

Nogueira, Roberto Passos; Paranaguá de Santana, José

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## Human resource management and public sector reforms: Trends and origins of a new approach

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# 115

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

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## **HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORMS: TRENDS AND ORIGINS OF A NEW APPROACH**

**Roberto Passos Nogueira  
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Brasília, January 2015

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Roberto Passos Nogueira<sup>2</sup>  
José Paranaguá de Santana<sup>3</sup>

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2. Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada – Ipea, Diretoria de Estudos Sociais, E-mail: <nogueira@ipea.gov.br>.

3. Pan-American Health Organization – Brasília, E-mail: <paranagua@bra.ops-oms.org>.

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## SINOPSE

Este trabalho procura mostrar que as reformas do setor público, nos anos 1980 e 1990, subestimaram a importância da gestão de recursos humanos, na medida em que os reformistas enfatizavam a necessidade de reduzir o tamanho do aparato de Estado; e travavam uma luta contra a burocracia estatal. A análise mostra que após duas décadas de experimentos reformistas medidas de correção estão sendo tomadas em vários países para restaurar a relevância da gestão de recursos humanos como uma política pública. Os governos perderam uma grande parte de sua habilidade de regular e de governar em razão dos efeitos combinados do *downsizing* e da negligência com a função de recursos humanos. Esforçam-se, agora, para corrigir esse erro de condução, e emerge uma nova tendência a colocar as questões de recursos numa posição mais estratégica, e, para isso faz-se necessário buscar um equilíbrio entre velhas e novas idéias. Com base no estudo clássico de Weber, sobre o papel da burocracia, os autores entendem que tal equilíbrio pode ser encontrado por meio da gestão de recursos humanos, desde que essa seja aplicada como uma função política capaz de mediar as prerrogativas da burocracia e os direitos dos cidadãos.

## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to show that public sector reforms, in the 1980s and 1990s, underemphasized the importance of human resource management, because, a) the reformers made strong emphasis on the need to reduce the size of the government apparatus; and, b) because they made war on state bureaucracy. The analysis shows that after two decades of reformist experiments, measures of correction are being taken in several countries to restore the importance of human resource management as public policy. But, in many places governments have lost their ability to regulate and govern owing to the combined effect of downsizing and underestimation of the human resource planning function. Governments are now endeavoring to rectify that strategic error, and a trend is emerging toward the upgrading of human resource management processes, which requires that some balance be sought between old and new ideas. Based on the classical study by Weber on bureaucracy, the authors understand that such balance could be found through human resource management if it is applied as a political function mediating between bureaucratic prerogatives and citizens' rights.





# 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper is presented as a contribution to a new approach to human resource management that will take account of developments in public sector reform in the 1980s and 1990s. The intent is to show that those reforms, especially in their opening stages, underemphasized the importance of human resource management for two essential reasons. First, because of the reformers' strong emphasis on the need to reduce the size of the government apparatus, and second because they made war on bureaucracy one of the principal objectives of the new style of public administration they advocated. Hence, their approach to human resource management was essentially a negative one and paid no attention to the legal framework that was essential to it, or to its political complexity.

We begin with Weber's classical analysis (1946) of bureaucracy in modern societies. Despite an effort in the 1990s by many sociologists and economists (Giddens 1994, Hutton 1997, Rosanvallon 1998, Sousa Santos 1996) to examine the role of government to help fill the ideological void left by the reformers of the New Right in the tenets of social democracy, these important writers are typically more concerned with the future of employment, working conditions, and social protection in modern society than with what is usually understood as human resources. This makes what Weber wrote at the beginning of the 20th century still relevant today. An additional reason for starting with his analysis is that many reformers have used him to buttress their criticism and even to turn the elimination of bureaucracy into a kind of slogan (Osborne and Plastrik 1998). The reformers (Pereira 1998) argue that Weber's description of bureaucracy is associated with an outdated administrative style that is obsessed with process control, proposing its replacement with a management style typical of private enterprise, focused on results and cost/benefit ratios, which often requires that actions be carried out not directly but by private firms or nongovernmental entities contracted for the purpose.

This is a false contrast that has been quite useful to the rhetoric of the reformers but rests on inadequate theoretical foundations. Weber himself put most felicitously the postulate that there is no modern society without a bureaucracy and without an ongoing effort at political mediation between the workings of the bureaucracy and the aims of equity, social change, and democratic participation. This means that, to make public services truly effective and thereby attain the aim of balance between bureaucratic prerogatives and citizens' rights, human resource management must be politicized, along with other measures of social control by the state to be taken outside the public agencies.

The interpretation proposed here is that human resource management is a political function for regulation within and outside the public agencies, which mediates between a bureaucracy and the ethical and political aims embodied in its institutional mission. It is understood that this analysis requires a change in the theoretical underpinnings that give requisite weight to the principles of justice, which must govern the functioning of public institutions in a democratic society, and this change must begin with an understanding of the social significance of a bureaucracy.

The interpretation of human resource management as a political regulatory function is a proposal to help counterbalance the excesses of overemphasis on economic aspects that typified the reforms in their early years. The present discussion must not disregard the current relevance of the principle of merit, which as an expression of equal opportunity governs access to public posts and serves as the foundation for the prerogatives of the bureaucracy. Meanwhile, more recent and complex notions of distributive justice are modifying the context of that principle, in which it becomes a relative value. Moreover, democratic policy has imposed heavy constraints on the power of the bureaucracy in the name of other citizens' rights, and the initiatives for public sector reform have only encouraged the radicalization of those views in advocating the urgency of shifting the focus of public services to the citizen/consumer.

