

Leadership, nation building and the APS

by Terry Fewtrell

The Australian Public Service (APS) is a key agent for building the Australia of the 21st century. As the principal policy advisor and deliverer of services for the national government, the APS needs to reflect the best of Australia, in order to do the best for Australia. The context of the APS is dynamic. Far from being insulated from economic, social, political and technological change, the APS is at the centre of these and other forces and must be effective in interpreting, responding to and driving change in modern Australia.

A range of factors define the macro operating environment of the APS. Each brings its own set of challenges and imperatives. Such factors include:

- social and community expectations of government and the public sector
- globalisation
- technology, in particular the Internet
- the demographics of Australian society at the start of the 21st century
- government/parliamentary expectations and scrutiny.

The mix of all these factors and the unique positioning of the APS, as the administrative arm of government, make it a leading social and community shaping resource. It also makes the leadership of APS agencies an exciting and exacting challenge. Achievement of specific agency objectives has rightly become the principal accountability of managers, team leaders and members. However it is important not to lose sight of the wider context when considering the leadership and performance challenge. Responding successfully to this agenda is a formidable task and agencies need support and encouragement to tap the best available advice and input.

Society and communities are increasingly demanding better performance from government and public services. The emphasis is no longer simply on large program development

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delivering standard bureaucrat-designed outcomes. The end client is now much more clearly in focus, along with the fundamental policy objective. Communities now expect governments to go beyond their organisational or jurisdictional boundaries to deliver real and often customised outcomes. This presents major challenges for all levels of government and their public services, requiring innovative responses and skill sets with different emphases and a particular focus on collegiate and co-operative behaviours.

In the APS context a key focus is the emphasis on Connecting Government. Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Peter Shergold describes whole of government approaches as “the public administration of the future”. This has significant cultural, as well as organisational, challenges. Working openly with communities, other agencies, governments and potential providers requires different attitudes and expertise. Potentially it takes Commonwealth administration much closer to the people, more attuned to regional difference and highlights the need for flexibility and accountability. Responding to the real needs of indigenous communities is a touchstone of these imperatives. Allied to this is the need to more effectively integrate service experience directly into front-end policy development.

The APS operates in a highly contestable environment. Today’s information rich world offers a menu of policy advice and service delivery options. The APS needs to leverage the global community of ideas, to know the vibe of world best practice and inject it into advice to government and program delivery design. Developments in free trade present on-going competitive opportunities and challenges that add yeast to all sectors of the Australian economy and potential for off shore

delivery of government needs. The APS must be open and attuned to these forces and able to interpret and fashion them in ways that enhance best practice and performance in all sectors of the economy.

Technology is refashioning our conceptual models of public administration and its delivery mechanisms. Endorsed e-government agendas articulate in part the direction and tools to be adopted. However Internet and other technologies are ever-changing, opening potential for creative service delivery options. Harnessing and channelling the technology is a major challenge in this area—

so also is managing the cultural impacts and changes.

The age profile of the Australian community presents major challenges for the APS, as documented in the *MAC Organisational Renewal* report. They include retention or replacement of the baby boomers and their knowledge and skills base, positioning the APS to engage and unleash the contributions of generations X and Y and to accommodate a

portfolio career approach. Among the strategies for meeting these challenges are workforce planning, creative attraction and development strategies, executive coaching and building a more porous public service where movement between public and private sectors enhances policy development and delivery.

In the midst of all this it should not be overlooked that the APS exists to serve the government of the day. As the administrative arm of executive government the APS is at the centre of the nation’s governance. Public and parliamentary scrutiny is critical. Ministers and the government are the prime customers of the public servant and there is a legitimate demand for performance, transparency

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and accountability, which underpins confidence in the broad parliamentary system. Allied to this is the challenge to ensure that the APS is responsive while maintaining independence. APS values, professionalism and integrity are fundamental elements of a sustainable public service, as are a range of good administrative practice skills that underpin the broad capabilities of public servants.

So how does the APS respond effectively to these demands? Clear leadership and direction setting is being provided by the nation's top public servant, Peter Shergold. He has recently emphasised the importance of the collegiate and active role of the heads of departments who now "work together much more closely than in the past". Shergold also emphasises the importance of building a new culture of working together across bureaucratic boundaries. Much of this still remains to be applied and made practical at the working level — a task for all agencies and for employees at all levels.

The role of the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) is pivotal to the future of the APS. The purpose of the Commission is to develop a confident, high quality, values based and sustainable APS. It has a critical leadership

role in ensuring the APS meets its challenges. Although the constituency of the APSC is grouped under 16 portfolios, it is in practice devolved across almost 200 agencies, representing a major challenge. Maintaining a sense of unity and collegiality in this dispersed environment is critical to the effectiveness of the APS overall and to the achievement of the objectives delegated by government. The APSC is mandated and positioned to take this service wide perspective and facilitate responses to it that will have real impact.

Clearly the role of the APSC is crucial in building effective responses to what are enormous leadership challenges. The leadership response must come not just at the SES levels of the service, where there is a major task of discerning and interpreting the broader context and framing that meaningfully. It must also extend to middle ranking levels to ensure that the objectives and work plans of teams have context and direction. Such leadership responses must also embody values and behaviours integral to the capabilities and professionalism of the service overall.

The leadership challenge is both broad and deep.

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