

June 23: Public Service Day

In pub talk the public service usually gets a bad rap. We hear stories of how people are sent from one government department to another and back again without ever having had their needs met. Or stories of government officials who were rude and unhelpful. Or perhaps rants that bureaucrats are lazy and overpaid, and should get a proper job. Good news stories are in short supply.

It is surely true that some public servants, like some of the rest of us, are lazy and incompetent, and that government departments can be uncoordinated. And also true that government workers are sometimes badly led by their government ministers and poorly paid for the work that they do. And true, too, that some of us whom they serve are rude and intolerant towards them. Public servants are people like us with the same range of virtues and faults. When we look at the part that the public service plays in our lives, however, we begin to appreciate how much we owe to it.

Even the much-maligned tax office collects the funds that will ultimately build hospitals, pay teachers and make roads. And remembering the ancient world when the collection of taxes was handed over to stand-over merchants and their hired thugs will surely make us think more kindly of the public servants who process the paper work involved in our taxes.

Bureaucrats, too, are a bridge between us and the State. They collect and compile information on all aspects of national life, use it to offer informed advice to governments on policies that will best meet needs, administer the wise or unwise policies that governments decide upon, and review their effectiveness. When they are professional and trusted, they can make the difference between good and bad government, between happy and unhappy citizens.

Nations need good politicians and good public servants. The difference between them is that politicians have two things in mind: the good of the nation and of the people in their own electorate. (they may also have one thing best kept at the back of their mind: their re-election). Public servants, on the other hand, have only one thing in mind: the good of the nation. They can advise politicians whether popular policies will benefit society, and bring past experience to bear on the decisions to be made.

Public service, of course, has two meanings. It can refer to the people who work for government or to an attitude that all people in society should have. It means looking beyond our own interests to the good of all the people in our society, and particularly to the good of those who are in most need. It means noticing what is happening in society and talking about it. It means looking for better ways to serve the good of society and offering our help in voluntary work to help the neglected.

Work that is apparently the most private is often the best imaginable form of public service. Caring for children in a family, for example, or for aged relatives benefits the whole community and shapes the future of society. Volunteering in visiting homes for the ageing, hospitals and prisons is also a public service. It helps people live more fully. It is a gift that we make both on behalf of our society and to it.

Non-government organisations like Jesuit Social Services, too, serve the public in accompanying people who are vulnerable, and cooperate with public servants our service. In doing this our concern must be for the whole society and not simply for ourselves.