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Mr Terry Moran  
Advisory Group Chair  
Reform of Australian Government Administration

Dear Mr Moran

I wish to provide the following comments for consideration by the Advisory Group.

My interest in this matter has its origins in a lengthy career in the APS and the ACTPS from 1964 until my retirement in 2003. My career in the APS included service with seven Commonwealth departments/agencies in Queensland, TPNG and Canberra. Earlier this year, I resumed service with the Commonwealth when I took up an offer of employment under the MOPS Act.

Although I had originally planned to comment on a number of the issues raised in your discussion paper, time constraints have caused me to focus, somewhat briefly, on just one matter. This particular matter is, in my view, absolutely critical to ensuring that Australia has an effective and apolitical public service that is clearly focused on the Australian community's long term interests. This matter is the inappropriateness of the current tenure arrangements for senior public servants.

My view is, and has been for quite some time, that the introduction of fixed-term contract arrangements for the Senior Executive Services in both the APS and the ACTPS has been a serious backward step with regard to the maintenance of an apolitical public service, with regard to the encouragement of 'frank and fearless' advice and with regard to the long-term policy interest of the communities that are served by each of those Services.

The inclination for past federal governments to seek to create a more responsive and flexible public service focused on implementing a new government's agenda is understandable, particularly given the difficulties experienced from time to time during the second half of the last century. My personal observation of this problem, while working in a major central APS agency following the election of the Labor Government in 1972, remains clearly with me.

From a government's perspective, the SES contract arrangements, that were ultimately introduced into the APS as part of a range of reforms, probably did contribute somewhat to the encouragement of a more flexible and responsive service. However, based on my personal experience within the ACTPS and on reliable information from within the APS, I am convinced that these arrangements have been, on balance, to the clear detriment of the public interest. The career and employment uncertainties created by fixed-term contracts have led to a disturbing trend away from the concept of an apolitical Service and also towards a much more short-term focused Service.

Of course, any trend towards 'short-termism' in the APS in the context of Australia's increasing need to deal with complex major long-term issues such as public health reform, an ageing population, globalisation, climate change, etc., has serious public interest implications. Any APS inclination towards short-termism has also to be considered in the context of the increasingly short-term focus

imposed on governments, parliamentarians and their staff by the nature and demands of today's 24/7 media environment.

Modern democratic processes and the modern media environment, by their nature, have forced political parties to adopt a relatively short-term policy focus. Although generally undesirable, this is probably an inevitable consequence and cost of democracy. Until relatively recently, these short-term tendencies of governments arguably have been, to the benefit of the public interest, somewhat offset by the generally longer-term policy focus of the APS. However, this balance between an elected government's short-term focus and the APS's traditional longer-term focus has been seriously threatened in recent years by the change in tenure arrangements for senior public servants. We now have a situation in which the public's long-term policy needs are increasingly less likely to be properly addressed by any element of the 'government'.

This situation has to be addressed either by a return to the previous tenure arrangements or, at the very least, by the adoption of much longer contract terms with all re-appointment decisions being transparently separated from political influence.

I thank you for the opportunity to submit my comments and views.

Your sincerely

Jim Bright