

SECRETARY'S
REVIEW

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Photo: Terry Moran

THE YEAR IN REVIEW: 2008–09

2008–09 has been a particularly busy and challenging year for the department. We continued to implement and consolidate organisational improvements, including further structural change, with the aim of enhancing the department's capacity to support implementation of the government's policy commitments across a wide ranging reform agenda. The department played a central role in the development and delivery of key domestic and national security policy initiatives and supported the Prime Minister in his efforts to advance Australia's interests on the international stage. We dealt with a number of major crises: the global financial crisis, Victorian bushfires, the Queensland floods and pandemic influenza. We helped the government put new ideas into action: for example, the department co-ordinated the response to the 2020 Summit, leading a cross-government effort to respond to all of the 962 ideas raised by Summit participants in April 2008.

Challenges at home and abroad

As the world endured the effects of the worst global financial crisis since the Great Depression, the department supported the government's effort to adjust to the challenges and opportunities that such circumstances bring including the preparation of the various stimulus package and financial sector initiatives. We established the Office of the Commonwealth Coordinator-General within the department to play a lead role in the coordination of whole-of-government work on the implementation of the economic stimulus, particularly the Nation Building – Economic Stimulus Plan.

In February 2009, Victoria endured one of the worst bushfires in modern Australian history. The department supported the Victorian Government's emergency response effort and worked closely with relevant Commonwealth and state authorities throughout the critical early days and weeks following Black Saturday to ensure the timely delivery of financial assistance and other support. At the same time, the department worked closely with the Queensland Government to assist in the response to major floods over a large area of North Queensland.

The Commonwealth's whole-of-government emergency response arrangements were further tested in April 2009 by an outbreak of a new strain of the human influenza virus, the H1N1 Human Swine Flu. The Pandemic Emergency Taskforce, a core responsibility of the National Security and International Policy Group within the department, was convened and the department's business continuity plan activated.

National policy reform

On the domestic policy front, the department was involved in a number of significant policy initiatives which are expected to deliver long term benefits to Australian citizens and the economy. In 2008–09, this included providing advice and support on the implementation of the Education Revolution, as well as a range of other key domestic policy priorities.

The COAG Reform Agenda remained at the centre of the national policy reform agenda during 2008–09, focussing on boosting productivity, increasing workforce participation and mobility, and delivering better services to the community. The department played a lead role in coordinating and shaping the COAG agenda, working closely with state and territory

governments and Commonwealth agencies through seven Working Groups: Health and Ageing; Productivity; Climate Change and Water; Infrastructure; Business Regulation and Competition; Housing; and Indigenous Reform.

Climate change is one of the great global challenges of our age and remains at the top of the government's policy agenda. Together with the Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism and the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, the department supported the development of the \$4.5 billion Clean Energy Initiative, including the \$1.5 billion Solar Flagships Program and the \$100 million National Energy Efficiency Initiative (Smart Grids). We provided support to the government in developing, announcing and implementing the Global Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) Institute, which now has over 100 foundation members, as well as the \$2 billion CCS Flagship Program.

National water policy has also been an issue of central importance during the 2008–09 year. The department contributed to the implementation of the \$12 billion Water for the Future initiative and the new management arrangements for the Murray–Darling Basin. Indigenous policy is also a key priority for the government and the department. In collaboration with the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the department prepared the Prime Minister's first annual statement to parliament on Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage.

The department played a central role in developing the Jobs and Training Compact (the Compact) which incorporates the Compacts with Young Australians and Retrenched Workers and the \$650 million Jobs Fund. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed the Compact at its meeting in April 2009.

Security and international engagement

The department was also at the centre of a number of significant national security policy developments during the 2008–09 year. A highlight was the department's contribution to the preparation of the Prime Minister's inaugural National Security Statement (NSS), delivered to the parliament in December 2008. The NSS outlined the Australian Government's vision for national security and provided strategic direction by agreeing to the recommendations of the Homeland and Border Security Review.

Also in December 2008, the Prime Minister announced the appointment of Mr Duncan Lewis AO to the new position of National Security Adviser (NSA), to improve the strategic and operational capability of both the department and government in responding to matters of national security. The NSA is the source of advice to the Prime Minister on all policy matters relating to the security of the nation and oversees the implementation of all national security policy. The position is at the level of Associate Secretary within the department and is supported by a restructured National Security and International Policy Group.

On the international stage, the department coordinated and contributed to a range of actions and initiatives to drive G20 efforts on the global economic crisis. The department also led an extensive whole-of-government effort in support of the Prime Minister's participation in the Washington and London Summits of G20 nations. This investment yielded dividends by enabling the Prime Minister, and through him Australia, to play an important role in shaping the G20 agenda and positioning the G20 as the pre-eminent forum for global leaders to coordinate policy internationally.

ENHANCING OUR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Our focus in 2008–09 has rested heavily on our most important stakeholder: Australian citizens. The department has strengthened its focus on innovation, implementation and evaluation in order to improve outcomes and benefits for citizens. We achieved this by: enhancing the role

of the Cabinet Implementation Unit in monitoring the implementation of policy; supporting the COAG Reform Council to ensure the implementation of COAG initiatives are kept on track; holding community based meetings such as the jobs summits and continuing to take government to the community through regular Community Cabinet meetings.

VALUING OUR STAFF

Our people are our most valuable asset and the quality of the policy advice we provide depends directly on the capability, flexibility and drive of our staff. In recognition of this, we have substantially increased our investment in learning and development and will continue to do so over the next year.

Throughout the year we continued to attract new staff to the department and we welcomed their innovative ideas and approaches. The department is now also home to secondees from a range of other government departments and agencies as well as non-government organisations. Likewise, we have supported outward secondments of departmental officers to a range of other organisations. We have also welcomed interns from diverse institutions, spanning academia and the private sector, including through the Australian National Internship Program managed by the Australian National University.

We demonstrated the value of 'in house' wisdom and experience through the internal promotion of some of our most experienced people. We also celebrated the special achievement of two employees – Mr David Tune, Associate Secretary (Domestic Policy Group), and Ms Jacqui McRae, Assistant Secretary (Cabinet Division) – who each were awarded the Public Service Medal.

We acknowledged the contribution of long serving staff who retired during the year and, in particular, the very significant career of one exceptional officer, Ms Barbara Belcher. Barbara served ten Prime Ministers and retired from the public service in April 2009 as First Assistant Secretary, Government Division, after a career of some 44 years in the APS. Few public servants can make claim to a career more dedicated to public service, more distinguished and more deserving of praise from Prime Ministers and ministers alike than Barbara Belcher.

GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

Last year I emphasised that we would strive in 2008–09 to continuously improve the quality of our policy advice. During the year, we created the Ministerial Support Unit to streamline core operational functions such as ministerial correspondence and briefing. Improving our internal systems, including new briefing templates, ensures our advice continues to be accurate and relevant.

Our corporate systems and policy products will continue to improve over the coming year through enhanced investment in staff learning and development, from our graduates to our Senior Executive Service staff. In 2010 we will double our graduate intake from 15 to 30 and, for the second year running, we will provide a Vacation Employment Program. We are increasing our investment in professional learning and development across the department and to support this we have strengthened our ties with the Australian and New Zealand School of Government.

I am confident that these operational improvements, together with our commitment to investment in people, will stand the department in good stead in the coming year, as we strive to provide high quality policy advice across the government's 2009–10 reform agenda.



Mr Terry Moran AO