

The prescription is right. But can it be administered?

By Terry Fewtrell

Dr Allan Hawke has delivered a report on the ACT's administration that has all the innovation and flair for which he was known when leader and manager in the APS. As a piece of work the report is easy to read and full of references to fresh sources that provide good insight into his key objective: to make the ACT Public Service fit for purpose as the administrative arm of a boutique city state.

The headline grabbing restructure of all agencies into a single entity is not the big breakthrough item in the report. Rather it is the emphasis on the cultural changes and challenges flowing from the city state model that will determine its longer term impact and effectiveness.

A blurring of focus, lack of clear accountabilities and the "desiccation of structures and roles", all combine to impede performance and delivery. Hawke is big on clear lines of sight regarding priorities and clear understanding as to responsibilities. There is little new here, except that in his view current structures and approaches mean that the ACT PS all too often misses the big picture context that defines the real agenda for government priorities.

However the conviction in his remedies are put into doubt by his conclusion that the ACT PS will be able to serve the government better by focusing on a smaller number of priorities. No doubt the ACT government itself would like to be able to focus on a smaller canvas and reduced number of priorities. However it is the nature of a government in a media and data rich community that demands and expectations of government tend to increase not diminish. The concern that seems to drive Hawke relates to alignment and collaboration and ensuring there are meaningful and measurable indicators of priority achievement. In place of "desiccation", Hawke wants the new structures and roles to be fluid, flexible and agile.

The report envisages a public service that leverages its scale and unique characteristics as servicing a well educated and endowed 'city state'. He questions an approach that simply continues a Westminster model framework, inherited from the APS and with a 19th century British provenance.

The logic of the report suggests there is good reason to experiment and innovate, to develop

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Level 2, 9 Sydney Avenue Barton ACT 2600
PO Box 4190 Kingston ACT 2601

Phone 02 6273 0168
Fax 02 62730246
Web yellowedge.com.au

a style of structure and operation that is grounded in the unique governance challenges of Australia's only real city state experiment. Its prescription aims to take advantage of the ACT's uniqueness "to be a leader in innovation in public policy design and service delivery". This is an appropriate but challenging manifesto.

While the review had some consultations with members of the Legislative Assembly it proposes that more work be done to ensure that both the legislative and executive arms of the Canberra model operate in unison, at least in terms of expectations and goal setting. Hawke sees merit in both Government and Assembly coming to some understanding that would bring "non-government Members into the policy and program design process sooner than is currently the case" and enable municipal type issues to be dealt with expediently. While proclaiming that the ACT administration "is not broken", the report is quick to identify a few areas where it clearly is. Planning and land management is one area that stands out on this front. The recommendations include the plain and urgent advocacy that the Land development Agency Board be replaced immediately. The appropriateness is also questioned of continuing government ownership of Capital Linen Service and Yarralumla Nursery. Another thread in the report is that wherever possible statutory decision making powers be vested in public servants, rather than boards and statutory officers. This is consistent with making the administration take responsibility for and be accountable for proper decision making. It is also runs parallel to a push to make jobs real and meaningful.

This raises an issue not addressed by the report, but which must inevitably be considered in the new administrative world of ACT PS – the number and deployment of senior executives. As has occurred in the APS in recent years, there has been considerable growth in SES numbers, often accompanied by and in part allied to, the delegating up of decision making and a curious reluctance to expect more of administrative staff.

In both the Commonwealth and parts of the ACT administration the lack of meaningful jobs and real accountabilities is directly linked to deskilling at lower levels as work is sucked up to overstretched senior managers, locked into a risk averse environment. It is hard to imagine that the cultural and capability reforms envisaged by Hawke won't demand or produce a reduction in senior level positions.

One of the key challenges in the implementation phase will be to define and articulate how the proposed Directorates and units within them are meant to function. Moving to the innovative and flexible working arrangements envisaged by Hawke will require people being able 'to see' and understand how things are meant to be different, both in roles and style. Clear expectations and performance markers will also be necessary in this area.

....implementation should occur with "an energising pace of change".
