relationship is supposed to be symbiotic. Furthermore, the duties and responsibilities seem to be perplexed and confused or there is overstepping and intrusion on each other's terrain and jurisdiction. The minister appears to be at pains to elucidate his duties and authority. One wonders why this could not be addressed in the offices if the relationship between the minister and permanent secretary is melodious and convivial. One respondent observed that "the permanent secretary is an ex-combatant who sabotages the Minister's plans"<sup>6</sup>. This had strained the relations between the two. Another respondent said that the "personality of the minister is the problem. He bulldozes, does not listen to advice"<sup>7</sup>.

The study notes that maladministration usually occurs if there is deceitful communication between the two officials. The political pressures continually conflict with administrative norms of designing and operating programmes in accordance with objective criteria. In Britain, administrative lines are often drawn so as to minimise political influences of this kind or to channel them within a framework of established rules and conventions.

One respondent states that permanent secretaries have taken the advantage of the greenness, rawness and inexperience of MDC ministers in government business to obtain free supremacy in determining the tempo and implementation of government policies and decisions.<sup>8</sup> For example, in the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sports and Culture; and Ministry of Public Service where the permanent secretaries overturned decisions with regard to new school fees structure and implementation of the skills audit of civil servants respectively. In an interview, 27 August 2009, the Minister of Education, Arts, Sports and Culture alluded to a perception of two centres of power in his Ministry (him on hand and his secretary on the other); however, he ascribed this to the process of transition that Zimbabwe is currently experiencing. For effective public administration to be realised in Zimbabwe, permanent secretaries must act at all times with objectivity, honesty, integrity and impartiality.

The conflicts and impertinence between the Ministers and permanent secretaries in the GNU is palpable and unmistakable in the case of the Secretary of Information and Publicity, when

he overtly castigated the Prime Minister for signing a bilateral agreement with the South Korean Government (CISOMM, 2010:17). The permanent secretary argued that the Prime Minister had no jurisdiction and authority to preside over in such matters. Indeed, the secretary could have been right in line with GPA, but the matter could have been handled by the President of the country. It was against *modus operandi* and procedure for the secretary to openly criticise the Prime Minister. According to the GPA framework, the Prime Minister is the head of government business which means not only is the Prime Minister a superior to the secretary but also to the ministers in the inclusive government.<sup>9</sup>

It is imperative to take into consideration that conflicts between elected and appointed heads are not only confined to officials from different political parties in the inclusive government alone. The fall out between the then Minister of Information and Publicity, Jonathan Moyo and his secretary, George Charamba in 2005 is a case in point. In this case the permanent secretary boasted of his experience in government which spanned over two decades against the minister's less than five (5). "Moyo said Charamba had no right to criticise him so publicly for allegedly impairing the line between civil servants and politicians" (<http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/sky51.12>). The Minister wrote an angry letter to the Chief Permanent Secretary in the Office of the President and Cabinet demanding that disciplinary actions be taken against the permanent secretary. What is visible here is that the permanent secretaries are not accountable to ministers and ministers have no sanction powers, i.e. to discipline errant, delinquent and wayward permanent secretaries. Intimately related to this case is the one between the then Minister of Agriculture, Joseph Made and his permanent secretary, Pazvakavambwa, who had a hullabaloo as a result of disagreements on a pact that lead to the procure of substandard fertiliser from South Africa in 2006. Pazvakavambwa was ejected from the Ministry and his dismissal was announced by Chief Secretary to the Office of the President and Cabinet. However, Pazvakavambwa threatened to 'spill the beans'. This menace shows that during good times, there could be a lot of connivance, complicity and collusion between the minister and permanent secretary to strike deals for self aggrandisement at the expense of the taxpayers. Another classical example is between the permanent secretary and minister of Tourism and Hospitality. The permanent secretary told the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Environment and Tourism that Zimbabwe had lied to win the bid to co-host the United Nations world Tourism Organisation General assembly in August 2013. The Zimbabwe Tourism Authority chief executive officer during the interview said "I see this lie by the permanent secretary as political. He thinks by lying it can turn against the Minister"<sup>10</sup>. The Minister responded to the allegations of lying and mendacious by saying "Zimbabwe's bid to co-host the General assembly had been undertaken on a 'fair and transparent way'"<sup>11</sup>. This explicitly shows the animosity, hostility and tension between the elected and appointed government officials. The President also blasted the behaviour displayed by the permanent secretary when he emphatically said: "The team around the preparation of this event must desist from issuing statements of a policy nature that undermines the credibility and authenticity of this international event." <http://www.newsdezimbabwe.co.uk/2012/08>. From the preceding President's statement one can glean that the permanent secretary was not supposed to comment on policy related issues. In other words this is the domain, realm and terrain of the Minister. Indeed, for the



purpose of national security, public interest and common good, the permanent secretary slipped-up and blundered.<sup>12</sup>

