**Review of the Australian Public Service (APS)**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on the APS Review. My submission reflects my academic studies in public management reform and experience working as a policy professional in various Australian state public sectors and New Zealand more recently. The points raised are generally high-level and intended to start a conversation. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like to clarify any of the points raised.

1. **Broader reforms beyond the APS Review are needed to deal with the challenges Australia is facing.** The Scenarios 2030 Report provides a good summary of the change drivers the APS will need to consider over the next decade. Underlying this context is increased complexity and the need for better public sector management approaches to address the ‘wicked problems’ this complexity is generating, while also making the most of the strategic opportunities it presents. The approaches outlined in the Report support this context, however, it is worth considering their limitations and expanding on what else could be done within the review scope and outside of it. This is consistent with the notion that ‘the sum is greater than its parts’ – APS performance will not be optimised unless broader reforms are made (as is touched on in other parts of this submission).
2. **APS success is dependent on the capability and capacity of its collaborative partners.** The APS must increasingly collaborate with the private sector and other public sectors at a local, state/territories and international level. This requires new and improved multi-stakeholder capabilities and capacity to be established. For example, this could extend to governance arrangements, funding arrangements, shared services, think tanks, cohorts, online hubs, collaborative public spaces and information capability. Effectiveness would be compromised, however, if the APS’s collaborative partners are not adequately equipped to deal with the future context. The APS should therefore encourage and support its partners to conduct their own reviews and transformations in parallel to the APS review.
3. **A common purpose and overarching strategy would provide guidance to the APS and its collaborative partners.** It is important to develop a common purpose which is customer-centric and focussed on the ‘why’ (i.e. the strategic outcomes/public value). The aim of the common purpose is to align stakeholders, priorities and results, promoting common focus and reducing duplication, offsets and other inefficiencies. The common purpose should be supported by a high-level strategy and principles which provides the overarching framework for how to achieve the common purpose through both policy and service delivery approaches. If done right, the common purpose/strategy can provide guidance to all collaborative partners while also providing flexibility to apply the strategy based on unique circumstances, ongoing change and different policy settings. The focus here is on moving the parts in the same direction. There are some examples where this has been attempted to some degree.
4. **Influencing more sustainable policy making should be key to the future role of the APS yet poses the greatest challenges.** Complex problem solving requires a long-term outlook which aspires to facilitate quality living standards (i.e. wellbeing outcomes) and fairness for future generations as well as current generations (i.e. intergenerational equality outcomes). This requires the APS to take on a broader role as ‘steward of the system’ – ‘the guardian of facilitating public value’. The APS Review is likely to better position the APS in this regard. For example, sustainability principles could be embedded into the APS culture, processes and advice. However, the tension between these principles and short-term political incentives is likely to remain. A broader review of Australia’s democratic system should therefore also be considered in parallel to the APS review.
5. **A review of Australia’s democracy is critical to delivering more sustainable outcomes for Australians and the world.** The scope of a review should include constitutional and non-constitutional aspects of the democracy that are important to a sustainable and stable Australia. This would encompass the role of public participation in the policy making process, open government, the use of surveys and referendums, representation, election cycles, national identity, indigenous Australia, the role of the monarchy, compulsory voting and accreditation standards for Members of Parliament. For example, it is worth considering whether the electoral cycle should be changed to four years to accommodate the demand for increased public participation in the policy making process while also providing Cabinet with more incentives to make more long-term decisions and deliver better results. The review would be complex given constitutional considerations and the level of debate it would generate but should be considered critical to modernising the system and ensuring all the parts are working together. There are also some conflict of interest challenges here on who would set the review scope and make recommendations and decisions. A bipartisan approach would be desirable.
6. **The role of the APS as independent facilitator of public value needs to be strengthened and its responsibilities made broader.** The Scenarios 2030 Report notes the lack of transparency and trust in government, and trends towards more public participation as well as more innovative policy making approaches. The APS has a critical role here to play as facilitator of public value between the people and decision-makers – this requires a shift. To achieve this, the APS should provide more policy services to the public and be more independent of Cabinet. For example, as is the case in New Zealand, heads of agencies could be appointed by a non-political head of the APS through a merit process and an ‘open government’ approach could be adopted. This would encompass more public consultation on key decision points and the proactive release of cabinet papers and background papers when decisions are announced (unless the information is confidential such as relating to commercial arrangements or national security).
7. **The policy making process should be driven by evidence and made more transparent.** Complex problem solving requires evidenced based policy analysis based on good principles, information and assessment processes. However, the demand for more public participation in the policy making process and short-term political pressures has increased the risk of ‘policy made on the run’. This can be partially addressed by developing new policy making processes and making these processes more accessible and transparent to the public. There is also opportunity to improve policy making capability particularly in relation to how information and analysis is used to inform decision-making and how progress is monitored. Areas of focus here are improving how the APS and Cabinet identifies, engages, assesses and explains the case for change including the options under consideration and the reasons why certain recommendations and decisions are then made. This could build more public trust while ensuring a focus on evidence based decision-making.
