

**Reform of Australian Government Administration**  
**Private submission by Nora Stewart**  
**8 November 2009**

## **Chapter 1: The Australian Government sector today**

**1. Do you think Chapter 1 accurately captures the role of the Australian Public Service?**

Yes.

**2. What are the implications of the statistical snapshot, and of employee views and attitudes in Chapter 1 for the future of the APS?**

- APS employees also have high expectations of their employer, especially Gen X and Y. Generational differences and pressure to promote quickly are creating a need to ensure that employees have the experience and maturity that will hold them in good stead for leadership positions and not promoting them too early before they are ready.

## **Chapter 2: Challenges in the strategic environment**

**3. What are the most important challenges facing the public sector over the next ten years?**

1. How to more effectively “join-the-policy-and-service-dots” *between* and *across* increasingly complex portfolios;
2. Recognising the potential for increased conflict in society as resources are stretched to an overpopulated world – significant issues to do with water, energy, changing climate and conditions, immigration, telecommunications, food and access to space. These and other issues have no easy or ‘correct’ answers, requiring APS employees to be trained to manage and negotiate in ambiguous circumstances.
3. Handling the mass media and using it constructively and proactively to get information across quickly and accurately to the public- not allowing fear of bad press to influence policy advice or decisions at APS level;
4. How to provide relevant policies and accessible services for an increasingly ageing, well-educated and demanding population.

**4. What are the key implications for how the public sector will need to operate?**

- How to attract and retain the best quality employees including how to shift SES from current “super-workers” to more strategic and connected thinkers and doers, who able to harness and integrate the capacity of their team;
- Pressure for the public sector to be more systematic, transparent and just than ever before when making important decisions, developing policies, applying regulations and delivering services to an resource-squeezed world. Key values such as equity, transparency and accountability will become more important as pressure mounts to ensure that the best and just policies,

## **Reform of Australian Government Administration**

### **Submission by Nora Stewart**

- decisions and services are exacted. Key skills such as planning and problem-solving will be more heavily relied on.
- Ensure there is a systemic process that requires all projects and programs to think about potential links with others *within* their areas and *across* Departments;
  - Managing the increased workload per APS employee arising from an increased Australian population, increased retired population, with less resources and more complex issues and technology requiring specialist skills and knowledge.
  - Use different types of employees more effectively: integrate and validate all types of employment such as full-time, part-time, casual, contract and consultant – and use them properly and give them all status under the APS Act. Currently, full-time APS workers (EFT) are seen as more important and valid than all the others.
  - APS workers will need a much better understanding of and connection with the needs of the people they serve – citizens, Ministers and other specialist stakeholder groups- to more clearly target policies and services.
  - The quality, timeliness and availability of information will become increasingly important as governments are pressured to be more responsive to their electorate.
  - Communication needs to become a more implicit part of every planned policy and service to ensure that the policy or service can be clearly understood within the APS and outside to the mass media, citizens, Ministers, etc.
  - Develop programs that sponsor routine exchange of staff and ideas between the public and private sector for professional and personal development across both middle and senior management.

## **Chapter 3: An aspiration for Australia's public service**

### **5. What do you think is an appropriate aspiration for the Australian Public Service?**

Yes.

### **6. Do the five key characteristics outlined in Chapter 3 adequately encapsulate what you would expect from a high performing public service?**

Yes, including the following comments:

- Defined objectivity – decisions based on evidence rather than opinion;
- Responsiveness should include *sincere* problem-solving – an indication that there is a *need to want* to help people and find real solutions, rather than just going through the motions, and knowing this is of no real help at all or not caring.
- Maturity – showing wisdom and good judgment when taking decisions

## **Reform of Australian Government Administration**

### **Submission by Nora Stewart**

that affect people's lives.

- Connectedness – taking time to consider all the relevant parts to a situation and anticipating where other problems may arise as a result of a decision taken and ameliorating or addressing this.

## **Chapter 4: A values driven culture that retains public trust**

### **7. Should the APS Values be streamlined? What values do you consider should be included in a revised set of APS values?**

- The values should be simplified and reflexive – what applies to the citizens should also be applied inside the organisation and across the APS;
- Seeing the big picture, the long-term and the connections between that. Valuing long-term holistic approach over short-term, reductionist approach. See [Attachment 1](#) for a set of proposed APS values that include these notions.
- Also need to pay attention to and clarify the employment relationship – what happens to contractors, consultants and casual workers – alternate workers? These are not covered under the APS Act and not covered by the APS values. How to provide protection for APS and alternate workers.