The study gleans that the concept of neutrality of permanent secretary is a myth and farce. The Zimbabwean Prime Minister, Morgan Tsvangirai believes that it is possible to have politically apolitical top public servants. He once said:

*We do not believe that civil servants should be appointed on a partisan basis; so there will be no civil servant from MDC or ZANU-PF. Any civil servant who participates in partisan politics will have no place in our public service and I urge the Minister of public Service to ensure that the appropriate measures are put in place to that effect.*

The Prime Minister sees a public service which is neutral in its business. This is a reverie, delusion and unachievable in Zimbabwe because of the nature of the politics. In principle, Zimbabwe's recruitment process is based on meritocracy as reflected in Section 18 of the Public Service Act, 1995 which reads:

The Commission shall:

- a) Have regard to the merit principle, that is, the principle that preference should be given to the person who, in the commission's opinion, is the most efficient and suitable for appointment to the office, post or grade concerned; and
- b) Ensure that there is no discrimination on the ground of race, tribe, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed, gender or physical disability.

In Zimbabwe, the problems between the permanent secretary and Minister are compounded by obscure reporting arrangements. While the permanent secretary interacts and gives advice to his/her responsible minister, he/she reports directly to the Chief Cabinet Secretary to the Office of the President and Cabinet through the Public Service Commission (PSC). He/she may be summoned to appear before the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and can also be directed by Treasurer (Ministry of Finance) to issue departmental instructions to hi/her officers. The relationship between the Minister and the civil servants should be that of colleagues working together in a team, cooperative partners seeking to advance the public interest and the efficiency of the Ministry. The Minister should not be an isolated autocrat, giving orders without hearing or considering arguments for alternative courses of action. The permanent secretary must not treat the minister as mere a cipher.<sup>13</sup> This however can only be avoided if the partnership between the two is alive and virile, rival ideas and opinions are fairly considered and the relationship should be one of mutual respect: understanding, of course, that the Minister's decision is final and must be faithfully, loyally and attentively carried out. To dishearten and depress honest official advice is both silly and destructive. Furthermore, advisers who are mere 'Yes-men' playing up to the Minister in the hope of advancement are just as perilous, death-defying as are stubborn and obstreperous 'No-men'. Both types are bad.

In comparative viewpoints, attitudinal and behavioural problems also exist between Ministers and permanent secretaries. In the process of implementing the administration reforms in the

United Kingdom for example, Ministers as a group developed certain attitudes towards permanent secretaries and the opposite is also true. Sir Kenneth Stowe, a former permanent secretary to three Prime Ministers of the UK said: “It will be lost if Ministers see officials as ‘gofers’ and if officials see Ministers as only uncritical dogmatics” (Stowe, 1994). This study observed that the tension between permanent secretaries and transient ministers in Zimbabwe is embedded in different ideological and economic paradigms. This scenario is not only exclusive to Zimbabwe. The Institute of Public Research in the United Kingdom states that the working relationship between elected Ministers and officials in the UK was for a long time on object of concern and suspicion to the opposition Labour Party. It further points to the complaint that existed before Thatcher’s government that the civil service had policy goals of its own and that as a result, “would-be” radical governments found themselves “mixed in the same old goggy centre right consensus” (Plowden, 1995). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, Ministers argue that since they are ultimately accountable to Parliament, they are leaders, while the permanent secretaries say they have the powers granted by the constitution and Acts of Parliament to control all financial, human and material resources of the Ministry and to that extent they are administrators and managers. Responding to the questionnaires, 78 % of the permanent secretaries argue that during the Inclusive Government period, Ministers peddle extensively in the administration of the Ministries especially in the appointments of staff, use of vehicles and above all, unnecessary claims for travel and subsistence allowances even in situations where there was no government business to be performed other than self interest. However, these problems radiate from the demarcation of roles between the Ministers and permanent secretaries which is very absorbent, leaky and fluid. In Zimbabwe, the demarcation is noticeable in circulars which are issued from time to time by the Cabinet office not procedures. In other jurisdictions, like the United Kingdom, boundaries are officially written, demarcating the powers of both, there are still problems in the relationships between the two. The ministers’ guidelines are stated in the memorandum on the “questions of Procedures”, for the permanent secretaries, they are stated in the “Duties and Responsibilities of Civil Servants in the Relations to Ministers”. These demarcation problems can only addressed through mutual, reciprocated respect between the elected and appointed officials. However, ministers complain that “the quality of policy advice we get from permanent secretaries is extremely poor”<sup>13</sup>.

Because of the nature of politics in Zimbabwe, sycophants are ubiquitous in the forms of both Ministers and permanent secretaries. Ministers tend to extol and eulogize the President gratuitously and unnecessarily and to inform him that all is well when things are not well all. This study is of the view that a sycophant, toady and flatterer must not be given a position of trust and responsibility for he/she tends to misrepresent the facts and does not objectively contribute to problem analysis and solutions. Such behaviour compromises the quintessence and epitome of public administration in Zimbabwe. Public administration is carried out by the public service, hence, the relevance of the permanent secretary and minister in both public policy formulation and implementation. The two need both *esprit de corps* and *esprit de service* for efficient government business. This will provide amalgamation of diverse contributions and viewpoints. Scopes of synthesis are the institutional and the intellectual (Self 1972). The institutional structure of the government influences the kinds of intellectual

contribution which are sought and are available. The study notes that bureaupathology is the major problem constraining the relations between the ministers and permanent secretaries. Some of the ministers especially from the MDC formations have inadequate qualifications and experience executive or administration for running a government effectively.

