

Te hāpai hāpori – a spirit of service to the community
(Introductory lecture)

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Tēnā tātou katoa. He mihi māhana tēnei kia koutou. Ko Rodney Scott toku ingoa. I'm the Kaitohutohu Mātāmua or Chief Policy Advisor of Te Kawa Mataaho the Public Service Commission of New Zealand. Michael has asked me to talk briefly about Te hāpai hāpori or the spirit of service.

Te hāpai hāpori in history

The spirit of service as a phrase has a long history in New Zealand. It appears in the long title of the State Services Act of 1962. New Zealand legislation used to have a short title as well as a long descriptive title, and the State Services Act long title was borrowed from a book by British public administration historian Edgar Gladden in 1945 which said the characteristics of the civil service were that it was “impartially selected, administratively competent, politically neutral, and imbued with a spirit of service to the community”.

When the State Services Act was repealed and replaced with the State Sector Act of 1988, the dominant theories of the time were economic, and in particular, public choice theory applied economic rationale to the public administrative realm. So the motivations of public servants were largely assumed to be rational and self-maximising. None the less, the phrase a spirit of service to the community was retained, this time within the purpose statement, and stood out somewhat as an acknowledgement that public servants had other motivations other than self-interest.

Te hāpai hāpori in the Public Service Act 2020

In 2018 the government commenced a review of the State Sector Act 1988 which eventually resulted in the repeal of that act and the passage through Parliament of the Public Service Act 2020. As I'll come back to, the spirit of service has grown in importance over the past several years as a central theme in public service discourse in New Zealand, so it was not so much a question of whether some reference to the spirit of service would be retained, so much as how it would be retained.

I want to mention three options that were canvassed. The first is the idea of a symbolic reference, such as in the State Services Act 1962 or the State Sector Act 1988. The government could have simply described the spirit of service to the community as a fundamental characteristic of the public service, without attaching this to any instrumental provisions that assign functions, responsibilities, powers, or duties, or obligations on anyone. The benefit of symbolic legislation is hotly debated but there has been a bit of resurgence lately with certain academics claiming that legislation can have a legitimate communicative function without being legally instrumental.

A stronger option would be to assign some responsibility. One option would be to make chief executives responsible for imbuing public servants with a spirit of service. This was discounted because it implied public servants did not already have a spirit of service to the community. The option that was ultimately chosen was that chief executives would be responsible for protecting, preserving, and nurturing the spirit of service to the community that public servants already bring to their work.

Te hāpai hāpori in Te Ratonga Tūmatanui

The resurgence of talking about a spirit of service to the community began in about 2016 and is closely associated with the current Te Tumu Whakarae mō Te Kawa Mataaho, the Public Service Commissioner Peter Hughes. Since 2016, the spirit of service has adopted the arguably the central position in public service discourse and self-conception for Te Ratonga Tūmatanui o Aotearoa. It is the name of awards that are given to public servants that most display this attribute, it was the theme of several of the annual summits of public service leaders, and it's something every public service chief executive has spoken about at length.

This is more speculative, but it seems to be part of a general shift toward organisational humanism, which is the idea that employees should not be treated as automatons but instead as entire humans with a range of values and motivations. The contention is that public servants are at their best, doing their best, when they feel imbued with a spirit of service to the community.

Te hāpai hāpori and shared meaning

So, what is a spirit of service to the community? It's somewhat of an amorphous concept, and every public servant's spirit of service is slightly different. I like to think of it as whatever motivates a public servant to be a public servant— it's usually about some version of wanting to be of assistance or of benefit to others. For some people that's about achieving social or environmental outcomes. For others it's about ensuring due process. For others it's about kindness and compassion. For others it's about supporting our system of government. All these different conceptions of service are different but what unites them is that they are the motivation or reason behind why someone wants to be a public servant. It is the difference that they wanted to make. In this way spirit of service is different to something like public service motivation, which academia has attempted to define with some precision – a spirit of service isn't defined by its contents, but by its intent, which is the desire to help or to be of service. The te reo Maori translation, Te Hāpai Hāpori, translates as something like supporting the community.

The phrase I like to use is that the spirit of service to the community is a boundary object. A boundary object is a construct from sociology that describes a concept that can be shared across intersecting social worlds, that retains enough commonality of definition to be meaningful but enough plasticity of definition to be accepted by multiple communities.

A spirit of service is a boundary object that unites the intersecting social worlds of different departments and agencies. It is the reason a police officer chose to be a police officer, and also the reason a social worker wanted to be a social worker, or a teacher became a teacher. Those individual reasons might be different, but all public sector professions and public sector occupations are united by a sense of altruism, or of wanting to aid others.

A spirit of service to the community is therefore part of an effort by the government to build a more unified public service around a shared identity. Individuals that feel like they're on the same team or the same group tend to be more cooperative with each other. The purpose of building a unified public service is to create a sense of a single team working across all agencies, who will use that sense of social identity to collaborate more effectively to achieve outcomes on complex problems that span agency boundaries, or to join-up and deliver better more integrated services.

Te hāpai hāpori as a field of study

I think it's important to acknowledge that this is an evolving space, and the actual effects of both the spirit of service clause and the acknowledgement of the spirit of service to the community in public service discourse are still unknown and up to current and future public service leaders to determine. As a topic of study, it brings together concepts of organisational humanism and public service motivation with ideas of social identity and a unified public service and so therefore I think it's interesting theoretically as well as practically. Kia ora and good luck with your studies. He waka eke noa.