
COMMENTS ON 'REFORM OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION'

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GENERAL COMMENTS

Reforms outlined in the discussion paper provide a good framework for refreshing and improving the APS.

In defining the framework for improving the APS there should be significant weight put on creating a change in culture towards continuous improvement rather than status quo. , Changes in behaviour are needed to achieve better performance. Any well-designed institution can be undermined by people not committed to its organising principles. It is the commitment and loyalty of the staff that overcome any inevitable weaknesses in the design of such a large institution such as the APS.

Two important issues of behaviour that will affect the capacity of the APS to achieve its goalare:

1. The ability in the APS of working cooperatively within and across portfolio boundaries; and
2. A working understanding of the government's agenda across the full spectrum of policy and portfolio areas. One priority should be strengthening the dialogue between not only the APS and its Ministers, but also between the APS and major stakeholders in each policy area.

CH 1. AUSTRALIAN GOVT SECTOR TODAY

Chapter 1 seems accurate in its exploration of the present status.

CH 2. CHALLENGES IN THE STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

A key challenge for the APS is working across portfolio or policy boundaries. There needs to be a sharing of information, ideas and sometimes control. In some cases this is can be solved by better communication and an understanding of joint interests ('Who else needs to know?'), A bigger challenge is turf protection (an unwillingness to cooperate at middle management level - 'does this threaten my budget, recognition, or control?')

A solution might be to ensure all levels in the APS understand that there is one government and include this in the APS value system. The breakdown of silos in the APS will depend on changing behaviour across all levels of the APH and can be achieved through leadership ensuring a whole of government approachThe barriers to collaboration section in Ch 5 bears on this issue directly. There are some obvious natural barriers (such as federal – state interactions; and statutory authority – core department interactions) where it requires a continuous effort to ensure communication channels are open and opportunities for collaboration and reform are not lost. Collaboration outside your own 'silo' is important. Managing these interactions falls to middle to upper levels usually, and it should be included in evaluation of leadership performance.

CH 3. ASPIRATION

The 2 line aspirational statement is good on outcomes, efficiency and public interest – 'best in the world, excellence and citizen focus'. By pitching it at whole of APS level, it leaves out the personal aspects – such as high personal standards of behaviour, such as integrity, accountability and inclusive behaviour – which means individuals in the APS might not 'connect' with the aspiration so well.

CH 4. VALUES DRIVEN CULTURE THAT RETAINS PUBLIC TRUST

There are several references in the paper to 'understanding the government's agenda'. The way in which public servants come to understand the government's agenda warrants closer attention in this reform process. This involves all levels of the APS understanding Government's intent sufficiently to make a contribution and ensure policies and programs are more likely to reflect the policy's outcome.

The importance of the issue is emphasised but less discussion of how to achieve it. There are comments about mechanisms for improving exchange between APS and government Ministers.

Good ideas (innovation) can come from any level employee. There should be considerable weight put upon promulgating the broader objectives of the Minister throughout each Department, and mechanisms of exchange between the APS and their Ministers should be encouraged. It should be one of the key criteria for successful leadership at mid to upper levels in the Service.

It is critical for good policy and successful outcomes to include stakeholder consultation and involvement. Good policy and good policy advice, needs to clearly articulate its effect on people – both positive, and negative. Government needs to know the APS has collaborated with the 'end user'. Ch 5. High quality, forward looking and creative policy advice

The skills gap discussion highlights a critical issue, with possible solutions including reviewing better practice mobility provisions; improving skills in recruitment; improving performance management (for handling the situations where people find themselves having taken a step too far up in the management hierarchy or into a functional area for which they are not suited). Learning organisations are important, but selecting for 'smarter' organisations helps speed up the process.

CH 6. HIGH QUALITY EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES FOCUSED ON NEEDS OF CITIZENS

A focus on the needs of citizens is a fundamental capability that should be explicit in performance management, skills development and broader education programs within the APS. The capacity of a person to see the world from the perspective of the customer (and in particular what they or their service area is doing to or for that customer) seems closely related to the basic elements of emotional intelligence. Citizen focus is important not only in frontline service delivery but also in policy development and evaluation (see ch 4).

CH 7 FLEXIBILITY AND AGILITY

My list of 3 ideas to promote continuous improvement:

1. Working smarter by raising the 'people skills' level and improve capacity to self-manage and self-awareness; encourage more thinking, analysis and support for floating of new ideas; expose the innovators to the people who understand the government's agenda – trial in-house think tanks for example
2. Better manage under-performance by helping managers in the difficult task of performance management (explicitly targeted coaching and training) in order to prevent the incremental creep of staff into positions to which they are not suited – this area seems to be absent or minimal in APS development programs yet it is a major impediment to lifting performance.
3. Help managers contribute to agility and improvement by enhancing capacity to prioritise and discontinue low priority, out-dated activities.

Points 2 and 3 are behaviours that are generally dealt with by a 'just do it' approach, yet they are done so badly there should be a more strategic approach to improving them.

CH 8. EFFICIENCY IN ALL ASPECTS

There have been occasions where a broad scale solution (such as travel purchasing) led to increased costs for smaller Agencies who were already operating efficiently. A 'one size' does not automatically fit all.

The public sector has a history of oscillating on decadal cycles between central and decentralized management systems . Whether it is a Division or a Department or the whole of government, there should be some basic principles established.

1. What is outcome sought (eg more cost effective IT services)?
2. How is it measured (KPI's) and what constitutes best practice?
3. What are the options available (central purchasing, Gershon review, etc) to achieve best practice?
4. Do the options work everywhere and at all levels? (see discussion in the paper about small agencies for example)
5. If the efficiencies are not found in a uniform way across the APS, then why is that so?

The aim is give primacy to the outcome rather than having uniformity be the ultimate KPI; but noting that there are some areas, such as industrial relations, where uniformity may well be a valid KPI given the transaction costs for things such as Enterprise Agreements.