## 6. Conclusions

Given conflicts observed between ministers and top public officials in the Government of National Unity, the appointment of permanent secretaries must be done with the input of ministers concerned. This will foster a spirit of truth, esprit de corps and unity of purpose. There is absolute need to have closest intellectual rapprochement between minister and administration. The biggest question which begs an answer is: who should be held accountable for the many scandals, irregularities, mismanagement and over-spending that have characterised some ministries and departments over the years? The answer is both the minister and permanent secretary. This arrangement is valid because government ministries have more than one head, namely, the elected minister who introduces policy and the permanent secretary, who is the administrative and executive head. In the end, the task is up to the Minister to make the system function properly. He or she must provide a strong policy leadership and inject the party's outlook and values into departmental decisions. The minister has the most to lose. A permanent secretary can sit and wait for cabinet reshuffle or the next general elections; however; the Minister has no such sumptuousness and opulence. The minister has to build bridges rather than burning them and communicate instead of keeping malice. If the policy of a Ministry is muddled, dithering, fickle and ineffective, it is, after all, the responsibility of the Minister; it is quite as likely to be his fault as that of his permanent secretary. In some departments, the relationships between the minister and permanent secretary are inexplicable, mysterious and inscrutability. Above all, the separating line between policy and administration is always an artificial and elusive one, drawn for institutional convenience. The vastness of administrative operations is done in political murkiness.

Effective working relationship can only be achieved where there are high levels of trust and mutual respect so that both are addressing the same challenges, sharing difficulties and concerns and are seeking the same positive outcomes. This is crucial for the effective leadership of government. Mistrust between ministers and officials mirrors a failure of leadership. It obliterates openness; confidence and creatively, dent mutual respect and divides leadership. This promotes ambience of mistrust, lack of respect and low morale throughout the organisation they are seeking to lead.

## 7. Recommendations

- Elucidation of the roles and responsibilities: although the Ministers and Permanent Secretaries have dissimilar backgrounds, responsibilities and accountabilities must find a way to work mutually in order to implement the government's agenda. A clumsy, inept and insensitive Minister can easily make the Ministry disconsolate and unenthusiastic, whereas what he/she should seek to do is to make people live-minded, happy in working for him/her. A good Minister as well as the good permanent

secretary can do much to spread esprit de corps among the staff and that desirable feeling of pride in working for the Ministry.

- Speaking truth to power: in order for permanent secretaries to deliver non-partisan policy advice to their Ministers. To do this permanent secretary should possess the following qualities resilience, strength of character and self-confidence. This is so because if the Minister looks bad, it reflects badly also on the permanent secretary. When the culpability comes, the permanent secretary will not be anonymous and spared. Furthermore, it is the permanent secretary who will be called before the Public Accounts Committee, hence it is up the permanent secretary to ‘speak truth to power’ about financial issues. With responsibility comes accountability.
- Proper induction training for Ministers and Permanent Secretaries, in order to cultivate mutual respect for and appreciation of the political and administrative worlds. The Government should guarantee that all new ministers receive induction training within four months of taking up the role. The induction programme must cover the structure and work of the relevant department, the scope and meaning of the codes of Conduct to which Ministers are subject, the implications of their status, the nature of their accountability to cabinet, the role of permanent secretary in managing the work and reputation of the department as a whole and where to seek advice and support on propriety issues. This ensures a shared understanding of what is expected and appropriate behaviour.
- Management Style: Ministers and Permanent Secretaries should espouse an open and participative management style that ensures that every public servant is encouraged to perform to the best of their ability. Ministers and administrators should learn to develop effective interpersonal skills, communication skills, attitudinal change and tolerance of each other’s views.
- Political neutrality: the minister must not engross personally in staff appointments.

## Endnotes

1. Interview with an academic at the University of Zimbabwe
2. Interview with the official from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
3. Interview with the Permanent Secretary
4. The then Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, quoted by Agere, S. e.d (1998) Zimbabwe Post Independence Public Administration: Management, Policy Issues and Constraints. CODERESRIA Book Series, Dakar, Senegal.
5. Interview with an academic at the University of Zimbabwe
6. Interview with a government official
7. Interview with the Principal Director in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

8. Interview with respondent
9. Interview with an academic at the University of Zimbabwe
10. Interview with Zimbabwe Tourism Authority official
11. Interview with the Minister of Tourism and Hospitality
12. Interview with a Member of Parliament
13. Interview with a Minister
14. Interview with a Minister.

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