### **8. How do we ensure that APS leaders fulfil their responsibilities to promote and uphold the values?**

- Be clear what the values look like in practice, and then get an upwards and sideways appraisal of how they are going.
- Get rid of individual contracts for SES, as this secrecy increases competition between SES and does not assist with a collegiate approach and does not allow SES to empathise/ understand conditions for their employees.
- Get rid of the use of referees as a way of employing and promoting people – can create strange dynamics when supervision relationship is poor but cannot be said because of fear of a bad reference.
- Keep a balance - remember also that APS leaders are just people, and we all make mistakes sometimes. Too much pressure to do the "right thing" can be negative too.

### **9. Do you think the APS engages appropriately and actively with government on an apolitical basis?**

No. Too much willing compliance, and not enough of a frank and fearless approach. This is partly a result of too much competition within SES ranks to be promoted, and also from past experience that the Government doesn't want to hear bad news. I hope this is a thing of the past soon.

### **10. Are further reforms needed to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the APS when dealing with ministerial offices?**

Yes. Ministerial advisers and their staff should be just that – advisers, not making decisions about matters of public importance that they are not accountable for. However, the Members of Parliamentary Staff (MOPS) Act 1984 has some difficulties, as outlined by Dr. Ian Holland in his

## Reform of Australian Government Administration Submission by Nora Stewart

Research Note no.5 2002-03 (20 August 2002) as follows:

“Mechanisms that contribute to the accountability of MoPS staff are limited but do exist. These include some elements of the Prime Minister's [Guide to Ministerial Responsibility](#). In 1998 a member of Minister for Resources Warwick Parer's staff was sacked for trading shares in breach of the Guide. There is also arguably a convention that ministers take responsibility for their staffers' actions. In practice, however, this seldom happens.

Ministerial staff have resigned because of errors they have reportedly made in their work. High profile examples have included the resignation of two staff from the Prime Minister's office during the 'travel rorts affair' in 1997,<sup>(6)</sup> and the sacking in 2001 of staff from the Deputy Prime Minister's office following the mis-handling of an Australian National Audit Office report on road funding.<sup>(7)</sup> The potentially high price MoPS staff may pay for mistakes is likely to provide some measure of accountability, though only in very particular sets of circumstances.

The accountability mechanisms do not include parliamentary scrutiny of MoPS staff as they do in the case of public servants. Those mechanisms that do exist are relevant only to ministerial staff, leaving the majority of MoPS staff untouched.

### Possible Reforms

Options for MoPS Act reform include:<sup>(8)</sup>

- restructuring legislation to distinguish ministerial staff from other MoPS employees ;
- including in the Act statements about roles and responsibilities of employees, particularly those employed by ministers ;
- inserting similar material, but through the Certified Agreement and individual employment contracts ;
- creating Parliamentary accountability by allowing ministerial staff to appear as witnesses before Parliamentary committees ;
- inserting a code of conduct to parallel those of the Service Acts ;
- inserting a code of conduct, but framed instead in terms of what staff should *not* do, as in the British [Code for Special Advisers](#) ;
- creating a Commissioner (who might or might not be located in the [Australian Public Service Commission](#) (APSC)) to investigate breaches of a MoPS Act Code, or;
- giving the existing APSC a role in supporting the staff of parliamentarians (separate from any investigatory role).”

6. Ann Tieman, 'Problem or Solution? The Role of Ministerial Staff', in Jenny Fleming and Ian Holland (eds), *Motivating Ministers to Morality*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2001, pp. 91-103.

7. Dennis Shanahan, 'Anderson in the alien corn', *The Australian*, 17 February 2001.

8. Some of these options have been canvassed elsewhere. See Verona Burgess, 'Accountability: an increasingly vexed question', *Canberra Times*, 21 July 2002; Andrew Podger's evidence to the Senate Select Committee, op. cit., 18 April 2002.

SOURCE: [Research Note Index 2002-03](#)

Research Note no.5 2002-03

Members of Parliament (Staff) Act: Accountability Issues

Dr Ian Holland, Politics and Public Administration Group, 20 August 2002

## **Chapter 5: High quality, forward looking and creative policy advice**

### **11. How can internal and external collaboration be strengthened to improve policy development and implementation?**

- More focus on the outcome and less on the output and the ego – micro-management of issues by competitive SES is killing any notion of substantial policy development and collaboration.
- Clarity and agreement about what “policy” is.