The analysis that follows shows that, 20 years after the establishment of the pioneering and highly influential framework in the United Kingdom, reformist experiments began a course correction that has restored the importance of human resource management as public policy. That trend must be interpreted as part of the reaction to the ideology of "the less government, the better," which impelled the reforms of the 1980s and today is the target of criticism from the multilateral cooperation agencies. The view in the present paper is that in many places government has lost the ability to regulate and govern owing to the combined effect of downsizing and underestimation of the human resource planning function. Governments are now endeavoring to rectify that strategic error, and a trend is emerging toward the upgrading of human resource management processes, which requires that some balance be sought between old and new ideas.

## 2 THE PRESENT CONTEXT FOR CRITICISM OF THE REFORMS

It is known that the proposals for reform of the public sector were components of the liberal economic reforms adopted in countless countries in the 1980s and 1990s. The novelty here is that fiscal adjustment policies, which were the backbone of those reforms, have recently acquired new critics in addition to those on the left. Eminent figures associated with United Nations cooperation agencies and the international development banks have been drawing attention to the unfavorable impact of those reforms on income distribution and on the overall indices of well-being in the developing countries. Also emphasized has been the impropriety of continued rigid application of the basic principles of those policies in a situation that calls for more effective action by the institutional structures of government. In 1998, when he was Vice President of the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz opened the door to that trend toward critical review when he stated that the principal aims of economic reform in the "Washington consensus" are insufficient to trigger the growth of national economies. In his view, measures to open up markets and stabilize prices, directed strictly at *making markets work properly*, fail to provide for important social aims such as equitable and democratic development (Stiglitz 1998).

A similar view is expressed by José Antonio Ocampo, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), who recognizes, however, that in

the last two decades the countries of Latin America have been extraordinarily successful in their policies for managing their public deficits and debts, which has brought their economies more into line with international guidelines. He underscores, however, that in face of the imperative of adjusting the public accounts, equity fell by the wayside. In his view, the strength or weakness of public finances depends on the capacity of a country to enter into a “fiscal pact” that legitimizes government action, so that priority aims can be set for public expenditure that will contribute to stable development. Experience with economic reforms has shown that many countries, after promoting privatization processes, have found themselves unable to make the investments needed to implement subsequent measures such as a) efficient regulation of new markets, b) the development of human capital, c) the provision of infrastructure services, and d), in consequence, wide distribution of the fruits of progress (Ocampo 1999).

Kliksberg (2000) notes that the emergence of these problems has revived discussion of the role of government in stimulating socioeconomic development. In the 1980s government was seen as a hindrance to the thriving of markets and was to be dismantled and reduced to the essential minimum. But this interpretation arose to supplant the view that government action was sufficient to promote development. These two opposing interpretations produced wild swings in opposite directions. It should now be recognized that, when deprived of government regulatory machinery, the market gives rise to enormous social disequilibria. Elsewhere, he warns that the time has come to restore the issue of social inequity at the heart of the development effort (Kliksberg 1999).

Enrique Iglesias, President of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), argues that, in the face of that social gap, which was partly widened or reinforced by the wave of reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, the role of government needs to be reconsidered in terms that go beyond the two extremes of the debate: government as the big engine of development and the minimal or near-minimal government implied in those reforms. He says the old fundamentals must be left behind and new theoretical references devised for reflecting on the role and functions of government as a precondition for its reinvention. One preconception that became deeply rooted and inspired many reformers led to a drastic downsizing of government and of its ability to intervene in economic and social affairs through such measures as privatization, deregulation, decentralization and withdrawal from whole sectors of activity owing to the scarcity of fiscal resources (Iglesias 2000).

When the reforms began it was thought that the smaller the government, the better, whereas the conclusion to be drawn from the accumulated experience is that **better the government, the better**. Iglesias cited the case of the United States, where a preoccupation with downsizing is giving way to another, in the face of mounting demands that government act intelligently to regulate markets and provide essential services, and there is an undersupply of talent in government institutions and an acknowledged shortage of public servants.

### 3 THE SHRINKING SUPPLY OF PUBLIC SERVANTS

The rule that the smaller the government, the better, which governed the reforms of the public sector, may be said to have been based on two assumptions, one financial and the other administrative. On the financial side the reforms started from the diagnosis that the government apparatus was bloated with personnel who cost much and did little. On the administrative side they thought that the bureaucratic style of public administration, favored by the distinctive culture of its personnel, should be replaced by a management style similar to that of private enterprise.

These two assumptions did not always lead to the adoption of the same kinds of measures. There was considerable variation among countries in the mix of internal contracting (between government entities), outsourcing (to private entities), outright privatization, and simple nonreplacement of terminating staff members (with and without early retirement incentives). But every reform led in one way or another to the same result: a reduction in the supply of civil servants.

Consider the changes in personnel strength in some developed countries as conveyed by data of the OECD. In the United States, under a downsizing program passed by Congress, between 1993 and 1998 the personnel of the federal agencies was reduced by no less than 355,500 persons, or 16.2%. In Australia the federal work force shrank from 177,742 in 1987 to 121,262 in 1998. In the United Kingdom the reduction came to 34,000, or 34% of the national civil service in 1979. In Sweden, despite the predominance of social-democratic policies, no less than 200,000 posts in the central government have been abolished since 1990.

The table that follows illustrates the changes in the strength of the civil service in seven OECD countries between 1985 and 1998. It is seen that only Netherlands did not reduce its work force of civil servants in that period.

