

6 November 2018

Independent Review of the APS  
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet  
PO Box 6500  
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: [apsreview@pmc.gov.au](mailto:apsreview@pmc.gov.au)

Dear Panel

## **RE: Professionals Australia response to the review of the Australian Public Service**

Professionals Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the review of the Australian Public Service.

Professionals Australia (formerly APESMA – the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia) represent 25,000 professionals across the country involved in the fields of science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) and managerial professionals.

For over a hundred years Professionals Australia has been the key union for scientists, engineers and technical experts in Australian Government employment. Our members are some of the best and brightest minds in STEM, and many of them deliver vital technical expertise to the commonwealth as APS employees in portfolios as diverse as transport, defence, environment, health, innovation and communications.

Every day in the Australian Public Service (APS), in their capacity as professionals, our members contribute to policy development and implementation, research and analysis, project and service delivery, regulation and investigation, and management, providing vital services and programs that serve the departments, agencies, the Australian economy and community.

The Australian Public Service is therefore a key area of consideration for Professionals Australia. We note the key objectives of the review, particularly:

- A modern APS will be an employer of choice, providing enriching work for its employees, nurturing talent and being an exemplar of innovation and adaptability.
- The review will identify an ambitious program of transformational reforms to ensure the APS is fit-for-purpose for the coming decades, and to guide and accelerate future reform activities.

To meet these objectives the APS requires strong, sovereign owned technical capacity. The APS must employ, grow and develop the professional and technical minds to transform and innovate; the private sector cannot be relied on to supply them instance by instance.

The issues discussed in the following response will focus primarily on the situation in the Department of Defence. However, these problems facing our members in Defence (eg outsourcing and the degrading of technical capacity) are being broadly experienced in other scientific and technical departments and

agencies. Professionals Australia also commend and support the submission to the review made by the Australian Council of Trade Unions.

### **The importance of STEM capacity**

Australia's modern defence capability depends on its technological edge, yet technology alone cannot achieve our nation's security. It is the people - their knowledge and what they create - that shapes the development, operation and future of our defence forces.

The responsiveness and capacity of the Australian Defence Force is fundamentally underpinned by the knowledge and expertise of the engineering, science and technical workforce - the people who develop, select, integrate, maintain and operate our modern defence effort.

The problem is this intellectual capital has been run down to dangerous levels after long years without bipartisan, long-term strategic policy stability.

When the HMAS Kanimbla broke down in Sydney Harbour and was, together with sister ship HMAS Manoora, subsequently decommissioned early at a cost to taxpayers of \$500 million, the Rizzo Review attributed the disaster to shortcuts in maintenance and the loss of engineering capability in Defence. For years since then, internal engineering capability has been eroded further by governments intent on making savings by cutting staff, rather than understanding the fundamental link between our defence capacity, and the technical integrity of what underpins it.

### **Long term vision**

Professionals Australia has a long history of advocating for the de-politicization of Defence acquisition, and for the acquisition process to be driven by professionals with expertise in the relevant field to ensure government remains an informed purchaser and avoids unnecessary waste from poor project scoping.

We believe that to provide a workforce capable of designing, building, operating and maintaining Australia's defence materiel we must enhance our STEM capacity in the Defence department. This requires bipartisan political leadership and long-term vision.

The capability needs of the ADF are unique. For Australian STEM professionals to have the skills and expertise required to scope, design and sustain that defence capability, they require study, training and development over many years; those skills can't be turned on and off like a tap, and they can't be purchased off the shelf. This is one reason why stable leadership from government and long-term planning in Defence is vital.

Political posturing and disagreements between political decision makers has previously created peaks and troughs of work for STEM professionals in Defence and defence industry, creating so-called 'valleys of death', where we lose skilled workers, degrading STEM capacity. A stable long-term pipeline of work will allow STEM professionals to develop into experts, the type needed to ensure Australia has world leading defence capability.

The current bipartisanship around the important role of defence acquisition is relatively new. Professionals Australia members still remember a time not so long ago when STEM experts in defence industry were told that they couldn't be trusted 'to build a canoe'. Civilians working in the defence department and industry have previously faced numerous slights at the hands of figures pursuing political ends. It must be understood that STEM professionals and other workers in Defence and defence industry work within policy constraints and directives set by Government and bureaucracy situated well above them. There must be bipartisan acknowledgement that Government creates the settings which determine if Australia has the STEM skills we need to scope, design and sustain our defence capability.

### **Big capacity issues to overcome**

In 2012, Professionals Australia and the Chiefs of Army, Navy, Airforce, the (then) Defence Materiel Organisation and the Department of Defence committed to work together to improve, "Defence's required engineering and technical capability." Yet still we see the Defence workforce facing untargeted staff cuts.

The Federal Government's Average Staffing Level (ASL) Cap currently restricts the number of APS jobs in Defence, while Defence remains under pressure to deliver projects, maintain service provision and meet operational requirements. STEM work is currently either intensified among a shrinking pool of professionals, or groups in Defence are driven to the use of contractors and external consultants just to get the job done.

Under the ASL cap there has been an explosion in the use of contractors in defence, while APS employed staff are reduced. Defence is losing its internal skills, capacity and technical integrity. Without enough APS employed STEM professionals to provide adequate oversight of projects, Government has no way to be sure that they're getting value for money from contractors. There are numerous examples on the public record of where this has resulted in capability not being fit for purpose, ending up in billions of dollars of waste.

That's not to diminish the importance of defence industry in achieving the Defence mission, there are numerous good reasons for the Defence department and STEM leaders in defence industry to collaborate closely. That close collaboration with contractors in defence industry who are global leaders in their fields is in fact vital. However, the balance must be struck to ensure that Australia retains its own expertise in Defence, particularly in defence science and defence engineering; this is vital for national security.

## **Conclusion**

The future policy settings in the APS must enable defence to rebuild its STEM capacity, removing the staffing cap and enable Defence to build the STEM workforce it needs, to do the job it has to do. Core STEM work and technical oversight needs to be done by in house professionals to ensure that Australia owns our own technical skills and maintains a sovereign STEM capacity.

[Dale Beasley](#)

**Director**

ACT Branch and Australian Government Group

0433 847 325