### **12. What should be done to continuously improve the capability of the APS workforce in policy formulation and implementation?**

- Better and more training for APS workers on analysis, policy development and project management.

### **13. What can be done to bring the workforce development approach of the APS up to the level of the best organisations globally?**

- APS workers need to understand how important their work is and the impact that it has on people’s lives everyday. A clearer link between their work and the impact could be a powerful driver and motivator for people to want to do better.
- APS leaders could do a better job in communicating purpose to their people, explaining why their work is important, how all the parts fit together and encouraging public servants to do a good job.

### **14. How do you think a stronger culture of innovation can be fostered?**

APS workers need better skills in understanding risk so they can make better judgements about taking risks and making innovation. They also need to see some examples of this from their leaders.

### **15. What approaches to engaging with risk are most appropriate for the APS to provide high quality, forward looking and creative policy advice?**

- Properly understanding risk and ways of managing it is the first step.

### **15. How can agency performance management processes be amended to maximise the focus on the attainment of outcomes?**

Pardon? Does this question mean how can we better get where we are going? One suggestion would be to use plain English to explain what we are trying to do. As per my comment Q.20, performance management systems need to be simplified and be able to be understood by those using them.

## **Chapter 6: High quality, effective programs and services focused on the needs of citizens**

### **17. How do we embed a citizen centred philosophy in all aspects of program and service design and delivery?**

- APS workers must become more aware of the impact of their work on people’s lives. What they do is very important and they need to treat the

## **Reform of Australian Government Administration**

### **Submission by Nora Stewart**

[work and its' implications seriously](#). APS workers can be reminded of this by having regular meetings with those they are helping or with representative groups, and listening closely to what they are saying.

- Get rid of the concept of *customer* in Government agencies. Customers can choose their provider, however citizens cannot shop around. Citizens have no choice about provider and they must deal with the agencies that exist.
- In addition, stop attempting to equate the public sector with the private sector. Government must be effective and efficient but it does not operate on a profit and loss basis in the same sense as business. The value of good government administration is that it should have the culture and capacity to consider new and innovative ideas, leading to different approaches and solutions to its considerably complex nature.

#### **18. How can we better bring together service design, delivery and policy formulation processes—within individual programs and across all of government?**

#### **19. What options could be pursued to ensure citizens, especially those with higher needs, can access government information and services that they need?**

Better trained and qualified APS workers to deal with those citizens with the highest needs, rather than what we have now – the least able people helping the least able, and the most able people helping the most able. Comparing Centrelink vs DFAT - we need to recognise that offering complex human services is just as skilled and important as strategic international policy. See also comments about the class system that has been created across different agencies through agency-level certified agreements.

#### **20. How can we ensure performance management frameworks focus on the attainment of outcomes for citizens?**

Current performance management frameworks are ineffective because they are too convoluted and miss the point. A simple performance management framework will do three things:

1. Make the purpose of work clear and give some idea of how we know we are on track;
2. Provide a useful, aligned system to help get there – values, decision-making, policy development, physical resources, etc;
3. Provide support and feedback to the workers who are part of the system – training, coaching, encouragement, pay, etc – to know they can contribute and that they are on track.

## **Chapter 7: Flexibility and agility**

#### **21. What is the optimal rate of mobility between APS agencies and other parts of the labour market? What could the APS do to encourage and support greater mobility?**

## **Reform of Australian Government Administration**

### **Submission by Nora Stewart**

- Good question. However, I suspect the rate of mobility is not the issue but the quality of the people that come to the APS, and what they contribute to the APS and vice-versa, is more important.

#### **22. What practical mechanisms could be used to foster a more unified public service culture?**

- Get rid of Departmental Certified Agreements. These create a huge amount of unnecessary work and have created a class system across Departments of lower, middle and upper class Departments, who can afford to pay less or more, depending on appropriations. Why should Departments dealing with social issues not be able to pay as much as central policy departments for their staff?
- Invest more in an APS-wide training program. Consider an 'APS Faculty' at a prestigious tertiary institution. The curriculum should include non-degree options that can build to graduate and post-graduate courses. Course content should include the philosophy and practice of government in a balance enhancing culture as well as capability.