TABLE 1  
Number of Public Servants over Time in Seven OECD Countries

Year	Canada	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Spain	United States
1985	399176	213000	2460200	858000	521933	900100	2843298
1990	406366	146948	2489600	873000	512228	893492	3008323
1998	330981	124943	2270100	516000	605996	829875	2782888

Source: OECD 2002.

There are no data for a group of Latin American countries, but the case of Brazil may be taken as an example: the work force of the Brazilian federal public sector shrank from 986,034 civil servants in 1991 to 830,180 in 1998, for a gross reduction of 15.8%.

In their beginnings public sector reforms were described by the reformers as an attack on what they regarded as the root evils of public service: privilege, corporatism and incompetence. One of the reformist slogans adopted by Margaret Thatcher's government was "deprivilege the civil service!" In many places the reformers publicized their agendas by using the word "bureaucracy" in a pejorative sense and identifying it with a) civil servants collectively, and b) a mode of administration based

on rigid standards and hierarchies that engendered an obsession with formal control of administrative processes. The two books by David Osborne et al. that have deeply influenced public opinion in the United States and helped the political leadership to devise the “business” model for civil service reform bear the suggestive titles *Reinventing Government* and *Banishing Bureaucracy*. They imply that radical reform of government by creative leaders requires elimination of the bureaucracy or a check on its power.

While the reforms in progress in such countries as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States all emphasize the managerial style of administration, they exhibit important differences in human resource aspects, with nuances that are not easy to see. Hence, it is necessary to consider how the cultural, political, economic, and social peculiarities of each country operate to shape the reform of its public sector.

#### **4 SIGNIFICANCE OF BUREAUCRACY: THE ERROR OF THE CIVIL SERVICE REFORMERS**

Paraphrasing Enrique Iglesias, the error of the reformers lay in thinking that the smallest bureaucracy was the best, whereas sociology actually shows that the best bureaucracy is the best. They distorted Weber’s thinking to buttress their ideas of flexibility in government action. Weber’s view (and, of course, the view taken in this paper) was that bureaucracy is indispensable in any modern society because its existence is a necessity for distributive justice. It must be emphasized, however, that the quality of a bureaucracy can vary as widely as the functions it performs.

According to Weber, a bureaucracy is an expression of the rationality of modern capitalism, which imposes general rules of control on the functioning of the organizations of society, be they private enterprises or government agencies. But it is above all an instrument for dispensing justice by virtue of its very impersonality, because it generates equality of opportunity or, more precisely, because by administering tests it gives all persons of talent a shot at a position or office. A bureaucracy does away with the patronage found in earlier societies, where appointments were made at the whim of the sovereign, his protégés, and the powerful in general.

The authority of bureaucrats derives from legal mechanisms that confer on them dominion over specific matters and/or territorial jurisdictions and is usually apportioned along hierarchical lines, in the sense that the higher the post or office, the wider the compass of the functions and hence, the greater the decision-making power. A public bureaucracy is governed by the principle of legality, under which only that which is expressly permitted by law and administrative regulations may be done. The very structure of a bureaucracy is determined by formal description because of the need to specify the qualifications required of the incumbent of each position and the duties attached to that position. A private bureaucracy is less formal in this respect, but it is known that the positions are also subject to qualification requirements and are associated with specific duties. In today’s societies selection tests

in both the public and private sector are increasingly guided by criteria of justice, including greater opportunities for minorities and the disabled.

These are perhaps the salient features of a bureaucracy, and it must be emphasized that the degree of centralism, formalism, and coverage of the hierarchies in which it is organized depends on the historical conditions of the particular case. In a meticulous study of the bureaucracy in a number of French institutions, Crozier (1981) found evidence that the notorious bureaucratic rigidity is less a preferred management style of the functionaries and more a personal strategy for defense against abuses of power by supervisors, and it also preserves a space for freedom of action around the worker without which life in those organizations would be unbearable. The idea that a bureaucracy acts everywhere in a coldly impersonal manner because it is required to by the rules that govern it is no more than a myth, for it ignores the adaptability and cultural evolution inherent in any social operating scheme.

Moreover, there is the reductionist view that a bureaucracy is only a way of organizing administration, which makes it one option among others available to the authorities of the public sector. In any sector of social activity, a bureaucracy embodies a basic solution for justice in a democratic society, and its structure is regulated by principles consistent with the general idea of equality: equal opportunity of access to positions and offices. This access is an important factor for inequalities of power, status, and property among members of society and so is customarily regulated by criteria of justice not only in the philosophical sense of the term, but in the positive sense that the applicable laws are to be obeyed, which in many countries is made a constitutional matter. The philosophers who have concerned themselves with establishing foundations for the criteria of justice in the modern world see that those differences cannot be taken as a matter of greater or lesser productivity of collective work.

It was John Rawls, the most eminent philosopher of justice, who with the well-known “difference principle” sought an appropriate solution to this problem in the doctrine of political liberalism.

*Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to positions and offices open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society (Rawls 1993).*

Under this principle it is understood that the differences engendered among members of society by the apportionment of positions and offices are fair when access to them is governed by procedures that ensure wide public knowledge, impartiality, and probity in the selection process, uniformity of the tests administered, etc. They are also fair when they confer in different ways certain prerogatives or advantages on the least privileged in the society. In many democratic countries there are special provisions favoring access to positions and offices for women, ethnic minorities, the mentally and physically disabled, carriers of AIDS, and other special population groups. These aims of distributive justice and their general criteria are usually enshrined in law, though the actual procedures for their implementation may be left to the discretion of those in charge. This is a basic feature of organizations in all

democratic societies, and may be said to produce a rationality of the rules of bureaucracy that administrators may not circumvent or bend unless they are prepared to answer to the civil and labor courts.

