

# SOUTH AFRICA'S THIRD TRANSITION

Generational Change · Public Service Reform · A New Constitutional Settlement

South Africa has launched a third transition – establishing the foundations for a relatively autonomous and professional public service. In this context this report shows that professionalization faces a real constraint – an aging public service – also, a great opportunity.

**n** **s** new south  
institute

*The Public Service Amendment Act was signed into law in 2025 — the most significant structural reform to South African government since 1994.*

# THE PUBLIC SERVICE AMENDMENT ACT, 2025: WHAT THE LAW DOES

*The most significant structural reform to South Africa's system of government since 1994*

## THE STRUCTURAL SHIFT

### BEFORE · Public Service Act 1994

Ministers and MECs held direct powers over departmental appointments, human resources, and operational decisions.

Political loyalty to the minister determined who was hired and how departments were run.



### AFTER · Public Service Amendment Act 2025

Appointment and operational powers transferred to heads of departments (Directors-General).

Ministers confined to their proper function: setting policy and overseeing its implementation.

## THREE KEY PROVISIONS

1

### Administrative powers to officials

Directors-General and Heads of Department gain sole authority over appointments, HR decisions, and departmental operations — insulating them from ministerial interference.

2

### Politicians confined to policy

Ministers set and oversee policy; they no longer control who implements it. The political-administrative boundary, long blurred, is now enshrined in law.

3

### Foundation for merit-based appointments

By removing political appointment powers, the Act creates the legal precondition for competitive, merit-based recruitment into senior management — including the new SMS.

# SOUTH AFRICA'S PENDLETON MOMENT — AND WHY IT MATTERS

*The PSAA is the legal architecture for a third transition: from party-state to constitutional administration*



## Correcting a founding flaw

---

The 1994 Public Service Act deliberately placed administrative power in ministerial hands — a workaround to control an inherited apartheid bureaucracy. The PSAA dismantles that architecture after 30 years of damage.



## Enabling coalition governance

---

Since the ANC lost its majority in 2024 and faces further losses, the temptation for new coalition partners to re-politicise the administration is acute. The PSAA changes the incentive structure — for all parties.



## A model for the continent

---

Rwanda, Ghana, Zambia and Nigeria are each attempting administrative reform. South Africa shows that the crisis of African governance is structural — the failure to separate political from administrative authority — not inevitable.

**⚠ The work ahead:** *Legislation changes incentive structures — it does not automatically change behaviour. The real test will come in implementation: whether officials' autonomy is respected in practice, whether merit-based recruitment and the National School of Government are pursued seriously, and whether the political class, across party lines, accepts that delivery is now an electoral matter.*

# A PUBLIC SERVICE AGEING ACROSS THE BOARD

PERSAL data 2009–2024 · Police, Health & Education frontline workforce

## POLICE

80%

of senior managers  
over 50 (2023)

---

*Officers under 30  
halved since 2009*

## HEALTH

37%

of nurses over 50  
(2023, up from 28%)

---

*Near-retirement nurses  
doubled 2009→2021*

## EDUCATION

33%

of teachers over 50  
(KZN & Gauteng, 2023)

---

*Under-30 teachers  
in sharp decline*

**Key finding: The 1994 generation dominates every major sector — and the younger cohort to replace them has not been recruited.**

# THE SENIOR MANAGEMENT SERVICE: A CLOSED COHORT AGEING IN PLACE

~4,900 SMS officials across National PS · Health · Education | PERSAL 2009–2024

**53–55**

Mean age of SMS officials  
across all three sectors  
(2024)

**73–80**

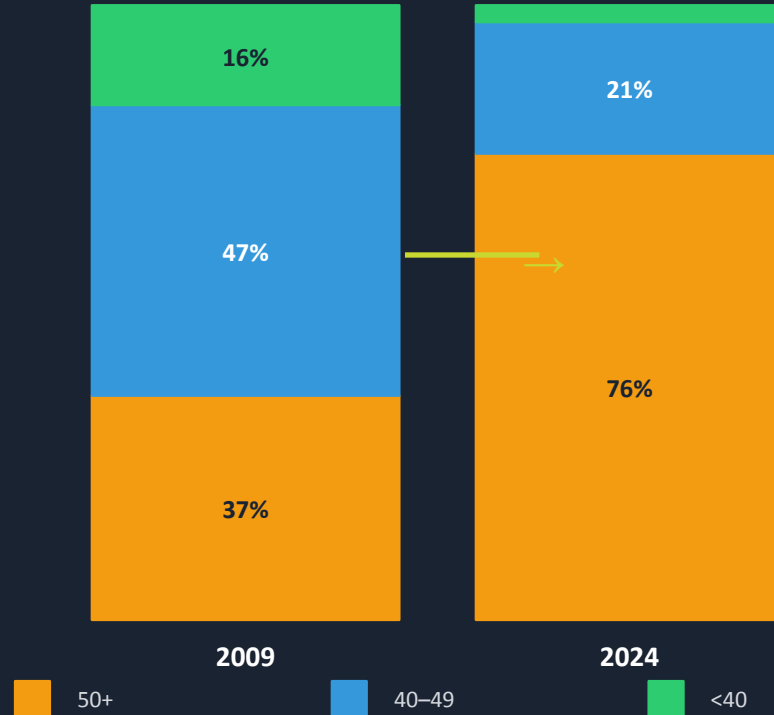
**%**

Share of SMS members  
over 50 (2024)

**~35**

SMS members under 40  
across all three sectors  
nationally

National SMS Age Profile



# THE SUCCESSION CLIFF: AN ACUTE LEADERSHIP CRISIS

*Without intervention, 1,500–2,000 senior management vacancies will open within a decade*

## NOW

Very Few SMS officials  
under 40 nationally

*The pipeline is  
virtually empty*

## 5 YEARS

Education SMS hits  
mass retirement  
(mean age 55 today)

*First wave:  
~600+ vacancies*

## 10 YEARS

Health & National PS  
join education in  
mass retirement wave

*Second wave:  
1,500–2,000 total*

# THE WINDOW IS OPEN — AND SO IS THE OPPORTUNITY

*Replacing 1,500–2,000 senior posts is the largest window for state renewal since 1994 itself*

## 01 End Tammany Hall Practices

Fill SMS posts through open, merit-based competition with independent appointment panels. Prohibit simultaneous senior party office and SMS roles.

## 02 Recruit for coalition governance

The 2025 Public Service Amendment Act demands officials who serve whichever party governs. New recruits' careers will span multiple administrations.

## 03 Build the pipeline now

A National Public Management Development Programme placing graduates in 24–36 month rotations, mentored by outgoing SMS members before they leave.

## 04 Capture knowledge before it walks out

Mandatory exit documentation, structured 'senior adviser' roles retaining departing experts, and mentorship pairing with high-potential younger officials.