#### **23. How could recruitment practices be enhanced within Australian Government entities? What are the strengths of current recruitment processes?**

- Stop seeing recruitment just as a process. Most agencies have recruitment that is like a juggernaut, an approach that is poorly thought out and unstoppable once a position is advertised as vacant. Recruitment should be a carefully thought out strategy that is part of the workforce planning approach, and potential candidates should be treated with respect.
- Evidence that someone can do a job should be stringent and appropriate to the job. There is an over-reliance on written job applications and interviews. Also, job references are known in the HR academic literature to be one of the least reliable forms of evidence that a person is suitable for a job and yet APS still persists using these. Better forms of evidence are samples of work, setting work projects as part of the job selection process, or assessment centres that review dynamics, communication and team skills based on active observation. The type of selection process should be customised to suit the level and type of job.
- More thought needs to be given to the needs of a job (not just recruiting the same as last time), what type of skills and capabilities are now required, and also how many hours are required for the job. Most jobs are full-time by default, without proper consideration of the workload which may be too much, just right or too little for the time available.
- Use probation period properly – to assess people for suitability to perform at level – and they should leave if they do not meet requirements of the job level early.
- The strength of the current recruitment process is that there is a process at all.

## **Reform of Australian Government Administration**

### **Submission by Nora Stewart**

#### **24. What are your top three ideas to encourage the pursuit of continuous improvement across the public service?**

1. Stop the continuous and disruptive movement of people in and out of teams and allow them to start performing and get results. This will encourage people to try to make improvement when they are clear about what they are doing and understand more about their job.
2. Give greater recognition to and foster the advantage of team-based approaches (revisit the value of the 1990s PSC team promotion program known as 2+2=5). This requires mature, adult relationships to work well.
3. Clarify the difference between "improvement" and "change". Change is not always an improvement.

## **Chapter 8: Efficiency in all aspects of government operations**

#### **25. How can Australian Government policy departments improve their own efficiency?**

- See answer to Q.27.

#### **26. How can Australian Government service delivery agencies improve their own efficiency?**

- See answer to Q.27.

#### **27. What mechanisms should be used to systematically improve efficiency across the public service as a whole?**

- Bring back the APS 1-4 levels that will provide stability, calm and efficiency to the APS and give them the respect they deserve. Cost of APS staff is the highest component of budget appropriations to Departments. *Have appropriately trained/ qualified people working at appropriate work levels.* For example do not have EL2 policy people operating photocopiers, completing their travel card acquittals, etc. This is an extremely inappropriate type of work for a highly trained person and they tend not to be as efficient as someone trained for those jobs, who can do it faster, better and they are paid appropriately.
- Get rid of Departmental Certified Agreements. These create a huge amount of unnecessary work and have created a class system across Departments of lower, middle and upper class Departments, who can afford to pay less or more, depending on appropriations. Why should Departments dealing with social issues not be able to pay as much as central policy departments for their staff?
- Question the notion that APS employees never lose in any financial transaction – APS workers rarely get demoted, and they never, never lose out if an entitlement changes. This is not how the rest of the world operates and it can be an unfair imposition on the public purse.
- Bring back HR / Personnel areas that actually help people to manage their people or do it for them. The experiment of devolving responsibility to managers has largely failed, as most managers actually are superior

## **Reform of Australian Government Administration**

### **Submission by Nora Stewart**

technical workers, with little time, skill or interest in actually managing their people. This also raises a larger fundamental issue about the need to properly stream people into work and up the hierarchy – having a separate technical work stream, an admin / management stream and a mixed stream that involves both types of work, to give people choices that suit their abilities.

- Put in place an IT driving licence system to ensure that every single APS worker knows how to use a computer and is given regular training updates. This might also include other gadgets such as phones and Blackberries. A huge amount of time is wasted with people who don't know how to effectively use technology.
- Create a simple and integrated records management protocol for paper and electronic records. Every APS agency I have worked for since 1994 has still not worked out a sensible approach to this and instead of a paperless office, we have mountains of paper and no-one can find anything electronically.
- Apply security clearances appropriately, consistently and thoroughly to job level, commensurate with responsibility and need for access. I have had positions where I have had only restricted clearance and had access to information that I shouldn't have, and other situations where I applied for a short-term contract to translate a certified agreement (public document) and was required to apply for a protected security clearance.