Even in the United States, which is viewed as the birthplace of labor flexibility, the body of provisions on human resource management is of enormous legal complexity. Since the New Deal in the 1930s, an extensive body of laws has been enacted to impose principles of equal opportunity in hiring, promotion, leave, working conditions, etc., prominent among which are the directives for affirmative action engendered by the civil rights movement of the 1960s. There are so many rules in force that, according to Walzer (1983) a position has become very similar to an office. Caruth and Handlogten (1997), the authors of an excellent manual on human resource management for enterprises, draw attention to this point:

*Virtually every phase of staffing - from recruitment to selection, from compensation to termination, and from performance appraisal to promotion - is covered in some fashion by federal legislation, executive orders, or federal administrative regulations. In addition state and local laws often impact staffing. And increasingly, common law provisions are applied to staffing issues.*

The intent of social regulation of labor in the public and private sectors is partly to preserve the sense of meritocratic justice: those with the best personal qualities must be rewarded with the best positions and the highest compensation. But the social gains for citizens expressed in these laws often have a side that makes the importance of meritocracy relative because, as emphasized above, application of the difference principle assures appropriate social compensation to those who are disadvantaged under fair employment practices.

Hence, the meritocracy principle--that is, of merit based on personal qualifications - so dear to the old bureaucracies, has been revamped and its importance relativized to adjust it to new notions of equity. Thus, an individual who obtains a lower score than another in a competitive examination may be appointed to the vacancy in contention if he is a member of a minority that is underrepresented on the staff relative to the total population.

In modern societies the validity of formal qualification as defined by tests or degrees is generally limited to a specified period of time, and there are mechanisms for reappraisal and revalidation that run counter to the old assumption that a degree (professional or other) is a warrant of knowledge and ability forever. As Walzer (1983) observes, meritocracy is an institution restricted to the idea of *simple equity*. In advanced democratic societies its importance has been recontextualized in a notion of *complex equity*--that is, it has to be offset and enriched by other criteria of justice so that it will not give rise to unfair privilege.

Indeed, the aforementioned mechanisms for regulation of the apportionment of positions and offices, which apply the Rawlsian difference principle, marked a decisive step in the evolution not only of the concept of meritocracy but in that of bureaucracy itself. This is a strong argument for the proposition that bureaucracy is culturally mutable and can evolve and be transformed at the same pace as public policy for the promotion of fairness. This is a fact of life in the world of



organizations, both public and private, and it is clear that those criteria of fairness cannot be attacked on behalf of an abstract flexibility with slogans that only conceal ignorance of the general rules that govern the organization of society.

In considering the issue of bureaucracy with an eye sensitive to what it represents as culture and as a manifestation of modern justice, we may conclude that its characteristics change, but are not abolished. Similarly, many of its administrative features and processes persist even in the most advanced enterprises. To be sure, every and any organization, whether civilian or military, follows rules such as these:

- a) more or less uniform internal procedures;
- b) a hierarchical chain of command;
- c) process control;
- d) filed records of communications, initiatives and results.

Even when a private enterprise has been subjected to methods of organizational flexibility, such as quality management or reengineering, its bureaucracy persists in another form, just as it does in the *reinvented* public sector. Bureaucracy comes in an enormous number of administrative styles, hence there are bureaucracies and bureaucracies.

But reformers have insisted that bureaucracy is only one specific style of administration and has been rendered obsolete by an evolving capitalism. For example, Osborne and Plastrik (1998) assert that bureaucracy was right for a certain time in the past, when the tasks to be performed by the public sector were relatively simple and the economic environment was stable. In their view, in an age of gigantic and abrupt changes, when the ability to compete on the market is based on intensive use of information media and knowledge management, bureaucratic institutions simply break down. The rhetoric of reform promises liberation of an entrepreneurial spirit languishing in the toils of the bureaucratic style of administration, and invokes the benefits that will accrue to all, to the body social (the citizen-consumers) and to the civil servants themselves:

*Today's environment demands institutions that are extremely flexible and adaptable. It demands institutions that deliver high-quality goods and services, squeezing ever more bang out of every buck. It demands institutions that are responsive to their customers, offering choices of nonstandardized services; that lead by persuasion and incentives rather than commands; that give their employees a sense of meaning and control, even ownership. It demands institutions that **empower** citizens rather than simply **servi**ng them.*

However, a critical reading of this paragraph reveals a clear exaggeration of propagandistic intent. Consider, for example, the issue of uniformity vs. diversity. Classical bureaucracy obviously standardizes. But it is known that quality management also favors uniformity just as much as diversity so long as the customer is happy. Some successful enterprises rely on a very limited line of standardized products - the most famous example is the McDonalds chain of restaurants. Others, such as the Swatch enterprise, a Swiss manufacturer of novelty watches, strives for the greatest possible variety in its product line. On the other hand, consider the matter of

“empowerment” vs. “service” in public institutions. It is obvious that a father expects a public school to empower his child educationally by developing in that child a real capacity to learn and not merely to conduct classes so that the child can exercise its memory or learn how to do this or that. However, if his child has an accident, what he most certainly wants is well-defined, high-quality first-aid *service*, and not empowerment.

It is concluded from all this that there is no “modern” way to administer private enterprises as against an “obsolete” way of administering the public sector. There are, simply, many ways of administering depending on the kind of service and the primary purposes (that is, the mission) of each organization. Differences between public and private organizations arise more out of how they define and redefine their mission and on how they control the prerogatives intrinsic to any bureaucracy, so that that mission can be accomplished.