8. **A focus on wellbeing which extends beyond fiscal indicators and economic growth can provide a more sustainable foundation in which to consider policy options.** The New Zealand Government has introduced a living standards framework to assess the budget impact of government policies on the wellbeing of New Zealanders across 12 policy areas and four capitals (i.e. natural, social, financial/physical and human). The framework is new and evolving but is ‘in theory’ allowing Cabinet to take a more balanced, sustainable and holistic approach to setting priorities and allocating resources. There is merit in the APS looking at a similar approach and incorporating it through its annual budget process and advice to Cabinet.
9. **The APS, as facilitator of public value, has a role to play in improving public engagement and promoting ‘solution focussed’ discourse.** Demand for increased public participation in the policy making process is increasing. There are three key issues here. Firstly, public engagement should be made the rule rather than the exception. Secondly, the APS could improve its engagement capability and capacity. For example, new processes and online tools could be established and central resources such as independent/expert chairs could be used to facilitate complex discussions. Thirdly, the public’s capacity and capability to engage needs to be improved. The education system could play a key role in this regard. For example, ‘applied policy making’ encompassing principles/values, public management frameworks, research, analysis/critical thinking and decision-making considerations could be part of the education curriculum from foundation levels through to tertiary levels. In regards to the later, all university students could be encouraged to complete a unit in policy making and apply the learning to their major – incentives, such as no fees, could be provided if necessary. Free courses could also be provided to mature age Australians as a transitional measure and resources such as online tools could be made available to the public on an ongoing basis. Regulatory tools such as NGO/interest group accreditation and a watchdog could be considered to improve the accountability of public policy influencers.
10. **A more transparent and collaborative performance framework, facilitated by a more proactive and independent APS, could improve Cabinet’s accountability.** A modified version of the Better Public Services approach adopted by the New Zealand Government between 2012-2018 provides a useful case study to consider. In this example, ten long-term strategic priorities were identified by Cabinet and delivered collaboratively across relevant public agencies with progress towards targets reported through a quarterly dashboard approach. While there were many good aspects to this approach, there were also critical areas for improvement. An improved version of this framework, for example, could be the APS playing a role in identifying the key policy priorities through evidence-based research and a public engagement process prior to the beginning of each election cycle. The APS could then provide open advice to all electoral candidates on these priorities prior to the commencement of election campaigns. This could support a more evidence based approach to defining policy issues and allow candidates the opportunity to respond to these priorities as part of their campaigns. Once elected, policy priorities (at the discretion of Cabinet) could be turned into policy goals and targets with progress monitored by the APS and reported to the public on a regular basis through a dashboard approach. This would result in more transparency, holding decision-makers more accountable for the policy priorities they set and the results they achieve.
11. **A more proactive APS could also promote efficiencies.** Encouraging the APS to provide more information and advice prior to elections would provide new governments with more certainty on policy issues, options and recommendations, and minimise the adverse flow on effects of cabinet members making ‘specific policy announcements’ prior to receiving detailed and independent advice from the APS. This would also encourage Cabinet members to focus on solutions and delivery from the beginning of their terms rather than half way through their terms, and minimise the potential inefficiencies of Cabinet needing to backtrack from election promises following the review of more comprehensive policy advice.
12. **Making it easier for people to access public services should be a service delivery priority and user-centric digital self-service options should continue to be a focus.** Notwithstanding longer-term policy priorities, service delivery is generally more efficient and effective when services are designed around users and the outcomes they seek. To optimise this, more consideration could be directed to identifying and reducing user pain points through joined up service delivery and restructuring how services are organised on this basis. A more fundamental approach, including a shakeup of the Centrelink and MyGov model, might be warranted as an alternative to a more incremental approach.
13. **A state of the service delivery system study could inform a restructure of how services are delivered.** A study could be undertaken to quantify, rationalise and map the services delivered by the APS and the States and Territories. This would include identifying linkages between services (i.e. pulling out the interactions between inputs, outputs, agencies, systems and shared outcomes across the public and private sector). The study could inform work on how the APS could be better reorganised around customer outcomes and establish a data profile of public services which could then be used to engage with stakeholders, set performance targets and monitor results through a dashboard approach. This is likely to take some time to produce in the first instance but could then be more easily updated on a rolling basis to inform future decision-making.
14. **Transformation of the APS requires cultural change.** The only thing constant in the future is change, complexity and the role of the public sector in having to deal with society’s most pressing challenges. This requires a culture focused on constant improvement where problem solving is the status quo; and requires values focussed on respect, resilience, excellence, neutrality, community, diversity, wellbeing and intergenerational equality.
