

State visions and truths from the front line

THIS afternoon at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Johannesburg, Economic Development Minister Ebrahim Patel will speak at the launch of a new book entitled *Constructing a Democratic Developmental State in SA*. Amid talk of conflict between economic cluster ministers, there will be a keen interest in what he has to say.

The idea of the developmental state is intoxicating because it suggests that governments can initiate institutional and policy changes to stimulate rapid economic growth. It is politically convenient today because it provides a bridge between the purported technocracy of the Thabo Mbeki era and the aspirant interventionism of the post-Polokwane African National Congress (ANC).

The book comes courtesy of the Human Sciences Research Council, an institution whose CEOs have been predisposed for four decades to add a gloss of academic respectability to any and all ruling party doctrines. This generally rosy collection of essays, however, quickly throws cold water on hopes of painless economic gains.



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Central to the developmental state idea is a highly capable public sector bureaucracy closely linked to business but immune to capture by special interests.

Case studies of the classical developmental states in East Asia highlight effective government administrative systems, meritocratic promotion, and superior training and motivation among public servants, as keys to success. Cross-national data indicate that merit-based recruitment and stable, long-term career paths almost certainly help to sustain economic growth.

The book's two most remarkable essays bring home how far away from such an ideal SA remains. Ben Fine observes of the strategic capabilities of the public service that "the electricity does not go off in a developmental state". Karl von Holdt, in a luminous study of the public health bureaucracy, sets out the deep obstacles to understanding a public service undergoing fundamental change.

A less consequential chapter (by this columnist) notes that patronage, weak municipal systems, HIV/AIDS, and the strategic imperatives of black economic empowerment undermine the coherence and efficacy of the state bureaucracy.

Former Public Service Commission (PSC) head Stan Sangweni has recently lamented that political battles between officials continue, limited loyalty to the service remains the norm, and there is little commitment to excellence. Rapid turnover at the top of the state is still destroying institutional memory and accountability. Does this mean a developmental state driven forward by a coherent public sector bureaucracy is nothing but a pipe dream?

One interpretation of recent events is that seeming conflict over planning and economic policy hides a growing consensus for state reform.

The government has initiated many changes over the past decade, from cabinet clusters to performance management systems. In 2006, the director-general in the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), Richard Levin, for the first time outlined the governance cluster's plans under the rubric of "addressing the capability needs of a developmental state". Key departments were to be subjected to capability assessments, the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative was unrolled, performance management systems were introduced, and development programmes for middle managers were scaled up. A government-wide monitoring and evaluation system was initiated to consolidate Presidency, Treasury, PSC and DPSA instruments.

On this longer view, the entrenched obstacles to a more effective state have been increasingly widely understood, and the idea of the developmental state has been mobilised to address them. Since last year, a network of like-thinking reformers has been given enhanced resources to take on these challenges.

The recent reappearance of Joel Netshitenzhe on the National Planning Commission and the February appointment of Levin as director-general of Patel's economic development department are equally unsurprising from such a perspective. They are reassuring signs that the planners are themselves working to a plan.

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