

# Submission by

Colin Lyons

To

## Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration

### Consolidated set of questions for discussion

#### Chapter 1 The Australian Government sector today

1. Do you think Chapter 1 accurately captures the role of the Australian Public Service?  
*It provides an informative snapshot.*
2. What are the implications of the statistical snapshot, and of employee views and attitudes in Chapter 1 for the future of the APS?

#### Chapter 2 Challenges in the strategic environment

3. What are the most important challenges facing the public sector over the next ten years?  
*To remain efficient, cost-effective and retain the confidence and respect of the broader Australian population and business community.*
4. What are the key implications for how the public sector will need to operate?  
*It will need to be seen to be responsive and transparent by the Australian Public; it will need to be considered an interesting and challenging workplace by existing and current employees. It will need to be careful not to be a pace-setter in salaries and conditions by other public services and the private sector or this will attract strong criticism from outside the APS.*

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

5. What do you think is an appropriate aspiration for the Australian Public Service?  
*To become as competent and efficient and well-respected as possible, and rank highly with the public services of other industrialised countries.*
6. Do the five key characteristics outlined in Chapter 3 adequately encapsulate what you would expect from a high performing public service?  
*These appear to be a reasonably comprehensive list of key characteristics.*

## 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?

*I think the values included could be more simply worded and less general in their nature. I believe that many public servants do not have a lot of confidence in the application of these values as they are too broad and difficult to apply.*

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

*The leaders as they are called, should be reviewed in their performance and audited if appropriate with regard to upholding these values. If this doesn't happen, then the 'values' tend to become little more than an empty list of statements.*

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

*I think there is a strong perception among the public and many public servants, that the public service no longer gives frank and fearless advice in the spirit of the Westminster system. It is not encouraged and public servants are rewarded for playing the game and delivering what the government and minister of the day want to hear.*

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

*Maybe the existing rules and responsibilities are clear enough but what is lacking is a clear statement encouraging public servants to be fearless in giving advice to their departmental heads and Minister which might be at odds with the prevailing policy stance.*

## 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?

*I think that collaboration can be improved by making this a deliberate policy priority and conveying this stance to relevant external and internal stakeholders. These stakeholders will need to be given adequate notice of policy development deadlines so that they can make quality input if desired.*

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

*I think a lot of training is offered but little opportunity to implement the training once officers return to the office. Therefore one tangible and valuable way to improve policy development and implementation is to make sure that officers have the opportunity to apply the lessons from their training. This training is often at a very considerable financial cost and the*

*taxpayer can reasonably expect it to result in improved outcomes for the agency and individual..*

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

*I suggest that one approach would be to examine what overseas public services have tried, what has worked and what hasn't. We can always learn from the experiences of others.*

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

*It would certainly help if staff were actively encouraged to make suggestions for change and that there would be no potential career damage in suggesting changes to the 'status quo'. Without an accommodating culture within agencies or organisations, officers will always remain reluctant to be very innovative.*

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

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

*The criteria on which agency performance is to be measured will need to have the key tasks and objectives to be stated in outcome terms and not output terms, as they often are currently.*

## **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?

*Currently I believe that the over-riding priority is to serve the Minister, not the public, even though it is called the public service. In order to embed a citizen centred philosophy in all aspects of the program, there would need to be a very tangible and articulated change in the way that the APS operates and the SES in particular.*

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

*One way in which these programs and services might be better co-ordinated is for a common methodology and language to be used in all agencies, with a minimum of public service jargon and more plain English used.*

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

*I believe that all agencies which offer services to those with such needs, could publish a concise explanatory booklet and put details on their websites about the services they offer, who is eligible and how to access them.*

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

*By explicitly including references to and outcome measures which reflect the needs of citizens. For example, when members of the public seek explanations from departments about government policy, they should expect an informative and timely response.*

## 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?

*I believe that one of the major barriers to mobility between the APS and other areas of the labour market is the lack of portability of benefits such as superannuation, recreation and sick leave. If these were removed, mobility would be greatly enhanced.*

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

*Currently, there are big differences in the reputation of different agencies as far as their professionalism, workplace morale and perceived management capability. If these could be brought closer together in a positive way, I believe a more unified public service culture could be achieved.*

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

*I think there is significant scope for improvement in this area of the APS. I believe that there is a considerable lack of confidence in key areas of the current system. In particular this lack of confidence lies with the use of the very broad and generic selection criteria, the lack of transparency in the selection process, the difficulty in making contact with 'contact officers', the time taken to complete the process in many instances and the failure to respond to officers seeking feedback on unsuccessful applications.*

*These problems result in many officers deciding that they will not lodge applications unless they believe they have strong reasons to believe they will be selected for interview.*

*In particular, a major concern which officers face in considering whether to apply is that the selection criteria are so general that they often convey little useful information about the nature of an advertised position and the expectations of the organisation. In many instances, the duty statement does not clarify the role either.*

*Another very frustrating problem encountered by officers seeking information about advertised positions is the difficulty getting to speak to the contact officer. This problem varies between agencies but it is not unusual to find that contact officers are not available prior to positions closing.*

*Furthermore, in many instances, no alternative contact person is available either.*

*Another significant problem which officers encounter in the APS is the time taken to complete the selection and recruitment process or even commence it. Receiving feedback is also a major shortcoming as some agencies appear to place little importance on this aspect of the process and their responsible officers take their lead from this policy stance.*

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

- 1. Make sure that selection panels, for all executive level appointments, always include one external member, wherever possible. This person could be from another agency or from a consulting recruitment firm.*
- 2. Write position descriptions in language and context which is informative and meaningful to people outside the agency (including the private sector) where vacancies are advertised.*
- 3. Make sure that contact officers for advertised positions are both readily available and knowledgeable about the positions for which they have been listed.*

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

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

*They can improve their efficiency by giving this task a high priority. Currently, it is accorded a high priority in some respects eg answering ministerial letters, but not in dealing with many other areas where the minister is not involved.*

*Policy efficiency could also be improved if sections and branches providing policy advice are all aware of each other's existence and particular areas of expertise and knowledge.*

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

*The same approach should be adopted as stated above. Agencies should set service delivery targets and make it a high priority to meet them. These targets should deal with both time and service quality attributes.*

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

*It can be a daunting task for the public to deal with public service agencies, knowing where to start, who to telephone or write to. It would make a considerable improvement in efficiency if a standardised approach across the APS was adopted for communicating with the public and between agencies.*

***This would require a consistent approach to providing information on agency websites and in telephone directories. This is particularly important for people seeking to speak to relevant officers, raise concerns or gain information about agency policies and services.***

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

***The key skills required are the ability to solicit and convey information to agencies and communicate effectively with their representatives. The officers entrusted with this role must have the capability to ensure that decisions on changes to policy to bring about greater efficiency are carried through.***