## **5 HUMAN RESOURCES AS A POLITICAL REGULATORY FUNCTION**

An organization’s bureaucracy may perform indifferently or incompetently relative to its mission, and this is the essential risk as much in the public as in the private sector. As Weber has already noted, the interests of the professionals in the bureaucracy frequently coalesce into standing mechanisms for the protection of their own careers, which contributes to their total alienation from the organizational mission.

The question then shifts to another field, that of determining how to restrict the powers of the bureaucracy so as to better serve the interests of the other members of society. Those who expect good performance from a bureaucracy include a) the directors, owners and shareholders, b) the customers, and c) the citizens. Every democratic government has to impose limits on the power of the bureaucracy so that other purposes of fairness, especially those linked to social welfare, may be served, and also for attainment of the aims of direct democracy, which are met by citizen participation in the control of what government does and how it does it. It is no accident that two of the words most frequently used by reformers in their antibureaucratic drive have been “accountability” and “openness.”

As has been said, the functionaries of a bureaucracy have to be appointed as a result of one of the conditions for fairness – the openness of the organizations of democratic society that gives equitable opportunity of access to their posts and offices. Conversely, society must make an effort to prevent the privileges of their positions from being exercised against other legitimate public and private interests. This control is necessary because in a modern society the bureaucracy wields its power under an express arrangement of social fairness and not by virtue of privileges based on inheritance, nobility or personal charisma. It is accomplished in part through legal instruments that refer to the accountability and openness of the organizations. However, it is only effective when exercised through a political process that springs from the movements and entities of civil society. One of the most important contributions of reformers has been their theoretically consistent

description of the instruments of accountability needed so that the public agencies will function for the benefit of the citizen/consumer and be open to direct control by the representatives of the entities of civil society (Pereira and Cunnill 1999).

There is a new approach in which human resource management is described as a component of the effort to mediate between the inevitably bureaucratic character of organizations and the missions they must accomplish with accountability and openness in a democratic society. It is usual to consider this form of management as a process geared to the organization's human resources themselves. This is actually an important and necessary aspect in the technical sense, concerned with the description of posts, recruitment, selection, determination of the conditions of employment, training, etc. But this part relates only to the design and maintenance of the functions and prerogatives of the bureaucracy. The always lurking danger here is that, when so conceived – as a technical matter – human resource management becomes an instrument in the service either of the self-interest of the functionaries or of the authoritarianism of the institution's management. To move beyond those usual tasks, human resource management needs to be politicized, and to be politicized it needs to be attuned to the mission of the given institution and motivate people to work for its accomplishment in their day-to-day activities.

The mission of a public agency corresponds in general terms to the public interests it is called upon to serve. It is not limited to a formal definition of the purposes that the agency must accomplish, but partakes of the quality of an ethical and political sphere of thought and action within which major goals are linked to values of the agency and society. The mission embodies a vision of the future, the strategies for realizing that vision, the ethical principles of the agency, the quality targets, efforts at accountability, etc.

Thus human resource management is seen as a process which, in regulating the components of the personnel system (careers, performance, qualification, etc.), endeavors to shape them so that they will not only be consistent with the mission, but also facilitate its accomplishment in the middle and long run. Accordingly, this form of management must be “uprooted” and “despecialized” within the organization, and be projected beyond the confines of any given department. So defined, human resource management is not a matter for a few professional specialists but rather one that is shared with all the levels of management, starting with the agency's executive head. The relation of an institution's strategies to its human resource requirements, hiring procedures, training measures, active participation in the selection process, performance evaluation, action to improve conditions of employment, etc., all these tasks are now decentralized throughout the organization, and at the same time are raised to the summit of the chain of command. The human resource department and its professional staff have specific tasks to perform, but their principal function becomes one of support to the process, which goes forward across the organization. The traditional “Human Resources (HR) specialists” are no longer seen as the sole performers of that complex function, but become more than anything else advisers to the managers in carrying it out.

Hence human resource management is politicized as it diffuses widely through the organization and as the top managers take over the strategic aspect of that

function completely. This strategic part may be defined as making initiatives for regulation of the personnel system into directly concordant with the components of the mission. This idea is summarized in the following table.

TABLE 2  
**Human Resource Management as Mediator between the HR System and the Components of the Mission**

HR System	HR Management	Mission Components
Description of posts		Strategic goals
HR planning	Cooperation processes	Vision of future
Design of Careers	Negotiation processes	Organizational values
Recruitment and selection		Quality of services
Rules for remuneration	Managers	Customer participation
HR development	Staff members	Accountability
Conditions of employment	HR advisers	Openness
Code of ethics	HR department	

Source: The working up of an authors.

In this view human resource management may be said to be playing a political role of regulation for two reasons. Firstly, because it satisfies the legal requirements for the different components of the human resource system, which are planned in light of the agency's mission, and secondly because the human resources are now mobilized and managed in accordance with the commitments imposed by that mission.

There are two principal ways to bring the human resource system into line with the mission components: a) cooperation processes, with emphasis on teamwork, which help to identify problems and propose and implement corrective measures, and b) conflict resolution or brokering, so as to arrive at agreements in keeping with the collective interests of the workers (union members and others).