15. **The role of the centre could be enhanced at both the Commonwealth level and within the APS.** Demand for more localised solutions does not necessarily equate to a reduced role for the centre. If anything, complex problem solving, particularly in relation to large-scale infrastructure and common priorities, requires the type of capacity and capability that is best generated through a central approach. The key here is to finding the right balance. At a Commonwealth/State & Territories/local government level, there is opportunity to develop more shared services between stakeholders, particularly where there is already significant devolution of power but limited capacity and capability to act alone. At an APS level, there is opportunity to streamline some capabilities across the APS (i.e. people, processes, technology and information) and build more flexible capacity in the centre which can then be deployed across the public sector as needed.
16. **Some capability should be centralised and agile, allowing resources to be deployed to operational policy and service delivery areas as needed.** There is a strong rationale for centralising functional capabilities in areas such as strategy, planning, policy development, special projects and change management. People in these areas could then be deployed to operational policy and service delivery areas on a needs basis to manage tasks such as strategic framing, public engagement, analysis, preparation of advice and liaison with decision-makers. This approach would encourage innovation and promote alignment with the common purpose, reducing duplication and other related inefficiencies while enabling more operational and technical staff to focus on business as usual (e.g. administering legislation, delivering services, providing subject matter expertise, liaising with stakeholders and reporting). This centralised and flexible capability should operate with a flat structure and be drawn from a base of permanent staff and flexible contractors who are ready to go at short notice. People who can think in shapes and linkages, and work independently with different subject matter, ambiguity and levels of detail, are ideal candidates for these roles. In addition to capacity management, flexible contractors can also play an important role here in challenging the status quo and introducing new ideas.
17. **Functional and professional leads can provide a focal point for subject matter expertise, thought leadership and ongoing professional development across the APS.** Leads could represent the interests of key functions and professions in the APS (e.g. strategy, analysis, service delivery, public consultation, regulation, information, finance). These roles could be centralised or sit within relevant agencies where it makes sense.
18. **People who work for the APS are generally motivated by the common good – this should be harnessed as an asset.** Public sector decision-making sits within a representative and delegated framework but leadership can and should happen at all APS levels and across all positions. Opportunities to explore more innovative leadership could be developed through cultural change, capability uplift and new tools. For example, public sector innovation hubs, platforms, think tanks and cohorts could be established to collectively workshop ideas, challenges and priority issues within the APS. This could also be opened to other public sectors, the private sector and members of the public where it makes sense to.
19. **Traditional ways of communicating can be enhanced.** There is a tension between traditional-style long policy documents, increased public participation and making evidence based decisions in a fast-changing world. While the need to produce long documents will not go away, there is scope to develop and encourage people to use different approaches where possible (e.g. diagrams, drawings, policy on a page, graphs and outcome focussed case studies which provide a line of sight from input to end user). A centralised policy artist capability and information insights capability could also be deployed across the APS on a needs basis to enhance more traditional communication approaches.
20. **Merit should remain as an important pillar of the APS but more innovative recruitment processes could be considered.** Candidates could be given more scope to prove they have the competencies required rather than following a traditional recruitment process. For example, questions could be forward focussed so they do not limit candidates to think within predefined walls of past experiences but allow them to think more creatively about problem solving in a future context using their past experiences, skills and knowledge. Likewise, candidates could be provided with more options to prove their case beyond a standard interview. For example, candidates could choose to make a presentation or facilitate the conversation rather than answer questions. This is consistent with concepts of complexity – there is more than one way to get to the same destination and candidates need to be problem solvers that know how to use their strengths to influence outcomes.
21. **Professionalising policy functions will better equip the APS to deal with the future context.** The APS deals with the most challenging issues facing Australians yet policy pathways do not always reflect these responsibilities and the capabilities needed to do the job well. There is a need to better reflect this through more competitive remuneration and by modernising and uplifting capability. For example, this could include mandatory standards and accreditation with renewal periods, ongoing learning, and providing more opportunities for emerging leaders/talent rather than depending on years of experience by default.
22. **A rebranding of the APS could be undertaken to demonstrate value, improve understanding and promote more effective engagement.** Some Australians perspective of the APS stems from the past when more inefficient bureaucratic models were at play. Times have changed – the APS has a critical role to play in the future and this should be acknowledged and valued in society. This could be achieved through a rebranding of the APS, which touches on the need for more effective public engagement and civil discourse, and elevates the role of the APS in facilitating this. This rebranding could reflect on all aspects of the APS including the policy profession, implementation and front-line staff. For example, this could include promoting the roles and responsibilities of teachers, nurses, fire fighters, customer services, counsellors, policy analysts and advisors.