

CIVIL SERVANTS

IS THE PUBLIC SERVICE REALLY BLOATED?

DATUK
DR JOHN
ANTONY
XAVIER

Productivity can be improved without the service having to grow endlessly

HOBBS, an English philosopher, in his 1651 book *Leviathan*, argued that if left to fend for himself in nature, the life of man would be "nasty, brutish and short". So, the role of the government is to protect life. Since then, the conception of government has spanned from the "minimal night-watchman" state of Hobbes, to a vastly expanded welfarist state advocated by Beatrice and Sydney Webb, the founders of my alma mater, the London School of Economics.

The embrace of the welfarist dogma has caused many governments of the West especially to grow, some monstrosity so. Our public service, too, has followed an expansionist trend — from its minimalist role of law, order and security in the immediate aftermath of British colonialism, to engineering sustainable and inclusive social-economic development.

Accordingly, *Leviathan* has grown so much that the state has been accused, fairly or unfairly, of being bloated. But, is it?

Recently, the second finance minister ignited controversy over the size of the public service, giving credence to public perception and unverified data that compared the size of Malaysia's public service unfavourably to that of other countries.

There is no authoritative benchmark for an ideal size nor what constitutes the public service. We have taken a simple definition, which is the source of the current furor over its size. We consider everyone who is paid remuneration out of government coffers to be a public servant. On this definition, the public service comprises the federal public service, state public services (including local authorities), education services, health service, judiciary, legal service, police and armed forces.

Other countries are not so inclusive. The United Kingdom, for example, considers only those working in departments that report to a minister as constituting the civil service. Accordingly, the two million or so employees in its national health and education services are excluded in the UK's computation of the size of its public service.



A policeman and a soldier during a joint patrol at Terminal Bersepadu Selatan in Bandar Tasik Selatan, Kuala Lumpur, last year. The police and armed forces share resources, such as sharing beat duty and training facilities. PIC BY AZUDDIN SAAD

Similarly, the borough and county councils are large employers. They offer such services as fire and rescue, town and country planning, library, youth and social services, and waste disposal. Their workers, too, do not figure in the UK's tally of roughly half a million public servants. Is it any wonder then that the UK's public servant to population ratio is 1:130 compared with Malaysia's 1:24?

Similarly, teachers, doctors, soldiers and police do not figure in the Australian public service head count. Accounting for only those working in public administration, the Australian public servant to population ratio comes close to that of the UK's, again putting the Malaysian case in bad light. If all government employees are taken into account, the public servant to population ratio will be roughly 1:12, suggesting that the Australian public service is twice as bloated as Malaysia's.

If we compare the numbers in public payroll, it is one in four in France, one in six in Germany and the United States, and one in seven in Britain. In Malaysia it is one in 10. These comparisons suggest that there is more than meets the eye!

"God is in the details," so said Rudy Giuliani, a former mayor of New York City, in his 2002 book *Leadership*.

So, let us decompose the size of our public service to examine where the fat is, if any.

Excepting the police and the armed forces, we have roughly 12 million public employees. That figure gives us a public servant to population ratio of 1:24. We have 430,000 teachers, or one-third of the public service establishment, housed in 10,000 schools. They serve five million pupils. We need our teachers. The future of our nation depends partly on them.

Our medical and health sector takes up another 220,000 personnel, or 20 per cent, of the public service establishment. Can we afford to cut their numbers, given overcrowding in our public hospitals and extended wait times therein?

We have about 250,000 administrative and support staff scattered across more than 770 public agencies, including 25 federal ministries, 13 state governments and 154 local authorities. The administrative staff to population ratio is 1:124. The balance of employees are sprinkled across institutions of higher learning, research and development institutes, judiciary, and across civil defence, engineering, agricultural and transport sectors.

On the face of it, and ignoring Benjamin Disraeli's rant that "there are three kinds of lies, damned lies, and statistics", the current establishment size appears justifiable. However, some critics want the state to be rolled back. Indeed, the worldwide

trend is towards gradual downsizing. In a recent International Monetary Fund study of 37 countries, 90 per cent have slashed public sector employment since 2000.

In keeping with this broad trend, productivity can be improved without the public service having to grow endlessly. This will then ensure that the current numbers continue to provide the same, if not better, services to meet the ever burgeoning size of the population.

Lifetime employment may have to be replaced with renewable contracts for employees. This will make it easier to jettison deadwood. Resources can be shared, as what the police and armed forces are doing to share beat duty and training facilities in combating crime. The cluster concept of the Health Ministry aggregates nearby hospitals into a cluster, where hospital facilities, such as beds and health professionals, are shared. Similarly, the Education Ministry merges schools with uneconomic enrolment.

So, the issue is not so much about whether the public service is too big. Rather, it is whether *Leviathan* can be made to work better without costing more.

johnxav@nu.edu.my

The writer is head of the Strategic Centre for Public Policy at the Graduate School of Business, University Kebangsaan Malaysia.

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