

Analysis

Viva to the SA pencil-pushing angels who simply do their jobs

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Chris Mann wonders whether it is elitist to cherish a burning desire to see the great South African dream come true.



[All hail to the administrators whose files are as neat as a pin, who come in on a Saturday morning to get up to date. \(AFP\).](#)

I have a confession to make: I love good administrators. It's true – I love modest, orderly and efficient fellow human beings who sit at desks in front of computers and telephones doing their job properly from eight to five until they retire.

I love in particular, though not without a certain apprehension, a great mama of an admin clerk who sits in front of a cliff of grey-speckled lever-arch files in which each invoice and receipt of a local small business is ordered, each budget and the minutes of each meeting for years and years are filed. She glowers at you when you enter as if you know nothing about what really counts in life – which she knows she knows, down to the last nut and bolt, the final cent.

What she knows is the movement of value among people, expressing what people need of each other and are prepared to pay for. She knows each abstract flow of money swishing this way and that, recorded and balanced at the end of each month. She is au fait with each transaction of goods and services moved out of the world of talk, talk, talk into the reality of a rural clinic or a truckload of bread by people who are trained and competent and caring, who stamp each completed transaction with the sacred seal of a name and a date.

That is what makes me so African, I suppose: this reckless enthusiasm, this extravagant admiration for good administrators.

Who doesn't curse out loud when a phone rings on and on in a government office during working hours; who doesn't feel a furious animosity when civil servants – yes, servants – take months to reply to emails and phone calls and letters, who aren't at their desks when you need an ambulance, a clerk of the court, a rates official or a water engineer?

These are people who, after you've queued for hours and hours to reach the glass-walled counter, can't find your file, title deed or municipal valuation. They are sullen-eyed, surly and beyond caring whether you and all the other weary faces in the queue behind you receive your rates certificate, your building clearance or your permit to trade.

Viva!

Am I elitist to cherish a burning desire to see the great South African dream come true? Is it unpatriotic to agitate unceasingly for taps that don't run dry, for houses built to last, for a school where the teachers are paid and textbooks arrive on time? Or for a hospital where the sheets, toilets and floors are clean, the X-ray machines are working and, in the dispensary, the medicines are ready and waiting in decently organised rows on the shelves?

All hail then to the administrators whose files are as neat as a pin, who come in on a Saturday morning to get up to date, who are just, efficient and merciful in their dealings, who don't stuff around with the girls in the office or with the office car, who get very angry and reach for the phone when a smarmy private-sector supplier hints at a kickback or when a cheating colleague slides a tender application form under the door of a cousin or homeboy.

I ask out loud: Are honest, polite, skilled, efficient, effective and impartial administrators, quietly working through the piles of dockets or requisitions on their desks, not the authentic comrades of liberation, the real cadres of democracy?

By this I do not mean the slogans of liberation, but the real liberation of putting people in jobs who know how to do accounts and how to do the work for which they're paid. I speak of the exhilarating freedom of short meetings that make things happen and get things done. I mean the only type of liberation that can hope to last, where companies care for people and the biosphere and pay their taxes in full, where civil servants don't dare to apply for lucrative posts beyond their competence and get the boot if they fail to do their jobs.

So viva, I say, to the administrators who are patient and equitable despite the boring repetition of their tasks, the lure of bribes and the shambolic accounts of the two-timing South Africans around them. Viva to the administrators who are at their desks from early Monday morning to late on Friday afternoon and who cherish their asset registers, transport logs and financial reports with the passion of a loving parent.

And viva to the people who make the schools, hospitals, payrolls, medical aid schemes and pension funds happen, and who keep the trains, pipelines and sewerage systems working. Viva to those who, like that admin clerk in the office of that humble company, stamp each completed transaction in a lifetime of effective transactions with the sacred seal of a signature and the date.

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