

This submission is written as a reflection of my experience and diverse involvement with the public service, professionally as a worker within it, personally as a user of public services, politically as an citizen, and academically as someone with an interest in good governance.

The aims outlined for the APS Review highlight important aspects of the job undertaken by the public service, but miss the broader issue that the APS is only one part of the overall structure of government and civil society. The most important issues for the public service are not internal, but at the interface of the public service with government, politicians, the public, and academia.

This submission will therefore be in four parts: the challenge of an agile and innovative APS; the difficulties of finding employment in the public service; the problems of obtaining and maintaining knowledge within and without the public service; and issues with the interface between the APS and its stakeholders.

Tied down but agile

Agility is a new concept in government. It has grown out of the IT industry and in particular a specific form of programming that combines delivery with testing to iterate towards a solution. Agile, as a programming methodology, can work very well. But it is not without challenges.

There needs to be a clear, strategic direction for the program being developed that provides hooks for future aspects of the program to be delivered. If these are absent, then the program will develop quickly, but be more time consuming and expensive to change.

A computer program develops within a data structure that will have major impacts on its future capabilities and ability to change. A government program does too. It is bound by legislation, departmental structures and physical infrastructure. The APS can only be agile and innovative within the confines of these boundaries.

An agile APS therefore, is dependent on an agile executive government. Government sets the problems to be solved, but must be open to solutions and possible failure, interrogate them and their effects, and be willing to change course to ensure the implementation is successful. It is a mindset counter to the nature of politics, where change is an admission of failure, honest assessment is better suppressed, and abandonment is preferred to modification.

Through the looking glass

The most noticeable difference between private and public sector work is not the workplace but the hiring process. A private company seeks to fill a role quickly and efficiently. It (generally) respects the time of the applicant. It recognises that the "best" candidate is hard to predict, and

offsets that with the best that became available at the right time. And when the private sector needs someone, it goes and finds them.

The public sector is none of those things. It relies on key selection criteria, asking for essays worth of information, in formats that actively discourage those outside government, it will sit on applications for months, often missing the opportunity to recruit them, it rarely seeks to find the right person.

The people working for the public service are generally very good. But they aren't better than those you'd find with a less arcane, more inclusive, faster and more efficient process. From the outside looking in, government is hard to get in to and therefore harder still to leave. The lack of churn between private and public spheres reduces the quality of external experience acquired by government, narrows the perspective and fosters an aversion to risk-taking and change.

Inside of government, the time it takes to recruit or procure encourages managers to focus on head-count instead of the work. Short-term vacancies stay empty for months then get double-filled when they return. Hiring freezes result in the most mobile (and possibly most valuable) employees leaving large holes while others bunker down.

The budget cycle creates its own work. The government seems to have little control over bids or strategy, and enormous quantities of wasted work involves bidding for dollars that will never arrive, only to repeat themselves the next year. For the most part, there isn't any more waste in government than the private sector. But the private sector always works for the end goal - selling goods or services. The public service, and indeed government generally, needs clarity over what it aims to achieve, beyond creating work for itself by spending less time spent discussing how to deliver, and more on actual delivery.

Known knowns etc.

The taxonomy of known knowns, known unknowns, unknown knowns and unknown unknowns was established well before Donald Rumsfeld, but it remains a puzzle to government and the public service.

There is data (our known knowns), and decisions are based on it because it provides the best source of evidence for policy.

There are also, generally, well known unknowns, where data is poor or questions are hard, and funding is required to seek out the evidence we wish we had. The APS needs this, but it also needs to be better at communicating why it needs it, and making it useful for the general public, to get better returns on investment.

The unknown knowns are more common than they should be, largely because the public service is very forgetful. Vast reams of knowledge are contained in the employees of the public

service, particularly those who are long serving. Even vaster amounts are contained in documents and records, but unless a senior servant is available to point to them, or a new servant is particularly keen, they will not know where to look before reinventing the wheel. Nowadays much of this knowledge has escaped to consultancies, who are no better at institutional knowledge or record keeping and have no reason to be, as reinvention is grease for future contracts.

Further loss occurs as governments change, and cabinet in confidence escapes into the archive, to be re-prosecuted in turn by fresh faces. Freshly, but wastefully. The public service needs to be better at supplying its knowledge to its workers. Openness to the outside world is the best option. The preservation of the ancient Greeks fell to the Muslim and Byzantine scholars to be resurrected in the Renaissance. The public service has no such saviours, but it needs them, which means creating better channels to the universities who store and communicate knowledge to the next wave of public servants, not hiding it from scrutiny for short-term gain.

The unknown unknowns continue to plague the public service, because they largely lie at the interface of the public and service provision. The public knows what is wrong; they know when their payment was cut because the system broke, when information is not available, when their roads are crumbling, when their trains are full, when their housing poorly and cheaply built, when their effective marginal tax makes working pointless, and why they make the choices they do.

But the public service is incredibly bad at knowing what the public knows, because it doesn't know it needs to. This is massively exacerbated by a culture that responds to letters with government talking points instead of information, and unkept promises to consider the problem instead of action. The right people rarely learn the problems. The fixes are never arrived at. An Agile programmer receives a list of system bugs to work through, knocking them out one by one. A static public service receives a list of complaints to be ignored, or bundled into initiatives.