This cannot happen if human resource management is viewed as a technical function with rules of its own and is made the exclusive responsibility of one department. In the new approach it needs to be a process in which the top managers are truly involved, though advised by specialists in the subject. Hence human resource management becomes politicized by virtue of its real importance to the mission and by the firmness of purpose of the managers in placing real emphasis on it in their decisions and going beyond the stage in which they confined themselves to fine words about the obvious, that is, how essential human resources are to the proper functioning of the organization.

This approach is presented here in rather general terms, but the intention is that it shall produce a scheme of strategic action that is valid both for public agencies and the private sector. As has been said, the difference between the two sectors is the object of their respective missions. In the case of the public sector, the components of the mission are (or ought to be) in line with the public interest, but in that of the private sector they are geared to the business strategies of the given enterprise.

The recent literature on the human resources of enterprises reflects the same concern to give effect to human resource management by associating it with the strategic decisions of its managers. The predominant idea is that this function has to be deconcentrated and the responsibilities for human resource practices, which include training, spread out. In *Human Resource Champions. The Next Agenda for Adding Value and Delivering Results* (1997), Dave Ulrich states that:

*The responsibility for strategic execution in most firms today is shared between HR professionals and line managers... As partners, each brings to the strategic discussion unique skills and talents. Together, they team up to accomplish business goals.*

In *Beyond the Learning Organization. Creating a Culture of Continuous Growth and Development Through State-of-the-Art Human Resource Practices* (1999), Jerry Gilley and Ann Maycunich are of the view that the responsibilities for human resource management can scarcely be spread out without a complete revamping of the technical role and orientation usually assigned to the personnel department in firms, where it is usually highly centralized:

*We contend that to improve credibility, HR professionals must be willing to leave the "mother ship," the highly centralized administrative unit, and become fully integrated into the broader business operations. They must relinquish most training and development responsibilities (formerly assigned to HR professionals) to managers and supervisors. Human resource professionals must encourage organizational managers and supervisors to become more actively involved in selection, recruiting, hiring, and training practices, while surrendering much of their responsibilities for compensation and rewards.*

The titles of these two books are given in full to illustrate the current trend to reassessment of human resource management in enterprises. Today, it must be acknowledged, there are signs on every hand of a reassessment of the importance of human resource management. It will now be shown that this trend is also visible in initiatives for reform of the public sector.

## 6 HUMAN RESOURCES IN REFORM: A COURSE CORRECTION?

Put rather schematically, it may be said that the three main dimensions of management that reforms of the public sector aim to develop are *results, leadership/governance, and values*. Each of these dimensions may be seen as resulting from a complex of factors and certainly as influenced by cultural determinants in each country, and their relative priorities may vary with the status of a given reform initiative. By way of illustration, the following table presents a partial list of the factors that may be included in each of those dimensions.

This division may appear artificial, as reforms are bound to be all directed at obtaining results that are financial more than anything else or, as it was put in a quotation above, at getting *more bang out of every buck*. This is so because the emphasis on results expresses the official intention of making more efficient use of the public budget, which means that the public sector must be made more obedient to the rules of competition on the market in its relations with both its suppliers and

its customers. But reformers are always aware that their reforms are in the nature of a political process that proceeds in a democratic milieu, in which weight is given to personal leadership qualities and to the system of institutional values of the society, which are important goals in themselves. Thus, an analysis of reforms cannot be correct which focuses only on the dimension of results and views leadership and values merely as means to the desired change.

TABLE 3  
Three Dimensions of Reform

Results	Leadership/Governance	Values
Contracts within the public sector	Entrepreneurial spirit	Accountability
Privatization of organizations	Creativity (reinvention)	Openness
Outsourcing of functions	Ability to redesign functions, hierarchies and teamwork	Social control
Partnerships with community entities	Empowerment of human resources and customers	Citizen participation
Evaluation of performance of human resources	Motivation and participation of human resources	Solidarity
Remuneration of human resources for attainment of goals	Preventive mentality	
Ongoing qualification of human resources	Delegation/Decentralization	
Focus on the customer/ Quality of services		

Source: The working up of an authors.

The abundant literature on reforms in public management contains exhaustive discussions on how those components are conceived and articulated in practice, which dispenses us from having to review them in detail. This paper will confine itself to citing some differences of emphasis in different national projects, especially at their inception.

In the United Kingdom the reform plan that began to be developed in 1979 was characterized by internal contracting, that is, by separation of the public functions that are divided between a contracting entity (which sets goals and administers a given budget autonomously) and a contracted provider (who delivers services in accordance with those goals and other specifications). This distinction corresponds in theory to the relationship between a principal (who contracts) and an agent (who is contracted); when it disseminates throughout the public sector it gives rise to processes of competition that are conducted within the public sector. The British reform was *regulated* in accordance with a contractual model of a market and was carried out from the top down, in which it was helped by the hierarchical spirit of the bureaucracy (Ferlie *et cols.* 1999). The main consequences were changes in the institutional configuration and in the power relations, both of which had profound effects on the bureaucracy. The two basic human resource issues addressed were a) how to win the bureaucracy over to that management model and generate an organizational culture geared essentially to results, and b) how, in a general way, to

promote the management training of civil servants in accordance with this new philosophy and how to attract managers from the private sector (Ferlie *et cols.* 1999).

In the United States the reform of the 1990s was also market-oriented, but as a consequence and not as a point of departure, in a process that combined leadership and values in a quest to *reinvent government*. The strategic aim was to produce institutional combinations that were more efficient and competitive, which did not, however, conform to a given regulatory model. Reform was from above and outside the bureaucracy, through initiatives taken by elected political leaders and by managers drawn from the private sector. At the national level the strategic conduct of the reform was in the hands of Vice President Al Gore. This was hence not a reform governed by a given model of institutional order, but the outcome of a set of practices of competitive excellence in which creativity and leadership were taken for granted, transcending the heuristic value of the models. The institutional patterns of the reform varied because they were responded to the entrepreneurial spirit, that is, the special, almost charismatic gifts of the chief executive officers. In this case the most important thing was the ability to combine a multiplicity of decisions for action and not be confined by formula.

