

Change in the public service –

We haven't seen the like of it!

By Terry Fewtrell

The public service is seen by many as unchanging. To a point this is correct and appropriate. However for much of the last 20 years, the Australian Public Service has been at the centre of constant and radical reform. Now it seems the nature and impact of that change is set to become far more dramatic.

Prime Minister Rudd has spoken of what he calls 'the productive tension between continuity and change' in the history of the public service. On several occasions during the past 18 months he has also referred to the:

- things that are good in the public service that need to be retained;
- good things that seem to have been lost in recent years and need to be re-discovered; and
- things that need to change, improve or be developed to meet new challenges.

The PM's diagnosis and prescription form a large part of the focus of the recently announced Advisory Group in its review process. The Group's mandate is to develop a reform blueprint for Australian Government Administration 'to achieve the aspiration of being the best public service in the world' .

Much of the agenda for the review draws on the work of Terry Moran, Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, in his previous role of Secretary to the Premier's Department in Victoria. An emphasis on the need to rebuild policy capabilities is a common theme from both jurisdictions. When added to the reflections of a PM, two years into the job, the ground to be tilled may be wider than it is deep.

The public service in the period ahead certainly faces some significant changes that involve real cultural and behavioural shifts and go beyond organisational and procedural matters. A focus on such items as:

- citizen centred philosophy of public administration;
- development of 'policy hubs'; and
- rationalisation and relevance of APS Values

suggest that we are on the threshold of fashioning a public service, not just for the 21st century but specifically for the new information and public media age, within an emerging ethos of citizen supremacy. These topics may appear to be within the existing paradigm of public service change. In truth they are likely to be far more dramatic.

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The combination of these factors has potentially radical implications. While there may remain a desire to reaffirm traditional Westminster values, a future that involves a strong focus 'on citizens in the formulation of policy advice' and a push 'to build a pro-disclosure culture within the Public Service' is sure to rewrite the rules, challenge long established cultures and practices and require new protocols. It shapes as a formidable challenge – one likely to require several iterations to get right.

Identifying these challenges is not to denigrate or reject the motives or objectives on which they are based. It is simply to recognise that we are entering a time when fundamental forces in contemporary society that are shaping many other parts of our community, are now starting to flow into the realm of government and public administration. The impacts and driving forces are irresistible. Indeed we should give credit to leaders who recognise the signs of the emerging times and seek to harness them for the community's good.

The Advisory Group's discussion paper raises a broad range of questions, precisely to prompt thinking and input. Written in a refreshingly simple style it provides the opportunity for broad ranging comments and highly targeted suggestions. Arguably, one area of focus emerges as a Trojan horse. The concept of a 'citizen centred philosophy' is on a totally different plain to past references to citizen engagement by former PM&C head Peter Shergold - then the emphasis principally was on moving away from a crude customer orientation.

In the words of the Discussion Paper, 'being truly citizen centred means placing the citizen at the centre of the entire public service endeavour. This requires a meaningful commitment to actively engaging and empowering people at all points along the service delivery chain...' A little later the paper highlights that 'new technologies are bringing new opportunities to enhance feedback between service delivery and policy or program design areas but a cultural shift among policy and service delivery agencies is needed for these opportunities to be fully exploited' .

Just what a citizen centred philosophy would mean in practical application is a moot point. Few would quibble with the rhetoric or aspiration but the shift to this style of operation needs to be further articulated in quite practical terms. Web 2 technology is certainly changing our world, making politics, community advocacy and campaigning much more accessible and broadly democratic. The Obama presidential campaign stands as the current benchmark for winning government. What is needed is an easily understood model for 'doing' government.

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It is revealing to apply to this challenge, some of the government's thinking and expectations in the area of technology usage from one of its other reform initiatives – the Web 2.0 Taskforce. In launching this venture, Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner noted that: “Information technologies are transforming the way that governments do business all around the world. They're opening up new possibilities for government to improve transparency, accountability and efficiency of government” . He went on to note that it is crucial Australia is among the leaders in applying Web 2.0 technologies. The Taskforce has undertaken a public consultation program and is to report findings and recommendations by 31 December this year.

The Chair of this exercise Dr Nicholas Gruen expresses the challenge for the Taskforce in terms of: 'take the situation that we're in now, where government information is secret, unless a decision is made to release it, and basically reverse that, so that government information is in principle, open, accessible, available, unless there's some good reason for that not to be the case' . It is no exaggeration to say that to deliver on this agenda will require breathtaking changes in the culture and operation of the public service. Indeed it is hard to draw a line on where rhetoric ends and reality prevails.

Clearly the government is committed in philosophical and policy terms to the broad application of these principles. Prime Minister Rudd has said the taskforce is 'looking at ways to use information technology to build a pro-disclosure culture within the public service' . Other policy initiatives in this area already confirm its preference. The recent abolition of conclusive certificates under amendments to the Freedom of Information Act testifies to this, along with other foreshadowed changes in this area of the law.

We have become accustomed to view whole of government approaches as referring to working across agencies and jurisdictions, breaking down barriers and recognising that citizens want government to move beyond dry arguments about responsibilities appropriate to particular levels of government and deliver services in ways that work for the citizen by consulting with them and involving them in the policy and service delivery processes. All that is within the frame of reference that we have gradually shaped.

The Copernican revolution foreshadowed by the application of radical citizen centred approaches, underpinned by a default position that knowledge (information, data and all form of policy related analysis of it?) is a resource to be shared with citizens, heralds a form of public service operation that many will have difficulty grasping as a concept, let alone a practice model. The future is not just different, it is radically uncertain.

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Kevin Rudd MP, John Paterson Oration, Australia New Zealand School of Government Annual Conference, Canberra, 3 September 2009.

Prime Minister's Website: Reform of Australian Government Administration - Purpose and make up of the Advisory Group.

Discussion Paper: Reform of Australian Government Administration – Building the world's best public service, October 2009, page 20.

Kevin Rudd MP, John Paterson Oration, Australia New Zealand School of Government Annual Conference, Canberra, 3 September 2009.

Discussion Paper: Reform of Australian Government Administration – Building the world's best public service, October 2009, page 28.

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Discussion Paper: Reform of Australian Government Administration – Building the world's best public service, October 2009, page 28.

Discussion Paper: Reform of Australian Government Administration – Building the world's best public service, October 2009, page 31.

Lindsay Tanner MP, Launch of the Government 2.0 Taskforce, 22 June 2009, transcript Finance Minister's website.

Nicholas Gruen, Chair of the Government 2.0 Taskforce, ABC Radio National, Future Tense program, 24 September 2009, Participatory democracy, Web 2.0 and the Government 2.0 Taskforce, transcript, ABC Radio National website.

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