#### **28. What skills and capabilities are required to drive efficiency throughout public sector organisations?**

- Skills
  - i. Much better planning and project management skills;
  - ii. Problem-solving skills;
  - iii. Technology skills – see answer to Q.27.
  - iv. Conflict management and resolution skills.
- Capabilities
  - i. Understanding all aspects of the purpose and objectives of the work being undertaken when considering efficiency ie sometimes not understanding these can lead to short-term efficiencies and long-term deficiencies;
  - ii. Commonsense and judgment when considering value for money;
  - iii. Ability to challenge the current paradigm/ process;
  - iv. Understanding the importance of being careful with public money, particularly in those areas that are invisible long-term multipliers such as APS pay rises, whilst still being able to get the job done.

## Reform of Australian Government Administration Submission by Nora Stewart

### Attachment 1

#### Comments about the current APS values

These values are largely expressed from the point of view of the employee-employer relationship and detail the expectations of employees from their employer, rather than a set of values that apply mutually and to individuals in service of the public.

#### The Australian Public Service:

- a. is apolitical, performing its functions in an impartial and professional manner
- b. is a public service in which employment decisions are based on merit
- c. provides a workplace that is free from discrimination and recognises and utilises the diversity of the Australian community it serves
- d. has the highest ethical standards
- e. is openly accountable for its actions, within the framework of Ministerial responsibility to the Government, the Parliament and the Australian public
- f. is responsive to the Government in providing frank, honest, comprehensive, accurate and timely advice and in implementing the Government's policies and programs
- g. delivers services fairly, effectively, impartially and courteously to the Australian public and is sensitive to the diversity of the Australian public
- h. has leadership of the highest quality
- i. establishes workplace relations that value communication, consultation, co-operation and input from employees on matters that affect their workplace
- j. provides a fair, flexible, safe and rewarding workplace
- k. focuses on achieving results and managing performance
- l. promotes equity in employment
- m. provides a reasonable opportunity to all eligible members of the community to apply for APS employment
- n. is a career-based service to enhance the effectiveness and cohesion of Australia's democratic system of government
- o. provides a fair system of review of decisions taken in respect of employees.

There is a need to acknowledge the APS as an organisation made up of an overall system with a purpose, and with people who define and carry out the purpose. Each part needs to be defined separately but as overlapping parts of a whole.

1. Values for the APS system as a whole.
2. Values for all APS workers including leaders.

*See next page for expansion of these two concepts.*

# Reform of Australian Government Administration

## Submission by Nora Stewart

### Attachment 1 *continued*

#### 1. Values for the APS<sup>1</sup>

The APS will ***create confidence and trust*** by taking an ***integrated, aligned and interconnected*** approach to all of the following values:

- *Public clarity of purpose and direction* for each entity within and between the APS;
- *Outcomes that maximise long-term and broad public benefit*; and incorporate an apolitical approach;
- Systems and processes that support purpose and direction;
- Capacity development that supports people
- Problem-solving and solutions;
- Equity;
- Transparency;
- Accountability;
- Upholding the *law*;
- *Objectivity* based on evidence;
- *Consideration* – including being open, inclusive of alternative views, thoughtful and prepared.
- *Resourcefulness*;
- *Responsiveness* – accurate, timely, articulate, comprehensive and helpful;
- Ensuring *mutual responsibilities* and *obligations* in all relationships are clear, understood and are able to be implemented, with applicable sanctions when they are not.

#### 2. Values for APS workers including leaders (should be first person)

All APS workers (***I will***) be ***responsible and deal professionally*** with Ministers, other elected officials, citizens, employees, workers and colleagues by demonstrating the following values:

- An apolitical approach;
- Actions that support public interest and not self-interest;
- Identifiable objectivity based on evidence and with reference to the APS system (chain of command, records, existing policy, legislation, etc);
- An equitable/non-discriminatory approach when making proposals, recommendations and decisions; and when acting;
- Consideration; such as:
  - A willingness to give others a fair go;
  - Open to entertaining other possibilities and views;
  - An appropriate amount of thought and planning applied to all situations before acting.
- Resourcefulness;
- Problem-solving;
- Responsiveness – accurate, timely, articulate, comprehensive and helpful;
- Willingness to be accountable and actions that support this;
- Positive reinforcement of these values by acknowledgement when demonstrated by other APS workers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Most of these terms will require clearer definition