

Building the world's best public service – the wrong aim

This goal is an example of Australia's cultural cringe at its worst. Australians do not need or want their public service to be recognised as "the best" by other countries. They are not interested in who has the glossiest brochures and they do not want to pay excessively for extreme services. What Australians care about is fairness.

When fairness is jettisoned for misdirected goals, the public suffers. For example, tax officers have gained great popularity in the past year by remitting General Interest Charge upon request. This initiative was established by a senior officer wiping debt off the accounts rather than collecting tax that is owing. The statistics look good, as outstanding debt is down, taxpayer satisfaction levels are up, and some taxpayers who have previously paid GIC have it unfairly refunded. No one is measuring the adverse effects on business people who make the effort to pay their tax on time. Pursuit of good reports is not pursuit of the needs of the public.

Providing public services is not a business and it is a mistake to judge it on business measures alone.

The goal should be that the Australian Public Service will meet Australians' needs as fairly as possible.