

*Submission*

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## **Reform of Australian Government Administration.**

### **Building the world's best public service.**

I note that in defining the Government's vision for the Australian Public Service, the Prime Minister has identified what he describes as, "re- invigoration of the Westminster tradition of an independent public service with merit-based selection and continuity of employment between governments". Significantly, this ambition heads his list of seven characteristics of a highly performing public service.(Chapter 3 of Guidelines)

A study of government administration, both state and federal over the past fifty years, leads to the inescapable conclusion that the abandonment of the so-called "Westminster tradition" has had few, if any, positive results in improving the delivery of public services. In making this submission, I especially target the appointment of departmental heads. **Significantly, such positions were once titled "Permanent Head".**

Both state and federal governments have engaged in the practice of going outside the public service in appointing senior positions, including the Head. Intrinsicly, there is nothing to fault this procedure, provided it is carried out scrupulously. Ideally, such positions should be advertised publicly to ensure that the best available talent, both inside the public service and in the private sector may apply.. The selection procedure should be above reproach. The Minister responsible for that department or organization has every right to be a member of the selection committee, but there should also be other objective and qualified senior

public service and private industry representatives, who should be able to bring a wealth of experience to the task.

Note that I am not advocating that Public Service Boards be restored with all the powers over appointments and employment conditions that they once enjoyed.

Nor am I advocating that senior positions in the public service should be restricted only to those already within the service. On the contrary, government administration can obviously be improved by an injection of "outside" talent. My major argument is that such appointments should be made transparently and certainly not by a minister acting alone. Under that regime, we shall never have a public service in which we can place trust. As a corollary, I can only agree with the Prime Minister's hope that the public service will become more independent, with merit-based selection and continuity of employment between governments.

Permanent Heads will, in fact, be Permanent Heads. Public servants will, in fact, be public servants, serving the community to whom they owe a responsibility no less that the responsibility that they owe the Permanent Head, the Minister and the Government of the day.

  
James Prior

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