What is the place of human resources in the American initiative? The answer is perhaps that it has to do with leadership training. But this does not appear to be a specific concern, for it is a very widespread cultural trait of American society. Indeed, a reading of the books co-authored by David Osborne leaves the impression that the human resources of the public sector are scarcely present in the dramatic scenes of institutional change brought about by enterprising leadership. The justification for underestimating the role of human resources has a theoretical basis, which this author has found in the teaching of the mentor of quality management, Edward Deming, who said that 80% of the errors made in a work process are attributable to the design of the system and not to people. The conclusion is that it is the system that must be changed, which can be accomplished only by bold, creative leaders who are not afraid to make mistakes. But, it may be objected, all organizational quality requires the ability to foresee the future and adapt to new circumstances, and this calls for certain qualities in people, starting with their education: "Preparation for the future includes lifelong learning for employees" (Deming 1993). However, the American reform model attaches (or attached) no importance to the functions of human resources in the public sector. Strangely, this concern does not even show up in the dominant concept of "human capital."

Australia, by contrast, presents an example of an institutional transformation of the public sector that strongly emphasizes values of social importance, which are inculcated in the human resources of the public sector, that is, the civil servants. Although, as elsewhere, there too privatizations and countless other market-oriented contractualistic institutional transformations have been carried out, the distinctive feature of the Australian experience is the centrality of values. The aim is to bring about a change in the outlook and behavior of civil servants on the basis of values fully regulated and publicized. The force of this "orientation to public service" as policy is well attested by the Australian government's elevation to the status of a law a code of conduct for civil servants with particular emphasis on the principle of merit in work, which must be honored and enforced by the autonomous agencies. Hence,

it can be said that the reform took as its governing criteria the components of the value dimension.

Thus in Australia the basic issue in human resources is associated with an ethical, political and legal reconfiguration of the performance of the civil servant: the aim is to change the values that actually guide his selection and performance, with an emphasis on the mechanisms of fairness relating to merit and equity of access concordant with an emphasis on the elements of the mission and the quest for results. Moreover, leadership is seen as a factor to be widely developed, though preferably within the public system and not as a force from outside.

The following features are prescribed by the Australian central government as constituents of good human resource management (APS 1999):

- All staff understand and are committed to the goals and values of the organization.
- Meeting the needs of government, clients and the community is a primary focus of all staff.
- Decisions on managing people are ethical and transparent.
- Staff are encouraged to find innovative ways to enhance organizational performance.
- The work environment reflects a respect for a healthy balance of work and personal life.
- The diverse backgrounds, cultural values, skills and knowledge of employees are viewed positively and used effectively to add value to business outcomes.
- Staffing practices incorporate equal employment opportunity, natural justice, privacy and elimination of unjustified discrimination.
- Recognition and rewards are values and performance based.

The notion of human and cultural diversity refers in this context to a human, cultural and ethnic capacity of the workers collectively, but is serviceable as an aid in accomplishing the institutional mission. Moreover, both arrangements for cooperation among work groups and those for collective bargaining in the workplace are clearly encouraged. With due regard for certain national parameters, the autonomous agencies are encouraged to take initiatives of their own, which includes collective agreements with their civil servants on remuneration and conditions of employment, organization of the work process, the framing of guidelines for recruitment, selection, promotion, and so forth.

In other countries only at the end of the 1990s did signs appear of anything that could be considered a reconsideration of human resource planning for government. In both the United Kingdom and the United States there is again talk of the importance of merit and of the need for greater efforts on the part of the agencies to improve their personnel recruitment, selection and planning processes. There appear to be three reasons for this shift in human resource management. Firstly, evidence has emerged of a scarcity of staff at the highest levels of qualification, which stems as much from downsizing of the sector as from a shortage of supply on the labor



market. Especially in the United States the labor market has been heating up in recent years with the remarkable growth of the national economy. Secondly, evaluations indicate that the systems for the reward of productivity are not working as they should and are in need of revision. Finally, a new policy orientation is gaining strength toward fairness of access, conveyed by the phrase *diversity in the workplace*, to enhance the opportunity for admission to public service for minorities and, at the same time, to generate greater diversity of thinking among the personnel.

The need for personnel planning is reemerging at all levels and in all spheres, but the greatest scarcity is that of high-level professionals owing to the importance and complexity of the regulatory and strategic management functions as well as because of the dizzying pace of economic and administrative transactions, based on information technology, in all government agencies. Consider the example of the United Kingdom. In the report on evaluation of the reform submitted to the Prime Minister in 1999 the head of the public administration stressed in the following terms the commitments assumed by the directors of the sector in relation to six basic themes:

- i. stronger **leadership** with a clear sense of purpose;
- ii. better **business planning** from top to bottom;
- iii. sharper **performance management**;
- iv. a dramatic improvement in **diversity**;
- v. a service **more open** to people and ideas, which brings on talent, and
- vi. a better **deal for staff**.