If we want the public service to be responsive to actual needs and fix actual problems, we need to acknowledge they exist, log them, measure how often they've been addressed, ensure the correct people can look at them, and at least tell the public why they are hard to fix, instead of shaking our heads at how hard change is.

Apolitical hide and seek

The most interesting aspect of finding employment in the public service is that it removes the veil. The decision making apparatus and strategy documents, suppressed by governments to hide their intentions, are laid bare. Outside the public service, you can only be discontented with the end product. Inside, you can see the reasoning and articulate disagreement.

The difference between those two positions: one is informed and respectful, the other thinks the public service and government is grossly incompetent.

The public service hides its advice from everyone except themselves, the minister and their advisors. Often they also hide it from themselves. The theory is that confining advice to the cabinet allows advice to be frank, fearless, and apolitical service. The reality is that neither the public service nor the government is held up to scrutiny; their plans and ideas are not tested by public debate or the cadre of experts in that policy area, but sit in a bubble impervious to new ideas or timely criticism.

The form of government, public service, parliament and shareholders is nominally that of a business: the management (with the minister as ceo), workers and board of directors. Except our board of directors is barred from examining the books, receiving only glossy annual reports and needing to submit freedom of information requests to understand what is actually happening. Our shareholders get to vote in a new board (and nominally the management) but likewise have no scrutiny over why management has taken their decisions.

The final decisions rest with the minister. A single person, a very busy person, not necessarily across the task, and almost certainly not able to digest every aspect of the mountain of briefs. Advisors, politically minded, often young and inexperienced, too often ideologically driven, provide what little scrutiny is offered.

But without outside scrutiny, no questioning of the assumptions of the public service is made at all. Public consultation, more often than not, is designed to inform, not consult, and occur after the key decisions have been made.

The secrecy that lies between the public service and the minister's office ensure that the main source of alternative viewpoints - parliament and the general public - have no oversight over any aspect of the public service.

The public can write letters and will receive response only to things already in public sphere (effectively a useless response to any well informed person). Enormous resources are spent not responding to public concerns, not discussing the complexities of the problem, or the possible solutions, in order to protect decision making from scrutiny. The fear is that scrutiny of plans will politicise the public service, but the main effect is to hide decisions from those who could best inform the APS where they are mistaken.

Actual experts in the field are either in the tent, and vowed to silence over any inherent issues, or outside, and spend their time struggling to gain enough information to provide useful inputs into what is working or not working. A massive waste of a potential source of intelligent feedback and ideas for improvements.

The non-expert public, being closest to the mechanics of service provision has the best visibility of flaws in its outcomes. But without being able to see what caused those outcomes, their ability to shape services to their needs, and to understand the complexities of delivery within constraints is limited.

Because Parliament is poorly informed, parliamentary questions are poorly informed. Questions and debate is over trivialities and outcomes, not actual problems, the solutions being implemented, and the inherent risks and opportunities. Actual issues are hidden; estimates sessions become an exercise in risk-averse obfuscation to protect the government from its poor decisions (and the public service from proper scrutiny).

Because the public debate is poorly informed, and oppositions are poorly informed, an election is conducted over policies that have already been extensively assessed, or ideas that experts in the public service - constrained to silence - have no ability to shape in any sensible fashion. A new government emerges with a set of ideas that have limited grounding in the reality of service delivery or policy setting. Years of useful work is shelved meaninglessly, for want of any understanding of the problems being faced.

Furthermore, the new government, convinced the public service is biased against them - and their well-intentioned but poorly conceived ideas - begets an antagonistic relationship that takes years to reestablish.

A new government has every right to set its agenda, but it is foolish that they must do so from an uninformed position, where the public service has actively excluded them from deliberations and advice.

An informed debate

The interface of the public service and the people to whom it serves must be improved. To this end, I would propose that Parliament appoint, for each portfolio, a committee (5-10 people of both sides of Parliament) who will be privy to what is currently ministerial information.

All ministerial briefs, business cases and other correspondence should be made available to members of that portfolio committee. Cabinet discussions and minutes will remain with the government, but much of what goes to cabinet will be open to scrutiny. The minister should meet regularly with the portfolio committee to address questions and refer any decisions, providing another layer of independent advice. However, the committee members are not the decision-makers, their only role is to request briefings on matters of concern and raise those directly with the minister.

This would close the circle, so-to-speak on the information gap between the public service and the people it serves, by providing representatives an opportunity to understand the decisions being considered.

The APS can continue to offer fearless and frank advice, as it is ultimately for the government to take or ignore advice. As is the case already, the government will be open to criticism if poor decisions are made, but unlike now, the basis on which they were made will be open to scrutiny. Likewise, the public service will be stronger for the scrutiny given to its advice, and the diversity of viewpoints brought about by serving the public, and not just the government of the day.

The alternative is not serving us well. The Opposition is poorly informed, the government is poorly scrutinised and the public service often fails to deliver services to the Australian public.