The choice of these themes may perhaps be taken as a sign of a new policy in force that resets the priorities to give more space and prominence to the human resource and institutional mission components, with at the same time a reassessment of the principles of fairness that inhere in the makeup of the government bureaucracy. It is stated that the current strategic objective is “to create a more open, diverse and professional Civil Service in which people will put the public’s interests first.” There is perceptible here a concern for adherence to values that could help surmount certain purely economic limitations in the original model. The prospect also opens of promoting processes that can attract talent from other sectors of the economy by offering higher levels of remuneration. The motto of human and cultural diversity in the workplace is also voiced in order, among other purposes, to increase the contribution from the work potential of ethnic minorities.

A similar set of policy guidelines designed to strengthen diversity and the human resource recruitment and selection methods of the federal government was issued in June 2000 by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) of the United States Government. In the official document the key idea of diversity is explicitly adopted in its economic scope in face of the strong competitiveness of the labor market, and also as an inclusive democratic policy, as seen in the following quote:

*The business case for diversity has two significant elements. First, the labor market has become increasingly competitive. The Federal Government must use every available source of candidates to ensure that each agency has the high-quality workforce that it needs to deliver its mission to the American public. Any agency that*

*fails to take steps to recruit among the full spectrum of the labor market is missing a strategic opportunity. Second, the changing demographics of America mean that the public served by the Federal Government is also changing. When agencies recruit and retain an inclusive workforce  $\frac{3}{4}$  one that looks like the America it serves  $\frac{3}{4}$  and when individual differences are respected, appreciated, and valued, diversity becomes an organizational strength that contributes to achieving results. Diversity offers a variety of views, approaches, and actions for an agency to use in strategic planning, problem solving, and decision making. It also enables an agency to better serve the taxpayer by reflecting the customers and communities it serves.*

Thanks to this shift in human resource management policies, which are again giving preference to certain principles of fairness in access to public positions and attention to equity in the delivery of services of public interest, public sector reform in the United States and other countries appears to be moving toward greater equilibrium between the imperatives of the economy and those of right.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

In the writer's view, the aim of these conceptual reformulations of public sector reform is to arrive at tools with which to make the management of government human resources a policy function with real regulatory power, to better help frame the institutional mission and bring the internal working capacity into line with the strategic aims and values embodied in it. The Australian experience is notable in this regard because it sustains a clear concern for overall management of the government's human resources and takes due account of the need to update the principles of fairness in the treatment of those resources. Though it was not possible to examine it in greater depth, the writer wishes to make clear that this is the experience that most closely approaches the above description of human resource management as a policy function of regulation.

This paper has examined the causes of theoretical error in the analysis of government bureaucracy which in the 1980s led to the strategic error of abandoning the planning of the human resources required by government. The downsizing of the public sector promoted at the time could have been accompanied by a forecast of strategic objectives that would prescribe targets for the numbers and kinds of human resources required to perform the new and old functions of government. That is, the capacity to predict personnel requirements could have been preserved. This, apparently, did not happen. In their analysis of the public services, the reformers shifted their focus too far over to the dimension of economic results and had eyes almost only for the need to improve the cost-benefit ratio of their operations and for the financial benefits that would accrue from downsizing.

Meanwhile, with the passage of time the changing economy itself and the increase of competition in supply and demand on the labor market have generated for government an unexpected need to resume the functions of human resource management. Competence in human resources has become a matter of vital importance to the proper functioning of government and is being called for not only for the proper performance of the complex tasks of social regulation, but also the

usual tasks of economic transactions between suppliers and customers in a relationship that is being increasingly mediated by information technology. One of the consequences of this new situation is a revival of merit and negotiation schemes in employment. Also, new and important concepts of ethical-political scope are being asserted, such as the notion of *diversity* of the workforce. Finally, human resource management in government — with all its legal, ethical, economic and political nuances — is once again on the order of business.

Generally speaking, in the Latin America and Third World countries, the dominant trend is the combination between the competitive forces of labor market not regulated and the rigorous restriction of governments expenses. This tendency reinforce the employment precarious in the public sector. The new proposals of public service revalorization and revitalization of its merit ideals could be copied from the developed countries, such as happened with the reform state models. However, its effectiveness depend of the emergence of sustainability conditions of the economic development and adequate public policies that still are not in place in these other countries.

Along the analysis we have value the notion of relevance of the human resources management in the public sector. We understand that is a new situation to the public sector management policies. This new context tend to be a break-even point between the state bureaucracy rights (that means the public sector workers) and the rights of the citizenship by the politicization of the human resources management. Our interpretation is that the human resources management has now to be a function regulation policy, played by the policy makers in accordance with technician specialists. This is a function that mediate policy and technique between the objectives of handling the workforce available and the ethical and political objectives of the institutional mission. The criticism to the state reformists was made because they had frequently been incapable to give the due importance to the justice principles that is materialized in the bureaucratic structure of the state, especially as for the principle of equal chance for access to the public service and the merit system. The conclusion that we arrived is that, although the efficiency of the state should not be lost of view, it is decisive that those principles are not abandoned to those work in public service in the democratic societies. This should comprise an understanding of the social meaning of the bureaucracy and their changes, *pari passu* with the economical and social development of those societies.

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**PUBLISHING DEPARTMENT**

**Coordination**

Cláudio Passos de Oliveira

**Supervision**

Everson da Silva Moura

Reginaldo da Silva Domingos

**Typesetting**

Bernar José Vieira

Cristiano Ferreira de Araújo

Daniella Silva Nogueira

Danilo Leite de Macedo Tavares

Diego André Souza Santos

Jeovah Herculano Szervinsk Junior

Leonardo Hideki Higa

**Cover design**

Luís Cláudio Cardoso da Silva

**Graphic design**

Renato Rodrigues Buenos

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